

RGS-IBG Consultation response

● NERC Strategy

The questions in the consultation on the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) Strategy:

- What is your view of the context, strategic goals and overall approach taken?
- If you feel that there are higher priorities that NERC should be tackling over the next 5-10 years than those presented in this draft strategy, please state what they are and provide your rationale for assigning them a higher priority.
- Do you feel that there are priorities or challenges in the strategy that NERC should not be investing in over the next 5-10 years? If so, please state what they are and provide reasons as to why you think NERC should not invest in them.
- If you have specific comments on the text in the draft strategy please identify the paragraph number that your comment refers to.

The Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the consultation by NERC on its new strategy. The Society is the learned society and professional body representing geography and geographers. It was founded in 1830 for the advancement of geographical science and has around 14,000 members. In preparing our response to this consultation, we requested comments from all Heads of Departments of Geography, the RGS-IBG research groups, and members of the Society's Research Committee.

Overall, the geographical community supports the new strategy, its thematic areas, and commitment to collaborative and multi-disciplinary research. In terms of specific focus, we wish to emphasise the need to sustain UK research base in hydrology/water science, a theme not explicitly identified. Also, we question the "Technologies" theme; this should be defined in a more appropriately "environmental" manner.

We support the new programme *Living with Environmental Change*, but it is not clear to us how this fits with the thematic priorities. This should be clarified. Environmental and social sciences must both be involved in the LWEP; this is a challenging requirement that necessitates an open assessment of research agendas at an early stage, and not an a priori establishment of environmental research agendas into which social scientists are then expected to fit. The latter will not produce cutting edge research on both sides of the "divide".

The geographical community also supports the mix within NERC of different structures for carrying our environmental science, including infrastructure (e.g. NERC institutes), directed research (e.g. thematic programmes) and responsive mode (blue skies grant applications from the community). However in the new strategy, we query the relationship between directed and responsive modes; especially in light of the suggestion that responsive mode research will contribute to the thematic programmes (since this implies an erosion of truly responsive mode research, especially in the absence of a "champion" for the responsive mode delivery). A number in the community noted that experience suggests that individuals who run thematic programmes play a very key role in defining their objectives. This can lead to loss of confidence in the structure if legitimate applications are ruled out because they don't fit narrowly defined thematic objectives. In support of the responsive mode funding, the community would like to see a fraction of the budget explicitly ring-fenced, along with strong oversight by NERC science managers and independent peer-reviewer committees of the thematic programmes, to ensure that proposals within them achieve a similar high quality to that for responsive mode.



Finally, the community raised questions as to whether the Strategy is adequately integrated with international programmes, notably those of NSF and the EU, to facilitate shared funding by joint international teams.

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