

Call for evidence: The ownership and governance of NERC centres

Response from the Royal Astronomical Society

The Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) has more than 3700 members (Fellows) working in areas related to the fields of astronomy, space science and geophysics. The Society works to advance these sciences and so we take a keen interest in decisions that may have an impact on the capability of British scientists to carry out research in these disciplines. We therefore welcome the opportunity to be involved with the consultation on this proposal.

In preparing this response, we have consulted with the Solid-Earth and External Geophysics Forums, convened by the RAS, but which both see attendance from senior NERC staff. We also liaised with the British Geophysical Association, the joint association of the RAS and the Geological Society (who will themselves put in a separate submission).

Geophysicists who responded are primarily concerned about the future ownership of the British Geological Survey (BGS) and the impact on the health of their scientific discipline.

The RAS response shares this concern i.e. that any change in status for the NERC centres should not have a detrimental impact on overall scientific activity. Although the health of the centres is not necessarily predicated on their position within NERC, there seems to be no great advantage to a change and a number of issues arise if they become private sector organisations, even if they are then run on a not-for-profit basis.

A variety of research institutes have been devolved from research council ownership in the past. Some appear to have prospered; some have closed or changed beyond recognition. It is suggested that no action be taken concerning national assets of the scale of the British Geological Survey without due consideration and consultation by NERC with its fellow research councils as to lessons learned and experience gained in change of ownership.

Turning to the BGS itself, this is an organisation that forms part of the core national capability for UK geophysics. Its present status allows it to be an honest broker between the rest of the public sector and private companies, who recognise its public good through the donation of research data. Its contribution in areas like the International Geomagnetic Reference Field (IGRF) and the curation of data over long periods of time is also invaluable. Should a change of ownership take place, the Society urges NERC to ensure that these and similar roles are given due protection, given that they may not always lead to immediate economic returns, but are nonetheless vital to basic geophysics research.

In general terms, if the operation of centres like BGS is handed to a large private sector company then other conflicts of interest and pressures will need careful management. For example, large corporations might simultaneously have interests in e.g. waste management but at the same time then be involved with advice on hazards. A private sector shareholder-based organisation might also face a conflict of interest if required to publish research results on an Open Access basis. NERC should also consider how safeguards can be put in place to ensure that the sharing of data between the UK and international partners for scientific purpose continues without additional hindrance.

The consultation document also does not make it clear how the assets associated with centres (i.e. the NERC services and facilities listed at <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/sites/facilities/list.asp>) would be affected by a change in ownership. These are now run by the centres, rather than centrally by NERC in Swindon. If NERC proceeds to move the centres to the private sector it would need to put arrangements in place to ensure continued access to these facilities at a sensible cost for scientific research.