NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL
ETHICS POLICY

Guiding Principles

The following principles provide the ethical framework that we aspire to while working in the UK and abroad.

In relationships with others

- Treat colleagues, stakeholders, customers, suppliers and the public respectfully and professionally, taking account of confidential issues when appropriate.
- Deal courteously with those who hold opinions that differ from ours.
- Respect cultural differences.
- Have open and explicit relationships with government, the public, the private sector and other funders.

In our work

- Operate with honesty and integrity in all our work, taking steps to identify and deal with corrupt scientific practices and professional misconduct.
- Be open and transparent in making decisions, undertaking activities and allocating funding; if that is not possible, explain why.
- Reach conclusions based on best scientific and professional practice, having considered all views.
- Work to the standards of UK legislation as a minimum here and abroad, and operate according to local laws as required.
- Disclose conflicts of interest and actively manage them.
- Ensure funding decisions are transparent and securely based on objective assessment and selection procedures.
- Recognise appropriately the intellectual, scientific support and operational contributions of others.
- Consider ethical challenges which arise from new or possibly risky research at the limits of our knowledge by broadening debate at an early stage.

Impact on the environment

- Weigh any possible adverse impacts of proposed work against the expected benefits, while considering the economic, social and environmental dimensions.
- Assess and minimise the adverse impacts of our decisions and work on the natural environment, on people and on animal welfare.

What does the policy cover and who does it apply to?

This paper sets out our guiding principles and how we intend to apply them, which together form the ethics policy of the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

The policy applies to all aspects of our governance, policy, research, commercial, operational and administrative activities. It covers all NERC staff, in Swindon Office and research centres. We expect those who serve on our decision-making and advisory bodies to respect the policy.

All those covered by the policy are personally accountable for operating within its scope and intent.

We expect those organisations whose staff or students receive funding from us to respect the policy and we reserve the right to refuse funding to those who don't.

We request organisations that we work with to respect our ethical positions.

Why an ethics policy?

NERC is a non-departmental public body, funded by government via the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. We are accountable to the public for the work that we do and the way that we do it. We think it is appropriate for us to have a set of principles on ethics that guide our thinking and actions.

NERC already has a range of policies on issues such as financial probity, the treatment of staff, health and safety and accountability to the public (Annex A(i)). We also accept the values covered in the 'Seven Principles of Public Life', which require all public servants to conduct themselves with selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership (Annex A(ii)). These policies and codes of conduct affect all NERC staff, and form part of their contracts of employment. The ethics policy will, in the first instance, sit alongside them and we propose to review all existing and new policies in relation to our ethics policy, as and when appropriate.

What ethics mean to NERC

Ethic - A moral principle or set of moral values held by an individual or group.

Values and ethics shape the way we view the world and how we behave in it. The purpose of this policy is to provide guidance to staff, fund holders and advisers in assessing the many and sometimes complex decisions they have to make. It will also signal to users and observers of NERC that they can have confidence in what we do and the way that we do it.

Implementation

All those covered by the policy are responsible for ensuring that activities for which they are responsible comply with this policy. People should raise concerns about research applications and procedures, or administrative and support activities, with line managers in the first instance. Similarly, clear breaches of the ethical policy should be referred to managers. Existing mechanisms within the organisation should be used to resolve concerns or refer onwards as appropriate. Serious or unresolved concerns should be referred to the Ethics Board (see section 8 below).

To help us apply the guiding principles to our work, a summary of our main activities, and ethical questions which may be relevant to those areas, are set out alongside this policy on our website. These questions, which are not intended to be exhaustive, come from a wide range of comments and inputs received as we developed the policy.

The Ethics Board and monitoring procedures

The Ethics Board will be a small team comprising the chief executive, one member from Council and one from the NERC Executive Board. Serious issues which cannot be resolved via existing mechanisms may be referred to the Board at any time. Breaches of the policy which cannot be dealt with in the line management system may also be referred to the Board.

The Board may then convene, with appropriate additional expertise if needed, to consider the issue. The Board's decision will be final and it will have power to take action it deems necessary. The Board will be accountable to the Chairman of NERC. The NERC directors will report annually on any ethical issues or activities through the normal audit procedures to ensure our policy is being applied consistently.

Communicating the policy

The policy will form part of the NERC induction process and adhering to the policy will be part of everyone's terms and conditions of employment. New members of NERC's decision-making bodies will be made aware of the policy and their responsibilities in relation to it.

Those receiving grants, funding or fellowships from NERC will be made aware of the requirements as part of the application and confirmation procedures.

Review

This policy, and the principles, will be regularly reviewed in the light of experience. They will also be kept consistent with any ethical code that Research Councils UK may develop. Comments and contributions on the policy from staff, stakeholders and the public are welcome at any time (Cathy Hargreaves, cawal@nerc.ac.uk).

Annex A (i)
NERC STAFF NOTICES: STAFF CONDUCT AND OTHER RELEVANT STATEMENTS

NO	TITLE	TYPE
1996/09	Code of Conduct for Staff of Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies	Personal conduct
1993/01	Comments on and Criticism of Official Activities	Personal conduct
1989/08	Disciplinary Procedures	Personal conduct
2004/03	Gifts and Hospitality	Personal conduct
2001/06	Grievance Procedures in NERC	Personal conduct
1994/20	Open Government: Your responsibilities to the public	Personal conduct
1989/25	Outside Professional Activities	Personal conduct
1990/04	Political Activities	Personal conduct
1973/04	Report of Arrest or Conviction, Bankruptcy and Insolvency	Personal conduct
2003/02	Respect at Work	Personal conduct
2000/02	Whistleblowers' Charter	Personal conduct
1996/08	Code of Conduct: Fraud - A Statement of Policy and Procedures	Expected Conduct
1997/06	Code of Conduct: Potentially Controversial Funding NERC	Expected Conduct
1998/08	Confidential Information	Expected Conduct
2000/06	Data Protection Act 1998	Expected Conduct
2000/05	Electronic Communications at Work	Expected Conduct
2001/05	Openness and Transparency within NERC	Expected Conduct
1996/06	Provision of Advice	Expected Conduct
1995/11	NERC Corporate Image on the Internet	NERC Conduct
1993/04	NERC Energy Efficiency Policy	NERC Conduct
1998/05	NERC Environmental Management Policy	NERC Conduct
2000/07	NERC Information Systems Security and Privacy Policy	NERC Conduct
2000/04	Regulations Governing the Use of Computing Facilities	NERC Conduct
Proc. No.1	NERC Health and Safety Policy	NERC Conduct
A joint statement by the Director General of the Research Councils and the Chief Executives of the UK Research Councils December 1998: The Avoidance of Scientific Misconduct		

Annex A (ii)
The Seven Principles of Public Life (from First Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (Cm 2850 I & II 11 May 1995)

Selflessness
Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends.

Integrity
Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity
In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

Accountability
Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness
Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.