

## CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

### **Question 1: Do the 2011-2016 strategic priorities remain robust and relevant for the period 2016-2021?**

The strategic priorities could be described as relevant, but this is because they are so broad and generic that it would be difficult for them not to be. As a consequence they are not robust or strategic simply because they are so vague. The robustness of the strategic priorities depends on understanding more about how the research strategy will inform the many areas of Scottish Government policy and practice relevant to rural affairs and environment, many of which are potentially conflicting or competing unless well informed by high quality science and evidence. For example, RSPB Scotland considers it critical that the first priority – supporting policy and practice – delivers a clear focus on the goals of biodiversity strategy from the global (CBD Nagoya and the Aichi targets, to European (EU Biodiversity Strategy) to national (2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity), in order that 2020 targets are met.

### **Question 2: Do these 'enabling principles' set the right context or should additional principles be adopted?**

RSPB Scotland strongly supports the view that this Research Strategy should be based on an ethos of collaboration across the science base, and with policy and practice end users, recognising that there are some organisations (e.g. SRUC, RSPB) with important roles working across this interface. In this sense, we agree that the suggested enabling principles set an appropriate context, although we consider that the sub-clause of principle 2 relating to "delivery of solution-focused impacts" is of such critical importance that it needs to be elevated to the status of an enabling principle in its own right.

### **Question 3: Are the high level outcomes sufficiently clear, if not, what changes would you propose?**

We are concerned that the high level outcomes lack any explicit focus on biodiversity conservation and protection of the natural environment, despite the clear commitments made in the *2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity*. It might be that these commitments are taken by Scottish Government to be implicit in the ecosystem services outcome, but the vague wording used (e.g. "key ecosystem services") risks critical national, European and global biodiversity responsibilities being squeezed once again between dominant policy sectors. In order to meet the evidence needs of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, it is important that an explicit

reference is made to biodiversity conservation amongst the high-level outcomes. In some senses, this could be regarded as part and parcel of the conservation of Natural Capital, although this risks a solely utilitarian (and hence undesirable) perspective on biodiversity conservation.

More generally, some of the terms used in this section of the document (e.g. 'systems thinking', 'sustainable intensification') beg many questions and invite diverse interpretations. In this context, clarification of these terms will be an essential part of the later, more detailed consultation on this research strategy that is promised.

**Question 4: Are the three broad themes identified an appropriate way of structuring our work? If not, what alternatives should be considered?**

This seems a reasonable structure but we are concerned that the lack of detail means that many questions remain in relation critical to biodiversity policy objectives. For example, (i) to what extent has the condition of the land/sea been degraded, and what is the potential for restoration to benefit biodiversity, people and economy?, (ii) will sustainability of land use and agriculture be measured by delivery of biodiversity conservation objectives?

A good way to tackle these difficulties would be to re-title the third theme as "Ecosystems Services and Natural Capital". This recognises the reality that in many intensively managed environments (e.g. farmland), delivery of some ecosystem services can be maintained whilst natural capital is severely eroded. In the current text, however, natural capital is mentioned only with respect to its potential exploitation; the ecosystem service focus of the document implicitly assumes that the only value in natural capital is to provide services to humans. This solely utilitarian focus on ecosystem services and natural capital will not be sufficient to promote the conservation and restoration of a rich natural heritage in Scotland. Consequently, the revised theme should include explicit reference to the need to *protect and restore* biodiversity and other components of natural capital, and to deliver the research needed to enable this in support of Scottish Biodiversity Strategy objectives. Indeed, delivery of the objectives of the 2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity should be incorporated as a high-level outcome under an "Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital" theme.

**Question 5: How can the SG maximise the benefits of on-going investment in the MRPs to build and benefit from connectivity with the wider science base?**

Maximising these benefits will depend on finding ways in which Scottish Government can work with other major research funders – EU, Defra, NERC, BBSRC, ESRC – to deliver coordinated and integrated funding opportunities which promote collaboration between MRP, HEI and NGO research providers.

Based on a recent meeting (23 April) hosted by SRUC and JHI, we also

note that the existing network of research farms owned and/or managed by the JHI and SRUC provides a substantial yet substantially under-exploited opportunity to develop research, trial and demonstration partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders to assist in the evidence-based delivery of land management policy objectives, including in particular those of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.

**Question 6: What are your views of the performance and operation of the CoEs to date, are there any additional areas that would benefit from such support?**

RSPB Scotland supports the principle of CoEs in critical cross-cutting policy areas such as Climate Change and Water Management. However, we feel that they perhaps have suffered from a lack of clear sense of identity in the context of the core delivery of the MRPs. What is the role and remit of a CoE and its added value?

The evidence needs of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and, specifically, the increasingly urgent needs of the 2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity is an outstanding example of a critical area of relationship between research and multiple policy sectors that would benefit from a CoE. For example, in the 2005-2010 RERAD Research Strategy, biodiversity conservation was incorporated (rightly – this was a highly progressive element of that strategy which, sadly, was not capitalised upon) as a cross-cutting theme. However, these cross-cutting themes remained poorly integrated into core research programme structures and consequently had rather limited impact. Biodiversity and ecosystem service research remains dispersed widely across the MRP research portfolio, so that synthesis and coordination in the interests of Scottish Biodiversity Strategy objectives would be hugely valuable, and a CoE would provide a mechanism to deliver this.

**Question 7: Do you agree with the SG's proposal to end support for SPs and to explore alternative mechanisms to strengthen engagement between its investment in research and the business sectors it aims to support?**

No comments

**Question 8: Do you have any proposals for how the research portfolio can better link to the business community to deliver the desired outcome?**

No comments

**Question 9: Is the purpose and value of underpinning capacity sufficiently clear, if not how can it be improved?**

No. Partly, the problem is that ‘underpinning capacity’ is taken to comprise such a diversity of assets and work streams. In the later stages of the consultation, this diversity could perhaps be teased out and explained in more detail. This would be worth the investment of effort because, in RSPB Scotland’s experience, some of the areas currently listed as underpinning capacity are indeed of critical value. In particular, we would consider (i) that long-term environmental monitoring studies and data are an essential and often under-valued component of research portfolios, (ii) that advisory services are a critical and often under-valued resource in translation of policy into good practice (the SRDP being a prime example), and (iii) that postgraduate training and support can deliver highly cost-effective research at the same time as developing the rural and environmental scientific expertise of the future. We also note that core resources that might be described as ‘underpinning capacity’ could also be crucial to realising some of the collaborative opportunities with other research funders that may need to be developed under the challenges set by question 5.

**Question 10: Do you have any views regarding the performance and use of the Contract Research Fund including how it could be improved?**

The Contract Research Fund (CRF) is a very important complement to the core, strategic funding of MRPs in allowing research to be commissioned to meet short-term or urgent research needs or to exploit collaborative opportunities that are complementary to or beyond the expertise of the MRPs. However, from the perspective of external research providers such as RSPB Scotland, the CRF appears difficult to access and engage with. The provision of clearer online information explaining how to suggest ideas for CRF commissioned research would be helpful.

**Question 11: Could the overall delivery model be further simplified in a way which still enables SG to meet its strategic priorities for the portfolio, if so how?**

No comments

**Question 12: Do you have specific suggestions as to how the RESAS research partnership?**

It is difficult to answer this question in detail, but it would seem essential to ensure that the RESAS and CAMERAS research strategies are complementary in delivering the rural affairs and environment research needs of Scottish Government and society. Certainly, both strategies should be clear in setting out how they propose to provide the evidence needs of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and, in particular, the 2020 Challenge for Scotland’s Biodiversity.

**Question 13: Do you have any suggestions for developing the partnership with other research funders?**

Yes. It is disappointing to see another Government research strategy which fails to identify the NGO sector as a significant contributor of research partnership opportunity, both in respect of scientific collaborations with relevant NGOs which themselves have research capacity (e.g. RSPB, GWCT, BTO) and/or significant land holdings that could assist in hosting key research and monitoring programmes (e.g. NTS, RSPB, John Muir Trust, SWT). Later stages of the consultations could valuably develop this area in addition to the focus on the university sector.

**Question 14: Do you have any particular suggestions as to how greater engagement with the HEI sector might be achieved?**

No comments

**Question 15: Are the research outputs from the RESAS portfolio of research readily accessible or can this be further improved, if so how?**

No. Research outputs tend not to be readily available in any 'one-stop-shop' format and instead must be searched for as they are published across the peer-reviewed literature. Even then the findings of research need to be communicated effectively to practitioners and other end users in ways that peer-reviewed outputs alone do not fulfil. In this regard, there are certainly aspects of access to the RESAS research portfolio that could be much improved. For example, there are no dedicated web pages for the current research programme (could SE Web help here?), unlike its predecessor, and no investment that we are aware of in communication of the RESAS research programme via the social media. This accessibility of outputs then needs to be backed up with investments in translational activity and knowledge exchange. Much of this is achievable simply via constructive and open dialogue, but this requires its own resources, backed up by time and intellectual commitments by all stakeholders.

**Question 16: Is the current performance management approach fit for purpose or can it be improved, if so how?**

No comments