



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

Government

Around nine in ten (88%) Government stakeholders say that they are familiar with NERC, with half (52%) saying that they “know a great deal” about the organisation. One in three (32%) Government stakeholders say that they come into contact with NERC at least weekly, with three in five (61%) saying that they do so at least once a month.

Government stakeholders are most likely to have come into contact with NERC through face to face contact or meetings (67%) in the last 12 months, with a similar proportion (61%) saying they have received emails from NERC during this timeframe. Half (52%) say that they have visited the NERC website or attended NERC events (48%) in the last year, with three in ten (30%) saying that they have received newsletters from NERC during this time. Nine in ten (90%) Government stakeholders say that the contact which they have with NERC is useful to them in their professional role, with two in five (42%) saying this is very helpful. Encouragingly, the vast majority of stakeholders (97%) say that they are favourable towards NERC, with no government stakeholders interviewed saying that they are unfavourable towards the organisation. Just less than nine in ten (88%) say that they would be likely to speak positively about NERC if asked.

Government stakeholders are most likely to associate NERC with providing strategic research grants (94%), providing discovery science grants and knowledge exchange and innovation (82% for each). Just over half (55%) associate NERC with providing skills and training and environmental policy advice (52%), with slightly fewer associating it with infrastructure funding (48%), public engagement and communications (45% for each). Similar proportions of government stakeholders say that they are familiar (52%) and unfamiliar (45%) with the vision of the Natural Environment Research Council. However, once provided with the detail of NERC’s vision, three quarters (73%) of government stakeholders say that NERC is effective in achieving this, although one in five (21%) say that they do not know.

Strategic engagement, evidencing impact and communication are of particular importance for government stakeholders. Government stakeholders cite a need for more information on what NERC are doing centrally, both in terms of the breadth and depth of research which they fund and conduct, and NERC’s own strategic direction as they often only have sight of one particular project or subject area. As such, many cite a need for regular, tailored updates which provide this holistic view.

Looking at communication of research findings specifically, many government stakeholders note that brief summaries of the policy implications of individual research projects which avoid scientific language and jargon would be really helpful both in terms of increasing knowledge exchange, and evidencing the impact of NERC-funded and conducted research.

Knowledge exchange is a particular area of interest for government stakeholders. Alongside digestible communications which avoid academic language, government stakeholders cite interest in NERC working with government and industry to enable two-way knowledge exchange. At present, government stakeholders see knowledge exchange happening in one direction only – from academics to stakeholders and would appreciate the opportunity to develop a form of knowledge exchange which works both ways, whereby government and industry stakeholders go into academic institutions and discuss the impact of individual research projects as well as social and economic topics where they see a need for further research.

Government stakeholders also cite a need for strategic engagement at the outset of research projects and would welcome the opportunity to feed into steering groups and shape project development to ensure that NERC-funded research projects are sufficiently tailored to achieve social and economic impact. Interdisciplinary working is seen as a key area in which social and economic impact can be achieved, and the possibilities of developing of specific funding streams which enable this and working with other Research Councils to develop these streams are discussed by this stakeholder group.

Government stakeholders recognise the importance of evidencing impact – particularly in the current economic climate – and also the need to develop mechanisms which evaluate research expenditure to justify funding. Some government stakeholders are concerned in particular about a lack of spending on infrastructure, and cite the need to ensure that funding is reserved for infrastructure spending so that the UK does not lose its research capabilities. Broadly, however, government stakeholders would welcome the opportunity for frequent and tailored communications from NERC and the opportunity to feed in on both its strategic direction and on a project-by-project basis where applicable.