

Proposed merger of British Antarctic Survey and National Oceanography Centre : Natural Environment Research Council response to the Committee's sixth report of session 2012-13.

Contributors

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House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**Proposed merger of British
Antarctic Survey and
National Oceanography
Centre: Natural
Environment Research
Council Response to the
Committee's Sixth Report
of Session 2012–13**

**Fifth Special Report of
Session 2012–13**

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Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Government Office for Science and associated public bodies.

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The Committee is one of the departmental Select Committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No.152. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/science>. A list of reports from the Committee in this Parliament is included at the back of this volume. The Reports of the Committee, the formal minutes relating to that report, oral evidence taken and some or all written evidence are available in printed volume(s).

Additional written evidence may be published on the internet only.

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Contacts

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Fifth Special Report

On 31 October 2012 the Science and Technology Committee published its Sixth Report of Session 2012–13, *Proposed merger of British Antarctic Survey and National Oceanography Centre* [HC 699]. On 21 December 2012 the Committee received a letter from Professor D J Wingham, Chief Executive, Natural Environment Research Council, which contained a response to the Report. The letter is published as appendix to this Report.

Appendix: Natural Environment Research Council response

On behalf of the Natural Environment Research Council, I would like to thank you for your invitation to respond to the Committee's report on our proposal to consider the merger of the British Antarctic Survey and the National Oceanography Centre. We congratulate you on the speed with which you produced such a helpful report following the hearing.

You are aware that Council decided not to proceed with the merger after considering your report and feedback from stakeholders including the polar affairs community and staff. I will therefore focus on future plans for BAS in my response to the Committee rather than the process of the consultation.

Firstly I would like to emphasise NERC's commitment to the effective stewardship of BAS, which delivers environmental science in support of the Antarctic Treaty, and also provides strategic presence for the UK in the South Atlantic. We are rightly proud of the geopolitical role played by BAS and work closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on areas of mutual interest. This is one of NERC's many contributions to supporting public policy.

BAS scientists are making an important contribution to our understanding of climate change and providing the evidence base which is shaping the understanding of our changing planet. I am pleased that the Committee had the opportunity to visit the Cambridge facility on 6 December to see their work at first hand. Along with the rest of NERC Council I greatly admire the skills and professionalism of our scientists and support staff in all our research centres. I understand that some may have been concerned about the possible merger and hope that Council's decision will provide reassurance.

Like so many others in the science community I was pleased that the Government decided to support UK science with a flat-cash funding settlement for resources in the 2010 spending review. Nonetheless, NERC has had to cope with a 3% cash reduction, and, inevitably, inflationary increases—such as those for marine fuel oil—continue to pose a challenge for NERC. That said, NERC has committed publicly to maintaining BAS funding at £42m a year for this CSR period. And I am pleased that David Willetts announced that he would like a separate funding line for Antarctic infrastructure and logistics from the next CSR. This will helpfully clarify NERC's support to Antarctic science.

Nonetheless, the level cash settlement for BAS and inflationary pressures do mean that all of NERC must continue to make efficiencies. For example, you will be aware from the oral evidence session for the marine science inquiry on 12 December that we reluctantly have to lose jobs across NERC. No organisation takes this decision lightly.

You asked about the appointment of Professor Hill as interim director of BAS. Short-term appointments of this kind are usually filled internally within NERC as detailed knowledge of the organisation is essential. I looked to replace the then director with a candidate with significant experience of world-class science; leading a science-based organisation; financial management; and change management. Professor Hill was particularly well qualified against these criteria and he went on to perform extremely well in a delicate situation. I hope you will appreciate that I cannot discuss details of other possible candidates.

You are now aware that Professor Alan Rodger is filling the role of interim director pending a permanent appointment. That position will soon be advertised externally. The requirements of the job have been discussed with stakeholders including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and BIS.

Your report also mentioned the management of research vessels. Professors Hill and Rodger discussed the NERC position on this at the oral evidence session on 12 December. NERC continues to look for ways of reducing the costs of operating its fleet whilst preserving as far as possible our ability to serve the entire range of NERC polar and marine science. We continue to work with the UK marine science community to deliver that best possible way forward.

I note that you raised concerns about NERC's role in the relationship between business and the environment. As discussed by Professor Hill in his oral evidence of the 31 October, since NERC's inception in 1965, the research and survey activities enshrined in our Royal Charter have sought to balance environmental stewardship and business interests. The allocation of resources from BIS following the 2010 spending review required NERC—and other Research Councils—to deliver excellent science and impact on the economy and society. NERC can claim many successful examples of the benefits of our research alongside a long list of scientific achievements. I am happy to meet the Environmental Audit Committee to explain in more detail.

