Grants Policy: Pathways to Impact

Background

Achieving excellence with impact is central to NERC, as to all research councils. As set out in the Research Councils’ policy, the onus of considering how their research can achieve excellence with impact rests with grant applicants who must consider the potential opportunities and approaches to generating impact from their research and should ensure user perspectives are represented. Through funding excellent science and impact activities NERC aims to deliver maximum economic and societal impact from its investments. In doing so, NERC strives to ensure the outcome of NERC-funded research:

• fosters global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom
• increases the effectiveness of public services and policy
• enhances quality of life, health and creative output

By capturing and communicating the impact of NERC science to government and other key stakeholders, NERC seeks to demonstrate the importance of its investment and thereby maximise government support for this crucial science area.

Impact is not only important to the Research Councils - HEFCE’s QR-related funding decisions are now based on submissions, including Impact Case Studies. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) includes an assessment of the ‘reach’ and ‘significance’ of the submitted impact examples.

Pathways to Impact

As a starting point to achieving impact all research grant and fellowship proposals must consider Pathways to Impact. Research and fellowship grants will not be allowed to start without an acceptable Pathways to Impact statement.

Whilst NERC does not expect applicants to be able to predict the economic and societal impact of their research, NERC does expect applicants to have explored the following from the outset:

1. Who could potentially benefit from the proposed research over different timescales?
2. How might the potential beneficiaries benefit?
3. What will be done during and after the project to increase the likelihood of the research reaching the identified beneficiaries and maximise the likelihood of the identified benefits being achieved?

Consideration of these key points should be an integral part of the thought process when designing the research, increasing the likelihood of impact ultimately being achieved.

It is essential that applicants demonstrate that opportunities to achieve possible economic and societal impacts have been fully considered. NERC recognises that some projects, particularly those that are very early in the research cycle, may have no immediate identifiable beneficiary and/or economic and societal impact. It is therefore legitimate to state this, however the thought process to reach this conclusion must still be carried out and detailed in the proposal.

Submission and Assessment

NERC publishes full guidance on the proposal submission and assessment processes.
When completing a proposal, points 1 and 2 above should be described in the Impact Summary section of the proposal form and point 3 should be detailed in the Pathways to Impact attachment. In both cases these refer to economic and societal impacts only.

Pathways to Impact activities do not have to be cost-incurring; it is not a requirement to include funded activities. Any funds required to carry out any proposed, outcome-driven activities identified within the Pathways to Impact must be fully justified within the Justification of Resources statement.

Panel members assess whether applicants have completed a robust thought-process around the potential economic and societal impacts of their research and proposed ways to move towards, accelerate or implement these and whether any costs requested to deliver these are justified. At moderating panel:

- Panels discuss and score the overall proposal research excellence which is used for ranking all proposals
- Panels discuss Pathways to Impact, identify any unacceptable Pathways to Impact or unjustified costs associated with proposals within the funding frame and provide feedback on the unacceptable Pathways to Impact
- Panels do not use Pathways to Impact as a secondary criterion for ranking proposals

An acceptable Pathways to Impact will:

- be project-specific and not generalised
- be flexible and focus on potential outcomes
- identify and actively engage relevant users of research and stakeholders at appropriate stages
- articulate a clear understanding of the context and needs of users and consider ways for the proposed research to meet these needs or impact upon understandings of these needs
- include evidence of any existing engagement with relevant end users e.g. via letters of support/supporting statements
- outline the planning and management of associated activities including timing, personnel, skills, budget, deliverables and feasibility

An acceptable Pathways to Impact is a condition of funding. Grants will not be allowed to start unless unacceptable Pathways to Impact are enhanced to an acceptable level within one month of notification of the panel outcome.