



Natural Environment Research Council – Stakeholder Audit

Qualitative report
September 2015

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Methodology

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.

Executive summary

As illustrated by the quantitative phase of research, engagement with the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) differs considerably between – and within – stakeholder groups. While the majority of stakeholders consider themselves to be familiar with NERC and the work that it does, when probed, it becomes clear that this engagement is restricted to the particular interests and areas of work of the stakeholder in question, as opposed to broader engagement with the Council itself.

As a result, while stakeholders have a good understanding of NERC’s broad purpose, and a detailed understanding of their own area of expertise, they are unlikely to have a holistic understanding of the breadth of work it does. While the majority of stakeholders say that they have a good understanding of NERC’s remit – broadly understood as facilitating, via the provision of funding grants and direct research, world class research into the natural environment – few are familiar with its strategic direction, or particular business objectives which means that there are limited advocates for the organisation overall.

This can be partially accounted for by the types of engagement which stakeholders have with NERC, and by the structure of the organisation itself. Stakeholders are most likely to engage with NERC on a topical or project-by-project basis, and therefore engage directly with particular specialists in this area: the academics NERC funds both within universities, as well as in its own centres and institutes. As such, stakeholders are much less likely to have regular contact – and in many cases have little to no contact – with what some define as “central NERC”: those working strategically for the organisation in head office.

This form of engagement means that the main people from NERC with whom stakeholders come into contact are those in the academic community, and that NERC’s reputation is primarily defined by those whom it funds. This puts NERC in a difficult position, as recognised by several stakeholders, as it has less control over the factors that influence how it is perceived. With NERC’s primary objective as an organisation seen to be the provision of funding for 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, stakeholders do note areas here in which NERC can positively impact its success rates by allocating grants appropriately, and encouraging multi-disciplinary research.

With the majority of stakeholder engagement with NERC occurring on a personal and project-by-project basis, communication is a key issue for NERC, and is noted by stakeholders as a clear area for improvement. Encouragingly, there is clear demand across stakeholder groups for more frequent engagement and collaborative working with NERC across a number of areas, including the development of policy-related research, and evidencing its social and economic impact.

NERC's current and future focus on "impact", and the balance between strategic and discovery science, is a contentious area for stakeholders. While many stakeholders note that NERC has put a clear emphasis on the importance of the socio-economic impact of its research in recent years, there remains a sense among stakeholders that more can be done to achieve these. It is important to note that there are concerns among some stakeholders – not limited to academic stakeholders – if the balance between strategic and discovery science shifts too much towards the former, that NERC-funded science will become too short-termist, and that vital longitudinal data and unexpected discoveries will be lost.

Perceptions of the Natural Environment Research Council

As identified in the quantitative phase of research, the vast majority of stakeholders interviewed say that they are familiar with the Natural Environment Research Council and the work that it does. However, the in-depth qualitative interviews indicate that this familiarity is largely limited to stakeholders' personal areas of interest and expertise. This is an important distinction to make: many stakeholders have a strong personal working relationship with NERC funded researchers in universities, those working at NERC-led institutes and centres, or have prior or current experience of NERC funding themselves. However, stakeholders are less likely to have a formal, established relationship with what some refer to "central NERC".

As a result, the majority of stakeholders – particularly government stakeholders – are unlikely to have a holistic overview of NERC's organisational priorities, objectives or the range of work that it funds and conducts. Therefore, many stakeholders feel distanced from the organisation as a whole and neither feel engaged with its strategic direction nor that they have the opportunity to feed into this direction.

"[NERC funded] academics quite often talk to me about NERC-funded projects. Beyond that I don't have any detail on what they do beyond just being a research funder"

Government

"Mostly I get in touch with the academics who might be interested in one of the subject fields rather than NERC per se. Through NERC specifically, it's usually at conferences and workshops, I guess"

Business

"I'm quite familiar with some of their institutes, and I've engaged with some of their funded research areas. I'm less familiar with them corporately"

Government

"We don't see much of NERC centrally. As in, we either tend to get approached by research scientists who have research proposals in who want us to be engaged. Or we're funding research with NERC institutes... for example, I wouldn't feel that I have a particularly strong overview of what relevant science, outside the work I'm immediately involved in, that NERC is funding. I'm not sure I'd know where to look"

Government

When asked to illustrate their perceptions of NERC's remit as an organisation, stakeholders cite the funding it provides to individual researchers within universities, with slightly fewer noting the funding it provides to researchers within its own centres and affiliated institutes. A minority of stakeholders cite a need for this research to have a clear social and economic impact as a defined element of NERC's remit, perceptions of which this report will explore in further detail.

"Fundamentally, NERC is there to take research on environmental issues, but clearly they have moved very much more, in recent years, to trying to make a greater play on impact and impact with businesses. That's come very much because of pressure from central government on the need to consider UK economic growth and its contribution to the economy"

Business

Understanding of NERC's remit varies considerably between stakeholder groups, with academic stakeholders likely to understand NERC's remit in some depth, and business stakeholders more likely to have a broader understanding of NERC's remit focusing primarily on its role as a funder.

"The research council that supports environmental science, but as a facilitator and a provider"

Academic

"To act as a focus for the government funding of environmental research, and to provide leadership and direction to the UK academic community"

Business

"It's undertaking quality science to increase our understanding of the natural environment, but then there's also the aspect that they're interested in informing decision-makers in the UK and internationally. It's really trying to be that voice for the natural environment within the research community"

Third Sector

"Promote research on the natural environment, but within that, they disperse funds and come up with mechanisms by which to support blue sky and strategic research"

Academic

“Well, in all honesty, [I’m] probably not [aware of their remit in] a great deal of detail. Obviously aware of their existence. You know, they’re a provider of, research and technology funding”

Business

A minority of stakeholders see an area of potential tension in NERC’s remit with regard to its funding of both “external” research – via universities – and “internal” research – through its own centres and institutes. While some see this as a potential hindrance to NERC’s ability to objectively fund the highest quality research, others see this capability as one of NERC’s particular strengths, which presents a challenge for NERC and how it communicates its research funding.

“Their remit is to support and enable research in the natural environment... they also run their own institutes, and I think therein lies some of the problem. They are their own funder, as well as the funders of independent researchers, and I think this distorts their activity, actually”

Academic

“A significant part of their budget goes to support their own researchers, and I think historically that those researchers have not been as strong or as competent as those in the university sector”

Academic

“It has tremendous capability itself in its centres... that is more sustainable than, say, academia, where the research is taken quite often over three to four year blocks, and then the people move on and change their careers... as well as the actual research it does, it has the actual skillsets that are available. So that’s where NERC is particularly strong and powerful”

Business

“One of the main challenges comes from the fact that NERC is quite an unusual research council, in the sense that it doesn’t just provide money to facilitate science to be done in mostly universities, but it’s also taken ownership of certain areas of science and runs its own research centres. There’s a tension there between having established research centres and funding the best quality science, in my opinion”

Academic

The relationship between NERC and its centres and institutes is an area of some confusion for stakeholders. This includes some of those working within the centres and institutes themselves, one of whom notes an increased emphasis in terms of NERC “branding” of the institutes over recent years, but explains that recent months have seen the devolution of management from NERC head office to NERC centres and the prospect of potential privatisation. This stakeholder goes on to explain that these have come without adequate communication or explanation from those at head office, suggesting a disjoint between NERC head office and its representatives within centres and institutes.

“The industry’s talking more of the institutes and the universities, and we did used to be looked down on by universities as almost second-rate scientists. We tended to go out and do an awful lot of data collecting, we could do an awful lot of very robust data analysis, but we weren’t seen as being exciting, blue sky scientists. Equally, they now recognise that data is actually really, very important and blue sky science does need a solid underpinning”

Academic

“I think some of the directly funded agencies, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, and the National Oceanographic Institute and so on and the other ones, British Geological Survey, are in very difficult times”

Government

“When NERC talks about the environmental research in the UK, it often talks about research from its own institutes, more than perhaps from the university sector. I don’t think having this split responsibility of being a generator and also responsible for research fits very comfortably in the funding environment that we have today”

Academic

For stakeholders more broadly, however, this distinction between “central NERC”, its own centres and institutes, and NERC-funded academics in universities illustrates the difficulties of defining their relationship with NERC as well as understanding and evaluating its success. Many stakeholders do not make this distinction – they understand their engagement with NERC funded researchers as engagement with NERC itself, and therefore understand the organisational success of NERC as the success of individual researchers.

This issue of definition will be key for stakeholder engagement going forward and presents an area of considerable potential difficulty for both NERC and its stakeholders – many of whom struggle to define what is meant by “NERC” and therefore by its successes. This

disjunct between “central” NERC and NERC-funded researchers within universities, and in NERC’s own centres and institutes underpins the disjointed nature of the relationships many stakeholders experience.

“I guess it depends on who you’re defining as NERC, do you mean NERC themselves, or do you mean the research that they fund?”

Government

As the next chapter will explore in greater depth, stakeholders are considerably more likely to engage informally with NERC representatives at an operational level – funded academics in universities, NERC centres and institutes – than they are with staff at head office, which poses some challenges for NERC in terms of ensuring consistent and effective engagement with stakeholders across the board.

Engagement with NERC

A clear demarcation can be drawn between formal and informal engagement between NERC and its stakeholders. As outlined in the quantitative research, many stakeholders – notably academic stakeholders – cite frequent contact with NERC, and this is borne out in the qualitative interviews. However, it is clear from these interviews that stakeholder contact with NERC is much more likely to be on an individual and informal basis – via its funded academics, NERC centres and on a project-specific basis, as well as ad-hoc communication at external (non-NERC hosted) events and conferences – than as part of a formal and centralised engagement strategy with staff at NERC head office.

Informal engagement

This personal and informal engagement between stakeholders and NERC representatives is seen to be useful, with stakeholders praising the highly intelligent and innovative nature of individual NERC-funded academics, with whom many cite long-running and fruitful working relationships. However, the specific and primarily project-based nature of this engagement entails that these relationships largely – but not exclusively – exist between NERC and academic stakeholders.

“People I know that are funded by NERC are often really good scientists, doing interesting and important things. [NERC] seem to fund good research”

Academic

“On an individual level, usually very helpful. So if you have a question and you need to approach people, then quite often they try and be helpful. So from that sort of individual process type engagement, I’d say NERC are pretty good”

Academic

“Invariably, they are good, high quality, knowledgeable, get straight to the issue, fairly pragmatic, no nonsense discussions about the ‘what can and what can’t work’ with respect to funding. They know their way around the academic business well”

Academic

“Engagement is absolutely positive. It’s wonderful... mostly email, but we have telecoms at least monthly, during what is our most normal way of working, but when we get up close to something that needs a lot of decision making then it’s much more frequent than that”

Third Sector

“I’ve had a few meetings with the Chief Executive. I’ve had meetings with the Head of Research and Innovation. I regularly meet with the head of risk. I meet their knowledge transfer team. They partly funded me the last four or five years”

Business

It is important to recognise that levels of engagement differ considerably between and within specific stakeholder groups – including academic stakeholders – and are largely dependent on the nature and existence of on-going projects. This may potentially be due to an absence of formal, consistent engagement with NERC head office. Many stakeholders do not have frequent or direct contact with NERC, even those to whom it provides funding, and there is a sense among stakeholders that this would be both welcome and useful.

“Yes, I think the work of NERC could be more useful. That’s I’m keen to engage with them more than I am able to. I think there’s a lot of potential for NERC to be more beneficial to my organisation than it is currently”

Government

Others note that there have been significant changes and turnover in NERC staff over recent years which have made it difficult to maintain consistent relationships, or identify who to contact on different issues.

“I think they have quite a lot of staff turnover and I don’t know the staff now. So, it would be good to have – probably I ought to make the effort to find out, but I’m very rarely asked – It would be good if somebody said, ‘Come and meet with some of the key players””

Government

More broadly within the sector, while some stakeholders note that they see NERC representatives at industry events and conferences, others relay that NERC is notable by its absence – a point made particularly with regard to the water industry. This illustrates a perceived lack of consistency in NERC’s presence in the community. Although academic stakeholders are not united by favourable perceptions of their engagements with NERC – both research-focused academics and those working in senior strategic posts cite difficulties – many non-academic stakeholders see NERC’s external communications – including its e-newsletter – as exclusively academic in focus and language, which is a source of frustration for many.

“My engagement with NERC is virtually zero. I contrast that with all the other research councils that have regular, and I mean six weekly type things, personal engagements with me at a senior level. So this is just reflecting my sense that NERC does not see the higher education sector as its primary stakeholder... it must be at least four years since we had a visitation from NERC, and I don’t even know who the Director of Research Strategy is at NERC”

Academic

“I suppose part of my frustration with them is that I only find out about [areas they’ve been funding] through my academic network. It would be much more effective to speak to them directly, and probably engage with projects earlier. We could offer them some support in looking at specifications and things like that, to deliver against their impacts and their policy”

Government

“It’s fairly minimal, really. They pay me to do research, and I tell them what research I’m doing... on an average day, there is no interaction with NERC”

Academic

“There have been a lot of changes within NERC, people coming and going, and changes in policy. We’ve felt it’s quite difficult to keep track of what’s going on”

Government

It is clear that communication is a key issue for NERC stakeholders, and it is an area where relationships could be improved relatively easily by signposting the content which is already available. Many stakeholders wonder whether NERC has such things available as an e-newsletter to which they can subscribe, while others cite their wish for a named contact and regular face-to-face meetings with staff at NERC head office, as well as an available directory of contacts illustrating who to contact on what issues.

Formal engagement

Those who are aware of available NERC content are broadly positive about the usefulness of this – with the exception of the language which is seen as highly academic – and those who are not cite a desire for more frequent communication from NERC on a wide range of topics. These include upcoming areas for funding; research NERC is currently funding as well recently published research, and invitations to relevant NERC-hosted events and conferences. Additional to this, there is clear interest among many to receive information

about NERC's own priorities – although a minority of stakeholders do note that they are aware of and have read NERC's own strategy document, *Business of the Environment*, and found this both helpful and informative.

"I don't know whether they produce an e-newsletter, one of those would probably be sufficient for my purposes"

Government

"They produce a magazine and they do produce some material which is quite useful"

Academic

"There was [a conference] a couple of years ago... talking about objectives and impact and priorities, I guess. I found that was very useful"

Business

"I think they're quite good... the website and the publications are usually of good quality and they do a lot to support people going out into the community and communicating, including their KE fellows. So I think they're trying to do a good job there, with limited resources"

Academic

"[I'd be interested in] new research grants being awarded, what new competitions are about to happen"

Business

"I think the work of NERC could be more useful. That's why I'm keen to engage with them more than I am able to"

Government

Tailored and accessible communication is particularly important to NERC stakeholders – some of those who do subscribe to the newsletter note that the language it uses is too academic for wider audiences, with one stakeholder mentioning that they have to translate the email and send it through to their own networks in more accessible language. While stakeholders appreciate the difficulties of communicating with such a wide stakeholder group, the accessibility and relevance of communications remains a key concern. This is particularly true for government and business stakeholders who need to engage with a wide range of organisations, and therefore have little time and resource to invest in each one.

When thinking about communications that they would like to receive, stakeholders note the importance of these being tailored to areas of particular interest, as NERC research covers such a broad range of specialisms.

“There are language problems... the way they try and communicate with business. [Their communications] are awfully acronym ridden. When they send out messages – I pick up their weekly emails, and where there’s something that may interest business, we want to pass it onto the business community, but very often they’re written in a way where we have to rewrite them, because they’re incomprehensible to business”

Government

“It’s difficult when you think that there are so many disparate customers and stakeholders, so if you try and do a general thing it will be useless for everybody”

Business

“I’m not interested in all the topics that NERC is interested in, so somehow you need to find a filter that I would get or be aware of what I’m interested in”

Business

“[Their communications are] not effective. I mean, I don’t get that many to start, and I’m on all of their mailing lists.... I can’t think of one I thought was useful”

Business

“I think it would be useful to know where research in relevant areas is up to, when it might deliver outputs, what research has shown. I don’t know if they do that, but I’ve not seen that in the five or six years I’ve been engaged with NERC”

Government

“Brief summaries of the policy implications of the research they’ve funded, with the ability of then delve deeper if we find it relevant. Too often academics send us scientific papers which don’t address questions. I’m sure they’re very good science, but they’re not necessarily telling me anything I need in a way I can use to communicate to policy colleagues”

Government

“If I was sent just a general blanket email inviting me to an NRC innovation distribution workshop, then I probably wouldn’t. But if I got someone who NRC phoning up [with a tailored invite] I might”

Third sector

Beyond the accessibility of language used in its external communications, stakeholders cite concerns about the accessibility of NERC staff, citing the difficulties of finding the right people to talk to within the organisation, particularly government and business stakeholders who are less likely to be engaged with NERC researchers on particular projects. Clear signposting of staff specialisms, contact details and available data are key requests from stakeholders, and would improve the transparency of the organisation.

“If they picked up the phone, that would be good”

Third sector

“You’d like to think that there is a clear structure that is transparent to external organisations and people, that means you can get from top to bottom to find the appropriate people in certain areas. That doesn’t happen. Actually it’s very hard to find the right people in the right areas, and that’s coming from someone who has had years of experience working with them and knowing where to go. Even I find it difficult”

Business

“There are two things that NERC could do better than they’re doing right now. The first one is, if you wanted to find out where there is expertise within NERC and funded institutions, you shouldn’t have to phone a few people and they’ll go ‘Oh yes, I know somebody’. If you know who to phone, you can get this information, but it’s never published... there’s got to be some kind of signposting documentation or website that would tell you where to get information or where to get people with information... the other issue is data. It’s very hard to know where to find data. There are six data centres. I don’t know anybody that knows of the existence of those data centres, or how to get information out of those data centres”

Business

“It would be great to know more about NERC programmes. What are their areas of interest? What are they thinking of investing in? How are they deciding what to invest in? Because we don’t really get consulted very much, we don’t get asked for a view”

Government

Demonstrating impact

Stakeholders understand NERC's objectives as an organisation to match its remit – facilitating world class science into the natural environment. The extent to which it is able to achieve this objective is seen by stakeholders to be dependent on several factors, primarily the individual academics conducting the research, but additionally the type of funding streams available and the criteria by which grants are allocated.

“I guess [its success] varies. That's partly because it's out of NERC's control. The tools or mechanisms they use are funding research projects, and, having funded the research grant they rightly step back from it. So whether the research projects delivers something that's useful... is very much dependent on how much the recipient of the grant is willing to

engage”

Government

Beyond the facilitation of world class science into the natural environment, the majority of stakeholders additionally note the importance of producing research which has a positive societal and economic impact, and see NERC as placing an increased focus on this in recent years. 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 “tickbox” exercise.

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.

Barriers to impact

While some stakeholders note that responsibility for project management – monitoring the progress and success of individual research projects – should lie primarily in the hands of universities (where grants have been made externally), many suggest practical measures

which NERC could introduce or improve upon to positively impact the success of the research projects which it funds, without compromising academic freedom. Stakeholders note the long rein which NERC gives the academics that it funds and the need to implement periodical checks to ensure that individual projects achieve – or justify why they did not achieve – the objectives laid out in the original brief.

Improving the process surrounding supporting letters – letters to support grant applications – is another area noted for potential improvement, particularly improving the lead-in time to ensure buy in. The development of genuinely strategic steering groups involving industry, government and third sector stakeholders is additionally seen as a key way in which NERC can look to evidence and improve the socio-economic impact of its research – currently this process is seen as a one-way relationships, whereby academics engage at the beginning and end of a project, informing steering group members as to the plan for, and outcome of, the project in question.

“When you interview academics, they say ‘Why would I want to work with businesses because research councils will give me loads of money and nobody ever checks what I’ve done with it?’ I’m paraphrasing slightly, but not much... there is a common perception among big universities that NERC money is easy money, there’s relatively little reporting requirement, there’s very little scrutiny on whether the money – even when they are addressing applied problems – there are very little checks on what’s been done”

Government

“These steering groups in my experience, and I’ve sat on some of them myself, mostly the academics will say, ‘This is what we’re going to do,’ and then you don’t get consulted at all and then a year or two years later they come back and say, ‘This is what we’ve done.’ To me, that’s not really the function of a strategic group. You end up then with outputs that are not genuinely of use to people”

Government

“It seems like academic staff scrabbling things together, and we often don’t get engaged until too late. Sometime that’s because of the deadlines that NERC has set. Sometimes they’re very short, and between the launch of the call and the initial expected interest, there often isn’t sufficient time to engage users fully”

Government

“The difficulty with NERC from my perspective would be that they’re quite an opaque organisation, so in terms of how you get policy to influence the direction of it [that’s quite difficult]”

Government

This absence of a strategic feedback process between NERC and external stakeholders is also perceived to be the case in terms of consultations. There is a clear demand from NERC stakeholders to have increased involvement in consultations and engagement processes. As with steering groups, these are seen currently to be largely “tick box” exercises, wherein stakeholders do not feel like there is room for genuine engagement or the shaping of strategic or research aims. Creating a space for genuinely collaborative engagement processes will address stakeholder concerns regarding NERC’s strategic plan, as well as increasing formal contact and potential advocacy levels.

“I think just think there are agendas that are just not listening to consultations... we are told ‘this is the way it’s going to be’”

Government

“In terms of the idea of consultation with society or with the scientists that are responsible to NERC... I definitely feel that as you go up the chain, there is less likely to be a helpful response and in fact, you may even say that at the upper levels, there’s no real engagement.

Decisions have been made and that’s what’s going to happen. So you end up at these meetings where you’re being told what’s happened, even though they may be badged as a consultation... on a strategic level, it’s much harder to believe that your views are being taken with seriousness”

Academic

Further administrative issues, including the perception of excessive bureaucracy involved in the application for grants and recent changes in the application process for grant funding are additionally noted as key areas for improvement, and barriers to conducting innovative research. In particular, the recent changes in the application process are seen to be overly stringent, rejecting grant applications on factors such as font size, and creating unnecessary barriers to funding on the grounds of limiting the number of applications NERC has to sift through as part of the application process.

“What is the point in employing some of the best graduates from the Russell Group and making them fill out 73 pieces of paper in order to do a small project worth £5,000? The administrative burden does not reflect the relevance of the work they’re trying to do”

Third Sector

“They seem to have [been trying to manage grant application numbers] in a really bad way recently by just rejecting grants...for really trivial things such as some parts of the application being in not exactly the right font size. That, perhaps, reduced the workload of NERC but that’s not really the way to do it”

Academic

Perceptions of NERC’s successes in achieving its objectives as an organisation also depend largely on stakeholder views of the balance between strategic and discovery science.

Strategic versus discovery science

The balance between strategic and discovery science is contentious among NERC stakeholders. While a majority note – and welcome – an increased focus on socio-economic impact from the organisation, a minority question the validity of this and raise concerns about the “short-termism” which this approach may produce. The feasibility of measuring the social and economic impact of research projects is called into question by several stakeholders, who argue that not only is it invalid to ascertain “impact” from one project in isolation – as impact is dependent on the existence of several projects in any given area – but that it is also subjective; reliant on the policy priorities or issues facing the government at any given time. However, regardless of perceptions of strategic science, the majority of stakeholders do cite the importance of “blue skies” and discovery science, listing the important discoveries relating to climate change which have emerged from discovery science projects and a wish to not see NERC curtail its work in this area.

“So if you ask at the wrong time, any individual piece of research might have had minimal impact, but next week when someone’s faced with that problem, it could be the crucial evidence that they need”

Government

Nevertheless, there remains a strong call from stakeholders – particularly business and government stakeholders – to develop and communicate a strong socio-economic focus to the research which NERC funds. Stakeholders note a variety of means by which they could do so, including a socio-economic focus in funding briefs – which many see as already in

place – making steering groups more genuinely collaborative, and ensuring research findings are communicated in accessible language to resonate with wider stakeholders.

“Personally I have every respect for blue skies research, we have to have it, but we also – certainly in environmental realms – we have a lot of very significant global and local UK challenges. We need Britain’s best minds to be working on these: therefore we should give a slightly higher emphasis to research that is genuinely investing in real and immediate problems”

Government

“Social and economic impact take a while... you know, it can take ten to fifteen years for a new piece of science to be adopted in terms of policy decisions. Economic impact especially is something that is particularly difficult with blue sky thinking, but you’re right in asking the question in the sense that that’s what NERC is driving towards. It wants to see impact on a shorter term. Are they good at doing that? Well, they’ve trying to make us fill in things like Researchfish and trying to improve ways of gathering that information. To be honest, I wonder whether that is very useful”

Academic

“In some ways, I think it’s kind of sad that NERC has to do that...the focus on impact is probably making scientists have to think too short term, the people that are out there now are putting grants in that they know are going to work... NERC’s focus on impact is stopping people being able to think quite so blue sky and quite so big about the questions they want to ask”

Academic

“The research programmes that NERC designs for itself, I think, in the future, could be more influenced by commercial and economic–value–type arguments, rather than necessarily by clear environmental–science–type targets, or whatever”

Third sector

“I think [they’re not achieving their objectives] because they’re not funding the applied research... Almost every other country in the world has a government funded extension service, we got rid of ours 30 or 40 years ago, and yet the British model for extension service is actually the one that is used globally.”

Business

“The REF process did an excellent job in obtaining examples of the impact case studies which came out of NERC sponsored research”

Academic

“It think the impact one needs to be reflected in the funding proposals... no one rates it highly as a priority [translating impact to a wider audience] so they always get away with it”

Business

“I think the main challenge comes back to understanding the term ‘impact’ in the way that a businessman would understand it, i.e. impact means something that actually affects the market or the consumer in real terms”

Business

In line with social and economic impact, some stakeholders note the difficulty of expecting knowledge exchange from each and every research project, particularly with regard to the general public, as the accessibility of NERC projects varies so considerably dependent on subject matter. However, the majority of stakeholders note that NERC is putting an increased – and welcome – emphasis on knowledge exchange, particularly in recent years through knowledge exchange fellowships and through grant applications, but note that many still view this as a “tick box” exercise, similar to consultations; concluding that there is still room for improvement in this area. Some stakeholders see the involvement of external stakeholders – both industry stakeholders and government stakeholders – as key to improving this process and ensuring that content is accessible from the outset, while others query whether NERC might be able to fund specific knowledge exchange roles.

“I think science excellence has to stand out as their key remit, simply because they will be measured internationally on their standing as a science research council, and do to that you’ve got to demonstrate a science excellence at the cutting edge repeatedly and you’ve got to be able to get that credibility”

Business

“When it does fund knowledge exchange, again because of the way they fund things, they fund the academics and some academics, a few but still plenty of academics, have a view that knowledge exchange means taking some people in a room and telling them what they should be doing. Usually very unrewarding I suspect for everyone, although it ticks the ‘We’ve done our knowledge exchange’, bit of the grant application”

Government

“So KE and whatever their version of it is, is popular at the moment. It’s a really difficult thing to do. The knowledge exchange has definitely improved. The way that we try and engage with the public and NERC has put a lot of effort into that. The research grants have a KE agenda, and that’s to be applauded”

Academic

“I think they’ve improved dramatically over the last five years. I think they weren’t really based at all in this area. They then developed knowledge exchange programmes. Sadly, some of those have been closed down...I’m not always convinced that, when they have [knowledge exchange] events that the follow through and follow up is powerful... dissemination happens, but that doesn’t really guarantee there is going to be any uptake and further action.”

Business

Challenges

Looking forward, the main challenge stakeholders perceive NERC to face is funding: how to deal with upcoming government cuts and justify the funding it currently receives. Evidencing the socio-economic impact of its research to public and government stakeholders is a key way in which stakeholders perceive NERC to be able to do this. The development of effective and genuinely strategic working relationships with stakeholders is another: this would enable NERC to speak to stakeholder concerns, and ensure that stakeholders feel that they have the chance to influence its strategic direction. This would also have the additional benefit of increasing stakeholder buy-in to NERC centrally, as well as to the projects it funds.

“I suppose the other thing is in these times of austerity where our funding is and most likely to completely disappear and if we head for the 25% or 40% [cuts] that are coming across government. If we are to be fully engaged as end users in research programmes, we are going to need funding for it”

Government

“I think the main challenges are funding, and the cuts in funding from central government. That’s tied up with a lack of appreciation from the public and the people who fund the research from their taxes. A lack of appreciation from them about what the point of science is and we seem to be funding it so much”

Academic

“Enhancing the investment which has already been made in existing research”

Third Sector

The encouragement of multi-disciplinary research projects – through the development of flexible funding streams and collaborative relationships with other research councils so that multi-disciplinary research projects do not fall through the gaps between councils – is another key priority for stakeholders, and ties in with socio-economic impact. The current and emerging environmental issues facing both the UK and the world more generally are seen by stakeholders to require multi-disciplinary approaches. Some stakeholders note that NERC has recently put a positive emphasis on this, others see its set up and funding streams as too rigid: creating a barrier to multi-disciplinary, innovative and impactful research.

“I think getting more applied research and more innovative research is the biggest challenge they face, combined with collaboration with other research councils. Actually, to be honest with you, multidisciplinary research is probably the greatest challenge of all... if you really want to get good multidisciplinary research done, you have to have it focused on either an industry or a societal problem”

Business

“I think interdisciplinary work is something they could think about working more with BBSRC or just on the edges of things which sit on the edges of research councils”

Government

However, despite stakeholders voicing the need for NERC to focus on the social and economic impact of its research – ensuring this meets current and emerging environmental concerns – there is also a clear sense that NERC should not abandon its “core business”; providing world class research on the natural environment, inclusive of both strategic and discovery, or “blue sky”, science. There is a concern among stakeholders that NERC does not turn its attention to strategic and policy-driven science to the cost of “blue sky” thinking, nor the collection of perhaps less glamorous, but vital, longitudinal data.

This presents NERC with a difficult balance to maintain – ensuring clear lines of communication between stakeholders and NERC senior team at head office, where appropriate, is vital to ensuring that stakeholders appreciate the difficulty of maintaining this balance, and feel that they have had sufficient opportunity to feed in. More broadly, ensuring all stakeholders have a key point of contact with, and receives communications from, “central” NERC will not only ensure that NERC has more control over its reputation but will enable NERC to ensure that its research gains the highest reach and deepest impact possible.