

The People Action Plan

'Success in delivering world-class NERC-funded environmental sciences lies with the skills, knowledge and dedication of all the people within the NERC community.'

(Next Generation Science for Planet Earth, 'People')

The NERC Strategy cannot be delivered unless people have the right skills. To deliver the Strategy effectively and to make the best use of the funding requires people align their skills with our objectives to recognise and embrace their role as part of the overall UK environmental sciences community. We need people with expertise and commitment, from leaders to support staff, all motivated to reaching our objectives successfully

We will ensure that we know what skills we have in our community and will make the most effective use of these. The environmental science challenges we face are so great that we cannot afford to waste resources. Building active research communities that extend beyond organizational and disciplinary boundaries is therefore an integral part of our People Action Plan.

We also recognize our responsibility to future generations. We will put effort into ensuring that the skilled people exist to deliver future strategies and to respond to rapidly changing priorities in our sciences. The activities in the People Action Plan reflect a 'cradle to grave' approach to providing skilled people for the UK. At the same time as we actively seek to identify the skills we currently have in our community and to make better use of them, we will also be looking to the future and trying to ensure we anticipate any changes that lie ahead.

Our constituency stretches beyond the people we directly employ. It embraces research scientists and engineers, technicians, and the wide variety of professionals who undertake the support activities that ensure NERC delivers its Strategy and meets its obligations to its stakeholders. The People Action Plan touches upon them all.

Timetable

The activities are timetabled on the basis of ensuring that activities that are crucial but will take time to come to fruition (notably those that require cultural change) are started at the earliest opportunity. At the same time, because activities have to be managed within the resources available and allowance has to be made for other substantial issues impacting on our area (notably the implementation of the Research Councils Shared Services Centre), this inevitably means that some activities will not deliver until later in the Strategy period. However, where 'quick wins' can be identified these have been timetabled for early delivery.

As far as possible, activities have been integrated, so as to derive maximum benefit. Thus, one activity may deliver across more than one of the key challenges identified in the People component of the NERC Strategy.

Four key challenges

The four key challenges which underpin the People area of the NERC Strategy were developed by a cross-community group, who identified the following People priorities for NERC:

- 1. Creating flexibility/adaptability in the people within our community**
- 2. Delivering training priorities to meet skills gaps in our community**
- 3. Attracting the best people for employment within NERC and developing them**
- 4. Identifying the role NERC can play in attracting young people to careers in environmental science**

The full programme of activities

The individual workstreams and activities which have been developed to deliver these challenges are:

- a. 'What's the Deal?'
- b. The Personal Deal
- c. Workforce planning
- d. Establishing a People and Skills Network
- e. Skills communities
- f. Interchange Policy
- g. FTA Policy
- h. Research Associate programme
- i. Reviewing redundancy provisions
- j. Merit Promotion Scheme revisions
- k. Fast track routes for promising scientists
- l. Leadership for NERC
- m. Enhanced change management
- n. Focussed NERC internal L&D
- o. IiP
- p. Pay and Rewards strategy
- q. ERFF review of skills requirements in the environmental sciences
- r. Collaborating with Theme Leaders and with groups such as NCAG to identify skills gaps
- s. Raising awareness of current training policies and delivery mechanisms
- t. Science Leadership Academy
- u. Grantsmanship training

Each of the work streams so far developed is [summarised below](#). A full implementation plan is available from the Head of People and Skills jmb@nerc.ac.uk which shows timetables, expected outcomes, key milestones and risks for all aspects of our People Action Plan. It links activities to each of the four key challenges, in such a way that each key challenge can be looked at as a separate entity.

Further work streams will continue to be developed focussing on key challenge 4: attracting young people into our sciences for example. This is a cross-NERC group that has been established to promote activity within this area (The network group is known as the EYES Steering Group).

Performance indicators

A range of metrics is being developed to test success in delivering each of these activities. By their nature, the true test for many of them (i.e. are they delivering the type of changes to skills and/or attitudes we require?) will come in the medium-longer term.

Major risks and dependencies

A number of significant risks and dependencies associated with this Action Plan have been identified. By its nature, the Plan is ambitious and needs to be underpinned by a willingness by our community to engage with us, most particularly in identifying the skills we need. More fundamentally, we need to see recognition that we are all part of an environmental sciences community and that there is benefit to us all in greater collaboration across organizational boundaries.

A further, substantial risk will be posed by areas beyond NERC control – e.g. the level of pay we can offer. This may impact significantly on the relationship between staff and the organization and result in loss of goodwill.

A significant risk is the perception by staff that NERC is seeking to cut/control staff numbers rather than deliver its Strategy in the most appropriate and effective way and those activities within this Plan are focussed on that aim.

Finally, lack of resources to deliver this ambitious Plan is a clear risk. The need to reduce posts to the levels envisaged in the post-SSC retained functions means that we are embarking on a highly ambitious programme at a time of some uncertainty. On the optimistic side, the transfer of some transactional functions to the SSC may create some space to undertake greater strategic activity; on the negative side, the initial period of coming to terms with the SSC may stretch our retained staff significantly.

Major dependencies

It is crucial to the success of many of these activities that NERC identifies its future priorities and links these to skills needs. The work of the Theme Leaders and the response of SISB and Council to the TAPs is therefore a critical dependency.

Many of the activities in the Plan depend on the willingness of NEB and other senior staff in the organization to show genuine commitment and leadership. Whilst recognised in some of the activities themselves (e.g. the Leadership Programme) this dependency justifies being identified separately.

Effective communications strategies are a crucial dependency and good internal communications will make or break many of these activities.

Finally, the actions of Council, SISB and those in key roles in the decision-making and funding process are critical to the way the organization is perceived by the people it employs and supports: this is a dependency that is often underestimated.

Contribution to NERC organizational objectives

This Plan began with the statement that:

“No part of the NERC Strategy can be delivered unless there are people out there in our community who have the right skills. To deliver the Strategy effectively and to make best use of funding and other resources requires people who recognize and embrace their role as part of the overall environmental sciences community within the UK.”

The activities in this Plan set out to achieve the changes needed to create and maintain the skilled community we require and to provide the motivated people who will ensure that the challenges identified in NGSFPE are delivered. More than that: they look ahead to the next Strategy and to the one beyond that. The NERC People Action Plan will ensure that in ten years time we will recognize genuine differences in the availability and levels of skills in our community and the way our people think of their role within it.

NERC People and Skills
April 2009

The NERC Executive Board member responsible for delivery of the People Action Plan is Janice Timberlake, Director of People, Skills, and Communication. It is managed by Jonathan Bates, NERC Head of People and Skills, assisted by Susan Lloyd. Much of the delivery of the Plan relies on the work of the People and Skills community across our Research and Collaborative Centres and our Corporate HR team, headed by Steve Allsopp.

Janice and Jonathan welcome comments, views and questions on the Plan; these should be addressed to jmba@nerc.ac.uk.

Activities primarily focussed on NERC employees

'What's the Deal?' (responds to key challenges 1 and 3)

NERC-employed staff need a clear understanding of what the organization expects from them and what it offers in return. This is particularly the case with a new Strategy redefining how we want our staff to operate.

'What's the Deal?' sets out to provide this understanding. In doing so, it emphasises the flexibility/adaptability increasingly expected of staff. It makes the point that building a career in NERC depends on the individual's skills adapting to match the organization's changing needs. It explains that the organization continues to want to grow experts, but that this is only one part of our needs, and uses various biographies to explain different career models.

The document also focuses on everything that NERC staff enjoy beyond salary and their rewards package, from a challenging environment, to an ability to question, to the chance to undertake development activities and to develop new skills at the organization's expense – not forgetting, of course, the opportunity to work on some of the key problems of the day.

'What's the Deal?' was developed by a group of staff from across NERC, including active research scientists and managers, and was trialled at a number of workshops. It has been endorsed by senior leaders from around the organization, but equally by the NERC Trade Union Side.

The roll out of The Deal to all staff began during the first half of 2009.

The Personal Deal (responds to key challenges 1 and 3)

'What's the Deal?' provides an over-arching framework – but all staff also have a personal deal with the organization and this evolves and changes as organizational needs and individual aspirations change. Your personal aspirations at the age of 25 are likely to be very different from those you will have at age 50. The trick is to ensure that throughout people's careers we bring the two together, for mutual benefit. This requires the organization to know what its needs are and to be able to predict how these may change - and to conduct regular and meaningful discussions with individuals.

A range of tools has been developed to assist with these key conversations and some ground-breaking work in this area has been undertaken in our Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. We will move NERC from the traditional 'career discussion' to a more focussed discussion aimed at matching skills, organizational needs, and personal aspirations. We will extend this to all NERC staff during the Strategy period, giving each of our Research and Collaborative Centres the ability to tailor the process to their own cultures.

One intended benefit of this approach will be a reduction in 'cliff edge' scenarios, with individuals adapting their skills to meet future needs.

All staff will have had two Personal Deal discussions by 2013.

Workforce planning (responds to key challenges 1 and 3)

Effective workforce planning is crucial if other activities such as the Personal Deal are to succeed and if NERC is to ensure that it continues to reap the benefits of the investment it makes in its people. It requires us to try to anticipate future skills needs. Models and tools used by other organizations are being adapted for NERC use as part of our response to this task and several of our Research Centres, such as the British Geological Survey, are positively responding to the challenge of trying to see what lies on the horizon – and beyond. This will also form the focus of some of the activities we plan under our Leadership Programme.

'Workforce Planning' is a key activity for 2008 and 2009 and beyond

The People and Skills Network (responds to key challenges 1 and 3)

Sharing both experiences and ideas, as well as forming a network of people who have an understanding of the skills we possess across the organization, the People and Skills Network brings together leading scientists and people professionals from across our Research and Collaborative Centres. The Network will meet formally four times a year and also foster informal contact. As well as sharing good practice its outputs will include formal policies, for adoption across the organization.

The People and Skills Network is active in discussing a wide range of issues including skills communities and mentoring.

Skills communities (responds to key challenges 1 and 2)

If the community is to work together and make the best use of its resources, we need a way of knowing what skills we possess. At present, the databases that do exist tend to be stand-alone, difficult to maintain, resource-intensive and limited in their use. New methods need to be introduced, working with IT staff who understand the capabilities of modern search engines and the potential of professional networking systems as a way of building pan-NERC communities linked by areas of interest – communities that people will see benefit in joining and where they will be happy to share information about their skills. This will be one of the major challenges of the People Action Plan, since it is needed to fully achieve many of the other objectives.

We intend to develop our first pilot communities during 2009.

Interchange Policy (responds to key challenges 1 and 3)

We need to move on from the old-fashioned interpretations of secondment to a new approach that seeks to identify all the opportunities that exist for interchange and to foster these. Where secondment is the answer, it should be pro-active and based on identifying opportunities and putting the right people into these – i.e. those who will benefit as part of their planned 'personal deal' type discussion. There should be clear return paths. Where staff do go to work in other organizations we should increasingly be looking at models that allow part-time secondments (maintaining a strong link with NERC), since experience suggests that only in this way will the staff most likely to benefit from interchange be able to take up the opportunities we identify.

A draft policy is currently under discussion

Fixed Term Appointments

(responds to key challenge 1)

We do not see Fixed Term Appointments as providing significant flexibility in themselves; the legal requirement to treat FTA staff in the same way as open-ended staff has largely removed the ability to treat them as a means of turning on/off a reservoir of labour. We are also very much aware of the disadvantages of FTAs in terms of selling science as a good career choice and in attracting and retaining the staff we need. However, there is no reason why FTAs should not be used where appropriate, which will mainly be when we know that we will only need skills for a defined period and cannot realistically redeploy/retrain staff when we no longer need their skills. The NERC Policy has been amended accordingly. It gives our Centres the ability to select the type of appointment they see as most appropriate in any case, with the Head of Corporate HR carrying out light touch reviews to ensure appropriate use.

The new Policy was introduced in 2008.

NERC Research Associate Programme (responds to key challenges 1 and 2)

NERC has the ability to offer those leaving University the chance to experience life in a research institute and decide whether it suits them. At the same time, we can pass on skills that they may not have received during their training – or may only have encountered in a theoretical sense. The new NERC Research Associate Programme will offer short-term employment in RCCs to undertake work experience with a defined training element. Appointments will be for three, two or one year periods. It is anticipated that some of those trained will come to work for NERC subsequently but many will move into the wider community.

This is a novel scheme, which seeks to adopt some of the best practices of similar arrangements within the professions. A unique feature is the payment of a 'transition award' at the end of the appointment, provided the individual has fully completed the programme and is not taking up employment with us.

The RAP was launched within BGS in early 2009 and in CEH in Spring 2009.

Redundancy provisions

(responds to key challenge 1)

We need to think about whether the redundancy terms we offer *new employees* should be maintained at the current levels, which we inherited from our links to the Civil Service. Are they appropriate to a changing world? We have no wish to change the terms of existing staff; we do not plan to move to levels that would not provide those leaving us with the underpinning they need. However, we are concerned that our current terms inhibit movement as staff build up their service and impose too great a burden on the Science Budget. We therefore wish to revisit this area.

We will be talking to other Research Councils with a view to approaching our parent body for their views.

Merit Promotion Scheme revisions (responds to key challenges 1, 2 and 3)

The new Strategy created a fresh impetus to ensure the indicators for promotion reflect those skills/attributes we wish to promote. Thus staff will, in future, find that their flexibility/adaptability will be recognised within the Scheme, as will their willingness to embrace knowledge exchange, etc. The core components – a robust scheme, which requires individuals to prove themselves at the higher level before being promoted - have been retained within a new framework that is simpler but that seeks to ensure that Panels receive evidence on which to base their decisions. The Scheme will continue to seek to provide NERC with rounded staff, who can contribute both within their specialist field and to the benefit of the organization.

The Scheme was revised during 2008 and the changes came into effect mid 2009

Fast track routes for promising scientists (meets key challenge 3)

In recent years NERC has focussed on ensuring that highly promising scientists acquire a wider range of skills, ensuring that by the time they reach senior positions they are effective in leadership and management as well as developing their research activities. This was intended to address the perceived problems that have been caused in the past by individuals occupying influential positions who did not show leadership or commitment to organizational values. However, we need also to ensure that the very best research staff make career progress at a comparable rate to other organizations. We are therefore looking at how we can fast track these promising staff, without compromising our wish to have quality leadership in the organization.

This is an area we will be exploring in 2009 with a view to having a new scheme in place by 2010.

Leadership for NERC (meets key challenges 2 & 3)

Although NERC's leadership programme pre-dates the Strategy, it represents a crucial plank in the way in which NERC will deliver its objectives and the opportunity has therefore been taken to revisit it and to ensure that it is aligned to the Strategy.

Participation has been extended to cover more than 135 individuals across the NERC family. A new induction programme has been introduced and a major module on Personal and Professional Impact has been successfully introduced. Targeted skills modules are being planned in key areas such as negotiating and handling difficult situations. Coaching provision is also being enhanced. Regular workshops bring participants together with NEB to discuss key issues; in 2009 we will focus two workshops around horizon scanning.

It has been pleasing to learn that one by-product of the Programme has been several new cross-Centre scientific collaborations, as result of people meeting and forming links. One of our original objectives was to create a common language.

This is an ongoing activity.

Enhanced change management (meets key challenges 1 & 3)

None of the significant changes in the way that NERC manages its relationship with its staff will be effective without a great capacity to manage change more effectively. The NERC Change Framework is introducing a new, more structured approach to this task, together with arrange of tools that will assist in embedding change. All senior leaders undertaking the Leadership Programme, plus others who are in positions where they would benefit from it, are receiving formal change training. A network of change facilitators will assist leaders in delivering change. A Change Initiation Document will ensure that the key questions are addressed at the onset of any change project significantly affecting people.

By April 2009, more than one hundred managers had received this training. This too will be an ongoing activity

Aligning NERC internal Learning and Development activities (meets key challenges 1, 2 & 3)

Resources spent on training and developing NERC staff need to be prioritised to reflect Strategy priorities and also need to flow from the Leadership programme. The current portfolio of training in NERC is increasingly being driven by organizational need (e.g. Project management training) but we need to go further and ensure a coherent approach. We will develop and designing a more targeted portfolio, but will have to take account of initiatives such as the introduction of the Shared Services Centre.

For this reason, we do not envisage having a fully effective new portfolio before January 2011.

Investors in People (meets key challenge 3)

We believe that there is value in SO and all its wholly owned Centres having IiP status and that at re-accreditation stage the opportunity should be taken to move up to 'profile' status in order to achieve a higher standard of benchmarking.

All wholly owned Centres now have IiP status, as do several Collaborative Centres.

Pay and rewards strategy (meets key challenge 3)

If we are to attract and motivate the right people for NERC employment, we will need to ensure our pay and reward package remains competitive. This is already challenging; unlike some of the other groups who employ research scientists we are bound by restrictive pay policies that preclude us simply increasing the reward element. For this reason, it will be important for us to ensure that we review our reward strategies and focus them on the areas of most significance in terms of our strategic objectives. We also need to emphasise the other advantages of NERC employment, spelt out in 'The Deal'.

An external review of our rewards strategies is under way in early 2009.

Activities focussed on building a skilled community

Review of skills requirements in the environmental sciences community

(meets key challenge 2)

This major review, conducted in collaboration with the Environment Research Funders Forum, seeks to identify what skills will be high priority over the next 5-20 years. It aims to achieve this through consultation with employers across the community. This is a major, ground-breaking piece of work, which we will use to inform our Training Strategy, enabling us to ensure that the funding we use to support PhD and MSc studies is informed by the needs of our community.

We hope that the Review will deliver its report by the end of 2009 or in early 2010. Significant early work has been done on defining the boundaries of our community and how to interact with them.

Liaising with Theme Leaders and other groups to identify immediate skills needs (meets key challenge 2)

It will be important to ensure that we do not rely solely on the ERFF Skills Review in this key area. Whilst it is sensible to await the outcome of the ERFF review before contemplating significant changes to training policy, some more immediate action may be appropriate if Theme Leaders or groups such as NCAG identify major concerns.

These discussions are already taking place and some areas for action in 2009 and 2010 have been identified.

Raising awareness: current training policies and delivery mechanisms (meets key challenge 2)

Consideration of changes proposed as a consequence of the Skills exercise requires a degree of knowledge of current training policies and their impact. A series of tasks has therefore been identified to raise awareness. These will include, inter alia, raising the issue of the balance between directed and responsive mode training; the basis of and balance between PhD and MSc support and also of Fellowships; the use of the algorithm and issues raised by it; different approaches by other Councils; and the impact of increasing cross-Research Council harmonization. We will examine the scope for adjustments to current policies - and equally the limitations on this. All this will be achieved in one or more papers to SISB.

We will also seek to establish the extent to which current training maps onto priorities identified in our science strategy. Again, this will be included as information for SISB.

We will also be seeking to identify the impact of NERC training policies. Where are the people we trained and how do they contribute to scientific advances and to the economy? We will ensure this information is available to those responsible for NERC's Spending Review bid.

Finally, we will be examining the extent to which research grant funding contributes towards building skills in the environmental sciences community and consider whether this should be a consideration when awarding funding.

This programme of tasks will run from autumn 2009 until spring 2010.

Science Leadership Academy (meets key challenge 2)

NERC will explore the potential for setting up a Science Leadership College for its community. This will be undertaken as a separate activity to Leadership for NERC, with a strong focus on leadership in the science context, rather than general leadership or leadership specifically for NERC. As a first step exploratory meetings with enthusiasts from across the community will take place in autumn 2008 to establish the extent of existing provision and how NERC can enhance this.

A full implementation plan, with an indication of levels of community support and costs, is timetabled for 2011/2012. Initial meetings within the community have been positive.

Training in writing better grant proposals (meets key challenges 2 and 3)

A new NERC training package will equip our employed people with a greater range of skills in bidding for funding. This training has the potential to be offered across our community (including to non-NERC employees) in the same way as our highly successful communication skills training.

Training has been developed and delivered to staff of the British Antarctic Survey; we are also encouraging similar initiatives within other Centres, such as BGS.
