



Natural Environment Research Council – Stakeholder Audit

Executive Summary
October 2015

Methodology

Quantitative research

ComRes interviewed 250 Natural Environment Research Council stakeholders online between the 5th June and 30th June 2015. Stakeholders fell into the following categories, broadly reflecting the make-up of the Natural Environment Research Council’s stakeholder database:

Stakeholder group	Number of completes
Media	6
Government & BIS	33
Business	69
Academic	91
Third sector	31
International	2
Research Council	3
NERC board	15
Total	250

Initial approach emails were sent by NERC’s stakeholder managers to stakeholders, after which ComRes sent personalised email invitations to the online survey. A total of 1,109 stakeholders were approached by ComRes, of whom 250 completed the questionnaire – representing a response rate of 23%.

Please note that, as with all stakeholder research, this sample is comprised of respondents who opted in to participating in the research. Fieldwork was monitored throughout to ensure that the breakdown of the final sample broadly reflected the Natural Environment Research Council’s stakeholder database.

Qualitative research

ComRes interviewed 26 Natural Environment Research Council stakeholders by telephone between the 5th June and 30th June 2015. Stakeholders fell into the following categories, broadly reflecting the make-up of the Natural Environment Research Council’s stakeholder database:

Stakeholder group	Number of completes
Government & BIS	6
Academic	10
Third Sector	4
Business	6
Total	26

As part of the initial quantitative survey, stakeholders were asked to indicate whether they would be happy to participate in a follow up qualitative interview. Invitations to participate were then sent to these stakeholders who had opted in, and qualitative interviews lasting around between 20 and 30 minutes were conducted by ComRes’s trained interviewers. It is important to note that, as with all stakeholder research, the sample is self-selecting – all stakeholders who participated in the quantitative research were asked to opt-in to participate in the secondary phase of qualitative interviews.

To ensure an accurate reflection of stakeholder opinion, ComRes put quotas in place on each stakeholder group to ensure that a proportionate number of qualitative interviews were conducted with each stakeholder group, so as to accurately reflect NERC’s stakeholder database. Additional to this, ComRes put quotas in place which took into account engagement with NERC in terms of familiarity and favourability with the organisation as indicated by stakeholders in the quantitative research. As such, ComRes ensured that a broad spread of interviews were conducted covering not only the full range of stakeholder groups, but also that similar numbers of interviews were conducted both with those who are highly familiar and less familiar with NERC, as well as those who are highly favourable and less favourable towards NERC to ensure an accurate picture of opinion.

It is important to note that the purpose of the qualitative interviews is to provide greater depth and insight to the representative picture of opinion provided by the quantitative research, rather than providing a representative benchmark of opinion in itself. This is reflected in both the different sample sizes and the different nature of questions asked at each stage.

Audience summaries

Academics

Academic stakeholders are the most likely stakeholder group to say that they are familiar with the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). Almost all (98%) academic stakeholders say that they are familiar with NERC, with three quarters (76%) saying that they know “a great deal” about the organisation. Three in five (58%) say that they come into contact with NERC on a weekly basis, with more than four in five (86%) saying that they do so at least monthly. Academics are most likely to have come into contact with NERC in the last 12 months via its website (89%), through direct emails from NERC (82%) and via grant applications (80%). Three quarters say that they have attended NERC events (74%) in the last 12 months, with seven in ten (72%) saying that they have had face to face contact or meetings with NERC during this time frame.

Nine in ten (88%) academic stakeholders say that the contact which they have with the Natural Environment Research Council is helpful to them in their professional role, with half (47%) saying this is very helpful. Four in five (82%) academic stakeholders say that they would be likely to speak positively about NERC if asked, with two in five (44%) saying they would be very likely to do so. Just one in ten academic stakeholders (13%) say that they would be unlikely to speak positively about NERC if asked.

Academic stakeholders have the greatest understanding of all stakeholder groups of the range of areas of NERC’s work. They are most likely to associate NERC with the provision of research grants, both discovery science (96%) and strategic (92%), of the areas of work tested, with similarly high proportions of academic stakeholders also associating NERC with skills and training (83%), knowledge exchange and innovation (80%) and infrastructure funding (70%). Academic stakeholders are less likely to associate NERC with public engagement (62%), environmental policy advice (52%) and communications (47%) of the areas tested.

Academic stakeholders are also the most likely group to say that they are familiar with the vision of the Natural Environment Research Council. Nine in ten (92%) say that they are familiar with this, with almost half (48%) saying that they are very familiar. Three quarters (74%) of academic stakeholders say that NERC is effective in achieving this vision – while 10% say NERC is very effective. One in five academic stakeholders (22%) say NERC is ineffective in achieving this vision.

While many academic stakeholders note that they have a good working relationship with NERC both centrally and on an individual level, others note that while they have good individual working relationships with NERC they have limited contact with “central” NERC. A minority of academic stakeholders note that despite being recipients of NERC funding they have little contact with either “central” NERC or other NERC-funded academics on a project-by-project basis. Broadly, it is felt by academic stakeholders that while contact with NERC is very helpful at an individual level, it is less helpful at a strategic level (including consultations). This entails that academic stakeholders do not always have a holistic understanding of the range of research which it funds and conducts, or of its strategic priorities.

Looking forward, a majority of academic stakeholders cite their concerns regarding the balance between NERC funding of blue sky and strategic science. Many academic stakeholders see NERC placing an increased focus on evidencing impact in recent years. Some are concerned that in the current economic climate, and given stretched resources, NERC is directing much of its funding towards strategic science by means of which NERC can demonstrate its social and economic impact. While most academic stakeholders recognise the need for NERC-funded research to demonstrate impact, some are concerned that this distribution of funding will have the unintended consequence of NERC-funded science becoming focused too heavily on the short term and also runs the risk of curtailing unanticipated scientific discoveries.

More broadly, many academic stakeholders cite the difficulties which NERC and individual scientists face in terms of evidencing social and economic impact. Some mention the difficulties of illustrating the impact of any one given research project in isolation – as often the impact is seen retrospectively, as part of a wider trend of research projects. Others note that these criteria simply aren’t relevant for many types of research – such as longitudinal research – and should not be applied. Similar concerns are raised by some academic stakeholders with regard to knowledge transfer – while broadly NERC is seen to be focusing increasingly on knowledge exchange, some academics note that it is simply more difficult to facilitate this on projects which are less immediately accessible to wider audiences (for example, projects which particularly theoretical).

Maintaining the UK’s position as a world leader in environmental research is the top priority which academic stakeholders see facing NERC in the coming years. Ensuring that NERC’s strategic direction is communicated well to academic stakeholders, and that these



stakeholders are given the opportunity to feed into this will be key in ensuring stakeholder buy in to enable NERC to achieve this priority.