

Ethics 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. (lp@nerc.ac.uk).

Scientists are making advances in research at a faster pace than ever before, and sometimes these advances raise concerns for the public. Researchers want to look at the ethical implications of their work and the work of others.

At the Natural Environment Research Council we fund science and employ scientists, supporting staff and administrators. We believe it is important that people look at the ethical aspects of all the work we do.

We adopted a new ethics policy in June 2005 after much debate, discussion and consultation. It is set out in this leaflet and more information can be found on the website at www.nerc.ac.uk/about/work/policy/ethics



Guiding Principles

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

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.
- All those covered by the policy are personally accountable for operating within the scope and intent of the policy.
- It covers all NERC staff – in Swindon Office, research and collaborative centres.
- 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 expect those who serve on our decision-making and advisory bodies to respect the policy.
- 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 Office of Science and Technology. We are accountable to the public for the work that we do and the way that we do it. We think it is timely to define 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. 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. These policies and codes of conduct, which are on the NERC website at www.nerc.ac.uk/aboutus/ethics, 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 over).

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 on the NERC website (www.nerc.ac.uk/aboutus/ethics/). 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 main purpose of this summary is to stimulate thinking. Where available, case histories on issues are included for guidance, and more will be added as the policy is used.

^{*} First Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (Cm 2850 I & II 11 May 1995)