

The following document is based on the summary of the annual PRC Chairs Meeting held on 3 March 2016, which was discussed by Science Board on 21 April 2016. The document includes an update on the actions as at December 2016.

## **Summary of Annual Peer Review College (PRC) Chairs meeting and Report to Science Board (SB)**

### **PRC Chairs Meeting held on 3 March 2016 and SB meeting held on 20 and 21 April 2016**

#### **Attendance:**

- (College Chairs) Andrew Binley, Lucy Carpenter, Kevin Fowler, Xavier Lambin.
- (Swindon Office) Andy Adams, Avril Allman, Emma Devine, David Roberts, Katie Tearall, Amy Vitale

#### **Apologies**

- Jonathan Bamber, Steve Banwart, Peter Cawood, Karen Heywood, Christopher Thomas.

#### **Aims of the Meeting**

- To review issues raised in the PRC chair reports received following the 2015 panel meetings and agree feedback to SB at the April 2016 meeting;
- To share best practice and facilitate continuous improvement.

#### **Background**

1. The PRC Chairs report to the NERC Director of Science and Innovation on Discovery Science (DS) funding policy and process matters. Each chair provides a panel report of each panel that they are involved in; these are reviewed at the group's annual meeting. The group also has a role in providing advice to SB on strategic issues relating to DS on an annual basis. This paper sets out the group's annual update to SB.
2. The PRC Chairs held their annual meeting on 3 March 2016. The meeting reviewed DS activity in the previous 12 months (calendar year 2015), and picked up on any items of note that it wished to raise with the office and highlight to SB. The following summarises those key points.

#### **New Investigators (NIs)**

3. The chairs requested feedback was given to SB on their continuing concerns over the integration of the NI call with the standard grant call. Although they recognise the success rates for NI proposals is similar to the overall success rate, their concerns are that (i) the success rate for NIs is considered too low and represents a waste of talent, given that the first few years are crucial to launching an academic career, and (ii) around the use of the NI call by very experienced co-applicants.

**Update December 2016: SB will be discussing NIs at their February 2017 meeting as part of the review into the Demand Management implementation.**

***Demand Management and Success Rates***

4. The PRC Chairs highlighted the increase in the percentage of very high quality proposals, attracting the highest research excellence scores (9 and 10). This has risen from around 6% to 11% in the last round. Also that 86% of proposals scoring 8 were unsuccessful in the last round. 52% of those funded were resubmissions from previous rounds. The PRC Chairs wished to highlight their concerns over the funding levels for DS, which they hoped would be considered in future Council discussions around funding levels across different NERC funding streams.
5. The new demand management measures came into effect from the July 2015 round, but had previously been communicated widely to the community. The measures included a cap on the numbers that institutions can submit if their success rate falls below 20%. As a result of this, the number of proposals received per round has been reducing, but would need to reduce to around 175 in order to achieve the desired 20% success rate.

**Update December 2016: The impacts of demand management will be reviewed by SB in February 2017 after the data from the first three rounds is available. The review data will include a targeted survey of 20 organisations.**

#### ***Discovery Science Panel Structure***

6. PRC Chairs supported the office recommendation to move from five to three DS panels (used for both the standard grant and fellowship schemes). They accepted that, with a reduction in the numbers of proposals being received and the need for the NERC office to work as efficiently as possible, the move to three panel areas was a sensible change.
7. The PRC Chairs raised some concerns over the changes and cautioned that the changes would require very careful communication with the community. The concerns raised were that moving to three panels might place some areas of NERC remit at a disadvantage. Similar concerns were raised over the previous five-panel structure. Although it will be possible for panels to have more panel members to cover the wider remits, there will always be cases, as there are now, where there is less expertise on the panel to cover some areas than others. The need for each proposal to have three, or ideally, four good reviews, will continue to be crucial.

**Update December 2016: SB accepted the move from five panel areas to three but requested some clarification on the categorisation of hydrology and soil science research topics. SB recommended a change in the process where occasionally individuals were reviewing proposals and subsequently acting as an introducer at the panel (as they had the greatest expertise on the panel). NERC Head Office has revised their approach in this situation and panel members will no longer be asked to introduce proposals they have reviewed. As the role of the panel and introducers is to moderate the reviews, this avoids any introducer bias towards their own review. The Discovery Science panel structure was revised prior to the July 2016 Standard and New Investigator grant closing date.**

#### **Independent Research Fellowships (IRFs)**

8. Science Board discussed the impact the move to three panels for DS may have on the application and assessment process for NERC IRFs. They also discussed the possibility of introducing measures to improve success rates for NERC IRFs as the success rate for this competition stands at c.8% (14 fellowship awards per competition).
9. PRC Chairs discussed several options for improving IRF success rates before they recommended that, for the 2016 competition, NERC increase the amount of evidence on its website concerning the requirements for success in this competition, the background of successful applicants, and introduce case studies of NERC IRF award holders. The intention of including this information is to deter unsuitable applicants from applying by demonstrating the very high levels of personal success required to receive an award and at the same time celebrating the achievements and raising the profile of the NERC IRFs. Reducing the number of applicants of unsuitable quality, will both improve the IRF success rate and reduce the total effort required to assess all proposals. The Chairs agreed that, without appropriate evidence, it was too great a risk to introduce stricter measures at this time to increase the IRF competition success rate without first exploring the options available and their potential impact.
10. If this informal mechanism does not reduce the number of applications and increase the IRF success rate, the PRC Chairs asked that NERC present further options at their 2017 meeting, including the risks associated with each option, for further discussion. In addition to exploring measures affecting the application process, such as restricting the number of applications an individual can make, the PRC Chairs asked NERC to consider changes to the review process, including the introduction of an "Expression of Interest" stage before requesting full applications with the aim of reducing the administrative burden of assessing applications.
11. To ensure that the NERC IRF scheme continues to achieve the objectives of this programme and contribute to NERC's strategic priorities, the PRC Chairs suggested that NERC undertake a review of the IRF scheme. This review should not only consider the impact of NERC fellowships but also whether the competition format and strategic oversight are appropriate to meet the requirements of this scheme.

**Update December 2016: SB noted the concern about the IRF success rate and also agreed the recommendation to publish on the website some example case studies of a range of successful IRF candidates. SB confirmed the IRF programme will be considered as part of the early careers research agenda item at the June meeting.**

#### ***PRC Structure and Recruitment***

12. The PRC Chairs discussed changes to the PRC chairs roles alongside the move to the three panel structure. Rather than having fixed chairs for standards, fellowships, large grants and highlight topic panels, they supported the office recommendation to have three chairs covering each panel area. This will allow more flexibility so the office can choose the most appropriate person (taking into account expertise, availability and conflicts of interest) for any of the panels.
13. The PRC Chairs supported the principle that there should be progression through the PRC, to reward and recognise those members who do a consistently good job in reviewing and panel membership. Recruitment to the core membership would be focussed on members of the PRC who have performed well with reviewing and on panels, and who meet any extra criteria for the PRC core. Recruitment to the deputy Chair roles (who will then become

PRC Chairs) would be mainly from the core membership. In exceptional cases, there may also be a case for inviting other individuals, who have previously contributed significantly to NERC peer review, to cover particular expertise needs or to help address the current gender imbalance.

14. The PRC Chairs agreed with the following approaches around recognition and performance management of the PRC:
  - Potential progression to the core membership and PRC Chair role for those members who make an excellent contribution.
  - Communication to vice chancellors to highlight members of the PRC (and their different roles) and the important contribution they make.
  - Individual performance reports to include any constructive feedback from panel members and Chairs.
  - Individual discussions, where necessary, where a member is not meeting the terms and conditions, for example, failing to respond to any review requests.
  
15. A new recruitment call will be held in 2016. Volunteers from SB are requested for the September recruitment panels. Being members of the panels should also ensure SB members are satisfied with the process undertaken and the subsequent recommendations. The recommendations from the recruitment panels could then be signed off by the Science Board Chair.

**Update December 2016: The recruitment call was published over the summer and the recruitment meetings were held in September. New members were added to the [NERC Website](#) in January, once they had all accepted.**

#### **Panel Process**

16. The PRC Chairs also discussed a number of issues around the standard grant panel process (brought in from January 2014). They agreed:
  - The pre-score process was valuable and that introducers should be reminded to provide enough written feedback to explain their choice of pre-score for the chairs benefit.
  - That the current process, where any applicants with only two reviews have the option of whether to proceed to panel or defer their proposal to the next panel to allow further reviews to be sought, should be continued.
  - That the current research excellence definitions (scores from 0 to 10) are appropriate and being used consistently by the panels.
  - That the process by which the final funding recommendation is made to the Director of Science and Innovation (funding all proposals of one research excellence score before considering any with a lower score) is appropriate.
  - They were satisfied with the resulting panel success rate variations (between 10.8% and 13.0%) over the three rounds since the panel areas were introduced.
  - The chairs discussed additional guidelines for the NERC conflicts of interest policy, and recommended that this is used for all funding assessment panels at NERC.