

Alan Thorpe, Chief Executive

# Setting priorities

WITH THE LAUNCH of NERC's strategy, *Next Generation Science for Planet Earth 2007-2012*, on 15 November, attention now focuses on setting priorities. NERC is no different from any organisation in having really difficult decisions to make on the level of funding to allocate to each priority. People may say that, because there is such a good case for increasing environmental science funding, we need to bid for more funds from the government. Whilst, naturally, I believe the strategy makes a super case for an increased funding allocation to NERC, when the government announces its Comprehensive Spending Review this autumn, whatever we receive we still have to prioritise. This is one of the toughest parts of my (and Council's) job. How should we go about it? Having a clearly articulated set of overarching goals and challenges in the new strategy is an excellent starting point. Many factors influence the funding levels, such as: quality of the research proposed, urgency for delivery, capacity of the research community to deliver, availability of the right infrastructure to carry out the research, inherent cost of delivery, activities of other funders both nationally and internationally, and likelihood of success.

The strategy identifies the big picture scientific priorities. But it doesn't yet allocate funding levels to these priorities at a detailed level. The recently appointed scientific theme leaders will be helping to elaborate on the priorities within the seven science themes and NERC's Science and Innovation Strategy Board will advise Council on the appropriate level of funding. The involvement of the scientific community and stakeholders, including the public, in setting the priorities is a vital part of the process.

The decisions taken will not simultaneously please all the scientific community. *Next Generation Science for Planet Earth* makes it clear that NERC needs to focus both on immediate societal needs for research on pressing environmental issues but also we need to support unconstrained, responsively-funded science. As a consequence, with many immediate research needs there will be areas of environmental science that are not at the highest priority. I hope not, but this could lead to resentment in certain parts of the NERC-supported research community. I see NERC's commitment to sustaining a significant responsive mode funding stream as the way to support those areas that fall into this category. Or to put it another way, not all research needs to focus on current needs. Indeed it has been shown time and time again that today's responsive mode science often goes on to address the future needs of society, and sets future priorities within the science community.

In the end, these decisions are difficult and require a significant level of judgement. Council takes on that onerous task and tries its level best to fully and fairly consider the whole environmental science portfolio.

Another key aspect is evaluating how well NERC is doing in delivering its strategy. We

need to review progress on today's high priority topics and judge whether that work will be sufficiently completed at some point in the future so that we can develop and fund other priorities instead. So a decision to put something as highest priority now must not exclude other topics coming to the fore later. This flexible and dynamic approach is crucial and the new strategy is clear that NERC will be putting in place improved monitoring and evaluation methods regarding the delivery of the strategy.

**See 'Next Generation Science for Planet Earth' page 10 and 11 for more information on the new strategy.**

