

Mid-Term Evaluation of NERC's Theme Action Plan Process Management Response, September 2010

Background

1. NERC commissioned a light-touch independent Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE) of the Theme Action Plan (TAP) process. This MTE was to investigate how well the TAP process is working, and hence to inform improvements to the process and decisions regarding continuation of the approach beyond TAP-3.
2. This document provides the management response to the evaluation report from NERC's Director of Strategy and Partnerships, who was the customer for the evaluation. The response was approved by Council (September 2010), and prepared in consultation with SISB (June 2010), NERC's Director for Science Delivery, Head of Research and Science and Innovation Managers; and the Theme Leaders, who submitted a separate response (Appendix A).

Management Response

3. The evaluation report provides valuable evidence on how well the new TAP process is working, on areas of strength and on areas to improve. The report recognises this is a new process that is still developing and brings new ways of working for NERC, the research community and other stakeholders. Hence it is important to distinguish and address two kinds of issues: start-up and development issues (which are inevitable for any new process) and more deep-rooted or fundamental issues (which will impair the long-term effectiveness of the process). It is also worth noting that consultation on any process associated with funding is always likely to result in a level of criticism, given that not all areas can be funded.
4. This response welcomes the overall findings that the new TAP process is, or is becoming, more effective in achieving its purpose. That is: to engage stakeholders in identifying, via the advice that Theme Leaders give SISB, the strategic investments (research programmes) that will best deliver NERC's agreed strategy objectives and challenges. This planning process does not go on to translate TAPs into actual funding opportunities and grants to researchers – that is the function of the commissioning process (which is outside the scope of this review and will be evaluated later in 2010).
5. This response also addresses stakeholder concerns about the effectiveness and efficiency of this new process, and proposes adoption of some of the suggested ideas for improvement.
6. It should be noted that the second TAP cycle was completed during the time the MTE was being carried out; hence some respondents to the evaluation survey may not have been aware of recent progress in developing and improving the TAP process.

Progress and positive benefits

7. There has been a significant increase in strategic partnership and co-funding (leverage) with other stakeholders. Theme Leaders (TL's) are starting to be seen within the HEI and wider stakeholder communities as a focal point for research engagement with NERC. HEIs report a modest positive trend towards improved interaction with NERC.
8. We welcome the findings that the TAP process: provides a clear link between NERC's strategy and the design and implementation of investments; enables a more strategic view and planning

across NERC's strategic research programme portfolio; enables the coordination and the development of cross-theme actions.

9. Some of these successes may be due to a variety of factors, including the Living with Environmental Change (LWEC) initiative. However there is strong evidence that the new TAP process and TL's, working alongside NERC officers, have contributed significantly to this success.
10. The report also notes the positive benefit of theme leaders being based in their home institutions to maintain their independence from NERC. The important role of the theme leaders in providing strategic advice, with no delivery responsibility, was thought to be working well.

Key issues and concerns

11. **Coverage.** We note the concern that it is difficult for theme leaders to get to know, engage extensively with, and act as foci for, all stakeholders and across the breadth of the research landscape. Some stakeholders feel excluded. This is partly inevitable, due to resource constraints and because NERC's strategy (and hence the TAP process) is deliberately focussed on key priorities. However it is important that all stakeholders understand how the NERC planning process works, how they can access and influence it, and how they can work with NERC to deliver excellent research that meets the UK's strategic needs.
12. **Bias.** There is concern that NERC may focus too much on the research community or knowledge area close to their own area of research and that too much power may be vested in these individuals. The TAP process is designed to include checks and balances, so that any such tendencies should be moderated by the scrutiny of TAPs that results from consulting widely among stakeholders, working closely with NERC's officers, and the strong role played by SISB. The first round of TAPs may in places have focussed on areas of high priority where TLs had initial expertise. As time goes on, TLs are gaining wider expertise and subsequent TAP rounds are intended to address the breadth of the NERC's strategy challenges. We note, however, that TAPs focus on NERC's strategic priorities and are not intended to provide funding opportunities for, or necessarily represent, the entire research community in the same way as responsive mode. Recent consideration by SISB as part of the TAP-2 decisions, and subsequent recommendations made on mid-cycle RP actions, has indicated the progressive achievement of reasonable coverage of the strategy themes.
13. **Transparency.** The report also notes a perceived limited transparency in the development of the TAPs. This concern seems to come from stakeholders who may have engaged in initial consultations but were not involved in subsequent planning, either of TAPs or in the later commissioning process. Whilst the outcomes of community events were published on the NERC website, it is important that we better explain to stakeholders how the whole process works and how TAPs develop.
14. **Timeliness and efficiency.** Some respondents were concerned about the length of time of the TAP planning process, about a potential lack of agility between TAP cycles, and indeed about the cost of the process. The first three rounds of TAPs will have been approximately 16 months apart, however there is provision for agile decisions between cycles (e.g. EPHH and NH out of cycle actions), and the second round of commissioning (translating TAPs into investments) is markedly faster than the first. The cost of the whole NERC strategy delivery system, including the TAP process, is being monitored to ensure that it does not grow and that it achieves value-for-money in delivering the NERC strategy. A wider review of benefits versus costs of the new processes will be conducted in 2012.

15. These concerns about coverage, bias, transparency and efficiency all contribute to reducing stakeholder understanding of, and confidence in, the TAP process, and hence its ultimate effectiveness. Of course there may also be trade-offs between effectiveness and efficiency. For example, there is a trade-off in securing partnerships and co-funding with reducing the length of the TAP process.
16. Whilst the TAP process is already developing and improving with experience, we acknowledge that action needs to be taken to address the concerns raised in the report to improve the overall effectiveness and efficiency of NERC's strategic planning. These improvements are addressed in the action plan below.

Out-of-scope issues

17. The report noted that some Research Centre respondents felt that the TAPs take little account of **national capability** (NC) and that this is impacting on the **financial sustainability** of Research Centres and UK **research capacity**. We acknowledge that understanding the landscape of NERC's NC has been difficult, not just for Theme leaders but more widely for NERC as a whole. However, TLs are increasing their understanding of NC over time, and the links between NC and RP are being strengthened via linked planning processes. Research capacity and the financial sustainability of centres are important issues that depend on a mix of income streams, not just NERC's Research Programmes (RP). These issues are being addressed separately by NERC and will not be considered within this response.
18. There were a number of issues raised which relate to NERC's **commissioning process**. These include the speed of commissioning programmes and the transparency in the development of research programmes which stem from the TAPs. We acknowledge these issues, and note that the commissioning process is out of scope for this review, and will be the subject of its own review in the near future.

Action plan

19. Some respondents suggested that (text in italics is taken from the report): *SIMs, with their knowledge of the community, greater understanding of the NERC portfolio and implementation issues, and lack of vested interest, should work more closely with TLs.* We endorse the suggestion that SIMs and TLs should work more closely together where this is not already happening.

Action 1	SIMs to work more closely with Theme Leaders
Issues addressed	Coverage, bias, transparency
Responsibility	TAP Process manager (Liz Fellman) working with Head of Research (Pamela Kempton)
Deliverables Due	Improved partnership working between SIMs and Theme Leaders Ongoing

20. Some respondents suggested that: *Each TL should have a small advisory group with whom they work to develop the TAP. Members could be from the community and/or SISB members and/or SIMs.* Small advisory groups have already been used on some specific occasions and, whilst there may be a trade-off with cost and speed, and possible perception of exclusivity, we support the opportunity for Theme Leaders to seek advice, possibly through such groups. This is particularly important for some of the broader themes, or where the area being developed is not close to the Theme Leader's area of expertise. Membership of such groups should be considered

carefully to ensure relevant expertise and balance. We do not think there is sufficient evidence to set up standing groups.

Action 2	Explore the setting up of more time-limited advisory groups
Issues addressed	Coverage, bias, transparency
Responsibility	TAP Process manager: Liz Fellman
Deliverables	Advisory groups to be set up where needed
Due	Ongoing (consideration will be action by action)

21. NERC engages the community in a number of ways, ranging from the public consultation on the strategy, through to community events to discuss draft TAPs, web consultations on individual research challenges, TL visits to institutions, and focussed meetings on TAP actions. However, we accept that there is a view that this engagement could be more effective, and we will work to address these concerns within the next TAP development cycle. For example, we are currently reviewing the model for community events to ensure they provide an effective forum for dialogue between the community and Theme Leaders. Another example is that we will explore the use of web-based engagement tools such as webcasts. We will also seek ways to communicate the role of Theme Leaders clearly and visibly to the community.

Action 3	Review mechanisms for engaging the community throughout the development of NERC's strategic priorities and TAPs
Issues addressed	Transparency
Responsibility	TAP Process manager: Liz Fellman
Deliverables	Engagement plan for development of each new action
Due	Autumn 2010

22. The few respondents who mentioned the private sector felt that Theme Leaders had given a low priority to building relationships with the private sector. We acknowledge that this is a NERC-wide issue, and is not the sole responsibility of the Theme Leaders. We are already taking action to address this and accept the report's suggestion that TLs should work more closely with NERC's Knowledge Exchange Team. The input from the newly-formed LWEC Business Advisory Board (BAB) in identifying opportunities and gaps within the research portfolio and in identifying business needs from NERC science will be used to feed strategic advice into TAP discussions. This will be complemented by strategic investment of KE resource in priority topic areas to maximise impact from NERC's investments across RP and NC. The use of appropriate funding mechanisms for business engagement in research will be important, including partnership research grants, collaborative R&D with TSB, CASE awards and related mechanisms.

Action 4	Improve the strategic input from business into the TAP development process via LWEC BAB and closer working of the Theme Leaders and NERC's Knowledge Exchange team.
Issues addressed	Coverage, transparency
Responsibility	TAP Process manager (Liz Fellman) working with Head of Knowledge Exchange (Simon Jackman)
Deliverables	1. Use of strategic advice from LWEC BAB in initial formulation and design of TAP actions (2 inputs this FY, 4 inputs next FY and 6 the year after) 2. Incorporation of business engagement mechanisms into TAPs to enable collaboration (Autumn 2010) 3. Engagement of businesses in TAPs (ongoing)

4. Impact on businesses which is primarily either change in practices in existing businesses or set-up of new businesses. This could take at least 3 years.

23. The evaluation report suggested improvements in the way SISB interacts with the TAP process. This need had already been recognised and progress was made during the second TAP cycle. However we will continue to explore ways of strengthening SISB's role and how it works with the TAP process. Recent examples of progress include interaction between SISB and Theme Leaders on non-TAP issues such as the strategy refresh, and the way that Theme Leaders are treated as honorary SISB members when they attend SISB meetings, and SISB's use of small groups to discuss draft TAPs in more detail.

Action 5	Explore ways of strengthening SISB's role and effectiveness in the TAP process
Issues addressed	Coverage, bias
Responsibility	TAP Process manager: Liz Fellman
Deliverables	Mechanisms to strengthen SISB's role
Due	Autumn 2010

24. The report highlights the long period from TAP initiation to announcing funding opportunities. The part due to the commissioning process, which has been speeded up for the second cycle, is out-of-scope for this review. But to speed up the TAP process we have already reduced the number of interim scoping studies, and are examining other opportunities, such as improving efficiency by encouraging fewer, larger actions (although recognizing that smaller actions are sometimes appropriate scientifically and where this is the case, should be supported).

Action 6	TAPs to include fewer, larger actions
Issues addressed	Timeliness, efficiency
Responsibility	TAP Process manager (Liz Fellman) working with Head of Research (Pamela Kempton)
Deliverables	A more efficient planning process
Due	Ongoing

Theme Leader response to the Mid-Term Evaluation of NERC's Theme Action Plan Process and comments in relation to the Management Response

We welcome the Mid-term Evaluation of the Theme Action Plan (TAP) process, and note the Management Response to it. While there are important messages that may be drawn from the evaluation, these should be tensioned against:

1. The low level of response for some sectors to the Mid-term Evaluation, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn from it. Only 3 of the 7 groups had a good response rate: Theme Leaders, NERC Centres (RCCs) and Swindon Office staff.
2. The evaluation was conducted before the completion of the TAP2 process. Consequently, the conclusions reached and recommendations drawn in the evaluation and the Management Response to it are dated.

Our view is that we have moved on considerably since the evaluation was conducted. We are very aware of sensitivities associated with the NERC Theme Leaders model and collectively we have been proactive in evolving our working practices to improve its efficiency.

Our comments on the Actions proposed in the Management Response are:

Action 1 SIMs to work more closely with Theme Leaders

We believe this is happening already and the TAP2 process was a good example of this. We can provide detail if needed.

Action 2 Explore the setting up of more time-limited advisory groups

Time-limited advisory groups are already widely used by Theme Leaders. Their purpose is to provide advice on the development of specific actions rather than on the themes in general. The membership of these groups has been broad, including HEIs, NERC RCCs and stakeholders, with the balance depending on the nature of the action being developed.

We agree with the Management Response with respect to standing groups.

Action 3 Review mechanisms for engaging the community throughout the development of NERC strategic priorities and TAPs

The issues around Theme Leader visibility and connection in HEIs and RCCs are important. Clearly, it is not possible to have a regular presence in 110 different UK Universities and the RCCs through a part-time job. We welcome working with Swindon Office to make the engagement more effective and efficient.

We were concerned about the claims made in the Report about bias in choice of actions. With very broad Theme remits, there is clearly a possibility of a selective view of which actions to take forward. The key issue is the extent to which actions map onto Theme challenges; this is addressed under Action 5 through engagement with SISB. Clearly, our individual research expertise areas are tightly mapped to NERC strategy and its delivery. Consequently, if we deliver NERC strategy, by default we are delivering in our own areas of competency.

Action 4 Improve the strategic input from business into the TAP development process via LWEC BAB and closer working of the Theme Leaders and NERC's Knowledge Exchange team.

We suggest this should be viewed as part of Action 1 in terms of 'team working.'

Action 5 Explore ways of strengthening SISB's role and effectiveness in the TAP process

We believe processes put in place during TAP2 and for TAP3 are addressing this action.

Action 6 TAPs to include fewer, larger actions

We support this proposal in general and suggest there are examples of it happening already in the TAP2 process. One note of caution: the size of the action should be mapped onto the capacity of the research community to deliver it. It is possible to have small actions with significant science ambition where they are moving the science forward in new directions and where they map on to the NERC Strategy.

This may be a useful point in time at which to revisit with SISB the measures of success for the Theme Leaders model in terms of delivery of the NERC Strategy. The review does not indicate whether the Theme Leader model is still considered the best way to achieve this. Nor does it come up with metrics that could be used as success measures. The Management Response makes much of the Theme Leader role in enabling NERC community liaison or NERC outreach to business and government but this would seem to be part of the role not its entirety. As spelt out in the Mid-term Evaluation Report, the Theme Leader role is:

- i. To provide scientific leadership by working with the wider scientific and stakeholder communities so that NERC is provided with the best possible advice on research needed to deliver the scientific priorities in each theme.
- ii. To champion NERC science in each theme, including acting as a focal point.
- iii. To promote strategic partnerships.
- iv. To monitor the implementation of strategic science (theme) investment plans.

We welcome further discussions on the Theme Leader role and model of working.