Guidance for applicants: Impact Plans for Research Grant Proposals.

Summary of changes

From 1 April 2009, ALL research proposals submitted to NERC should be accompanied by an Impact Plan that will detail:

- those who may benefit from the research
- how they might benefit
- methods for disseminating data/knowledge/skills in the most effective and appropriate manner

Any research proposal submitted without an Impact Plan risks being rejected from the round.

Background

NERC wishes to demonstrate the impact arising from its investments. Studies illustrating the impact of our activities contribute to the evidence base for the continuation of the government science budget and can influence the outcome of NERC's spending review allocation (the funding we receive from government).

A core part of NERC's mission is to use its science for the benefit of the UK and more widely. Key to this is knowledge exchange, which provides the mechanisms for the impacts of research to be realised. Impact activities should be an integral part of any research and NERC expects all researchers to carry them out. Along with the UK's other Research Councils, NERC has made it mandatory for all research grant proposals to be accompanied by an Impact Plan.

Carrying out the activities in the Impact Plan will allow potential users and beneficiaries to better understand and benefit from your research and will, in some cases, enable greater involvement in your research.

Requirements

ALL research grant proposals must be accompanied by an Impact Plan. Any research proposal submitted without an Impact Plan risks being rejected from the round and it is not possible to submit the application through JeS without attaching the impact plan,

Applicants should identify the kinds of activities they expect to undertake in order to disseminate knowledge acquired through their research and to engage in impact activities with stakeholders and/or the user community. There is a range of methods to do this. Some illustrative examples are in Annex 1. However activities need not be restricted to just these methods.

Whilst it may not be possible at an early stage to identify all possible outcomes or the best ways to achieve impact, very often generic methods can be used to good effect.

Broad outline and structure of the Impact Plan

There is a template to help you structure your Impact Plan and ensure relevant and useful information is included. This can be downloaded from the Impact Plan area of the website. Unless specified otherwise by the Announcement of Opportunity, the Impact Plan should be:

- A maximum length of two sides of A4
- Minimum 11 point Arial, 2cm margins

Your plan should detail potential users[1] and activities to engage them with and facilitate knowledge exchange and impact. The cost of the activities to be undertaken should be included. Full details should be provided in the Financial Resources and Justification of Resources sections of the main JeS proforma.

If a proposal is highly speculative and novel and at this point no users outside the academic community can be identified, the Impact Plan should:

- Outline activities that will be undertaken as 'routine' methods of achieving impact, such as journal publications, conference attendance, data management or communicating with the public through stories in the press
- Provide clear evidence that the involvement of users has been properly considered
- Identify areas/sectors in the user community this work may be relevant to in the future

Information to include in the Impact Plan

When writing an Impact Plan, it is important to remember that impact is the outcome whereas knowledge exchange is the process by which impact is achieved. Impacts can be local, regional, national or international in scale and impact is most effective when user engagement is sought as early on in proposal development as possible, and where the activities are embedded within the research process.

In considering how best to maximise the impact of your research, you should think about its likely outcomes, who it might be of interest to and how best to communicate it to this individual / group. At this stage you might be able to identify individuals or groups in user organisations who will be interested in specific aspects. If at all possible, you should consider approaching these potential users prior to submitting your application: early user involvement will strengthen the likely impact of your research and users may be able to advise you on the best method(s) to disseminate your work. If you do this, you must allow a considerable period of time to build a relationship with the user community. Under no circumstances should you try to solicit support from them without appropriate and timely discussion. Users will not welcome demands for last minute engagement with proposals.

Impact Plans should:

1. Set out engagement with the user community, for example:
   - Who the potential users are

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[1] Users/user community = people who use the outputs of your science. For example, they could be from industry, business, government, charities or the general public.

- How the work will build on specific existing links
- Other beneficiaries/stakeholders who may have an interest in outcomes
- Identify how users will be engaged if the research proposal is funded

2. Demonstrate awareness of possible impacts of the work on users through increased knowledge and understanding, for example:
- Economic impacts
- Public policy or legislatory impacts
- Quality of life and public good impacts

3. Identify activities that will be undertaken to ensure good engagement and awareness-raising, such as:
- Secondments of research or user community staff
- Workshops to provide training or information dissemination
- Publications summarising main outcomes in a way that people will be able to understand and use

4. Identify who is likely to be undertaking the Impact activities, such as:
- PhD students and post-doctoral researchers who may be involved in activities in addition to research
- Bought-in staff specifically to undertake Impact activities
- Technical experts to write publications, web pages and user-friendly interfaces

5. Details of costs of the activities proposed, including staff time

Funding

There is no maximum funding limit for activities within the Impact Plan provided that they are fully justified in the Justification of Resources section of the JeS proforma. Impact activities that are funded will be funded at 80%, but note that Impact Plans will not be funded as stand-alone activities.

Assessment of Impact Plans

Research grant applications will be assessed in the normal way (http://www.nerc.ac.uk/funding/assessment /). Science excellence remains the primary criterion for assessment of responsive mode proposals. Impact Plans will be considered as a secondary criterion alongside risk/reward and cost effectiveness..

Impact Plans will be sent for peer review and, where the science proposals is in the funding frame, will be discussed by affiliates and members of NERC's Peer Review College at the moderating panel meetings.

Impact Plans will be graded high, medium or low.

Only research grant proposals selected for funding will have their Impact Plans graded in the moderating panel meeting. Where an Impact Plan receives a grade of low, NERC reserves the right to withhold science funding until the plan has been revised to a sufficient standard. In such circumstances, feedback will be provided to help with resubmission of the Impact Plan.

Criteria for assessment

For all Impact Plans, consideration will be paid to the research being undertaken and whether the Impact Plan is appropriate to deliver the relevant activities. For highly speculative or novel proposals where the user community cannot easily be identified at the proposal stage, the range of activities undertaken is more likely to be routine than for those proposals of a more applied nature.

Assessment criteria for Impact Plans can be found at
http://www.nerc.ac.uk/funding/application/impactplans.asp

Monitoring of Impact Plan activities / outcomes

NERC routinely collects information on research grants and how researchers have engaged with users. We do this through the annual Outputs and Performance Measures (OPM) exercise and highlights are published in the NERC annual report. Impact Plan information collected through OPM will be made available through the science impacts database (SID) which is publicly accessible (http://sid.nerc.ac.uk/).

Advice, guidance and queries

Many research organisations have set up offices to help provide advice to researchers on areas such as economic impact and knowledge exchange. You are advised to contact them as they may be able to help guide you with putting together your Impact Plan.

For all queries relating to Impact Plans, please contact knowledge@nerc.ac.uk

Annex 1: Examples of activities that can be undertaken and outlined in Impact Plan

The list below illustrates activities that could be included in an Impact Plan.

This list is by no means exhaustive and activities need not be restricted to these examples, however many of these methods are tried and tested and deliver good results.

Examples of users include: policy-makers, NGOs, charities, government agencies, industry, public sector, schools, museums, professional / amateur associations, media, etc.

Examples of activities include: workshops, websites, publications, conferences, public lectures, networks, freeware (data) tools, new methodologies, exhibitions, roadshows, media, training, commercialisation, technology, on-line databases, etc.

The following list has been provided to illustrate some activities you might want to consider as part of your knowledge exchange activities.

Activities need not be restricted to these examples, and this list is by no means exhaustive – however many of these methods are tried and tested and deliver good results.

- **Special data management:** substantial amounts of data are generated from research and often published in ways that are not easily available, accessible or meaningful to potential users. You could use the funds to convert the data into a form that can be readily used.

- **Networks:** formation of a network made up of researchers and members of the user community. This will enable the exchange of people, skills and knowledge and could allow new mutual research directions to be defined.

- **Website:** you could set up a website with information written in a user-friendly and accessible way to ensure your data can be used. NERC-funded websites must follow basic style guidelines developed by NERC. We can also advise you and give you support with construction and accessibility. Before embarking on any website planning, please contact the NERC communications team at the earliest instance: editors@nerc.ac.uk

- **KT translators/facilitators:** employ a facilitator to move between the research base and user community, and act as a focal point for a range of activities. The facilitator acts as a translator enabling the user community to access information in a meaningful manner from a wide range of sources through one main interaction.

- **Special publications:** data and knowledge are often held in journals and other formats that are not easy for many users to access. Produce targeted publications to enable the exchange of knowledge in a format that encourages uptake and use. Make sure that you talk to your user community so that you know what knowledge they need and what format is most useful to them.

- **Workshops:** these can provide a quick and easy way for researchers and users to come together to exchange skills and techniques that are vital for their activities. The involvement of users in the exchange of skills and techniques is key to the success of workshops in facilitating impact. Workshops inviting only researchers from within the disciplines involved in the proposal should not be considered as an effective mechanism to achieve impact. Inviting colleagues from disciplines outside the proposal will improve the opportunities for impact, but without the involvement of users, such a workshop still does not constitute a really strong impact.

- **Secondments, fellowships and interchanges:** exchanging staff between the research base and user community enables an increase in the understanding of common issues, access to skills and knowledge, and can facilitate future collaborations. During your research you could help users get involved in collecting data, experimenting, or interpreting results.