

NERC Executive Board

Team briefing

September/October 2007

Nominated Centre/Site Contact: *<please insert name of person organising local briefings. This person may want to add further speaking notes about any local/centre/site implications of this briefing>*

This briefing document is explained further at <http://net.nerc.ac.uk/business/nebteambrief/> Please return feedback using the attached feedback form.

Discussion issues:**Item 1: The New NERC IT Strategy**

NEB has just given full support to a new IT strategy implementation plan for NERC. The strategy has been formulated to address six key drivers:

- 1) The need to support and enable excellent science within NERC .
- 2) The drive within the new NERC strategy “Next Generation Science for Planet Earth” towards greater collaboration – between research centres, and between centres and the wider community.
- 3) Efficiency: NERC has had to submit plans for year-on-year efficiency savings as part of our comprehensive spending review plan. IT can play a significant role in this, while maintaining or even enhancing service levels.
- 4) Organisational change: FAB and the Shared Service Centre will drive NERC centres towards more common business models and administrative processes – all suggesting more common systems.
- 5) Greening: NERC currently runs a large amount of kit housed in air-conditioned server rooms, or on desk tops. Power consumption could be significantly reduced.
- 6) Harness technical advances in a strategic, coordinated way.

NERC values local IT groups in each centre – whose job will be increasingly freed up to add value to scientific performance, and meet specific local requirements. Their experience, and the feedback they get from customers, will be key to the ongoing development of the vision for IT.

Because we have a lot of change around us at present, the strategy will be implemented on an evolutionary basis, but heading towards a clearly defined NERC vision. We will establish a NERC funded community-wide customer governance group to define and refine the vision of user needs.

More information is contained in the NEB Paper that can be found at <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/work/boards/executive/documents/9itstrat.pdf>

Questions:

- Are there any particular areas of operation where you feel IT needs to be improved, and are there exemplar organisations we could look to, to help establish this improvement within a NERC vision?
- A board will be set up representing science disciplines with different IT needs, not by research centre. Could you suggest a range of disciplines/interests that should be represented?

Further Information:

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Item 2: Delivering NERC Strategy – the role of National Capability and Research Programmes

NERC is introducing new ways of describing and funding its strategic activities. Alongside curiosity-driven, responsive research (also known as blue-skies), we will identify two other kinds of activity: National Capability and Research Programmes. The relationship between these three strands is illustrated in the accompanying diagram. See <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/work/boards/executive/documents/9NCDiagram.pdf>

National Capability enables the UK to deliver environmental science to support current and future national strategic needs, and to respond to emergencies. It focuses on environmental survey and monitoring, shared services and facilities, skills and expertise, research infrastructure plus related training and knowledge exchange. In the UK, NERC research centres and established collaborative centres play a leading role in managing and delivering this capability.

Research Programmes deliver strategically directed environmental research, training and related knowledge exchange. They explicitly address the science challenges and priorities identified by NERC's strategy. Research programmes are open to the entire research community in partnership and collaboration, and build on national capability. Funding for them will be time-limited and competitive.

Research centres are currently working to identify these different kinds of activity within their current five-year core programmes, ready to align funding streams more closely with strategic activity.

These changes contribute to the new ways of delivering NERC strategy that are described in *Next Generation Science for Planet Earth* (<http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/consult/strategy/>) and will be implemented through the Funding Allocation and Budgeting (FAB) project. They help NERC show government and users of our science the value of the different activities we support and how we respond to changing national needs and priorities.

Questions:

- How is your centre or Swindon business group preparing for these changes?
- Each centre has nominated change leaders and change facilitators to help implement this process - do you know yours?

Further Information:

Phil Heads

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Item 3: Review of NERC Libraries

NERC is reviewing its library services to ensure that they are in line with user requirements.

Throughout the UK the role of research libraries is changing. Researchers are still making use of library services, but not necessarily in the library. With online access to journals, repositories and other resources many libraries are seeing fewer and fewer researchers coming through their doors to consult hard-copy materials.

Council has requested a review of these services. NERC's Information Strategy Group (ISG) will do the review and report back to the NERC Executive Board in 2008. External consultants with expertise on the way research library services are currently developing within universities and other research organisations will carry out the fact-finding part of the review. ISG will develop recommendations for future services based on information provided by the consultants and feedback from NERC staff.

Through the NEB Team Brief process the review team is interested to hear your thoughts on NERC's library service.

Questions:

- What are your views on the current NERC library service?
- How do you use NERC libraries?
- Of the services that the libraries offer, which ones do you use most and are there any additional services you would find useful?

Further information on the review:

Mark Thorley, secretary to the NERC Information Strategy Group.

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The ISG will post information on the NERC extranet about the review, including the detailed terms of reference and information on the contractors.

Information Points

1. The NERC E-mail Project

At its July meeting, as part of the IT strategy, NEB agreed to a proposal to implement a NERC wide email system.

NERC currently has five email systems. This fragmentation is a barrier to effective collaboration and integrated science. The number of servers we use is excessive and are expensive. The approved proposal will halve the number of servers, improve the robustness of the service, and improve security. As well as being good scientifically and financially (three year payback), it is also a very environmentally friendly change.

NERC have chosen to implement Microsoft Outlook/Exchange, a product that will be familiar to most of us. This mirrors the choice of all other research councils, and it is the market leader. We intend to add other functions over time, including a broadband internet telephone service with the potential for videoconferencing, collaboration tools and instant messaging.

Accompanying this change will be a review of policies regarding email storage. This should markedly improve how we save emails in ERMS while improving visibility of information within NERC.

Further Information:

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2. Examples of research and commercial partnerships emerging from NERC

Environment and human health

A new £4.4m partnership programme to explore the impacts of modern living on our health has just started to fund its first research projects. The Environment & Human Health Programme comprises 37 projects that cover a broad field of environmental concerns linked to human health.

One of the newest emerging concerns is the possible hazard from engineered nanoparticles in our environment. Nanotechnology involves manipulating material and creating devices on a nanometre scale (a nanometre is one thousand-millionth of a metre). Their miniscule size means they can easily be inhaled, ingested or absorbed without knowledge. The particles are currently used in over 200 commercial products including sunblocks, creams, cosmetics and fabric coatings, and are inevitably entering the environment either through manufacturing discharge, accidental spillage or general use. The environmental behaviour of these engineered nanoparticles is currently unknown and their potential to harm human health is a major concern.

Press release: www.nerc.ac.uk/press/releases/2007/35-health.asp

Cheaper toxic waste disposal solutions

A novel, safe, cost-effective method of treating and disposing of waste metalworking fluids has been developed by researchers from the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology,

The new treatment method is based on microbiological technology developed by Professor Ian Thompson and Dr Christopher van der Gast. The scientists identified a market need for the technology and have formed a spin-out company, Microbial Solutions Ltd.

Press release: www.nerc.ac.uk/press/releases/2007/34-waste.asp

Science in the city

Insurance companies are more sensitive than most to weather-related catastrophes. The companies exist because of risk and uncertainty and are usually able to adapt quickly to new risks. But the uncertainty associated with projected future climate impacts has made it difficult for them to respond to this issue.

Willis Reinsurance has called on the Walker Institute for Climate System Research to help bridge the knowledge gap between climate research and the insurance industry. Together they have formed a unique academic-Industrial collaboration – the Willis Research Network

More information can be found in the next issue of Planet Earth, published in October.

NERC-funded research often contributes directly to policy development, monitoring and assessment. Our commissioned research provides reliable and independent policy advice to government and others. Look out for new promotional material coming out from the KT team in the next few weeks.

3. Announcement of Theme Leaders

NERC has announced the appointment of its new ‘theme leaders’ who will champion seven environmental science themes and encourage partnerships across the research and stakeholder community.

The themes and their newly appointed leaders are:

Climate system – Professor Rowan Sutton from the University of Reading.

Biodiversity – Professor Lloyd Peck from the British Antarctic Survey, Cambridge

Earth system science – Professor Tim Jickells from the University of East Anglia

Natural hazards – Dr John Rees from the British Geological Survey, Keyworth

Sustainable use of natural resources – Professor Louise Heathwaite from the University of Lancaster

Environment, pollution and human health – Professor Roy Harrison, OBE, from the University of Birmingham

Technologies – Professor Alastair Lewis the University of York

Press release: <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/press/releases/2007/38-champions.asp>

Please use this opportunity to discuss the implications of any of the above issues to your centre/site and to discuss any additional local Centre/Site issues.