



# Natural Environment Research Council – Stakeholder Audit

Executive Summary  
October 2015

## Methodology

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### Quantitative research

ComRes interviewed 250 Natural Environment Research Council stakeholders online between the 5<sup>th</sup> June and 30<sup>th</sup> 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>

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 5<sup>th</sup> June and 30<sup>th</sup> 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>

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.

## Executive summary

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While stakeholders report relatively high levels of engagement with the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), questions arise as to what stakeholders understand engagement with NERC to be, and with whom.

The quantitative research illustrates that four in five stakeholders are familiar with NERC, with more than half reporting that they “know a great deal” about the organisation. Stakeholders also report frequent communication with the organisation: two in five say that they come into contact with the organisation at least weekly, with two thirds saying that they do so at least monthly. However, the qualitative research reveals that this relationship is more complex than may be immediately clear from this topline finding. Stakeholders are most likely to engage with NERC on a topical or project-by-project basis and are therefore most likely to engage directly with NERC-funded academics, both within universities and NERC’s own centres and institutes. As such, stakeholders are considerably less likely to engage with what some refer to as “central NERC” – understood as those working strategically on behalf of the organisation in NERC’s head office in Swindon – with some stakeholders not doing so at all.

As might be expected, therefore, it follows that academic stakeholders report coming into contact with NERC more frequently than other stakeholder groups – as they are most likely to be working directly with NERC-funded individuals on particular research projects. Just under one in five academics report that they come into contact with NERC on a daily basis, compared to just 2% of business stakeholders who say the same.

The majority of stakeholder engagement with NERC is therefore indirect: stakeholders are most likely to come into contact with those in the academic community, which means that NERC’s reputation is primarily defined by those whom it funds. This presents a challenge for NERC, as recognised by several stakeholders, as it has less control over the factors that influence how it is perceived. In addition, with NERC’s primary objective as an organisation seen by stakeholders to be facilitating world class research into the natural environment, its main measure of success is seen as the achievement of such research. In this way, the NERC-funded academics, as opposed to “central” NERC in head office, are seen to have much of the responsibility for NERC’s ultimate success.

However, the personal and often long-running relationships NERC stakeholders have with the NERC-funded academics with whom they work entail that favourability levels towards

the organisation are high. Nine in ten stakeholders note that they are favourable towards NERC, with one in three reporting that they are “very favourable”. It is interesting to note that favourability levels are highest among government and business stakeholders, despite these groups reporting lower contact and familiarity with NERC than academic stakeholders. Reflecting high levels of favourability across the board, potential advocacy levels are similarly high among NERC stakeholders. More than four in five stakeholders say that they would speak positively of NERC if asked, and this is consistent across stakeholder groups.

These high levels of favourability and potential advocacy reflect the strong appreciation reported by stakeholders for NERC’s mission and purpose as an organisation – which, as outlined above, is seen to be the provision of funding for world class research into the natural environment. Stakeholders are aligned on the necessity of this, particularly given the current environmental challenges which they see facing the UK and the world more broadly.

However, while a majority of stakeholders say that they are familiar with the vision of the Natural Environment Research Council, with a third saying that they are “very familiar”, it is important to recognise the limitations of this familiarity. The indirect contact that the majority of stakeholders have with NERC – often mediated via those whom it funds – entails that while stakeholders have a good understanding of NERC’s work in a particular subject or topic area, and understand its wider mission as facilitating world class research, stakeholders are less likely to have a good understanding of NERC’s broader strategic objectives or the breadth of its work.

When asked about the remit of NERC, stakeholders are most likely to cite the provision of research grants, both strategic and those relating to discovery science. Similar proportions of stakeholders associate NERC with providing knowledge exchange and innovation, with slightly fewer associating NERC with providing skills, training and public engagement. Stakeholders are least likely to associate NERC with providing communications, of the areas of work tested.

Communication is noted as a key area for improvement by NERC stakeholders. While many stakeholders – particularly academic stakeholders – note frequent communication with NERC, as outlined above it becomes clear through the qualitative interviews that although many stakeholders may have frequent communication with NERC this communication is primarily on a project-by-project basis with NERC-funded academics, as opposed to those in head office. As such, many stakeholders cite the usefulness of receiving tailored email updates outlining current NERC projects, as well as information on its strategic direction and

goals. Furthermore, in lieu of centralised contact, stakeholders also highlight the difficulties of finding NERC specialists in certain topic areas, and indicate the usefulness of a directory of NERC contacts which would provide these contact details.

Overall, NERC is seen by its stakeholders to perform well across the majority of the areas of its work tested. Skills, training and research grants are seen as particular strengths, with room for improvement noted in terms of public engagement and generating evidence of the social and economic impact of its research. Explored in depth as part of the qualitative interviews, stakeholders note the need to evidence social and economic impact in part as a justification of the sector – particularly in light of the upcoming government Spending Review – but also note the difficulties of doing so in a meaningful way which is more than a “checkbox” exercise. While many stakeholders do see NERC placing an increased focus on evidencing social and economic impact in recent years, others do not and would welcome this focus.

Broadly, the issues with evidencing social and economic impact are seen to be more fundamental than the nature or quality of the evidence provided to this end. While stakeholders do note some areas for improvement in the selection, design and evaluation of research projects to increase the potential for social and economic impact, the difficulties of evidencing such impact on any one piece of research are additionally noted. A minority of stakeholders illustrate the difficulties both of quantifying the impact of any one piece of research in isolation – as opposed to as part of a wider set of research projects – and the necessarily relative nature of “policy impact” in particular which is seen as being dependent on government priorities and environmental concerns at any given time.

NERC’s current and future focus on “impact” and the balance between strategic and discovery science is a contentious area for stakeholders. While many note that NERC has put a clear focus on the socio-economic impact of its research in recent years, and cite the importance of evidencing this impact as outlined above, there remains a sense among others that more can be done to achieve this.

## Areas of opportunity

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While stakeholders cite high levels of favourability towards the Natural Environment Research Council and broadly appreciate its mission and the work that it does, they note a number of areas for improvement in its stakeholder engagement, as outlined below.

- **Centralised and regular communication**

Communication is a key area for improvement noted by stakeholders. The indirect nature of current communications between stakeholders and NERC – primarily mediated by those funded by NERC either in universities or NERC centres and institutes – entails that few have regular contact with those working strategically in NERC head office, and that communications with NERC are largely informal and restricted to a particular project or topic of interest to the stakeholder in question. This means that stakeholders have little understanding of the breadth and depth of the research funded by NERC or NERC’s strategic and business objectives beyond the funding of world class research into the natural environment.

Encouragingly, the majority of stakeholders cite their interest in more frequent engagement and collaborative working with NERC across a number of areas, including the development of policy-oriented research and evidencing its social and economic impact. Increasing awareness of the communications which NERC already has on offer is a key way in which NERC can look to improve its stakeholder engagement. For example, many stakeholders question whether there is an e-newsletter to which they can sign up to for updates.

More broadly, many stakeholders cite the difficulties – in the absence of central and formalised engagement – of finding or being directed to the relevant specialist in a particular area. Ensuring each stakeholder has a named contact at NERC with whom they can liaise regarding such questions could resolve this difficulty. Similarly, with few stakeholders citing a comprehensive understanding of NERC’s strategic and business objectives or the breadth and depth of work it is conducting, implementing a formal and centralised engagement plan would be a key way in which NERC can ensure that its stakeholders have a holistic understanding of the range and success of the work it does.

- **Defining and communicating the NERC brand**

Implementing a formal and centralised engagement strategy would have the additional benefit of accurately defining the Natural Environmental Research Council as the sum of its parts – including both those working strategically at head office and NERC funded

academics in universities, NERC centres and institutes – as opposed to limiting this to those with whom stakeholders work with directly on individual projects. Doing so would again provide stakeholders with a greater and more well-rounded understanding of the range of work NERC funds and conducts, therein increasing the perceived impact of this.

- **Defining impact and “success”**

A lack of clarity as to the constituent parts of NERC means that many stakeholders find it difficult to evaluate NERC’s success – many understand this primarily as the success of any individual piece of research conducted by a NERC-funded academic. Stakeholders therefore question both the possibility of measuring this success, and the extent to which “central” NERC can have influence over it. Developing a formal and centralised stakeholder engagement programme which communicates NERC’s key strategic objectives and the metrics by which it measures its own success will give stakeholders a greater understanding of the parameters within which NERC success can be measured, and a greater appreciation of the work it does.

The measurement and definition of impact – whether social or political – is a contentious area for NERC stakeholders. Many cite that more needs to be done to ensure that NERC-funded research provides as much socio-economic and political impact as possible, while others cite concerns that this focus will restrict the valuable unanticipated discoveries which result from blue-sky research, and that it will result in research which is too “short-termist” in outlook.

A number of stakeholders note that although they recognise that NERC has placed an increased emphasis on evidencing the social and economic impact of its research in recent years, there are ways in which it could improve the processes of project design and evaluation to ensure that the potential impact of its research is maximised from the outset. In particular, stakeholders note steering groups as an area for potential improvement. Many note that these groups are not sufficiently strategic, and that stakeholders are not given the opportunity to shape the strategic direction of the research either at the outset of the project, or during the research process itself.

To ensure that stakeholders are sufficiently engaged in measuring and ensuring the impact and success of NERC-funded research, NERC should look to develop these genuinely strategic partnerships with its stakeholders. These should be put in place both on a project-by-project basis – ensuring that stakeholders, where appropriate, have the chance to have an impact on the strategic direction of a research project from its outset, as opposed to



being briefed on the objectives and latterly the findings of a particular project – as well as in a broader strategic sense. Ensuring that stakeholders have the opportunity to feed into NERC’s strategic direction as an organisation and feel that their views are being taken on board is a key way in which to not only increase stakeholder understanding of NERC’s strategic direction and objectives, but also to ensure stakeholder support and buy-in.

Developing stakeholder engagement through a central and formalised engagement plan will ensure that stakeholders are not only aware of the breadth and depth of work NERC funds and conducts, but are also aware of its strategic objectives – and are therefore more accurately able to assess its success as an organisation. Ensuring stakeholders are able to genuinely feed into strategy development will have the additional benefit of increasing stakeholder buy-in. Increasing stakeholder buy-in and enabling stakeholders to more easily assess its success will enable NERC to increase its advocacy base, and improve working partnerships going forwards.

## Audience summaries

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### 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.

## Business

Familiarity with NERC is lowest among its business stakeholders. Around three quarters (72%) of business stakeholders say that they are familiar with the Natural Environment Research Council, with one in four (26%) saying that they know a great deal about the organisation.

Business stakeholders are most likely to report coming into contact with NERC by attending NERC events (63%) followed by direct emails (57%), face to face contact or meetings (56%) and visiting the website (46%). Business stakeholders have the least frequent contact with NERC of all of its stakeholder groups. Around one in seven business stakeholders (14%) say that they come into contact with NERC at least weekly, with similar proportions say that they do so at least monthly (44%) and around every three to six months (41%). Three quarters (74%) of business stakeholders say that the contact which they have with NERC is helpful, with one in five (21%) saying this is very helpful.

More than nine in ten (96%) say that they are favourable towards the Natural Environment Research Council, with one in four (26%) saying that they are very favourable towards the organisation. Nine in ten (90%) stakeholders say that they would be likely to speak positively about NERC if asked.

Business stakeholders primarily associate NERC with knowledge exchange and innovation (85%) and strategic research grants (81%) of the areas of work tested. Around two thirds (68%) of business stakeholders associate NERC with providing research grants for discovery science, while half (51%) associating it with providing environmental policy advice. Just over half (56%) of business stakeholders say that they are familiar with the vision of the Natural Environment Research Council, with just over two in five (44%) saying that they are unfamiliar with this. Having been provided with a description of NERC's vision, seven in ten (69%) say that the organisation is effective at achieving this vision, with one in ten (9%) saying that they are not. One in five (22%) say that they don't know whether NERC is effective in achieving this vision, indicating a lack of awareness in this area.

Developing industry links and focusing on knowledge transfer to increase social and economic impact are top priority areas for business stakeholders. Similarly to government stakeholders, business stakeholders cite the need for NERC to ensure that the research which it funds and conduct is focused on societal and industry need. More broadly, industry stakeholders cite that they would like to know more about NERC programmes – both the areas which NERC are thinking of investing in, as well as the broad range of research areas

which it already funds. Involvement in strategic planning is key in this area – business stakeholders say that they would appreciate the opportunity to feed into NERC’s strategic direction both in an overarching sense in terms of the topics and areas of research which it funds, and also on a project-by-project basis. The development of genuinely strategic steering groups is noted as a key area for improvement by business stakeholders in terms of project-by-project working. These stakeholders would like the opportunity to shape the direction of an individual project from the outset, working in partnership with NERC and its funded researchers to ensure that relevant projects are sufficiently focused on a given social or industry issue and can therefore maximise the socio-economic and political impact of the project in question. Partnership working is a key area of interest for business stakeholders, many of whom cite their wishes to develop greater and more effective working relationships with NERC as they see the current and potential value of the research it funds and conducts.

Additional to this, business stakeholders cite a range of practical ways in which NERC can look to maximise the socio-economic and political impact of its research, from putting impact criteria in proposals, engaging with stakeholders in the design of briefs and ensuring stakeholder objectives are taken into account and engaging with industry stakeholders to ensure that it understands and defines impact in the way in which industry would. Developing funding streams for multidisciplinary projects – potentially working with other Research Councils to do so – is additionally noted by business stakeholders as a key way in which NERC can increase the impact of its research.

Providing tailored communication is key to achieving sufficient cut-through with this audience. Business stakeholders cite the need for information to be communicated in language which will resonate both with industry and their wider stakeholders. At present, many business stakeholders note that the information which they do receive from NERC is overly academic in its presentation and content, and includes acronyms and jargon which cannot be easily translated for non-specialist audiences. One business stakeholder noted the need for information to be disseminated via industry contacts who are specialists in a particular area to ensure that the content is properly understood and can then be translated for wider audiences.

Developing and enabling partnerships with business stakeholders, ensuring that mechanisms are in place to ensure that these stakeholders are able to feed in and shape both NERC’s strategic direction, and the strategic direction of individual projects.

## 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.