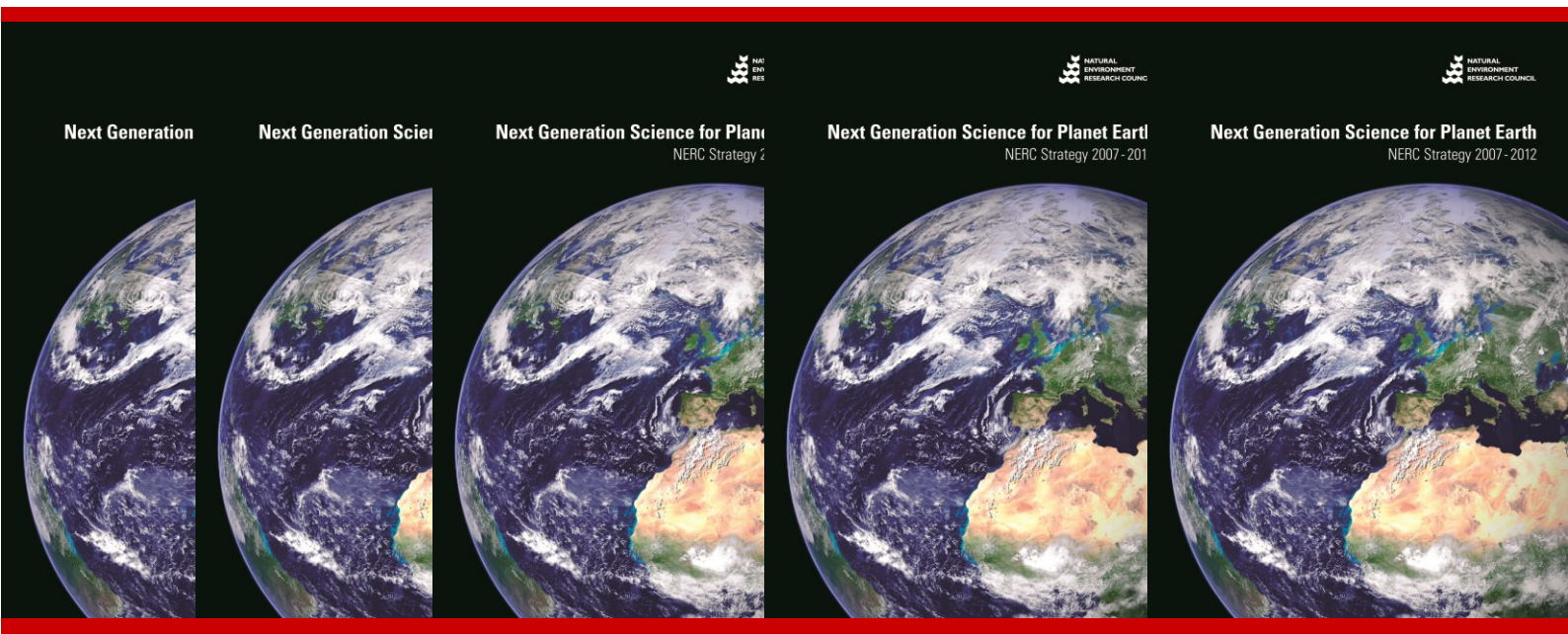


# EVALUATION REPORT



## Mid-term evaluation of NERC's Theme Action Plan process

January 2010

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### Acknowledgements

The Evaluation Team would like to thank all of the survey respondents who gave their time to contribute to the evaluation.

### Acronyms

DSP	Director for Strategy and Partnerships
HEI	Higher Education Institution
SIM	Science and Innovation Manager
SISB	NERC's Science and Innovation Strategy Board
SSPO	Senior Science Programme Officer
TAP	Theme Action Plan
TL	Theme Leader

## SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

This light-touch mid-term evaluation was commissioned to investigate how well NERC's Theme Action Plan (TAP) process is working, and hence to inform improvements to the process. It was conducted by NERC's evaluation team, and involved a brief survey in November/December 09 of current and ex Theme Leaders (TLs), members of NERC's Council and Science and Innovation Strategy Board (SISB), relevant Swindon Office (SO) staff, NERC Centre directors, Heads of university departments receiving significant NERC funding, and key stakeholder organisations.

The findings are as might be expected at mid-term: some good progress with intended benefits starting to be realised, but some areas of slower progress and a number of issues needing attention:

Topic	Highlights identified by respondents	Key issues and concerns raised by respondents
Working with the research community and stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TLs are starting to be seen, in some parts of the community and for some key government stakeholders, as a focal point for interaction between the research community and NERC</li> <li>• TLs have been successful in initiating some new partnerships and co-funding for new investments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The impact of having one TL per theme, in particular that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TLs do not have time to get to know the whole community. Some groups feel excluded, some feel that TLs are focussing too much on their own 'comfort zones'</li> <li>- The model vests too much power in individuals: TLs are too strong and subjective a filter between the community and NERC</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Preparing the TAPs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TLs are working well together as a team, and as a result, there are good linkages between TAPs and cross-theme topics are being addressed</li> <li>• TLs, through TAPs, are bringing more scientific expertise to the implementation of NERC's strategy</li> <li>• Preparing regular action plans is helping to maintain a clear and up-to-date link between NERC's strategy and investments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A perceived lack of transparency arising from the development of TAPs and TAP actions by small groups of people, the lack of feedback to the wider community</li> <li>• As a result of the above two points, a feeling amongst some of the research community and some SO staff that TAPs do not represent the community's views, do not always include the top science priorities in the area, do not have the full confidence of the community, and do not take account of the long-term sustainability of UK research capacity</li> <li>• Concern from some of the Centres that TLs do not sufficiently understand national capability, and hence that TAPs will impact on their ability to deliver</li> <li>• TLs have made little progress with building partnerships with the private sector</li> </ul>
Consideration by SISB and Council	TAPs are starting to enable SISB and Council to take a strategic view across NERC's portfolio	Although improving, SISB has been too adversarial, too willing to make major changes, and too focussed on detail. The relationship between TLs and SISB should be more one of a partnership
Timing	The move to an 18 month cycle is more appropriate than 12 months	The long lead time from starting to develop TAPs to producing calls is not giving NERC the intended agility, and is leading to frustration, funding gaps and stakeholders losing interest
Efficiency		The process has not to date been very efficient, because of the high level of inputs, the long lead times and the fact that many of the initial TAP actions have been small
TL mode of working	The mode of working (part-time, based in home institution, advisory, working closely with Science and Innovation Managers) is appropriate and generally working well	

## 1. INTRODUCTION

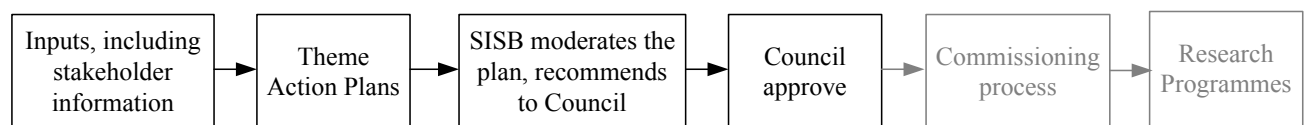
1. The Theme Action Plan (TAP) process and the Theme Leader role were devised as part of wider changes to NERC's strategy delivery processes, and entered operation in 2007. After two planning cycles and with the majority of TL contracts ending in a year's time, it is now timely to undertake a light-touch mid-term evaluation of the process.
2. This evaluation was commissioned by NERC's Director for Strategy and Partnerships and the chair of NERC's Science and Innovation Strategy Board (SISB), to:
  - Provide evidence on how well the TAP process is working;
  - Identify best practice and lessons learned, to inform improvements to the process; and
  - Identify best practice and lessons learned of relevance to other NERC business.

### Theme Action Plans and Theme Leaders

3. TAPs are the way in which NERC identifies how it will deliver the challenges identified under the seven science themes in its strategy<sup>1</sup>. One TAP for each theme is developed by Theme Leaders and Swindon Office, drawing on a variety of inputs including consultation with the research community and key stakeholder organisations. The process, and how it leads to the commissioning of research, is summarised below. Two rounds of TAPs have been produced to date, the first was approved by Council in July 2008, the second in November 2009. Further information is available at [www.nerc.ac.uk/research/themes/tap](http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/themes/tap).

#### Simplified: The Theme Action Plan process (and scope for the evaluation)<sup>2</sup>

The subsequent processes are included for context but are not part of this evaluation



4. Seven TLs were recruited in 2007, one for each theme. The role is closely allied with the TAP process, but also has other responsibilities. The role description describes four key foci:
  - 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;
  - To champion NERC science in each theme, including acting as a focal point;
  - To promote strategic partnerships; and
  - To monitor the implementation of strategic science (theme) investment plans.
5. The role description also describes their way of working, including that they are part-time and based in the community; attend and advise/report directly to SISB; work as a team with other TLs and work closely with relevant executive officers; lead in developing particular proposals and theme action plans in response to strategy; and work primarily at the strategic theme level, with no executive responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/strategy/ngscience.asp>

<sup>2</sup> This diagram is simplified for illustration, the full process maps are included at [www.nerc.ac.uk/about/delivery](http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/delivery)

## Evaluation objectives and methodology

6. The objectives of the evaluation were:
  - **To investigate the effectiveness of the TAP process, particularly the effectiveness of the TL model, and the effectiveness of SISB’s role in the process; and**
  - **To identify ways in which the TAP process and TL model could be improved and made more robust.**
7. The evaluation covered the TAP process, as shown in black in the diagram at paragraph 3. It did **not** cover the individual performance of TLs; the commissioning process (which will be evaluated next year as it has only been through one TAP cycle); or progress with implementing the science themes through the TAPs.
8. The evaluation was managed by NERC's Evaluation Team. Evidence was gathered through sending a short, tailored list of survey questions to the groups listed in the table below in November and December 09. Ninety-two responses were received. Individual responses were treated confidentially, i.e. were Many respondents took up the offered option of retaining confidentiality (i.e. that their responses would only be seen by the evaluation team, and would not be reproduced or accredited in the report).

**Table 1: Summary of questionnaires sent and received**

Group	Sent	Received	
		Number	% of sent
Current and past Theme Leaders	9	7	78%
Current and recent SISB members	21	8	38%
Current and recent Council members	14	4	29%
Relevant NERC Swindon Office staff <sup>3</sup>	28	19	68%
Research community: Heads of HEI Departments <sup>4</sup>	147 from 54 institutions	34 from 21 institutions	23%, 39% of institutions
Research community: Research Centre directors <sup>5</sup>	7 Centres	10 from 7 Centres	100%
Key user organisations (listed at Annex 1)	35 from 26 organisations	10 from 9 organisations	35%, 35% of organisations
<b>Total</b>	<b>261</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>35%</b>

9. The responses were analysed by the Evaluation Team, and this report produced for the Director of Strategy and Partnerships (DSP). Percentages are given where legitimate (where responses fell into discreet categories and where a reasonable number of responses were received), in other cases, a semi-quantitative scale (a few, some, many, most) has been used.
10. DSP, as customer for the evaluation, is responsible for producing a Management Response setting out actions to be taken as a result of the evaluation. The report and draft Management Response will be considered by SISB, and the final versions copied to Council and published on NERC's website.
11. The surveys generated a wealth of comments and ideas. This report is brief at the request of the customer, and aims to highlight the main messages to key decision-makers. Additional detail of value to process managers in Swindon Office is included at Annex 2.

<sup>3</sup> Staff involved with TAPs and TLs, or responsible for areas affected by/relevant to them, including Science and Innovation Managers (SIMs) and Senior Science Programme Officers (SSPOs)

<sup>4</sup> Departments currently receiving >£0.5 million from NERC. Many consulted their staff before sending a collated response. In addition, plus 5 HoDs sent unsolicited responses

<sup>5</sup> BAS, BGS, CEH, NCAS, NCEO, POL, Oceans 2025 (on behalf of the marine Centres), plus 3 staff sent individual responses

## 2. SURVEY FINDINGS: THE TAP PROCESS

### Introductory remarks

12. This section considers each step of the TAP process in turn. Before describing the findings, it is important briefly to consider the context. The TAP process and TLs were major changes for NERC, the research community and user organisations. It will take time for these changes to settle down, for teething problems to be resolved and for best practice to be shared (indeed this was one of DSP's key reasons for commissioning this evaluation). At this relatively early stage in implementation, therefore, rather than asking whether the current model is perfect, it may be fairer to consider whether the situation is improving, and whether NERC is travelling in the right direction. Similarly, it should also be borne in mind that the allocation of funding in a highly competitive environment will inevitably result in some parts of the community feeling less well off at times.

### Step 1: Building relationships

#### a) With the research community

13. All TLs, some Board members, SO staff and Centre respondents, and a few HEI respondents felt that this aspect of the TL model is working relatively well: that TLs are building relationships amongst their communities, are helping to communicate NERC's strategy to the community, and are starting to be seen as a focal point for interaction with NERC. A few noted that effectiveness has varied between TLs.
14. However, the majority of respondents, and particularly those from HEIs, felt that TLs are not fully effective in this aspect of their role. A significant proportion of HEI departments reported very little contact with TLs (Tables 2 and 3). In addition, the majority, even amongst those who had been visited, felt that there had been little follow up interaction or feedback. This is reflected in the fact that the majority of respondents said that TLs have not changed the way that their department interacts with NERC.

*Tables 2 & 3: HEI responses on contact with TLs*

How much contact have you had with TLs? (some overlap)	% of depts
Regular contact with relevant TLs	15%
Relevant TL(s) has visited	38%
Only at community events	38%
No contact	18%

Have TLs changed the way your dept interacts with NERC?	% of depts
Has become slightly better	18%
No change	56%
Has become worse	3%

15. Most of the Centres reported good and frequent contact with TLs, through visits, meetings and community events. Two were less satisfied, and felt that TLs did not know or understand their Centre well.
16. Four main issues were raised:
- Concern, from almost all respondents (and shown by the above evidence), that TLs do not have enough time to get to know the community or the research landscape, especially for the broader themes;
  - Having one TL per theme has in some cases led to TLs (knowingly or unknowingly, and partly inevitably due to the lack of time) favouring building relationships amongst their part of the community;

- It is difficult for TLs to fulfil their role properly, as explained by an SO staff member *“Theme leaders have to walk a very thin line between representing NERC and representing the science community. This means that the theme leaders are neither an “unfettered” advocate for their community or conversely “open” conduits of information on “how things really are” within NERC. Instead, some see them as simply conveying the NERC “party line”, which isn’t much different from the sort of contact they have had available to them in the past”*; and
- TLs should not be ‘leading’, and are usually not the most appropriate people to do so (e.g. it would not be possible for one person to be seen by the community as the leading scientist in all of a theme’s science), their role should more be one of facilitation and co-ordination.

17. The consequences of these concerns for the TAPs and NERC are discussed under Step 2.

## **b) With stakeholders**

### Public sector

18. All TLs and some Board members and SO staff felt that TLs have been quite successful at building relationships with key stakeholder organisations in government, as illustrated by the new partnerships and co-funding included in the first two rounds of TAPs. One SIM noted that TLs have the necessary influence and status to get the attention of other organisations.
19. These views were reflected by the fact that the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC), the Met Office and the Living With Environmental Change partnership (LWEC), some of the stakeholders closest to NERC's remit, reported regular contact with TLs. However, most of the other stakeholders reported no more than incidental contact with TLs, and that TLs have not changed the way they interact with NERC (although some did note that they had not made much effort to interact with TLs either).
20. TLs and SO staff raised concern over a number of operational issues:
- Relationships are time consuming to develop, TLs do not have sufficient time to do this properly (or do so at the opportunity cost of other important work);
  - Progress in this area has been hampered by ambiguity and overlap over the roles of TLs and SO staff, but that this is currently being clarified; and
  - The fact that TLs undertake the initial contact then hands over to NERC staff to negotiate the contract means that new relationships (between the stakeholder and NERC staff) need to be developed mid way through the development of the partnership.
21. One stakeholder suggested that it would be more effective to recruit someone from the stakeholder community, with a better understanding of user needs and without the bias of needing to maintain an academic career, to identify the science needs of stakeholders and then to refine these with academics.

### Private sector

22. Few respondents commented on the private sector, but those who did noted that little progress has been made, as this area has not been prioritised by TLs. SO staff commented that for private sector interactions, TLs could beneficially work more closely with NERC's Knowledge Exchange team.

## Step 2: Preparing the TAPs

23. TLs and some SO staff and Board members felt that the process for preparing the TAP document is generally working well. Three aspects which have been major improvements on previous practice were identified:
- Almost all respondents noted that TLs are working together as a team, the benefits of which were noted by a Council member: *“The number and scope of cross-theme initiatives is clear evidence that the TLs operate as a team. Moreover the degree of unity they have exhibited in formulating and developing the TAPs has been impressive”*;
  - TLs, through TAPs, are bringing more scientific expertise to the implementation of NERC’s strategy (meeting one of the original aims of TLs and TAPs);
  - Preparing regular action plans is helping to maintain a clear and up-to-date link between NERC’s strategy and the design and implementation of investments; and
  - It has been valuable having someone responsible for synthesising information across a theme and being able to advise on significant strengths, weaknesses or gaps.
24. HEIs and Centres were asked whether they had been involved in the development of the TAPs. All of the Centres had, through 1:1 meetings, working groups and community events. Of the HEIs, 21% had been involved at several points during the process, 15% had attended an initial community event but had had no further contact despite promises of feedback, and 38% had not had any involvement.
25. Respondents raised two issues in particular:
- Some respondents felt that the one-person-per-theme aspect of the model was a strength and was starting to provide a focus for the community’s interactions with NERC. However, the majority were less positive, feeling a) that TLs do not have the time to properly get to know the whole community and the whole research landscape, and b) that the model vests too much power in individuals, meaning that NERC’s RP investments are too influenced by their particular expertise (comfort zone) and views, i.e. that TLs are too strong and subjective a filter between the community and NERC; and
  - Some HEI, Centre and SO respondents felt that the preparation of TAPs (and also subsequently, in the development of each Research Programme) **lacks transparency**. They were frustrated that after initial wide community consultation, the process seemed to disappear into ‘smoke filled rooms’ where further work was done by small writing groups, with no subsequent feedback to the wider community. They felt that some of the programmes had been ‘stitched up’ by small groups close to the TLs, and some parts of the community felt excluded altogether.
26. Respondents felt that these weaknesses had led to the cases where the TAPs and TAP actions do not represent the community’s views or the top scientific priorities for the theme, had dented the community’s confidence in TLs and ultimately NERC, and would have a detrimental impact on the long-term sustainability of the UK’s scientific capability (see also paragraph 29), and on NERC’s ability to deliver its strategy.
27. These two quotes from heads of HEI departments illustrate the issue:
- “I don’t think they all have the ‘big picture’ of their theme area. Some neglect aspects - primarily those where they have less expertise/interest - others seems to be buffeted by the ‘wind’ of scientists badgering them for support for a given area, so TAPs represent who they were ‘got at’ by last (and that may have been SISB!)”*
- “Effective academics target funding according to available budget and likelihood of success. The TAP process requires significant effort by academics (consulting, lobbying, liaising with other institutions), success rates are unknown, and funds available for any particular topic are*



*unknown. This is a disincentive to many academics who could play a major role in delivering NERC science”.*

28. A number of potential solutions were suggested, including:
  - SIMs, with their knowledge of the community, greater understanding of the NERC portfolio and implementation issues, and lack of vested interests, should work more closely with TLs, and on more of an equal footing;
  - 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;
  - There should be a more formal process for involving the community in the various stages of TAP development; and
  - Each theme should have more than one TL.
29. Four of the Centres were concerned that TLs have not been able to develop a full understanding of Centres’ remit, variety of activity and scope of expertise, and that as a result the TAPs take little account of NC. They reported that this is leading to funding gaps that will reduce Centres’ ability to deliver of NC (particularly in cases where research is needed to maintain the NC e.g. having leading scientists to advise government, providing the community with cutting edge technology).
30. SO staff noted that potential partners can be put off or are reluctant to commit funds because a) TLs cannot commit for NERC because they are not executive and b) NERC cannot commit until Council has approved funding, or has to wait to develop partnerships until Council has approved funding.

### **Step 3: Consideration of draft and final TAPs by SISB**

31. A few respondents thought this was working well, and that it had enabled SISB a strategic view across NERC’s portfolio. The majority were less positive, although many did note that the situation is improving. The following concerns were commonly raised:
  - SISB have been too adversarial, and too willing to make major changes at a late stage in the process. The relationship should be more one of partnership, with SISB feeling ownership. Suggestions included getting SISB members more involved in the early stages, and giving them more time with the papers to allow more considered thought at the draft stage;
  - SISB has focussed too much on detail, and not enough on what should be its key role, which is taking the strategic overview (e.g. will the TAPs together deliver strategy?);
  - A few respondents were concerned that some SISB members are becoming advocates for their own areas; and
  - A few centre and HEI respondents felt that it is a weakness that they can no longer present their case for funding directly to SISB.

### **Step 4: Approval by Council**

32. It is impossible to draw conclusions here, as very few respondents commented on the treatment of TAPs by Council, and all of the comments received were different.
33. This was the end of the evaluation scope in terms of steps in the TAP process. A few respondents made process-level comments about the commissioning process, these are included at Annex 2.

### Timing and periodicity of the process

34. All of the survey groups were asked to comment on the timing and periodicity of the process. Although a few thought that an annual process was good, most TLs, board members and SO staff thought it was too frequent, using up a large proportion of TL time, meaning there was not enough time for TLs to scope, consult and develop partnerships, and leading to actions that were too small. Most felt that the proposed 18 month gap until the third TAP round will work better. A few noted that with a longer gap, the mechanism for approving investments in between TAPs where necessary, e.g. taking up arising opportunities with other funders, will be very important to retaining agility.
35. The few comments on timing and periodicity from Centres and HEIs were that the time from developing TAPs to producing calls is too slow, i.e. that the process does not give the agility that was intended. Respondents felt that this was leading to frustration in the community, stakeholders losing interest, funding gaps, and the risk that the science will have moved on by the time the programmes are funded.

### Overall effectiveness and efficiency of the TAP process in delivering NERC's strategy

36. By way of conclusion, Theme Leaders, SISB members, Council members and SO staff were asked whether they felt that the process for deciding NERC RP investment via TAPs is effective and efficient in delivery NERC's strategy. Respondents made a wide range of comments, but the main messages were:
- **Effectiveness:** noting that it is early days, the majority were fairly positive. Reflecting the discussion above, the main concerns were the risks and consequences associated with investing so much responsibility in one person, and the gaps in coverage of the first two TAPs (although these views are counterbalanced by the research community's concerns discussed above); and
  - **Efficiency:** respondents were less positive here, noting that the high cost (in terms of community and staff time) and long lead time for Research Programmes were not particularly efficient, especially as the early TAPs had led to many small activities.

## 3. SURVEY FINDINGS: ADDITIONAL ASPECTS OF THE THEME LEADER MODEL

37. This section considers other features of the TL role not covered above.
38. **Providing strategic advice, with no executive delivery responsibility:** Respondents felt that this is an important aspect of the model, as it helps to ensure that TLs perceived as being independent. TLs, board members and SO staff felt that this generally works well, although success has varied between TLs, and this aspect can be difficult for community to understand. Some TLs and SO staff noted a lack of clarity regarding the role of TLs in implementing TAPs, noting that this was improving with time (further detail in Annex 2).
39. **Monitoring the implementation of TAPs:** This is one of the four key foci for the TL role, but given that implementation is still in the early stages, those asked (TLs, SISB, Council, SO staff) felt that it was too early to judge.<sup>6</sup>
40. **Part-time:** TLs and SO staff gave a very similar response: that the job must be part time to enable the incumbent to maintain their research interests and standing in the community, but

<sup>6</sup> A process to monitor theme delivery has recently been agreed and will be piloted in 2010. This will fully involve TLs, and has been designed to enable them to fulfil this aspect of their role.

that the role as currently set up is too much to do in part time (the impacts of which e.g. lack of time for getting to know the community are discussed above). Suggestions focussed on getting more people involved, as discussed at paragraph 28.

41. **Based in home institution:** Both TLs and SO staff felt that staying in their home institution was essential to TLs being perceived as part of the community and independent from NERC, and to being able to take up other roles after stepping down.
42. **Administrative assistance based in Swindon:** Both TLs and SO staff (including TL assistants) felt that this generally works well. Uptake varies as some TLs prefer to use their local support.
43. **Working with other TLs as a team:** This aspect of the model provoked the most positive response – all TLs, and almost all SO staff, SISB and Council members felt that TLs are working well as a team, and that this is a strength of the model. The fact that this was working is shown by the number of cross-disciplinary actions in the TAPs.
44. **Working closely with SIMs:** Both TLs and SO staff felt that this aspect is very important to enabling TLs to prioritise the science and understand delivery issues. They reported that it has mostly worked well, especially as the process settles in and roles become clarified. Several were concerned about remaining confusion about responsibility for developing partnerships (paragraph 20). A few SIMs and SISB members felt that SIMs should have a higher profile and be more influential with TLs (one of the options at paragraph 28).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

45. The findings are as might be expected at mid-term: some good progress with intended benefits starting to be realised, but some areas of slower progress and a number of issues needing attention:
46. Three courses of action could now be beneficial:
  - A: Taking action as appropriate to address actual and perceived weaknesses in the model,** taking into account the suggestions made by respondents;
  - B: Communicating with the research and stakeholder communities,** to address areas where clarification, assurance and confidence is needed; and
  - C: Communicating the results of the evaluation:** preparing a clear Management Response that sets out any actions that will be taken, and communicating this report and the Management Response, both directly to respondents and other interested parties e.g. the NERC Executive Board, and to a wider audience through NERC's website.

## **ANNEX 1: LIST OF USER ORGANISATIONS INVITED TO RESPOND**

This list was put together in consultation with NERC's Stakeholder Liaison Team and the SIMs. It was not meant to be exhaustive, merely a sample of some of the key organisations which have/should have been involved in the TAP process.

The organisations which responded are shown in **bold**.

### **CENTRAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH PARTNERS/USERS**

#### **Department of Energy and Climate Change**

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Department for International Development

#### **Department for Transport**

Department of Health

Ministry of Defence

### **OTHER GOVERNMENT RESEARCH PARTNERS/USERS**

Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council

Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council

The Economic and Social Research Council

Medical Research Council

Science and Technology Facilities Council

Technology Strategy Board

Environment Agency

Health Protection Agency

Joint Nature Conservation Committee

#### **Living with Environmental Change**

#### **Met Office**

#### **Natural England**

National Physical Laboratory

#### **Scottish Government**

#### **Scottish Environment Protection Agency**

SEPA

#### **Welsh Assembly**

### **PRIVATE SECTOR**

Willis Re

#### **UK Water Industry Research**

Infoterra

Lighthill Risk Network

## **ANNEX 2: FOR SO STAFF: DETAILED PROCESS-LEVEL COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS**

Respondents made a number of more detailed process-level suggestions, which are summarised here for reference for Swindon Office process managers.

### **Managing Theme Leaders**

- TLs would be much more efficient if they had more support and independence in developing actions through workshops and other mechanisms;
- It would be helpful if TL Assistants could access TLs' online diaries to enable them to be more aware and to know how to contact TLs when urgent;
- Some SO staff would appreciate more frequent visits to Swindon (say once a quarter) as many had not yet met the TLs;

### **Building relationships with the research community**

- There was a mixed response from those who had attended TL community events. Some had found them a useful way to keep in touch with developments and to network, others had been disappointed that they seemed to be more about announcing decisions already made than about truly working together. A few were frustrated that spaces at these events have been so limited;

### **Building relationships with stakeholders**

- As an indicator of stakeholder buy-in, it would be helpful if TLs could list in TAPs what interaction they have had with stakeholders during development of the plan;

### **Preparing TAPs**

- SO should have more involvement in the development of costs and financial profiles for TAP actions, to ensure that they are realistic and appropriate;
- TAP financial profiles should be submitted well before the deadline for SISB papers to enable the office to assess the appropriateness of those financial profiles before SISB;
- More help from SO in mapping existing investments, identifying investment implications, and developing partnerships would free up time for TLs;

### **Implementing TAPs**

- A few TLs and SO staff were concerned that programmes are not always being implemented as the TL envisaged, due to the brevity of descriptions in the TAP. The fact that TLs are now being consulted as programmes are being developed should help to address this issue. SSPOs also suggested that as they are the ones implementing the programmes, it would be beneficial if they were more involved during the development of the TAP, so that they develop an early understanding of the context and issues, and start to build relationships with partners.
- To tackle the issue of vested interests and perceived cliques, the Chairs of RP Boards and of the writing teams for RP science plans should be independent people with some knowledge of the NERC system; and
- The 2-page descriptions of new actions and subsequent community events to develop these actions should be more widely publicised – to the research community, and also to partners that should start to be engaged at this early stage.