

Annex 6 – SRG Forms and Guidance Notes

SERVICES REVIEW GROUP

Application Guidelines & Review Procedures



NERC collaborates with various universities, NERC Collaborative and Research Centres and other Research Councils in order to make best community use of specialist “unique” essential equipment capacity and expertise, the capital for which had usually been originally purchased for in-house research programmes. These facilities are operated under VAT-exempt NERC research contracts and service level agreements to provide a user-service free-at-the-point-of-delivery, and are particularly cost-effective.

The NERC portfolio planning process will identify where there is a need for new services and facilities to underpin delivery of NERC strategy.

BACKGROUND

1. It is incumbent on NERC, in the continuing drive to obtain the best value for the resources expended on scientific infrastructure, to review each of the existing services/facilities (S&F), along with NERC recognised facility status:
 - to consider the contribution of each facility to delivery of NERC’s strategic priorities¹ (also including Responsive Mode and research training);
 - to ensure that each facility is/will be delivered in the most cost-effective manner; and
 - to ascertain that the science supported is of the highest quality.
2. Since 1996, this has been undertaken through the Services Review Group (SRG) in which a proportion of the S&F – those in the penultimate year of their contract or Service Level Agreement (SLA) – has been subjected to penetrating review via an ad hoc committee competitive with other facilities under review at that time. The SRG is chaired by a member of the NERC community (Table 1) who is not connected with any service under consideration. The SRG primarily comprises NERC Peer-review College members, plus others having expertise appropriate to the business at hand. The Services Review mechanism has proved itself to be effective, challenging for the S&F, robust and reasonably consistent year-on-year. The fact that there has been little change over the years might be interpreted to indicate that all major needs continue to be met, although there are numerous examples of evolution in the nature and quality of individual facility and their mode and efficiency of delivery.

¹ **Next Generation Science for Planet Earth 2007 – 2012** identifies strategic and scientific priorities for UK environmental sciences over the next five years. These priorities have evolved from extensive consultation, involving scientists, business executives, policy makers and the public.

NERC wishes to encourage and grow these priority areas over the next five years:

- **Climate System**
- **Biodiversity**
- **Sustainable Use of Natural Resources**
- **Earth System Science**
- **Natural Hazards**
- **Environment, Pollution and Human Health**
- **Technologies**

For full descriptions, you are advised to see: <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/strategy/>

Existing Facilities

3. All existing facilities are operated by NERC via:
 - a Service Level Agreement (SLA) if the service is provided by a NERC Research Centre or by NERC staff, or by another Research Council; and/or
 - a contract, if a university or some other external body provides the service.
4. The duration of these contracts or SLAs is normally 3 to 5 years, depending upon the recommendations of the SRG. All contracts or SLAs terminate at a financial year-end, irrespective of their start-date. Contracts/SLAs are not renewed automatically. Facility Heads are required to apply for competitive renewal of NERC support, if necessary, approximately 18 months before their contract/SLA is due to terminate.

Proposals From Facilities For NERC Recognition

5. There are a number of facilities, both in NERC Research Centres and in the universities, which currently offer services to support research in the environmental sciences. NERC is prepared to consider awarding 'recognition', without financial support, in order that the services on offer can be included in NERC publicity. Before recommending use of such services to the research community and including service details in its literature, it is vital that NERC satisfies itself that the quality and reliability of the service is adequate. In particular, the application must provide appropriate quality assurance.
6. Recognised facilities will be reviewed every five years.
7. Additions to the list have mostly been those where worthy funding bids have failed. The Office supports the concept because it provides an effective low-cost means of communication of where and how research infrastructure support might be obtained, additional to that from the S&F.

REVIEW PROCEDURES

8. Applications for renewal of an existing contract/SLA, for a new contract/SLA (new provider) or recognised facility status will be reviewed by the SRG. The SRG will include:
 - at least one reappointed academic member able to provide continuity from one SRG to another;
 - sufficient members (either from the Peer-review College or other experts) with knowledge of at least one of the areas to be reviewed to cover all S&F under review.
9. The NERC Swindon Office, in consultation with the chair, will determine the membership as a function of the business to be conducted, and provide the secretariat.
10. The SRG will normally hold one meeting to consider all of the facilities to be reviewed at that time. The Group will consider each application individually and its recommendations will be considered for endorsement by the NERC Executive, Director of Science Delivery.

Applications to provide an Existing Facility

11. Applications may be submitted by the existing provider (renewal) of a facility, or interested parties seeking to take on provision of the facility (rival bid).
12. For each facility seeking renewal of NERC support, the Head of Service will complete the application form SRG1 and attach a set of standard Output and Performance Indicator (OPI) information for that facility plus a set of specific information as detailed in Appendix 1 (if not already covered by the standard OPIs), including letters of support from key scientific community sources. This ‘case for renewal’ will include estimates of the costs for a new contract by completing form 1b, details of technology transfer from the facility to industry, publications by facility staff and users, potential new markets for the facility and the potential implications of closure of the facility on other areas of NERC. Existing S&F are required to signal (via email) their intention to seek renewal, and submit a full application to the NERC Swindon Office in accordance with the timetable detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Services Review Group 2012 Timetable.
Actions for Renewal Bids, Rival Bids and Recognised Facility Status Bids.

Chair: Professor Paul Monks	
Date	Action
August 2011	Announcement of Opportunity published
30 th September 2011	Deadline for Expressions of Interest (Renewal and Rival) Deadline for Outline Bid (Recognised Facility Status)
3 rd January 2012	Deadline for Full Applications
March 2012	Panel Meeting held
June 2012	Formal Decisions made by NERC

13. Providers submitting a rival bid are also required to complete the application form SRG1 and wherever possible, attach a set of standard Output and Performance Indicator (OPI) information as detailed in Appendix 1. It is recognised that this information may not always be readily obtainable by rival bidders. Letters of support from key scientific community sources should be included. This ‘case for funding’ will provide estimates of the costs for a new contract by completing form 1b, details of technology transfer from the facility to industry, publications by facility staff and users and potential new markets for the facility. New providers are required to signal (via email) their expression of interest, and submit a full application to the NERC Swindon Office in accordance with Table 1.
14. The NERC Swindon Office may undertake a survey of users of the facility, specifically for the SRG, seeking views on the future requirements for the service. This may not be necessary if the required information is adequately covered in the letters of support from the scientific community.
15. The SRG will review the applications prior to the meeting and provide written feedback to the applicants. The applicants will have the opportunity to provide a written response to issues raised. At the SRG meeting, the application, feedback and response will be considered along with:
 - an input from the facility steering committee(s);
 - financial and other information provided by NERC Swindon Office.

Applications for NERC Recognised Facility Status

16. Existing facilities providing support for research in the environmental sciences that are seeking NERC recognition will initially provide details of the services that are on offer by submitting an outline bid. Appendix 2 outlines the information required. The closing date for the outline bid to be submitted to NERC Swindon Office is in accordance with Table 1.
17. Depending on the nature of the facility, e.g. number of other potential suppliers, the applicant could be asked to complete a full application (i.e. the front page and questions 1 – 13 only of the SRG1 application form). The closing date for its return to the NERC Swindon Office is in accordance with Table 1.
18. Facilities applying to retain their recognised status need to complete the relevant parts of the SRG1 application form (i.e. the front page and questions 1 – 13 only).
19. The SRG will review the outline bid/application prior to the meeting and provide written feedback to the applicants. The applicants will have the opportunity to provide a written response to issues raised. At the SRG meeting, the application, feedback and response will be considered along with the letters of support.

Evaluation Criteria

20. In considering applications for funding, the SRG will take the following criteria into account:
 - likely contribution to the delivery of NERC strategy;
 - letters of comment on the status and standing of the service/facility, but not as peer-review of the application itself, from international reviewers selected by the Office;
 - statement of research to be supported by the service/facility, eg this can refer to current grant applications, Directed programmes, or Research programmes both ongoing and proposed;
 - if it is proposed that the service/facility be located in a particular university department or Centre/Survey, the record of that group in the relevant area of science or technology. (Have other locations been considered?);
 - estimates of cost over a three- or five-year period (capital, staff and recurrent) with an Economic Appraisal comparing other options, if appropriate;
 - time before the service/facility becomes operational;
 - timeliness of the proposal;
 - details of expected usage over a three-year period and the uncertainty in those figures;
 - the proportion of time which is to be made available to the community and how the balance of time (and hence costs) is to be funded;
 - likely role of and contribution to both user and student training;
 - capacity of the service/facility, both theoretical and as it is proposed to be operated;
 - risks associated with a proposal to install untried technology or new applications of existing technology;
 - expected extent of the user community, eg departments, institutions, or generic groups of users where possible;
 - likely usage by non-NERC fund holders, who might be charged;
 - commercial exploitability;
 - details of any comparable facilities in the UK, Europe and worldwide;
 - the consequences of funding not being made available.

21. The SRG will consider the application in terms of the need for the facility, uniqueness of the facility, the quality of the science and training that it supports or is likely to support and the quality of the service provided or likely to be provided.
22. To achieve this the SRG will grade:
 - the **'need'** for the facility' in the range 1 (low) to 5 (high), taking into account:
 - extent to which it delivers NERC's strategic priorities, including Responsive Mode;
 - needs of the user-community;
 - potential growth of the user-community;
 - the **'uniqueness'** of the facility' in the range 1 (low) to 5 (high), taking into account:
 - national/international uniqueness of capability;
 - the **'quality of service'** in the range 1 (low) to 5 (high), taking into account:
 - efficiency of service provision;
 - cost-effectiveness;
 - user-feedback and -appraisal;
 - the **'quality of the science and training'** to be supported in the range 1 (low) to 5 (high), taking into account:
 - applications to the facility for support;
 - developments in techniques;
 - output/publications produced and engendered;
 - NERC Research Grants and PhD students supported; and
 - any other output performance indicators.
23. The SRG will review each application for funds individually and arrive at a recommendation for each. It will then prioritise those applications that it has recommended for funding.

ACTIONS FOLLOWING THE REPORT OF THE SRG

24. On receipt of the Report from the SRG and after seeking approval from the NERC Executive, NERC Swindon Office will decide what actions are to be taken.
25. Where the SRG recommends continuation of an existing contract/SLA or the start of a new contract and the estimated annual costs, excluding capital provision,
 - is less than c£150k pa, the Office will decide, how far down the prioritised list it can fund, based on the availability of funds from the Services and Facilities allocation and any reasonably assured prospective income plus other management issues etc.
 - exceeds c£150k pa, the Office will seek confirmation from the NERC Executive that the contract should be renewed.
26. Where the SRG recommends closure of a facility and termination of the contract/SLA, and the annual operating costs of that service, excluding capital provision,
 - is less than c£150k pa, the funds thus released, less the frictional costs for terminating the contract, may revert to the Services and Facilities allocation.
 - exceeds c£150k pa, the funds thus released, less the frictional costs for terminating the contract, may revert to the NERC Executive's 'Headroom' Budget.

Appendix 1

STANDARD PERFORMANCE MEASURES TO BE PRESENTED TO A SERVICES REVIEW GROUP BY EXISTING SERVICES

The facility will provide the following information for each year of the last contract period.

On the capacity of the facility:

Recognising the complexities in measuring the ‘capacity’ of any particular service as discussed in the Scientific Services Policy Statements Manual, the Head of the Service should attempt to provide:

- details of the total capacity of the facility and the proportion of that capacity funded by NERC;
- details of the proportion of the NERC funded capacity lost or wasted due to problems within the facility;
- details of NERC’s usage of the facility;
- details of the unused proportion of the NERC-funded capacity of the facility.

On the demand for the facility:

- total number of NEW users;
- total number of applications received by peer-review grade;
- total number of applications satisfied by peer-review grade;
- percentage of applications satisfied by peer-review grade;
- number of applications received by peer-review grade by NERC Responsive Mode, Research Programme, or Directed Programme;
- number of applications satisfied by peer-review grade by NERC Responsive Mode, Research Programme, or Directed Programme;
- percentage of applications satisfied by peer-review grade by NERC Responsive Mode, Research Programme, or Directed Programme;
- number of applications received from users not currently in receipt of direct NERC support by peer-review grade;
- percentage of applications satisfied by peer-review grade for users not currently in receipt of direct NERC support.

On performance as seen by the customer:

- results of customer-satisfaction surveys;
- details of complaints.
- These statistics represent the longer-term requirements for the SRG. Facilities may not, currently, collect the information relating to NERC’s Responsive Mode, Research Programmes, or Directed Programmes. Facility Heads should ensure that the relevant information is collected for future reviews.

Letters of support from two key users in the scientific community as well as a two-page synthesis of supporting comments from other users should be appended to SRG1 application form.

Appendix 2

STANDARD INFORMATION TO BE PROVIDED BY APPLICATIONS SEEKING NERC RECOGNISED FACILITY STATUS

Applicants (which may be individuals, groups or committees) should provide an executive summary of the following information as a two-page outline bid.

- name of proposed NERC service/facility;
- name of applicant(s);
- description of proposed NERC service/facility, including funding arrangements. It should be made clear what service is to be delivered;
- Statement of research to be supported by the service, eg this can refer to current grant applications or directed programmes, both ongoing and proposed;
- Relevance to NERC's strategic priorities (*Next Generation Science for Planet Earth*) of the science supported;
- details of expected usage over a three-year period and the uncertainty in those figures;
- likely role of and contribution to both user and student training;
- expected extent of the user community, eg naming departments, institutions, or generic groups of users where possible;
- details of any comparable facilities in the UK, Europe and worldwide.

Letters of support from two key users in the scientific community as well as a two-page synthesis of supporting comments from other users should be appended to the outline bid.