Centres Competition 2018
Full stage (invitation only)
Call specification

This version: 27 July 2018

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Summary
The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is investing up to £30 million over five years in centres. It is anticipated that we will fund four or five centres through this investment. The competition is for proposals ranging from £2.5 million to £8 million at 100% full economic cost (fEC) with a term of five years. We will meet 80% of the full economic costs on proposals submitted (for example - ESRC funding total of around £24 million at 80% fEC).

Centres are major ESRC strategic investments. In addition to taking forward an ambitious research agenda and making significant economic or societal impact, they add value by increasing research infrastructure, building capacity, encouraging interdisciplinary working in social science and beyond, and enabling research collaboration in the UK and internationally. We envisage centres as long-term investments which strengthen the social science landscape in the UK. We anticipate that over time centres awarded under this call will become major strategic partnerships with their host research organisations.

The Centres Competition 2018 is being run as a two-stage application process. Outline stage applications closed on 20 March 2018 and the Outline Assessment Panel convened in May 2018. This call for full proposals is open only to applicants who have been invited to apply. Any uninvited proposals will be rejected.

Applicants are invited to submit a full proposal via the Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) System no later than 16.00 on 13 September 2018. Peer review of full proposals will inform the full stage shortlisting panel discussions (5 February 2019) which will identify shortlisted applicants to be invited for interview (6 and 7 March 2019). Funding decisions to applicants will be available late March 2019.

Successful grants must start on 1 October 2019.

Background and scope
Research centre funding is aimed at experienced research leaders who require longer-term or extended support for research groups, inter-institutional research networks, project-linked programmes, medium-to-large surveys, other infrastructure or methodological developments, or any related larger-scale projects. Research centres also have a distinct role in supporting the development of early career researchers and building new research capacity. They are expected to be high-impact investments over the longer term.

What we expect from centres
Our expectations are that centres:
- provide scientifically coherent programmes of research aimed at driving forward innovations in social science theory, the development and application of novel research methods, data sources, and practical application
- will be international or national centres of excellence for social science research, where researchers can collaborate on long-term projects
- make significant contributions to scientific, economic and/or social impact
- involve potential users of research, and take advantage of international collaborative and/or comparative opportunities
- support active career development programmes aimed at building research capacity.
Centres are seen as an integral part of the ESRC’s long-term strategy for extending research excellence and impact and building research capacity. Successful proposals must add value to the current portfolio of ESRC centres. Proposals for new centres should ensure that they do not substantially overlap or duplicate an existing centre.

Submissions from existing centres should explain how the proposal meets the current centre’s aims and objectives and how the research programme will be expanded upon. Applications from existing centres will be treated the same as any other application and will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way.

We would expect centres to have the strategic support of their host research organisation (RO), and to provide evidence of the institution’s support to the centre over the longer term. We would expect the centre to seek sustainable funding over the longer term from their RO and beyond.

Successful applicants will be expected to follow branding guidelines of the ESRC and UKRI (https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/visual-identity-and-logos) and any other funders when developing digital or printed material as part of the grant activity, such as including appropriate logos on websites or publications.

Call details
The Centres Competition is open to innovative new research addressing any theme which falls within the ESRC’s remit. There will be no priority areas for this call. Proposals may be made for fundamental or more applied research topics. All projects must be grounded in empirical evidence, and should make appropriate use of existing data.

It is an essential requirement that your primary research area is in the social sciences but the call also offers researchers major opportunities for promoting innovation and interdisciplinarity, both within and beyond the social sciences although excellent research within a particular social science discipline is also eligible for this call where that is appropriate. We strongly encourage inter/multidisciplinary working both within and beyond the social sciences, as long as at least 50% of the proposed programme of research is within ESRC remit. Please refer to the list of research areas that fall within ESRC remit (https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/is-my-research-suitable-for-esrc-funding/discipline-classifications/) for further information.

We particularly encourage ambitious and novel research proposals addressing new concepts and techniques, and proposals with the potential for significant scientific or societal and economic impact. Knowledge exchange and impact-generating activities will be an integral part of any centre proposal, regardless of topic area or discipline.

Funding can also be used to develop capacity for the collection and subsequent linkage and/or analysis of major new data resources. Such data might include social media data, tracking data and image data. We appreciate the value of these and other new forms of data for academic research, and the exploitation of such data (including the development of innovative tools and methods for collecting, preserving and analysing them) is actively encouraged.
Given our commitment to creating and maintaining large-scale data resources, proposed centres which undertake secondary analysis of these existing longitudinal, business and administrative data sets are particularly welcome, details of our data investments can be found on the ESRC website (https://esrc.ukri.org/research/our-research/) and include but are not limited to UK Data Service (www.ukdataservice.ac.uk), CLOSER (www.closer.ac.uk), Understanding Society (www.understandingsociety.ac.uk), and Big Data Network investments (https://esrc.ukri.org/research/our-research/big-data-network/big-data-network-phase-2/).

**Structure and organisation**

Applicants are encouraged to think imaginatively about the appropriate structure for their proposed centre. The centre may consist of:

- a team of researchers in one or more organisations, with a lead institution that has overall management and financial responsibility
- a hub and spokes model where the team is mostly in the lead organisation but works closely with experts in different organisations in a multi-stream research programme. (This type of arrangement provides an opportunity for more transformative individual work streams and for early career researchers to lead particular projects)
- researchers from a number of disciplines within the social sciences and beyond
- partner and co-investigator institutions; these may include any combination of academic, civil society and private organisations.

We welcome inter-organisational proposals and also encourage partnerships with non-HEI organisations and the inclusion of business, civil society, NGOs or public sector co-investigators, and international organisations. We expect non-academic stakeholders, including potential research users and intermediary organisations with a mandate to communicate research, to be included and involved in both the early design and ongoing conduct of the programme.

Details of how the structure and organisation of the centre, and wider collaborations, will be managed must be detailed in a management plan.

**Institutional support**

As in previous Centres Competitions, ESRC will be looking for evidence of long-term institutional commitment, both strategic and financial, to the proposed centre application through the provision of grant-associated parallel activities and capacity-building. We have not previously stipulated a minimum expectation of the research organisation (RO) financial contribution. It is not our intention to change the actual level of commitment ROs have generally offered in the past but in view of the new graduated funding model for centres (offering follow-on support, if also supported by the host RO, once the centre grant comes to an end) we are requesting ROs indicate at least a minimum strategic commitment at this stage to demonstrate the ROs strategic commitment to the centre over the longer term. We strongly advise that you read the further information about the new centres funding model, available on the ESRC website: https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-large-investments/esrc-centres-and-institutes/.

The centre competition grant requires approximately 20% RO contribution of the full economic costs under standard ESRC funding guidelines (as ESRC funds 80% of the full economic costs of the proposal, with some exceptions) plus at least an additional 5% of the
full economic costs of the proposal for the five years of Centres Competition funding (ie 25% of the Centre grant in total). This minimum is intended to echo the total level of commitment that will be required of the RO to co-fund follow-on funding if the centre is later successful in applying for ‘transition funding’. However, we would encourage ROs to continue to offer the level of support they have in past proposals through commitments appropriate to their plans for the centre.

A successful centre will be eligible, at the end of the centre grant (ie after 5 years), to apply for up to a further five years follow-on ‘transition’ funding at a reduced level, supported by strong commitment from their host research organisation (RO). Towards the end of the ESRC transition funded period the centre may then be eligible to apply for a further period of recognition as a Legacy ESRC centre to help it leverage funding from other sources and limited ESRC funding to support communication and impact generating activities.

This new funding model is intended to help centres establish a self-sustaining funding model beyond the life of ESRC funding and, in particular, establish a new relationship between ESRC and host ROs, in recognition of mutual benefits in supporting these high-profile and high-impact centres of excellence over a longer period. Further information about the new centres funding model is available on the ESRC website (https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-large-investments/esrc-centres-and-institutes).

ESRC would particularly welcome commitments to cover costs that are not eligible under the centres scheme. If successful, the contribution to the centre’s outcomes and impact of these additional strategic RO commitments will be reviewed as part of the ESRC’s standard investment management during the grant, and through the Transition review process on application for transition funding.

Full proposals must include a substantial one-page institutional letter of support from the Pro-Vice chancellor of research (or equivalent role) from the lead research organisation that confirms the RO’s (and any partner ROs’) commitment to the Centre application. Please use the guidance provided to help you in shaping this letter.

**Research impact and knowledge exchange**

Applicants are required to consider carefully how best to build links and contacts with potential beneficiaries and users of the research at the earliest possible stages of research design and development, and to work towards co-production of knowledge with research users where appropriate. In addition to knowledge exchange and impact strategies that focus on particular user groups and/or specific named beneficiary organisations, we strongly encourage public engagement activities which bring together researchers and the wider public.

Consideration of, and advance planning for, knowledge exchange and strategies to maximise economic and/or societal impact should be central elements of proposals submitted to the Centres Competition. In the ‘Pathways to Impact’ attachment, applicants should present initial plans for developing an impact strategy, promoting knowledge exchange, public engagement and effective communication with key stakeholders. We encourage the submission of creative and innovative pathways to impact. The resources required to undertake effective knowledge exchange should be accurately reflected and fully costed. We recommend that a minimum of 10% of the overall budget should be dedicated to deliver the activities outlined in the impact summary.

**Partnerships and collaboration**

We strongly encourage proposals which involve partnerships and collaborative relationships with other UK and international organisations, stakeholders and users of the research. Partnerships may build on existing relationships or represent new collaborative relationships with, where possible, evidence of meaningful engagement in the development of the proposal. We also recognise that it may take time to create new partnerships as well as build on existing ones. The full stage shortlisting panel will consider the plans for involvement of academic and non-academic stakeholders but will bear in mind the lead time required to generate new partnerships.

The configuration of partnerships and collaborations should be driven by the research and impact objectives underpinning the proposal. The principal requirement is for substantive, targeted and high-quality collaborations or partnerships, demonstrated through clear leadership roles, and balance and proportionality in partners’ roles and responsibilities.

**Leadership and management**

We expect applicants to demonstrate the experience and track record to lead large collaborative and complex centres of this kind. Applicants will need to provide convincing evidence within their application of their ability to develop and sustain successful partnerships and collaborations and to manage centres of the size and complexity proposed.

The management plan should specifically outline how the centre management team will provide leadership to a potentially diverse group of researchers and collaborators and how the proposed programme of activities and its outputs will be managed. There should be a clear outline of programme management arrangements and responsibilities for leading work packages, as well as coordinating across them. Where teams are interdisciplinary or international in scope, the proposal should outline how the team will ensure genuine and meaningful collaboration. Proposals should also include details of governance structures, including any advisory group that will be appointed to oversee the development of the centre and to advise on key activities and directions.

This section should also set out the project management resources and administrative support that will be put in place. The Centre principal investigator (PI) may wish to identify a co-director of the Centre (as co-investigator (Co-I)) or a centre management team. The proposal should outline the role of this team, and any additional support functions, in leading external engagement with stakeholders and the public, and in the day to day interactions amongst collaborators and partners contributing to the work of the centre. Please explain how these arrangements will provide adequate operational capabilities and resources to meet the demands of the research programme. Further guidance is provided in the ‘Je-S guidance notes for applicants’ document (available to download from https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/centres-competition-2018).
Career Development and Capacity-building
The full proposal must include an outline of how the centre will contribute to career development of researchers engaged with the centre, and beyond. Details should be included in a ‘Career development and capacity building’ attachment.

Examples of activities to build capacity could include:
- Support and mentoring
- Summer schools
- Management and leadership development
- Studentships based in the UK (eligibility requirements below)

Research staff career development
We will be looking for evidence of a strong commitment to supporting the development of researchers engaged in the centre, and beyond, at all stages of careers. We encourage centre proposals to include the participation of early career researchers in the centres application as co-investigators. Please refer to recent policy development around early career researchers in other ESRC funding schemes: https://esrc.ukri.org/skills-and-careers/postgraduate-careers/early-career-researchers. However career development proposals should include but not be limited to the early career stage, and you are encouraged to consider how you can support the career development of all members of the team. The proposal should include an outline of the centre’s approach to a strong career development programme for centre researchers, shaped to suit the stage of the researchers’ career and providing increased opportunities for professional development. In particular, the development of leadership and management skills should be included in these proposals to support the effective delivery of the centre, and the collaborative work of the centre. Consideration should also be given to supporting the wider leadership roles of PIs and Co-Is in collaborating across disciplines and internationally, and in engaging more broadly with wider research communities, stakeholders and the public.

Associated studentships
Associated studentships, formerly known as grant-linked studentships, are permissible under this call. Up to three ESRC-funded associated studentships may be included on any one proposal. The student must have a distinct, independent area of enquiry that will add value to the overall research objectives of the grant.

In exceptional cases, proposals that include more than three associated studentships will be considered, providing that a strong justification for capacity-building in that particular area and how it adds value to the overall proposal is supplied.

Associated studentships must be embedded in an ESRC Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) studying on an accredited pathway, and can start from 1 October 2019 onwards. They can also be embedded in an ESRC Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) but studentships associated with a CDT can only start on 1 October 2019, no later. The student’s primary supervisor must be either the principal investigator or a co-investigator on the grant and must be based at the DTP/CDT and approved to act as primary supervisors, and these must be identified in the studentship attachment. The total cost of the studentships must be included in the total costs for the grant, and within the maximum funding available. A separate case for each associated studentship for which ESRC funds are
being requested will be used must be submitted with the proposal. Full details are available in the ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide (available at https://esrc.ukri.org/skills-and-careers/studentships/esrc-students/).

Please note that the RO can also fully fund studentships as part of their institutional support. Where an RO is fully funding studentships, we would expect students to follow the same requirements as ESRC-funded students unless a clear justification as to why this would not be appropriate in this instance. Where institutions are planning to co-fund the associated studentships with ESRC this must be confirmed in the proposal and the relevant documentation should be included for all students. For example, if funding equivalent to three full students is being requested, but the RO intends to co-fund an equivalent amount, six project student requests should be included in the proposal. The application must include a letter of support from the relevant DTP/CDT director.

**Capacity building**

The centre proposal should also make explicit how it will contribute to capacity building more widely, beyond the institutions engaged in the centre, contributing to wider social science capacity building.

Our research centres play an important role in developing the new methodological tools and techniques required to address cutting-edge social science challenges. Where our research centres develop new methods or apply them in novel ways, they are expected to raise awareness of these new approaches. Building capacity in such areas should also be embedded within the centre's programme of work, achieved through the delivery of high-quality training and other relevant capacity-building activities. Centres will be expected to work with our National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) to integrate their training into the broader social science training programme delivered by NCRM and to identify opportunities where further collaboration would be beneficial.

**Research ethics**

Applicants must ensure that the proposed research will be carried out to a high ethical standard and must clearly state how any potential ethical and health and safety issues, including those related to data access and security, have been considered and will be addressed, ensuring that all necessary ethical approval is in place and all risks are minimised before the project commences. All proposals must comply with the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics: https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics.

**Funding**

ESRC will be investing up to £30 million 80% full economic cost (fEC) over five years through this Centres Competition. Proposals are invited for projects with a fEC value between £2.5 million and £8 million. The fEC value refers to the total cost of the project, and is not the actual contribution paid by the ESRC. Our contribution is generally 80% of fEC (with some exceptions, please refer to the ESRC Research Funding Guide: https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide). It is anticipated that we will fund four to five centres. The final decision on how many proposals will be funded will depend primarily on the quality of the proposals but will also be informed by the availability of funds.
What can be applied for?

- Costs will be supported in-line with standard ESRC funding rules.
- Centres may request costs for technical and clerical staff to support management and communication activities of the centre.
- Small equipment and consumables may be requested where appropriate as long as individual items are below £10,000.
- Capital or infrastructure expenditure is not an eligible cost for this call.
- A maximum difference of 10% is permitted between the costs specified in the outline stage and full stage applications.

The ESRC will fund all justified costs associated with international co-investigators and UK business, civil society or government bodies at 100% fEC. However, these combined costs must not exceed 30% of the full 100% fEC cost of the grant. Applicants should note ESRC’s policy on the inclusion of international co-investigators and UK business, civil society or government bodies on proposals (please see Je-S guidance for the call).

If successful, proposals recommended for funding may have budgets reduced if they are considered excessive. All applicants are strongly advised to consult their institutional finance/research offices regarding the financial aspects of their proposal in good time before the call deadline. All costs should be broken down and fully justified.

Selection criteria
Scientific excellence with impact is the primary criterion and is an essential requirement of all proposals. All proposals will be subject to the core ESRC assessment criteria: https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-peer-reviewers. However, only those proposals which demonstrate that they meet the following criteria are likely to be awarded funding:

- An innovative research agenda (in theory, methods, data and application) that can be fully sustained through the life of the award
- A clear set of strategies to maximise knowledge exchange and impacts through the proposed research
- A strong career development programme shaped to suit the stage of the researchers’ career and providing increased opportunities for professional development of established investigators
- A robust management structure with a nominated director(s) and clear arrangements for co-ordination and management of the strategic direction of the centre
- Strong institutional commitment and practical contributions to hosting and sustaining an ESRC centre
- A commitment to identifying and exploiting potential opportunities to work with existing ESRC investments, where appropriate, to maximise impact
- Full consideration of the contribution that the centre will make to international collaborative and/or comparative opportunities
- Research contributions which add value to the ESRC’s existing portfolio of research investments by addressing current gaps in coverage.
- Evidence of the strategic and minimum financial support of the host RO and planning to ensure sustainable funding for the centre over the longer term
Eligibility
Standard ESRC eligibility rules apply. For further information please see ESRC’s Research Funding Guide https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide. However, if in doubt of eligibility, please contact the ESRC office.

Principal investigators
Principal investigators on proposals to this call must be based at a UK institution eligible for UKRI funding; see the UKRI website for a list of eligible organisations (https://www.ukri.org/funding/how-to-apply/eligibility).

It is likely that successful applications will be led by experienced researchers who are internationally recognised and have a well-established track record of publication within their field of study, as well as proven ability to deliver a large-scale research project successfully. The amount of time committed to the grant by the PI and co-investigators must be costed into the proposal, but very small fractions of co-investigator time should be avoided. Any time commitment lower than 5% would need to be fully explained in the justification of resources. Standard ESRC research funding rules apply for staff engaged in more than one ESRC grant (see ESRC Research Funding Guide, page 27: https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide/).

Co-investigators and collaborators
The inclusion of international co-investigators in proposals is encouraged, however please note that academic researchers (at PhD or equivalent status) must be from established overseas research organisations of comparable standing to ESRC-eligible UK research organisations to be listed as international co-investigators under this call.

International collaboration is not limited to co-investigators but may also involve partnerships to develop international datasets, promote knowledge exchange and international impact, and enhance social science conceptual development on an international scale. Further information on eligibility is provided within the ESRC Research Funding Guide (https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide/); guidance on the inclusion of international co-investigators is also available at https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-international-co-investigators-on-proposals.

We also welcome inter-institutional applications and strongly encourage partnerships with non-HEI organisations and the inclusion of third sector, business and public sector co-investigators (see https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-uk-business-third-sector-or-government-body-co-investigators-on-proposals).

Applicants should note ESRC’s policy on the inclusion of international co-investigators on proposals (please see Je-S guidance for the call).

How to apply
Full proposals must be submitted to Je-S by the call deadline 16.00 on 13 September 2018. Electronic acknowledgements will be sent to the principal investigator and submitting organisation. All proposals must be submitted in English, costed in pounds sterling using the Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) system. Proposals can only be accepted by electronic submission through the Je-S system: https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk/jeS2WebLoginSite/Login.aspx
The full proposal has two elements: an online form requesting key information; and a series of mandatory attachments, including the Case for Support, Pathways to Impact, Justification of Resources, Institutional Letter of Support, Letters of Support from all named Project Partners, Data Management Plan, Case for Studentships, and CVs for all named individuals, which are to be completed offline and uploaded as attachments (PDF format recommended) in Je-S. List of Key Publications, Facility Form, Final/Interim Reports are optional attachments which should be included where necessary. If you are unclear about whether you can include a specific attachment after referring to the Full proposal stage ‘Je-S Guidance Notes for Applicants’ please contact esrc.centres@esrc.ukri.org. Generic guidance on the completion of the structured boxes and sections of the form is available from the Je-S Help screens, which can be found at the top right hand corner of each Je-S screen.

Applicants must ensure that they have read and complied with the call-specific guidance set out in the ‘Je-S Guidance Notes for Applicants’ which is available at https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/centres-competition-2018 as well as the assessment criteria set out in this call specification. Where call-specific guidance provided in these call documents differs from generic Je-S help, the call-specific guidance should always be followed. Care and attention must be given to completing the proposal correctly and complying with all technical requirements. Proposals that are not completed correctly may be rejected by the ESRC office.

The final submission process is the responsibility of the host institution, and the ESRC cannot accept responsibility for any delays which may occur. It is recommended that applicants submit in good time before the call deadline at this stage. We strongly advise applicants to confirm with their relevant administrator that the proposal has been submitted successfully to the ESRC.

Assessment of applications
Full proposals will be referred to six external peer reviewers. Applicants will have the opportunity to nominate two academic peer reviewers, one of whom should be from outside the UK. Normally, at least one of these nominees will be approached as part of the peer review group. Applicants should seek the nominated reviewers’ permission and commitment before nominating them. Applicants will also be asked to nominate up to two users of the research from outside the research community. We may also approach independent user reviewers. Please ensure that nominees do not have any conflicts of interest with the investigators or their institutions (see ESRC guidance on conflicts of interest at https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/conflicts-of-interest-complaints-and-appeals.)

Applications will be assessed by the commissioning panel in London (5 February 2019) and a final shortlist invited to interview in London (6 and 7 March 2019). Funding decisions will be announced by April 2019, and successful centres will start in October 2019.

Commissioning timetable
- Full stage call published (invite only) - 18 June 2018
- Full stage proposals close - 16.00 on 13 September 2018
- Full stage shortlisting panel meeting – 5 February 2019
• Interview panel for shortlisted applicants – 6 and 7 March 2019
• Decisions to applicants – late March 2019
• Award start date - October 2019

Further enquiries
Enquiries relating to ESRC research funding rules and proposal procedures should be addressed to:
• ESRC Centres Team
  Email: esrc.centres@esrc.ukri.org

Enquiries relating to technical aspects of the Je-S form should be addressed to:
• Je-S helpdesk
  Email: jeshelp@rcuk.ac.uk
  Telephone: 01793 444164
  Monday to Friday 09.00 to 17.00 (UK time, excluding public and other holidays)