

Terms of Reference for the ESRC Strategic Advisory Network (SAN)

Purpose and scope

The Strategic Advisory Network (SAN) exists to provide ESRC and its Executive with:

- detailed expert support and advice (to cover the design of strategies and schemes, investment management, pre- and post-award, and interventions);
- a broad perspective of advice on issues, proposals and decisions, including feedback on views within our various stakeholder groups;
- access to a pool of academic and user experts to whom the office can turn to for ad-hoc advice and advocacy and to test out new ideas;
- provision of input into general policy advice.

An important principle governs its function: the separation of the provision of strategic advice from delivery and decision-making by the Executive.

Membership

The SAN will comprise of approximately 30-35 members ensuring coverage of the breadth of disciplinary and user requirements while also being manageable by the secretariat.

Stakeholder perspectives likely to be most represented are:

- academic, including representation from core social science disciplines as well as appropriate representation from research infrastructure (eg on methods, research talent, data and longitudinal studies);
- users of research, including business, third sector and Government;
- others including third sector, government, representative bodies.

In addition to their area of expertise, members are expected to bring a broad strategic view to bear and to act as 'generous generalists', advising across the breadth of ESRC's portfolio.

SAN membership does not preclude the Office from accessing additional academic or user expertise not formally part of the SAN where this may be required.

Members are required to declare any personal, private or commercial interests that might conceivably conflict with the interests of the ESRC, and must withdraw from any discussion of topics in which they have such an interest.

The names of all SAN members together with a register of potential conflicts of interest will be published on the ESRC website.

Nominations and Recruitment

Annually, ESRC will issue an open call for self-nominations via our website and also invite nominations from across key stakeholder groups on a needs basis. Based on the

competencies and characteristics required for the vacancies, the Executive will identify those who it might wish to appoint.

Term

Membership will generally be for up to three years, with the possibility of extension of up to a further three years. In order to ensure the maximum flexibility and to ensure long-term continuity across the SAN membership, ESRC will ensure there is staggering of terms.

Remuneration

Remuneration for involved work would be via a day rate of £160 for pre-approved discrete activities that the Office requests.

Operation

The SAN will typically be deployed via Task and Finish groups (T&F groups), brought together to address specific questions, on which the Executive requires advice. Licenced by Directors they will explore and test new strategies and policies as they are developed. The size of each group will vary according to need. These groups comprise a core (office sponsor and or Council member as lead) a mantle (selected members of the SAN) and exterior (which includes additional expertise where it is required). Collectively these layers ensure a join-up between Council, the Executive and the SAN making sure that recommendations are targeted and robust.

Activity specification

Each of the SAN's individual activities will be framed by a proforma setting out the context, terms of reference for the T&F group, the desired outcome, and how the outcome will be used. The Executive Chair then signs off the proforma. The team confirms membership of the T&F group from the SAN and elsewhere. The T&F group delivers the activity and is then disbanded.

Pre-activity briefing

For each work-stream, those members involved will be provided with a full briefing in advance. Prior to beginning each task and when the scope has been discussed and agreed, the members will be asked to consider if any additional expertise might need to be co-opted on to the sub-set. At the same time, members will be informed about the levels of confidentiality that will apply. This will be determined on a case by case basis.

Quality assurance

ESRC relies on the quality of the strategic advice it receives. This provides a valuable external check on the development of ESRC's direction and plans. Where appropriate a Council member will be assigned as chair of each work stream, primarily to provide oversight of these aspects and to ensure that the reported outcomes accurately reflect the nature of the advice received.

The advisory function of the SAN is separate from:

- responsibility for the decisions made by the Executive
- the independent peer review processes managed by ESRC.

Expectations

The Executive will endeavour to:

- provide a clear specification for each T&F group
- provide the appropriate information so that SAN members are adequately briefed and able to contribute meaningfully
- provide an appropriate forum and tools for members to provide appropriate, high-quality strategic advice
- maintain members' knowledge of ESRC strategic thinking through regular information flows following Council meetings and through at least one annual meeting of the whole SAN
- be clear about the information SAN members can share more widely and that which is provided in confidence
- inform members about the outcome of the advice and how it will be used and in particular to explain the rationale where the advice has not been followed.

Members of the SAN will endeavour to:

- act within the 'Seven Principles of Public Life', in particular to provide independent, informed advice avoiding actual or perceived conflicts of interest and taking a collegiate approach to policy and strategy development
- act as 'generous generalists'
- challenge constructively and/or validate ESRC's perspectives drawing on the available evidence and their own experiences
- take individual and collective ownership of the advice they provide whilst recognising the separation of that advice from responsibility for the decisions made, which rests with the Executive
- make themselves available to participate in SAN T&F groups, subject to sufficient notice
- respond to any requests to participate in pre-activity briefings
- actively participate in SAN meetings and events
- use their profile as SAN members to improve two-way communications within their respective stakeholder communities and, where appropriate, with decision-makers:
 - for example, on intelligence gathering that can be brought to bear in policy development;
 - explaining ESRC policies to the community; and advocating, where relevant, on specific issues on behalf of the social sciences.