

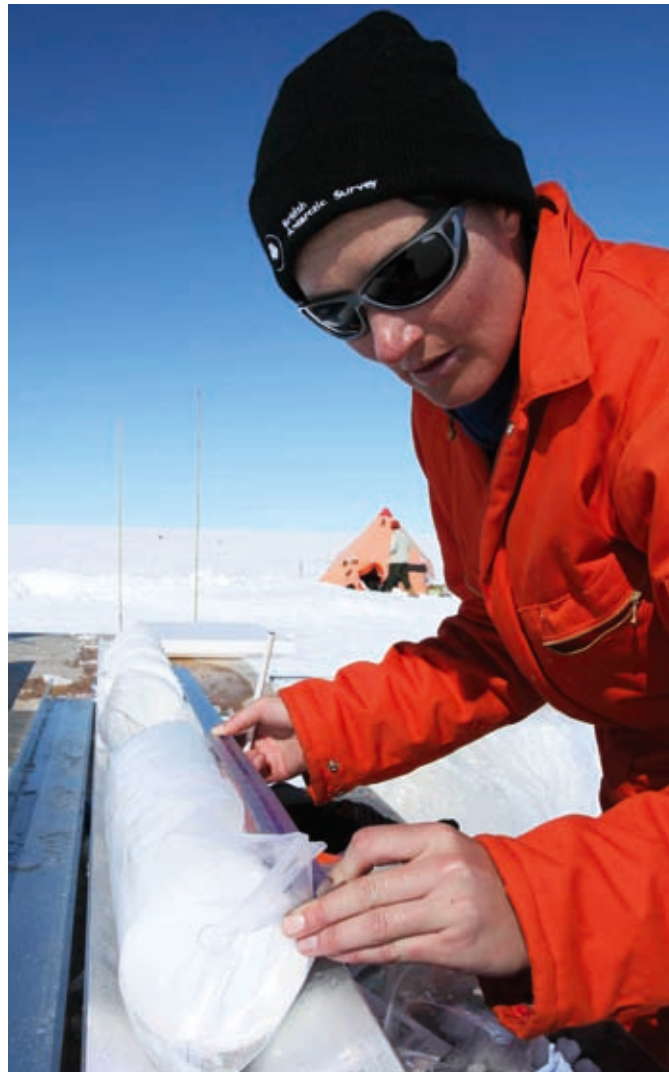
Research for our future – excellent science with impact

Alan Thorpe, *Chief Executive*

THE GLOBAL economic downturn does not only affect NERC financially; it has also led ministers to reflect on the particular importance of investing in research. The government's commitment to research is evident in the April budget statement's confirmation of the ring-fence protecting the overall level of the science and research budget that supports the Research Councils. This is very good news.

The science minister, Lord Drayson, has called for a debate in the science community about the areas of research to focus on where the UK has a competitive advantage. Stimulated by this the Research Councils held an event in April to address these strategic issues – see www.rcuk.ac.uk/news/090406.htm. An important plank of that discussion was that research with social and economic impact will help the UK out of the downturn.

Demonstrating the impact of research has never been more vital, and this includes the impact on business, policy-making and the public. This is not a call for more applied research, but rather an acknowledgement that we have everything to gain both as researchers and as a society from identifying the potential impact of research and enabling that potential to be realised. The impact of research is of particular significance now in sectors such as the green economy, life sciences, digital economy, high-value manufacturing and services, and in the cultural and creative industries. This is why the cross-council multidisciplinary research themes have been introduced, such as



Living with Environmental Change and Energy.

Does this focus on impact signal a radical change in the way NERC operates? I would argue not, as NERC strategy fits very well with this agenda. NERC already divides its funding into several streams that deliver the balance required to carry out world-leading environmental science research. We support blue-skies research that in the long-term will inform new directions for NERC strategy. We

also support national capability to provide the permanent infrastructure that allows top-level research to be carried out – platforms, instruments, data sets, computing and the expertise to develop and use these capabilities. We are now launching a series of time-limited research programmes to address today's strategic themes. Finally, we provide crucial support for training the next generation of scientists.

Some have argued that

this call for focus deflects funding away from the blue-skies research that they say is the life-blood of new ideas for the future. The fact that NERC continues to give strong support to blue-skies funding should allay such fears. Impact plans are now required for all blue-skies (and other) research proposals to all Councils, but the excellence of the proposed research remains the key criterion determining whether a grant is funded.

The quality of impact plans is used alongside other criteria to discriminate between proposals judged as being of equal science excellence. But the real value of impact plans is in encouraging scientists to explore ways of maximising the impact of their research, and in providing a basis for funding the required knowledge-exchange activities hand-in-glove with the research.

But environmental scientists also need often expensive facilities and equipment – ships, planes, satellites – to do their research, and NERC continues to support this. Equally, many individual researchers bid for funding from themed research programmes just as much as they do for blue-skies grants; research is research.

Environmental science needs all these streams of funding and activity, but of course we do need to make sure the balance between them is fine-tuned to meet current and future challenges. The case for investing in environmental research has never been stronger, never been more widely recognised – the more we can tell people about how beneficial it is, the better!