

Strategic planning, 1988 – a geological survey in transition

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Chapter 8 Strategic planning, 1988

A considerable amount of activity took place in the interval between the submission of the Butler report and the announcement in the House of Commons by the Secretary of State for Education and Science in November 1988 on the outcome of the Government's deliberations on it. Amongst it was the preparation of an update to the 1985 Strategic Plan. The decision to revise the 1985 Strategic Plan and then to develop an operational plan from it, the latter to be subject to annual revision, was taken formally at an ad hoc Directorate meeting on 14 January 1988. The meeting had been called immediately after a visit to Keyworth by the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Cabinet Office, Mr John Fairclough. The Working Group was to be chaired by Brian Kelk, who had chaired the 1985 Strategic Plan Working Party. The group was to be given three weeks to prepare a draft for discussion by the Directorate. The other members were Chris Browitt and Don Mallick, both of whom had been on the 1985 team, Neil Chapman, Group Manager for Fluid Processes, Chris Deegan, Programme Manager for Hydrocarbons (Offshore) (who was, in fact, replaced by Mike Dean, also of Hydrocarbons (Offshore)), Judy Parker, from the Hydrogeology Research Group, Tony Reedman from the Wales Research Programme and Byron Lintern from the Southern Scotland and Northern England Research Programme, who was secretary.

The terms of reference given to the Working Group were: # Taking into account the developments of the geosciences and their applications, the report of the ABRC/NERC Study Group into geological surveying (Butler), and the BGS/NERC submission to DES on the composition of the Core Programme (the Briden-Larminie paper), to update the Strategic Plan produced in 1985.

1. To make recommendations on any redirection or re-emphasis of expertise required to pursue the strategy, particularly with respect to the Core Programme.
2. To report, in draft form, to Director, BGS by 8 February 1988.

The group met on 21 and 28 January and 3 and 4 February. Written submissions were requested from staff and the trades unions; 22 submissions were received and considered.

The draft document that went to the Directorate contained revised terms of reference for the BGS and quite a radical restructuring of the Core Programme. The Working Group argued that because geological surveying was, above all, an integrated multidisciplinary activity it was scientifically more realistic to divide the Core Programme into units that reflected this rather than the essentially monodisciplinary units that had emerged in the 1985 Strategic Plan, Butler and the Briden-Larminie paper. They divided the Core Programme into:

Multidisciplinary regional surveys

Nationwide survey and monitoring activities

Geosciences information system

Strategic research and development

In a letter to the Director accompanying the draft plan, the chairman of the Working Group listed a number of issues that were on the fringes of the group's terms of reference, but which the group wished him to draw to the Director's attention. These included improving project management, giving greater financial and managerial responsibility to project managers, appointing a committee of the Directorate to oversee the Core Programme, improving the efficiency of office management, the introduction of a package of incentives for the increasing number of short-term contract staff being recruited and the development of a policy for selling BGS expertise via the Responsive Programme.

There was an inescapable logic to the approach they had taken in subdividing the Core Programme, and it was to be taken again in the 1999 Strategic Plan, but with a different outcome. The fringe issues also have a modern resonance, though they were not taken up at the time. The draft plan, however, when it went to the Directorate, was received somewhat impatiently. A radical change like this, though attractive, was not what the first term of reference required them to make and was not politically wise at that time. Government was still considering the Butler report and the last thing that the BGS should do at that stage was to publish a revised Strategic Plan containing a completely different structure for the Core Programme from the one Butler had put to Government.

The draft went then to the three Chief Scientists, John Mather, Richard Howarth and myself, with a brief to produce a second draft, which kept to the Core Programme structure recommended by Butler. The second draft was put to the Directorate for comment early in March; a third and final draft was then assembled and signed off by 30 March.

The document was then considered by the Director, Geoff Larminie, and the Director of Earth Sciences, Professor Briden, who could not agree what to do with it. The 1985 Strategic Plan was never published and there were indications that this one would also be suppressed. Eventually, the Director took a unilateral decision and ordered the Strategic Plan to be printed. It was published in November 1988. The date given under the Preface, 17 November, is just over a week after the announcement on Butler by the Secretary of State for Education and Science. This timing was crucial. NERC Council had already agreed to establish a Programme Board to oversee the BGS Core Programme and its first act was to define the programme. The appointment of the Programme Board was not to happen until after the Parliamentary announcement. Geoff Larminie was determined that the Programme Board's agenda should be set by the BGS. With masterly timing, he put the Strategic Plan into the public arena before anyone else could react.

The final document differed in only minor ways from the draft prepared in March. It was much shorter than the 1985 version, being less concerned with making the case for a new programme structure and more concerned with its content. The Core and Responsive programme definitions presented were more concise than in the 1985 version and became the quoted ones thereafter. Thus the Core Programme was said to comprise those long-term strategic activities that are the proper concern of an established national geological survey. The Responsive Programme, which is underpinned by the core, is a variable, evolving programme of applied work, largely carried out on commission, in response to the short-term requirements of Government and other publicly funded bodies.

Possibly the most important part of the new plan was in the revision of the terms of reference for the BGS. Two modifications in particular reflected a considerable change in thinking in the three years since the 1985 plan was prepared.

The 1985 terms of reference were for the Core Programme alone, not the whole of the Survey. Thus

the fifth term started with the words, 'To maintain the capability to carry out applied and other geological work on commission for Government departments ...' In other words, there must be a capability to carry out a Responsive Programme maintained within the Core Programme, even though there may never be a Responsive Programme. In 1988, it was decided that the terms should be changed to include in them the requirement actually to do a Responsive Programme, therefore making the terms of reference applicable to the whole of the BGS. The wording, therefore, was changed to, 'To conduct, and maintain the capability to do appropriate applied and other geological work, on commission, for the Government departments and national bodies both in the UK and overseas'.

The second important change was with regard to carrying out commissioned research for the private sector. This was an issue raised in the Butler report, which clearly did not strike a chord with Government thinking, as it was emerging, or with NERC Council. Butler said, 'We see advantages in extending it (the Responsive Programme) into the private sector, although the Survey must not thereby endanger its ability to give well-informed independent and impartial advice to Government on geological matters. The BGS should not compete with private consultants through unfair use of its privileged position as recipient of data, nor for commissions for which it is not especially suited'.

This sentiment became reflected in the modified terms of reference, given in the new Strategic Plan. It was now recognised that the BGS was going to have to work increasingly for the private sector and a new term, the eighth, was added, 'To conduct, and maintain the capability to contract for, work with the private sector ...' A caveat was added, more or less reflecting Butler's concerns. The separation of this statement from the term of reference about the Responsive Programme reveals the extent of the sensitivity about working for the private sector. The Responsive Programme was still seen essentially in the post-Rothschild sense as work carried out for the public sector and not as the totality of the Survey's commissioned research.

Another significant change was in the second term. The new one read, 'To interpret the geological structure and evolution of these areas using the results of the surveys and related studies, *and to evaluate such resources of the onshore and offshore areas as may be timely*'. The part in italics was added in part to appease the BGS minerals lobby, which had never been happy about minerals being omitted from the 1985 Core Programme.

The only contentious issue taken up by the Working Group was how to deal with the Butler Study Group recommendation to establish a Science Programme in addition to the Core and Responsive programmes. The Strategic Plan Working Group could not agree with this concept, for mainly practical reasons, and decided that an element of R&D should be embedded within the Core Programme. Much of it would be conducted within programmes and projects, but they recommended that a separately identifiable portion of the Core Programme, to carry out forward-looking R&D in which new equipment, expertise or methodology will be developed and tested, should be overseen by the Chief Scientists. They regarded externally funded basic research as a component of the Responsive Programme.

With regard to the Core Programme itself, the plan follows the Briden-Larminie paper of 1988 with six main components:

Onshore surveys

Offshore surveys

National geochemical surveys

Hydrogeological surveys

National geophysical surveys and monitoring

National Geoscience Information System

The seventh part was to be the strategic R&D Programme.

The plan covered required legislation to make the BGS the designated national repository for all geoscience information, training, quality control and assurance, laboratories and other facilities and contracted-out services, but the main new area covered, as required by the second term of reference, was the skill base. The 1985 Strategic Plan attempted to cost the proposed Core Programme, but did not look at the skill base required to carry it out. The funding issue had been taken up in the Briden-Larminie paper, but the skill base had not hitherto been addressed. The Working Group identified a number of areas in which the BGS was in short supply. These included field mappers, macropalaeontologists, hydrogeologists, engineering geologists, seismic interpreters, economic geologists, computer scientists, numerical modellers, organic chemists, specialists in remote sensing and electronic engineers. They also commented on the effect of the high ratio of scientific to support staff, pointing out that it had serious consequences on, for example, data entry into the Information System.

Work on an operational plan dominated April, culminating in a costed plan being submitted to the Directorate at the end of the month. A fifteen-year view was taken, essentially because this was the time that was estimated in 1984 to be needed to complete geological mapping to modern standards. The plan was to increase spend over three years and then plateau. The components of the Core Programme identified in the Strategic Plan were closely followed. The financial input was constrained by the knowledge the BGS had of the NERC Corporate Plan planning figures and estimates of commissioned income. At that stage, there was not even a hint of any PES award, let alone its magnitude. Best-guess expenditure for the whole of the BGS in the period 1988/89 to 1990/91 was around £20 million a year. The operational plan came out with a requirement of over £33 million a year for the Core Programme alone, a 50% increase on the figure in the Briden-Larminie paper accompanying the PES bid.

As a planning exercise this was next to useless. The six Assistant Directors, who had taken part in it, had presented wish lists rather than objective demands constrained by financial reality. The detailed programme they had developed was ambitious and could probably not be done with the available staff resources, anyway. Operational planning was suspended after this until the autumn, when it was expected that firmer financial planning figures would be available.

Like the first Strategic Plan, the 1988 version covered a wide range of issues, nearly all of which were subsequently ignored, but the central element in both was the definition of what should be included in a Core Programme and this was not ignored. Because of the timing of the publication of this plan, the Core Programme described in it became the basis for the programme that the Programme Board eventually implemented.

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