



**ICM**Unlimited...

# **Economic and Social Research Council**

## **Communication and Engagement Perceptions Audit 2015/16**

**Key audiences summary report**

**Prepared by ICM for the Economic and Social Research  
Council**

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# Introduction

This summary report presents the key findings from the 2015/16 Communications and Engagement Perceptions Audit split between two key audiences: academics and other stakeholders/users.

This research was undertaken by the ICM Government & Social Research Unit.

## Background and objectives

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's largest funder of research on economic and social issues, and aims to support independent, high-quality research which has a clear impact on business, the public sector and the third sector.

In recent years, ESRC has worked with a wide range of stakeholders from the public sector, third sector, and business with the aim of enhancing awareness and engagement of ESRC and its work, as well as promoting and generating impact.

To evaluate the current status of ESRC's communications and engagement, in autumn/winter 2015 ESRC commissioned ICM Unlimited to undertake a new research programme. The research covered the full spectrum of ESRC's stakeholders, including stakeholders from the academic community, government and the public sector, media, business, think tanks, and the third sector.

The overarching objective of the research was to provide a rigorous and authoritative assessment of ESRC's stakeholders' perceptions. This includes exploration of stakeholders' understanding of ESRC's vision and mission, views on its performance and impact, relationships with ESRC, and communications and engagement activities. In particular, the research aims to:

- Explore stakeholders' views of ESRC as an organisation, as well as its performance and impact;
- Examine attitudes towards ESRC's communication and engagement with stakeholders to inform future approaches; and
- Identify what ESRC can do to improve.

## Methodology

The research consisted of two strands: i) a quantitative survey of 227 ESRC stakeholders; and ii) a series of 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with key stakeholders.

### Quantitative survey

ICM conducted a quantitative online survey with stakeholders and opinion formers from the full spectrum of ESRC stakeholders, including contacts from parliament, policy and government, business, third sector, media, think tanks, and the academic community.

ESRC compiled a sample frame from its systems and databases of stakeholders. Once duplicate entries were removed this sample contained 1,606 usable contacts.

A warm-up email, signed by Professor Jane Elliott, the Chief Executive, was sent to all contacts to confirm the authenticity of the research and stress its importance to ESRC.

This email was followed with an invitation email containing an online link to the survey, which was sent to all contacts in the sample. Reminder emails were sent at weekly intervals throughout the fieldwork period to all stakeholders who had not yet completed the survey. No quotas were set during

fieldwork. In total, 227 ESRC stakeholders and opinion formers completed the online survey, giving an unadjusted response rate of 14%.

As the exact size and nature of ESRC’s stakeholder universe is unknown, data are unweighted. This replicates the approach used in previous years and is a standard approach used in stakeholder research.

The fieldwork was carried out between 25 November and 17 December 2015.

### Qualitative in-depth interviews

ESRC provided ICM with a sample of 84 contacts from which to conduct these interviews. An advance email, signed by Professor Jane Elliott, the Chief Executive, was sent to all contacts to confirm the authenticity of the research and stress its importance to ESRC.

This email was followed up with telephone calls to set appointments. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and all interviews were conducted by telephone.

In total, ICM contacted 52 stakeholders to achieve 20 in-depth interviews, giving a response rate of 38%.

The interviews were carried out between 2 December 2015 and 5 January 2016.

### ESRC stakeholder sample details

The table below outlines the split between the two stakeholder groups across the quantitative and qualitative strands of research:

<b>ESRC stakeholder sample details</b>			
<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Sub-group</b>	<b>Number of interviews in the quantitative sample</b>	<b>Number of interviews in the qualitative sample</b>
<b>Group 1 Academic stakeholders</b>	Research Organisations, Investments, and ESRC Committees	169	6
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Group 2 Other stakeholders/users</b>	Businesses, Trade Associations and Business Connections	5	1
	Civil society	2	4
	International	1	2
	Learned Societies	10	2
	Parliament	-	1
	Press and media	1	-
	Public sector	23	3
	Think tank	10	1
	Other	6	-
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>14</b>

## Presentation and interpretation of data

It should be remembered at all times that a sample of ESRC stakeholders – rather than all stakeholders – has been interviewed. In consequence, all results are subject to sampling tolerances, which means that not all differences are statistically significant. In particular, with a total base size of 227, the amount of sub-group analysis that is possible is limited. As such, this report discusses differences between two broad groups: academics and non-academics. While there will be natural variations in opinion between sub-sets within these overarching groups, the base sizes are too small to be eligible for analysis.

In particular, it should be noted that the base size for non-academic stakeholders (58) is small, and as such, findings should be treated with caution, and viewed as indicative only.

We also emphasise that this survey deals with stakeholders' perceptions at the time the survey was conducted, rather than facts. Stakeholders' perceptions, therefore, may not accurately represent the work of ESRC itself.

For the ease of reading, Group 1 Academic stakeholders are referred to as academic stakeholders and Group 2 Other stakeholders are referred to as non-academic stakeholders throughout the report.

## Executive summary

This report presents the findings from the 2015/16 Communications & Engagement Perceptions Audit on behalf of the Economic and Social Research Council (hereon in referred to as 'ESRC'). The research consisted of two strands: i) a quantitative survey of 227 ESRC stakeholders; and ii) a series of 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with key stakeholders.

The research was designed to explore stakeholder perceptions of ESRC as an organisation, as well as its performance and impact; examine attitudes towards ESRC's communication and engagement with stakeholders; and identify what ESRC can do to improve future approaches.

Fieldwork for the quantitative survey took place between 25 November and 17 December 2015, while the qualitative in-depth interviews were carried out between 30 November 2015 and 5 January 2016.

### Key findings

Overall, this research presents a positive picture of ESRC, which has a strong reputation among its stakeholders and is seen as a central actor within the social science sector. It is generally held in high regard among stakeholders, is associated with high quality academic research, and enjoys high levels of favourability and advocacy.

It is clear that ESRC stakeholders are both interested in and supportive of the work of the organisation, and ESRC is widely thought to be performing well. Indeed, ESRC is thought to be performing best in the aspects of its role that stakeholders consider the most important: promoting and supporting high-quality research and training, and fostering research and innovation.

Further, ESRC has strong relationships with many of its stakeholders and, encouragingly, those who know ESRC best and are in most regular contact with the organisation are the most positive about it. Stakeholders generally feel well informed about ESRC and its work, and most sources of information on ESRC are highly rated in terms of quality and usefulness.

However, there remain a number of areas for improvement. A common theme throughout this research is the fact that ESRC is better known among its stakeholders in the higher education sector, and widely perceived to be most engaged with – and most influential within – this community. Indeed, it is clear that academic stakeholders are more familiar with ESRC and, perhaps as a consequence, tend to show stronger levels of favourability and advocacy.

As a result, stakeholders are clear that they would like to see ESRC build closer links with policy makers and other users of research. In particular, there is a clear appetite for more frequent contact and open dialogue between ESRC and its stakeholders, particularly among the policy making community.

Perhaps related to this, there remains a tension between the immediacy of the needs of research users and policy makers and the commissioning of high quality academic research. While non-academic stakeholders tend to focus on the importance of funding research with a clear impact, and are significantly more likely than academic stakeholders to say it is very important for ESRC to promote easy access to research findings, academic stakeholders tend to place more emphasis on achieving academic excellence.

Stakeholders from all backgrounds emphasise the importance of maintaining an openness to new ideas, and allowing for failure in order to achieve success. Resolving these sometimes competing demands, without diluting the quality of the research, is a key challenge for ESRC.

Similarly, with research budgets under pressure, and the upcoming re-structuring of the UK research councils, stakeholders feel that ESRC could do more to act as an advocate for the wider value of economic and social science research. While many suggest that it has improved in this regard in recent years, there is perceived to be room for further improvement.

### ESRC and its role

- On the whole, ESRC is **well known among its stakeholders**, with nine in ten (88%) reporting that they are familiar with the organisation. However, academic stakeholders (91%) are significantly more likely to feel they know ESRC well compared to non-academic stakeholders (79%), reflecting their generally closer relationship.
- A large majority of stakeholders – four in five – have a **favourable view of ESRC** (81%). While this is consistent across stakeholder groups at the overall level, there is a greater strength of opinion among academic stakeholders: three in ten (31%) say their impression of the organisation is 'very favourable', compared to one in five (22%) of those in other fields.
- Levels of advocacy are also high: two thirds of stakeholders (65%) **would speak highly of ESRC to other people**. Again, however, academic stakeholders are much more likely to speak highly of the organisation without being prompted to do so (31% compared to 16% of non-academics).
- Stakeholders generally have a **strong understanding of ESRC's role**, including its work and remit beyond funding research. Stakeholders from all groups, including academics, believe that ESRC's role also includes championing social science, recognising future needs in this field, and providing evidence to guide policy.

### Vision, performance and impact

- A majority of stakeholders are positive about **ESRC's overall performance as an organisation**, with 76% saying the organisation is performing well.
- Stakeholders highlight a range of strengths which ESRC brings to its work, including its **reputation for supporting high-quality research**, the **breadth of its work**, and its focus on **developing skills and expertise** and **improving access to data resources**. Some gave specific examples of ESRC's work which they viewed as a strength, including the establishment of the What Works Centres and longitudinal studies such as Understanding Society.
- However, stakeholders also identify a number of weaker areas. There is a feeling that ESRC is **most engaged with its most established audiences**, mainly those from an academic background. Further, many stakeholders would like to see the organisation being **bolder and more dynamic in its public engagement and in communicating the impact of research**.
- Some stakeholders also express concerns regarding overly bureaucratic processes, suggesting that **ESRC can be inflexible in its work**. Reflecting this, it is sometimes perceived to be **slow in addressing emerging issues** in social science.
- Almost eight in ten stakeholders (78%) feel they have a **good overall understanding of ESRC's vision and priorities** and virtually all stakeholders (99%) are aware of ESRC's aims to promote and support high-quality research and postgraduate training, and foster research and innovation. These are also the areas which they consider to be most important (89% agree they are important).
- In relation to its key areas of activity, **ESRC is believed to be performing best in the areas which are perceived as most important** by stakeholders. These include promoting and supporting high-quality research and postgraduate training and fostering research and innovation. This is supported by the qualitative research, where stakeholders are **similarly positive about ESRC's performance in fostering research and innovation**, noting the quality of work the organisation supports. They are also **positive about its work in creating and maximising data infrastructure and building capability**, citing examples such as the Administrative Data Research Network, the Doctoral Training Centres, and the Q-Step funding programme.

- By contrast, ESRC's performance is rated (relatively) less well when it comes to communicating clearly and promoting public understanding of social science, and **facilitating partnerships and realising impact**, which are perceived as the two (relatively) least important areas. While some have positive experiences of ESRC's work in this area, most would like to see ESRC develop its strategic partnerships further over the next few years. In particular, stakeholders feel that **more could be done to facilitate partnerships with research-using organisations**.
- In terms of facilitating engagement between social scientists and other fields, most stakeholders think that ESRC is **effective in engaging with policy makers (70%) and with government (63%)**. Stakeholders are able to cite some examples of successful engagement with government and policy makers, but there is a clear sense that with ESRC largely funded by BIS, it is difficult for it to have more bilateral relationships with other government departments. Further, there is a sense that ESRC could do more to build its engagement with key stakeholders in the public sector.
- **Fewer think ESRC works effectively with business (26%)**. Stakeholders suggest that ESRC's relationships with the private sector have historically been weaker, and businesses are thought to be much less aware of ESRC and its work, and much less likely to rely on social science in their work.
- There is a **clear relationship between ESRC's perceived level of engagement, and its perceived level of influence**. While seven in ten think ESRC is influential among policy makers (71%) and in government (63%), only 22% think the same is true of business.
- On the whole, stakeholders are **positive about ESRC's impact**, with seven in ten (71%) saying the organisation is effective at maximising impact. However, a quarter (24%) do not agree that it is effective.
- The **communication of impact is highlighted as important** by many stakeholders, especially to ensure the continuity of funding, and there is a widespread feeling that **ESRC has made improvements in this area** over the last few years.
- In the qualitative research, some make further suggestions for how ESRC could maximise its impact and ensure that ESRC-funded research is brought to a wider audience. There are those, particularly non-academic stakeholders, who would like to see more **concise, relevant summaries of research evidence**, including syntheses of existing research and case studies. Further, stakeholders believe that **involving users early on in the research process** would help ensure that research evidence is focused on economic and social issues relevant to the UK's policy agenda.

## Relationships with ESRC

- ESRC appears to have **strong relationships with its stakeholders**, with a majority (73%) saying they are satisfied with their current relationship.
- Indeed, there is a **sense that relationships are improving**, with a quarter (26%) saying their satisfaction with their relationship has improved over the last two years, compared to eleven per cent who say it has got worse.
- **Those closest to ESRC are most positive** about their relationship: stakeholders who are in contact with ESRC on a monthly basis are significantly more likely to be satisfied with their relationship (82%) than those in contact every 4-6 months or less often (59%).
- In the qualitative research, there is a clear sense that the best relationships are characterised by **open, honest communication** and a **willingness to discuss shared issues**.
- However, there is a feeling that ESRC can be a bureaucratic organisation, and this can cause issues when working with it. A sizeable minority of stakeholders express dissatisfaction with some of ESRC's processes: 44% feel the organisation is **too bureaucratic** and 22% feel it does not communicate in a way that is clear and accessible.
- Contact with ESRC appears to be driven by a wide variety of factors. Most commonly, stakeholders have contact with ESRC to attend a briefing or meeting (51%), about a funding

application (36%) or grant investment maintenance (31%), and to attend an advisory committee (25%).

- The vast majority of stakeholders either have the **right amount of contact with ESRC** (63%) or **would like more** (21%). Just seven per cent would like less frequent contact.
- ESRC is widely perceived to add value to stakeholders' work, with four in five (81%) stating this to be the case. There is also a clear appetite for closer working with ESRC, with three in five (59%) saying they would like to do so.
- Stakeholders appreciate open communication on the part of ESRC. This includes **sharing on its current thinking and its activities**, but also **working with stakeholders to identify opportunities for collaboration** and **proactively building relationships** with new audiences.
- Stakeholders, particularly those from non-academic sectors, would like to see ESRC **continue to focus on engagement and collaboration** over the next few years.

## Communications and engagement

- On the whole, stakeholders feel well informed about ESRC and its work. Four in five say they feel **well informed about ESRC** (82%), and a similar proportion find it easy to access the information they need (80%).
- The most common ways of engaging with ESRC are by using the **website** (81%) or through **email contact with staff** (74%). These are also the preferred means of engaging with ESRC, with around two thirds saying they would prefer to engage via **email contact with staff** (66%) and via the **ESRC website** (63%). Around half would prefer **face to face meetings** (54%) or **events and workshops** (51%).
- However, stakeholder groups differ in their communication preferences. While both groups' first preference is to engage with ESRC staff by email, academics are most likely to prefer engagement via the **ESRC website** (67%), while their non-academic counterparts are significantly more likely to prefer face to face meetings (60%) and information in the form of **evidence briefings** (45%).
- **ESRC staff are praised** by several stakeholders and the means of communication which involve direct interaction with them – whether face to face, or by email or phone – are generally considered to be the most valuable. A number of stakeholders expressed interest in more face-to-face contact.
- When asked about the **quality of different sources of information** on ESRC's work, stakeholders were most likely to rate face-to-face meetings (80%), events and workshops (80%), contact with ESRC staff by telephone or email (79%) and regular ESRC publications (78%) as good. ESRC social media accounts (70%), the ESRC website (68%), and the bimonthly newsletter, eNews (68%) are also rated highly in terms of quality.
- In terms of usefulness, the **top rated sources are face to face meetings** (86%), **contact with staff** (86%), **the ESRC website** (84%) and **events and workshops** (78%). Further, a majority of ESRC stakeholders feel that regular ESRC publications (65%), the bimonthly newsletter, eNews (56%), and ESRC press releases (53%) are useful to them.
- Relatively few stakeholders in the research engage with ESRC via social media (21%), but 46% consider social media a useful source of information.

## Future priorities

- Stakeholders are almost unanimous in their concerns regarding **the availability of funding**, and **the possible changes caused by the restructuring of the UK research councils**. Stakeholders frequently mention the spending review and tightened government budgets, often drawing a connection with the need for continuous communication of impact.
- Some academic stakeholders are concerned the **impact agenda** could narrow the field of research ESRC operates in, but those outside academia were more likely to see **opportunities to raise the profile of social science research**.



- While there is a feeling that much is out of the organisation's control, stakeholders are generally confident that ESRC will do their best to meet these challenges. **However, many would like to see ESRC focus on building closer relationships with stakeholders, in order to help the organisation be as effective as it can be.**

# Group 1: Academic stakeholders

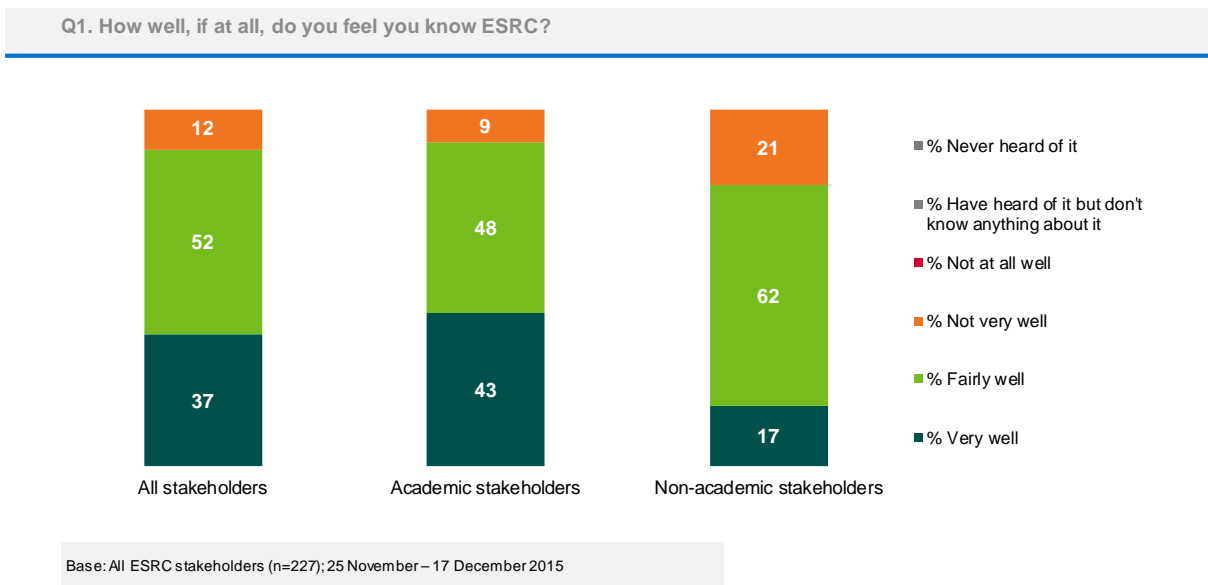
## Perceptions of ESRC

### Overall perceptions

ESRC has a high profile among its academic stakeholders. Stakeholders working within academia tend to feel they have a strong understanding of ESRC’s core role, but also of the responsibilities it holds as part of this remit.

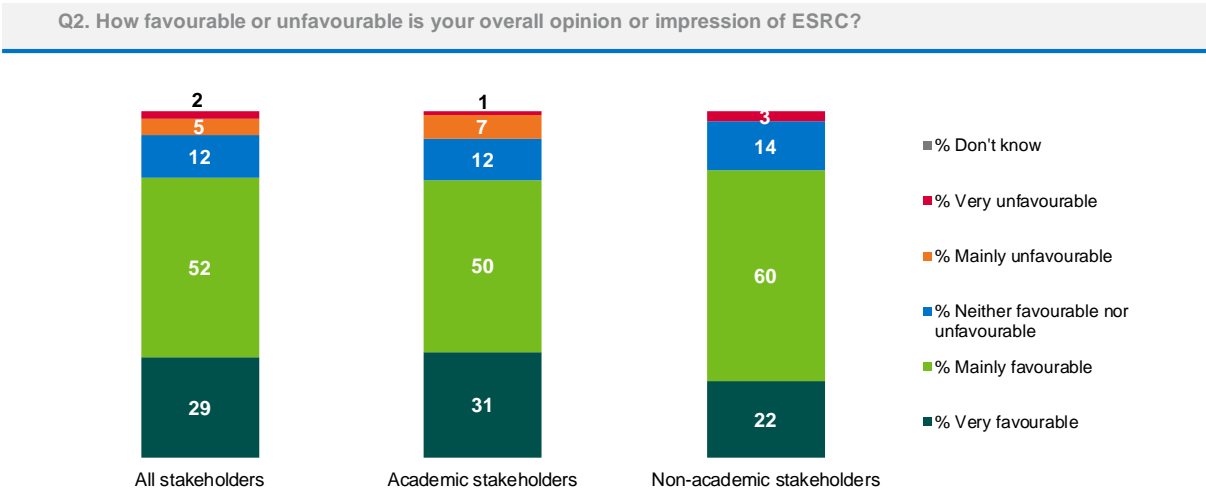
Indeed, a large majority of academic stakeholders (91%) feel they know ESRC well. Further, academic stakeholders report a greater depth of knowledge about ESRC compared to stakeholders from other fields: more than two in five (43%) say they know ESRC ‘very well’ compared to 17 per cent from non-academic sectors.

Fig 1: Familiarity



Academic stakeholders also tend to be positive about ESRC. A large majority (80%) have a favourable view of ESRC, and three in ten (31%) say their impression is ‘very favourable’, compared to just one in five (22%) of those in non-academic fields.

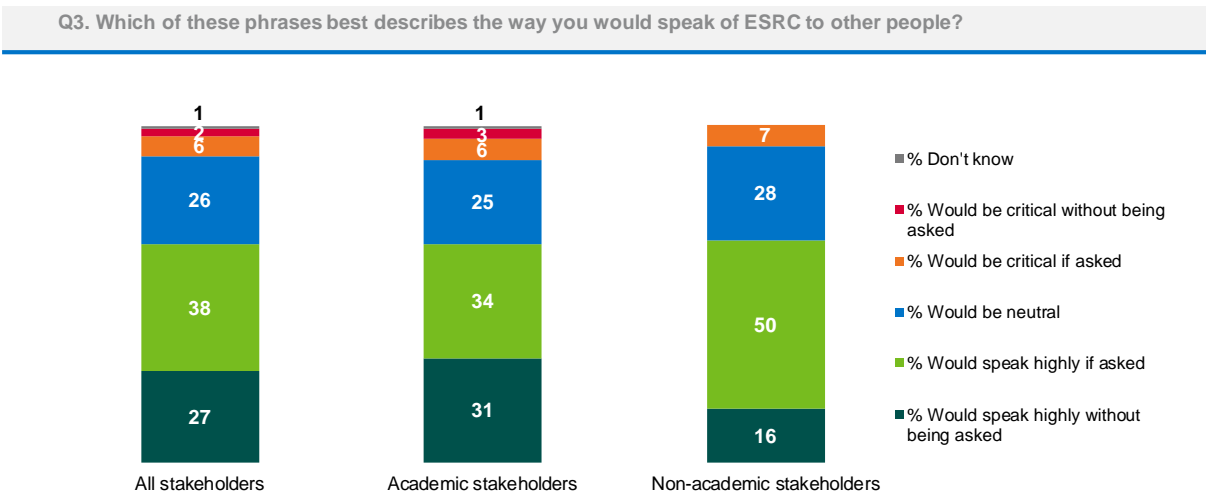
Fig 2: Favourability



Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015

Similarly, levels of advocacy are high among academic stakeholders, with two in three (64%) saying they would speak highly of ESRC. Again, the strength of feeling among academic stakeholders is more pronounced compared to their non-academic counterparts; they are almost twice as likely to speak well of ESRC spontaneously (31% vs 16%).

Fig 3: Advocacy



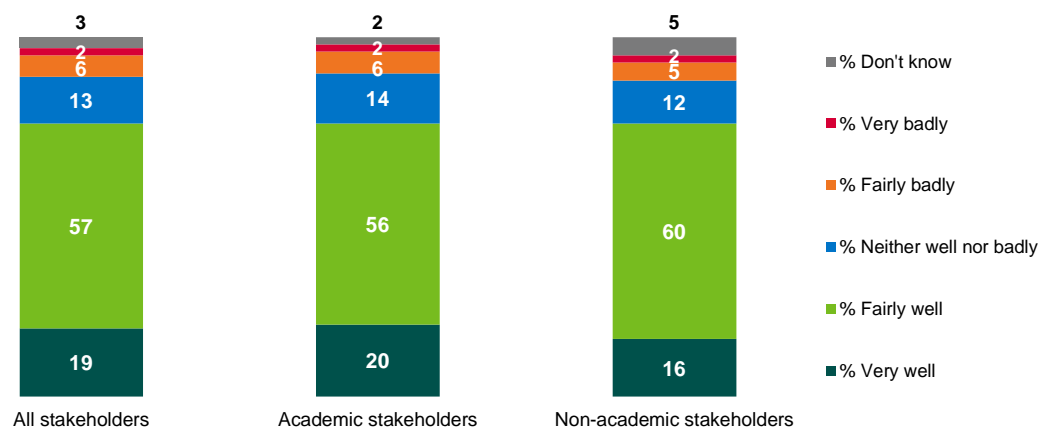
Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015

## Performance

On the whole, academic stakeholders are positive about ESRC's overall performance, which reflects their positive views of the organisation as a whole. Three quarters (76%) believe that ESRC performs well as an organisation, while just 8% believe that it performs badly.

Fig 4: Overall performance

Q8. Overall, how well or badly do you feel ESRC performs as an organisation?



Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015

In the qualitative research, academic stakeholders cite a number of strengths which ESRC brings to its work. These include its investment across the economic and social sciences and its ability to shape the research agenda for the wider social science community. More specifically, a number of academic stakeholders refer to ESRC's doctoral training centres as a strength of the organisation.

Conversely, academic stakeholders also identify a number of weaknesses, including a perceived element of bureaucracy due to the lack of flexibility in its processes, including the types of funding available and the application processes for funding. Further, there is a feeling that ESRC is most engaged with its most established audiences, and in particular with stakeholders with whom it has a direct funding relationship.

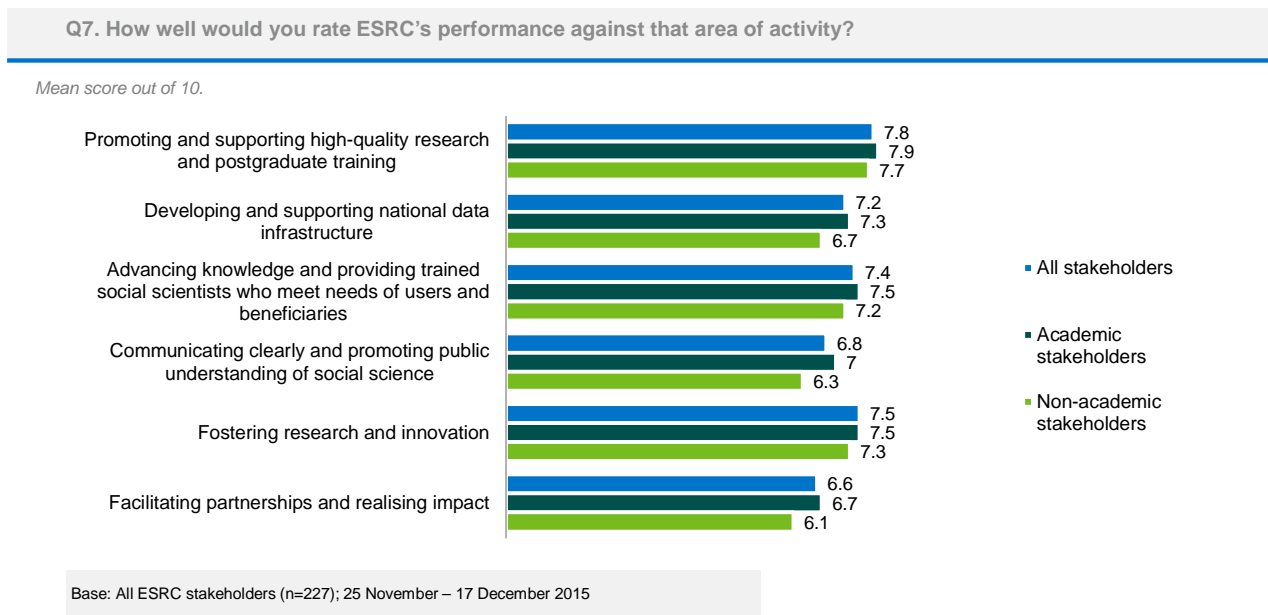
Among academic stakeholders, ESRC is widely perceived to be performing well in its key areas of activity<sup>1</sup>. It is most frequently thought to be performing well in the areas which are most frequently perceived as important; these include promoting and supporting high-quality research and postgraduate training (7.9), advancing knowledge and providing trained social scientists (7.5), and fostering research and innovation (7.5).

ESRC is slightly less frequently thought to be performing well when it comes to communicating clearly and promoting public understanding of social science (7), and facilitating partnerships and realising impact (6.7).

As the ratings are generally positive across all areas of activity the analysis suggests that stakeholders feel ESRC is focusing its efforts in the right areas of activity.

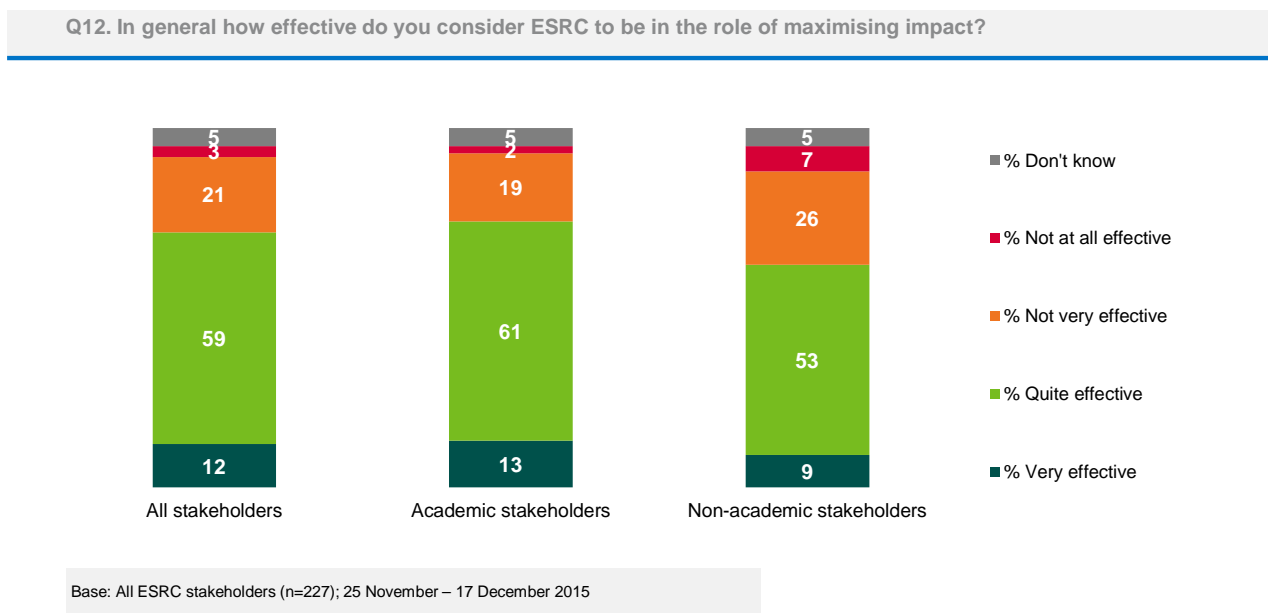
<sup>1</sup> Stakeholders were provided with a list of ESRC's key areas of activity, and asked to rate ESRC's performance for each area on a scale of 1-10. Ratings cited here are the mean ratings out of 10 for all academic stakeholders.

Fig 5: Performance in key areas of activity by sub-group



On the whole, academic stakeholders are positive about ESRC's impact, with three quarters (74%) saying the organisation is effective at maximising impact. Areas such as longitudinal data investments and economic research funded through the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) are cited as positive examples of ESRC's impact.

Fig 6: Effectiveness at maximising impact



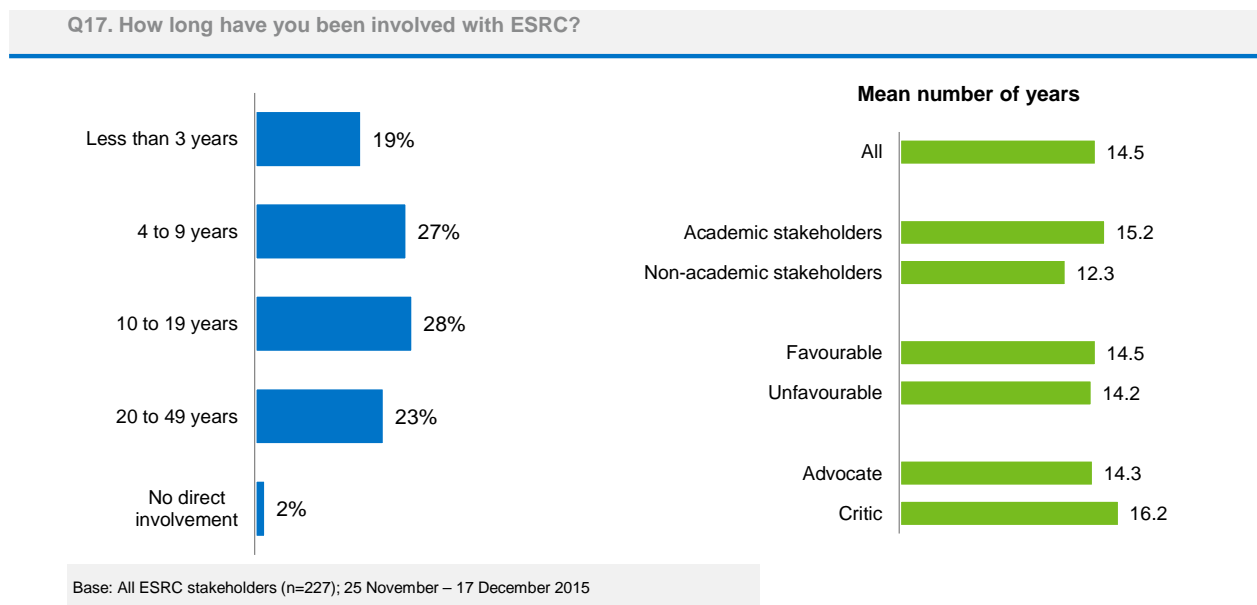
However, some academic stakeholders emphasise the importance of maintaining an openness to new ideas and allowing space for 'blue-sky thinking'. There is a general acknowledgement that it is not always possible to foresee which projects will have a high impact and which will have a low impact when they are commissioned, and academic stakeholders feel that ESRC needs to maintain a flexible approach and continue to fund speculative research projects in order to ensure that its work has a wide-ranging impact.

The communication of impact is highlighted as important by many stakeholders in this group, and there is a widespread feeling that continued efforts in this area will be necessary to ensure the continuity of public funding for economic and social science research.

### Communication and engagement

On average, academic stakeholders have been involved with ESRC for 15.2 years, and just under half (44%) are in contact with the organisation at least once a month.

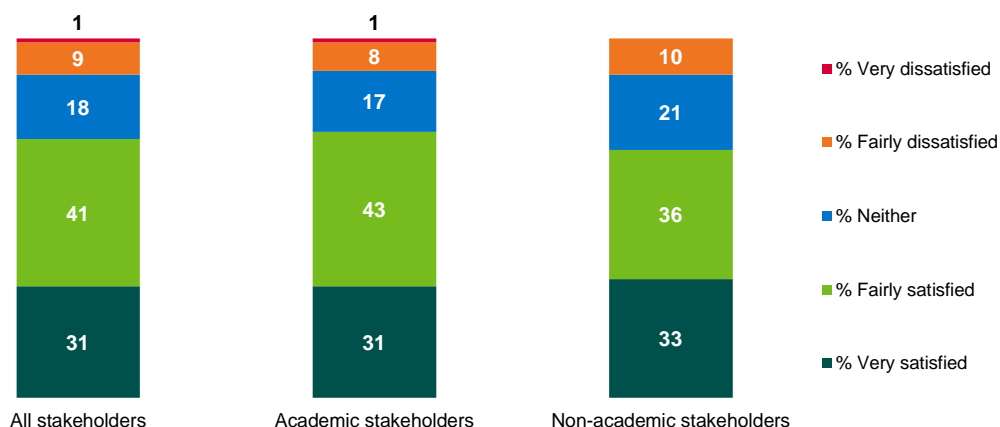
Fig 7: Length of involvement



Among academic stakeholders, there is a high level of satisfaction with relationships with ESRC. Three quarters (74%) say they are satisfied with their relationship, compared to just one in eleven (9%) who are dissatisfied. Indeed, there appears to be a positive direction of travel: over a quarter (27%) report that their level of satisfaction has improved over the last two years, while three in five (60%) say it has stayed the same.

Fig 8: Satisfaction with working relationships

Q15. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your relationship with ESRC?



Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015

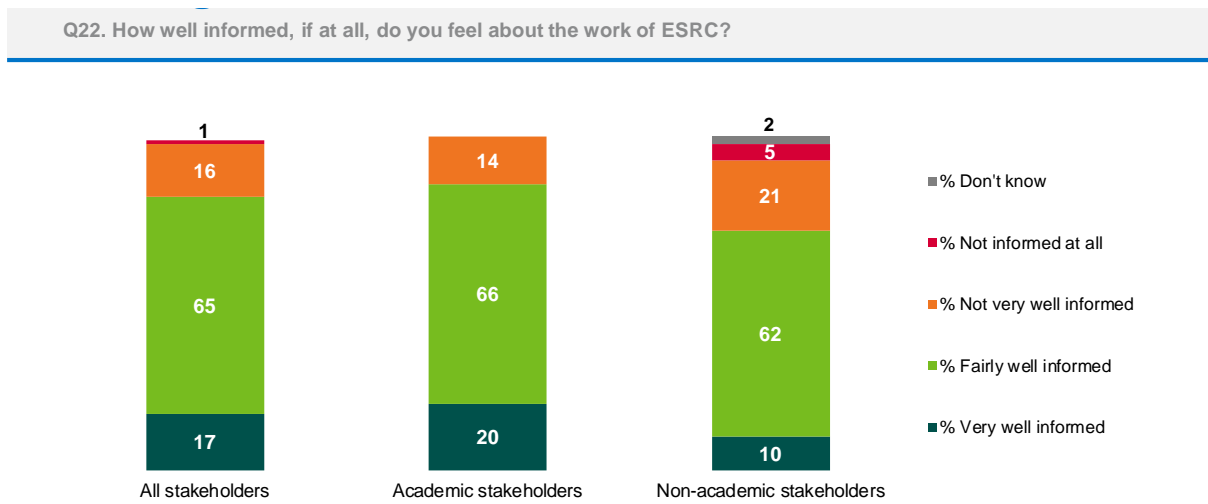
Similarly, in the qualitative research, most academic stakeholders express satisfaction with their current relationship with ESRC, and there is a clear sense that ESRC has a strong understanding of the academic sector and the needs and expectations of stakeholders working within universities and research centres.

Most feel they are getting the right amount of contact with ESRC, with two thirds (66%) suggesting the level of contact is about right, while one in five (18%) would like more contact.

In particular, those who have a specific point of contact within ESRC are most positive about their relationship. There is a feeling that having a specific contact can provide additional support in navigating ESRC’s organisational hierarchies and processes, and helps stakeholders find a ‘way in’ to the organisation.

When it comes to communications, more academic stakeholders tend to feel well informed about ESRC compared to other groups. A large majority (86%) say they feel well informed about ESRC and its work, compared to 72% among non-academic stakeholders.

Fig 9: Feeling well informed



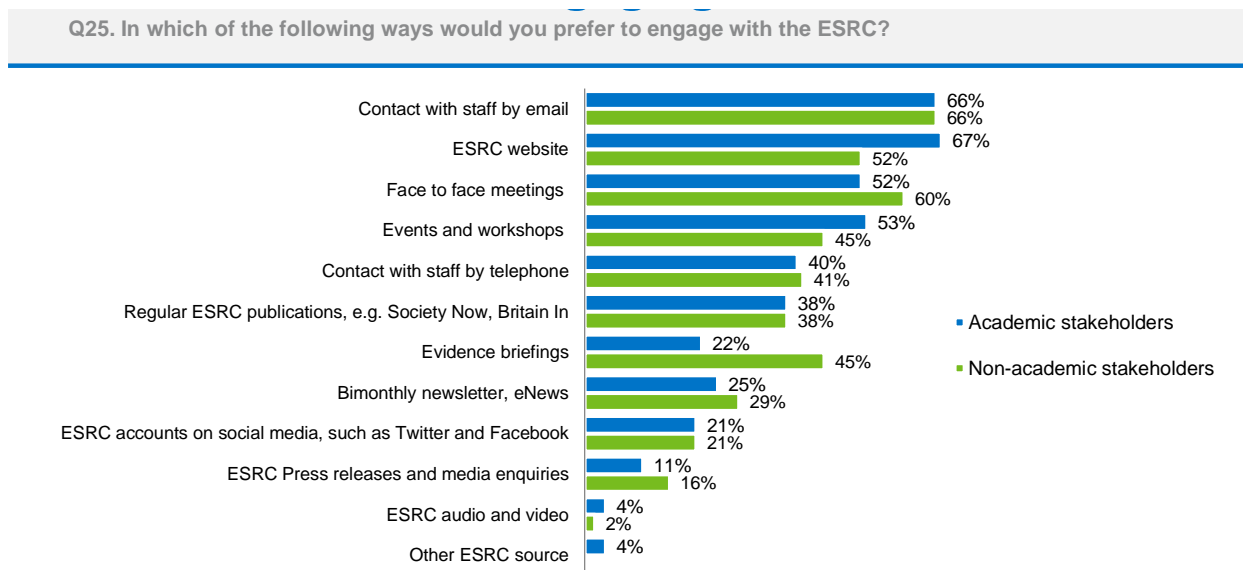
Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015

Currently, academic stakeholders use a range of channels to engage with ESRC, with at least half engaging with ESRC via the ESRC website (89%), contact with staff by email (76%), face to face meetings (54%), regular ESRC publications (53%) and events and workshops (52%). Two in five academic stakeholders contact ESRC by telephone (41%).

Relatively fewer, but still a substantial proportion, engage with ESRC via the bimonthly newsletter, eNews (31%), and ESRC accounts on social media (27%).

Academic stakeholders are most likely to say that their preferred channels of engagement are the ESRC website (67%) and contact with staff by email (66%). Events and workshops (53%), face to face meetings (52%), contact with staff by telephone (40%) and regular ESRC publications (38%) are also mentioned as a preferred means of engaging with ESRC.

Fig 10: Preferred means of engaging with ESRC by stakeholder group



Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015



On the whole, academic stakeholders are positive about the quality of these channels of engagement. Indeed, four in five rate the quality of regular ESRC publications (80%), face-to-face meetings (79%), events and workshops (79%) and contact with staff by telephone or email (78%) as good. Further, a majority rate communication and engagement via ESRC accounts on social media (69%), the bimonthly newsletter, eNews (68%), the ESRC website (66%), evidence briefings (62%) and press releases (62%) as good.

Notably, academics are significantly more likely to describe the quality of regular ESRC publications such as 'Society Now' or 'Britain In' as 'very good' (33%) compared to their non-academic counterparts (13%).

Most channels of engagement are considered useful sources of information about ESRC and its work, with at least four in five rating the ESRC website (86%), telephone or email contact with staff (86%), face-to-face meetings (86%) and events and workshops (80%) as useful. Regular ESRC publications including 'Society Now' and 'Britain In' (67%), the bimonthly newsletter eNews (60%) and social media (49%) are also generally considered useful. Platforms such as 'Britain In' are less frequently seen as useful than more traditional forms of communication such as contact with staff.

That said, compared with non-academic stakeholders, academic stakeholders are more likely to consider written communications produced by ESRC to be 'very useful'. For instance, a quarter (24%) report that regular ESRC publications are 'very useful' compared to just 8% among non-academic stakeholders, while one in five academic stakeholders (22%) report that eNews is 'very useful' compared to 6% among non-academic stakeholders.

In the qualitative research, it is clear that many academic stakeholders frequently interact with ESRC in the course of their work, often through case officers or designated points of contact.

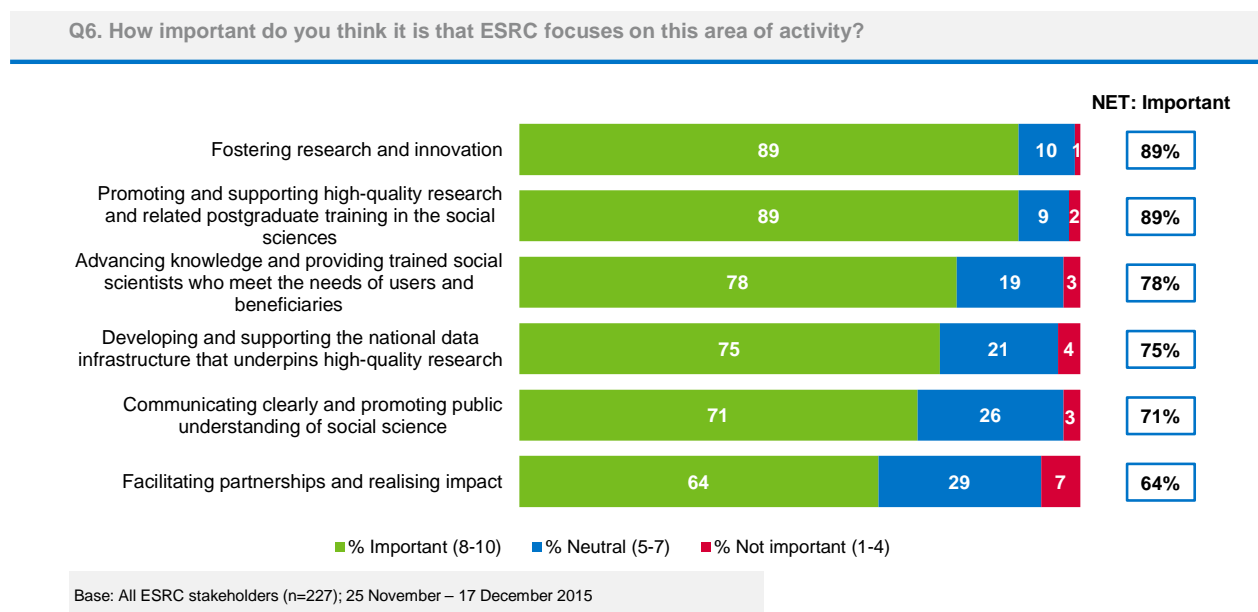
Anecdotally, many academic stakeholders report a high level of interest in keeping up to date with ESRC and its work. Several stakeholders state that they refer to the website, regular publications such as Society Now, and regular email communications to find up-to-date information on ESRC's work. Further, a number of academic stakeholders hear information about ESRC through contact with their wider academic network.

## Perceptions of ESRC’s activities

ESRC’s aims are widely supported among its academic stakeholders, with a majority rating each of its activities as important<sup>2</sup>. However, it is clear that activities relating to ESRC’s core role as a funder are most frequently considered important by academic stakeholders.

For instance, nine in ten think it is important that ESRC focuses on promoting and supporting high-quality research and related postgraduate training (91%) and fostering research and innovation (90%).

Fig 11: Perceived importance of areas of activity



Three quarters say it is important for ESRC to focus on advancing knowledge and providing trained social scientists (77%), developing and supporting the national data infrastructure (75%), and communicating clearly and promoting public understanding of social sciences (73%). Facilitating partnerships and realising impact is less commonly considered important, with three in five academic stakeholders (60%) saying it is important for ESRC to focus on this area (compared to 76% among non-academic stakeholders).

This hierarchy is reflected in the qualitative research, in which academic stakeholders spontaneously define ESRC’s role in terms of funding academic research, and it is perceived to be highly influential within the social science community in this role.

However, there is a clear feeling that its remit extends beyond this core role. Academic stakeholders cite a range of related responsibilities, including taking a strategic view across its funding portfolio to identify any new challenges or issues for economic and social sciences, and promoting a high standard of quality in economic and social science research.

<sup>2</sup> Stakeholders were presented with a list of ESRC’s key areas of activity, including promoting and supporting high-quality research and related postgraduate training in the social sciences, advancing knowledge and providing trained social scientists who meet the needs of users and beneficiaries, developing and supporting the national data infrastructure that underpins high-quality research, communicating clearly and promoting public understanding of social science, fostering research and innovation and facilitating partnerships and realising impact.

In addition, a number of academic stakeholders highlight the importance of ESRC's role in bringing research findings to a wider audience and promoting the utilisation of research.

## Concerns

Despite their positive views of ESRC and its work, academic stakeholders do cite a number of concerns, both in relation to ESRC itself and the external challenges it faces.

In the qualitative research, some academic stakeholders suggest that ESRC's processes contribute to the perception of ESRC as a **bureaucratic organisation**, and refer to the extensive application forms required as part of the process for funding applications. This leads some to suggest that ESRC is **much more accessible to stakeholders who already have established relationships with the organisation**.

On a related note, while ESRC is thought to have a good understanding of the higher education sector, some academic stakeholders **question its understanding of non-academic fields**, and believe that ESRC **could do more to focus on building relationships with users**. Indeed, some suggest that part of ESRC's role is to help build connections between researchers and research users.

More broadly, academic stakeholders express concerns over **ensuring future funding for research**, and maintaining the strength of social sciences in the aftermath of the Nurse Review of UK research councils. There is a feeling that ESRC will face many external pressures over the next few years, and many therefore believe that ESRC will need to continue to advocate for the value for social science research as well as communicate the impact of ESRC-funded research.

That said, some have concerns over the **continued focus on the impact of academic research**. While the impact agenda is widely supported among academic stakeholders, there is a clear feeling that the potential impact of a research project will not always be clear at the outset, and that ESRC needs to maintain an open-minded and flexible approach when it comes to identifying and funding impactful social science research.

## Potential for improvement

On the whole, ESRC appears to have a strong relationship with its academic stakeholders. Most are not only positive in their overall views of the organisation, but express satisfaction with the relationship they personally have with ESRC. However, there are a number of potential areas for improvement which emerge from this research.

Firstly, when it comes to ESRC's engagement with academic stakeholders, it is clear that the majority of academic stakeholders value a close relationship with ESRC. Many emphasise the importance of personal contact with ESRC staff, whether face-to-face, or by telephone and email, as this allows them to maintain an ongoing exchange of views and more potential for collaboration on issues affecting both parties. This underlines the importance of maintaining, and where possible, expanding the opportunities for academic stakeholders to engage with ESRC staff.

More generally, however, academic stakeholders have a clear interest in keeping up to date with ESRC's activities in their field. This group often refer to the ESRC website, as well as written ESRC publications and newsletters, to ensure they are aware of the latest developments. This suggests that ESRC should continue to promote these sources of information among academic audiences, and make it as easy as possible for academic stakeholders to find specific information relevant to their field of research, including funding opportunities, ongoing ESRC-funded work, and other developments.

More broadly, academic stakeholders are keen to see ESRC acting as a strong advocate for the value of social science research. In the aftermath of the Nurse Review of UK research councils, there are substantial concerns among academic stakeholders about the future position of social science research, and the allocation of the science budget. In this context, stakeholders from all backgrounds believe it will be vital for ESRC to be a strong advocate for social science research, and play a prominent role in communicating the value of social science outside the research community.

Similarly, academic stakeholders would like to see ESRC continue to promote impact, but there is some concern that the impact agenda could have a detrimental effect on the range and quality of research funded by ESRC. To address this, ESRC will need to communicate openly with stakeholders about the future needs of the sector, and be clear about how it defines different types of impact, and how it evaluates the success of its work.

Finally, many academic stakeholders feel that ESRC can lack agility in responding to current issues and policy concerns, and therefore be slow to address emerging economic and social challenges. The focus on large investments is perceived to have contributed to this lack of immediacy, as it is difficult for academic researchers to secure funding for short-term research projects addressing an immediate need.

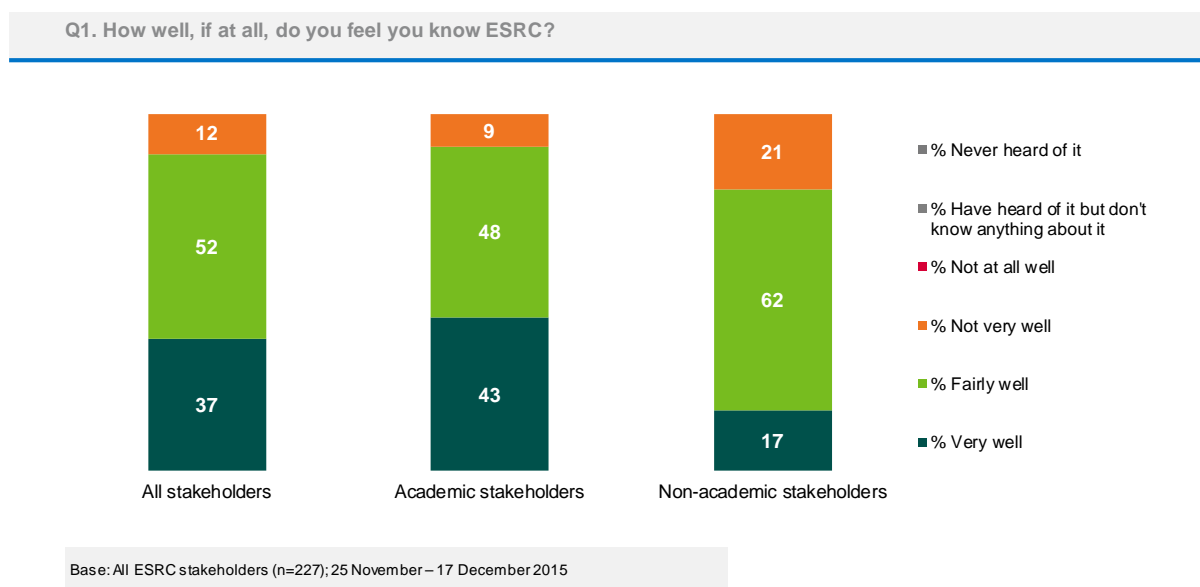
## Group 2: Other stakeholders/users

### Perceptions of ESRC

#### Overall perceptions

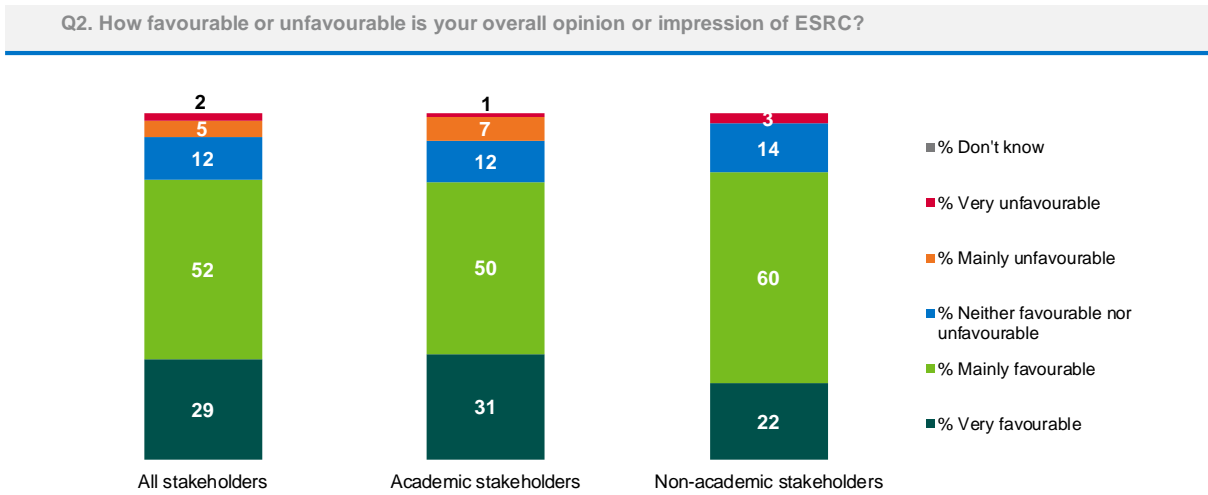
ESRC is relatively well known among its stakeholders in the group 2 areas, with four in five (79%) saying that they feel they know ESRC well. However, fewer non-academic stakeholders report that they know ESRC ‘very well’ compared to their academic counterparts: just 17 per cent say they know ESRC ‘very well’ compared to over two in five (43%) academic stakeholders.

Fig 12: Familiarity



This lower level of knowledge about ESRC is reflected in ESRC’s reputation among non-academics. While a large majority (83%) have a favourable view of ESRC, only one in five (22%) say their impression is ‘very favourable’, compared to 31% of those in academia.

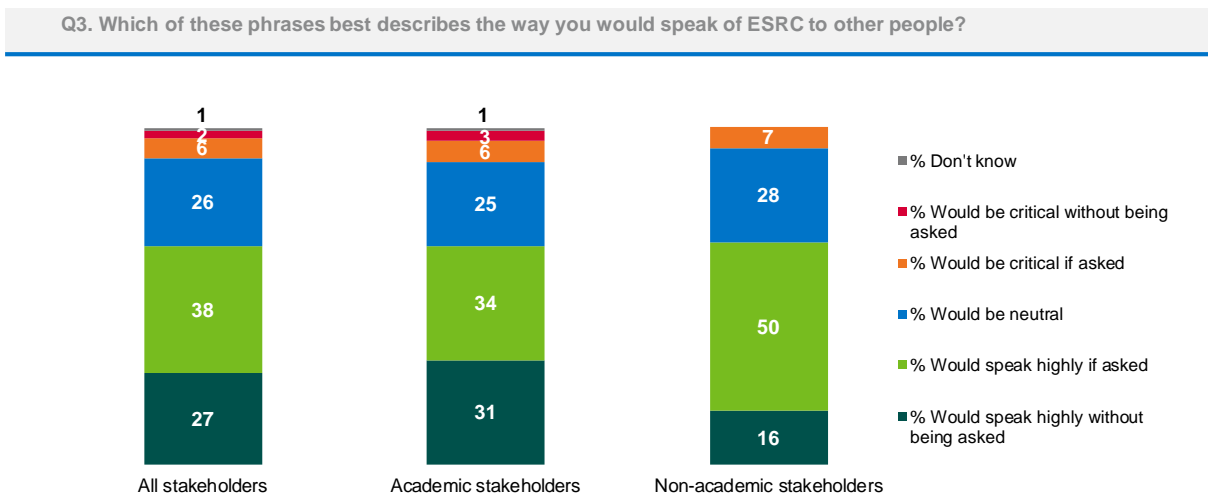
Fig 13: Favourability



Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015

Similarly, levels of advocacy are high overall among non-academic stakeholders, with two in three (66%) saying they would speak highly of ESRC. Again, however, academic stakeholders remain almost twice as likely to speak well of ESRC spontaneously compared to non-academic stakeholders (31% vs 16%).

Fig 14: Advocacy



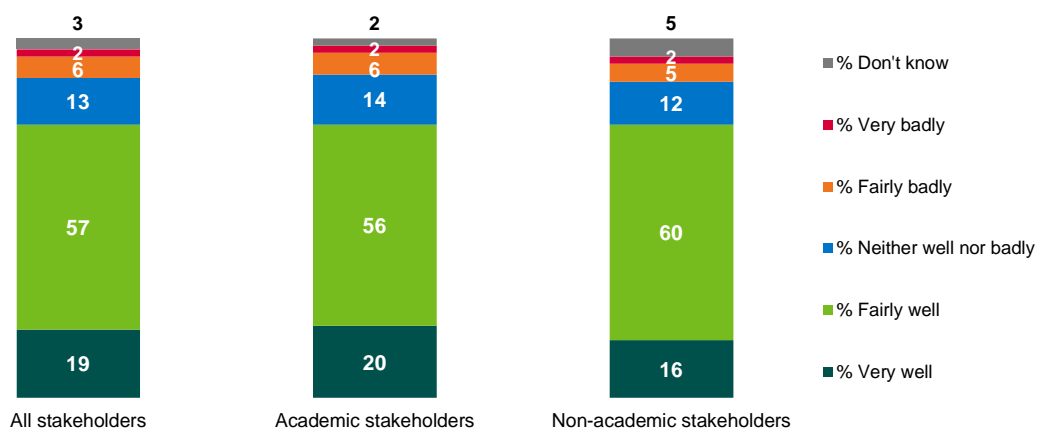
Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015

**Performance**

Stakeholders from non-academic fields are positive about ESRC’s performance. Three quarters (76%) believe that ESRC performs well as an organisation, while just seven per cent believe that it performs badly.

Fig 15: Overall performance

Q8. Overall, how well or badly do you feel ESRC performs as an organisation?



Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015

In the qualitative research, non-academic stakeholders cite a number of strengths of ESRC. These include a widespread acknowledgement of its position as a leading authority for economic and social science research and the perceived breadth of its remit across the economic and social sciences.

More specifically, a number of stakeholders from non-academic fields refer to the quality of ESRC’s work in particular areas, including investment in data resources, and programmes such as the What Works Centres.

Conversely, stakeholders also identify a number of weaknesses of ESRC. There is a clear feeling among non-academic stakeholder groups that ESRC is most engaged with its most established audiences, and in particular with stakeholders from academia. This reflects a general sense that ESRC is a body that funds academic research rather than one which funds research of immediate relevance to policy makers and other users of research.

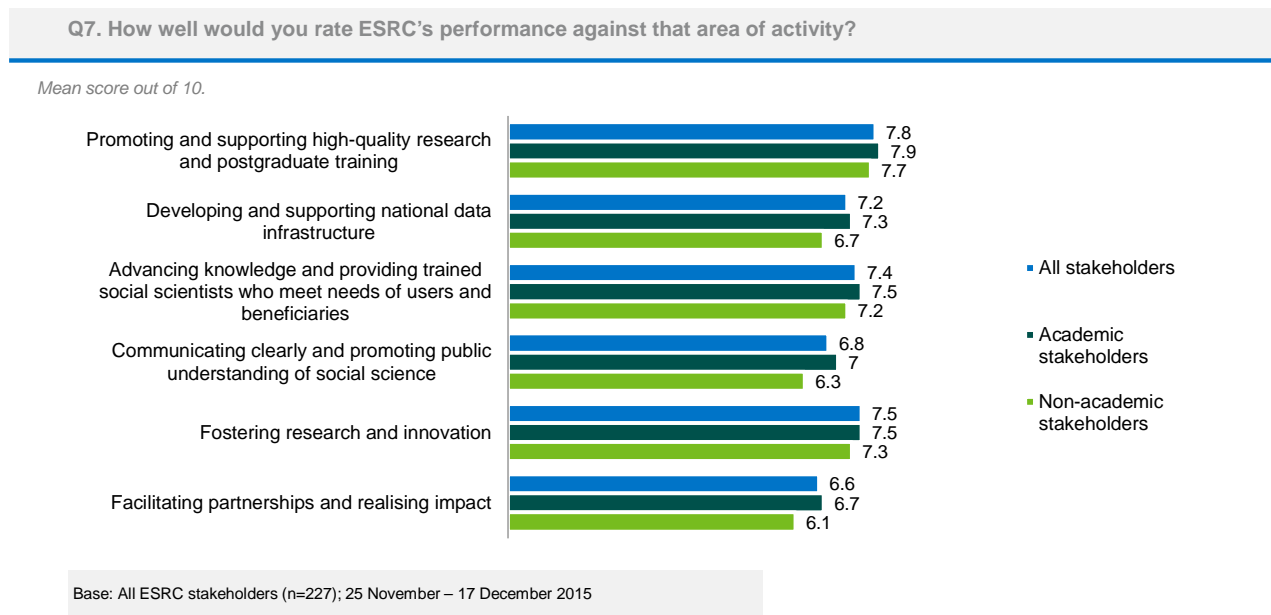
Further, ESRC is sometimes thought to be slow at addressing emerging issues in social science. Indeed, a number of stakeholders feel that more focus on emerging issues would ensure that ESRC’s work has a greater impact in informing policy debates.

On the whole, stakeholders from non-academic fields are positive about ESRC’s performance in its key areas of activity<sup>3</sup>. It is most commonly thought to perform well in the areas which are most frequently perceived as important; these include promoting and supporting high-quality research and postgraduate training (7.7), fostering research and innovation (7.3), and advancing knowledge and providing trained social scientists (7.2).

ESRC’s performance is only slightly less frequently rated well when it comes to communicating clearly and promoting public understanding of social science (6.3), and facilitating partnerships and realising impact (6.1).

<sup>3</sup> Stakeholders were provided with a list of ESRC’s key areas of activity, and asked to rate ESRC’s performance for each area on a scale of 1-10. Ratings cited here are the mean ratings out of 10 for all non-academic stakeholders.

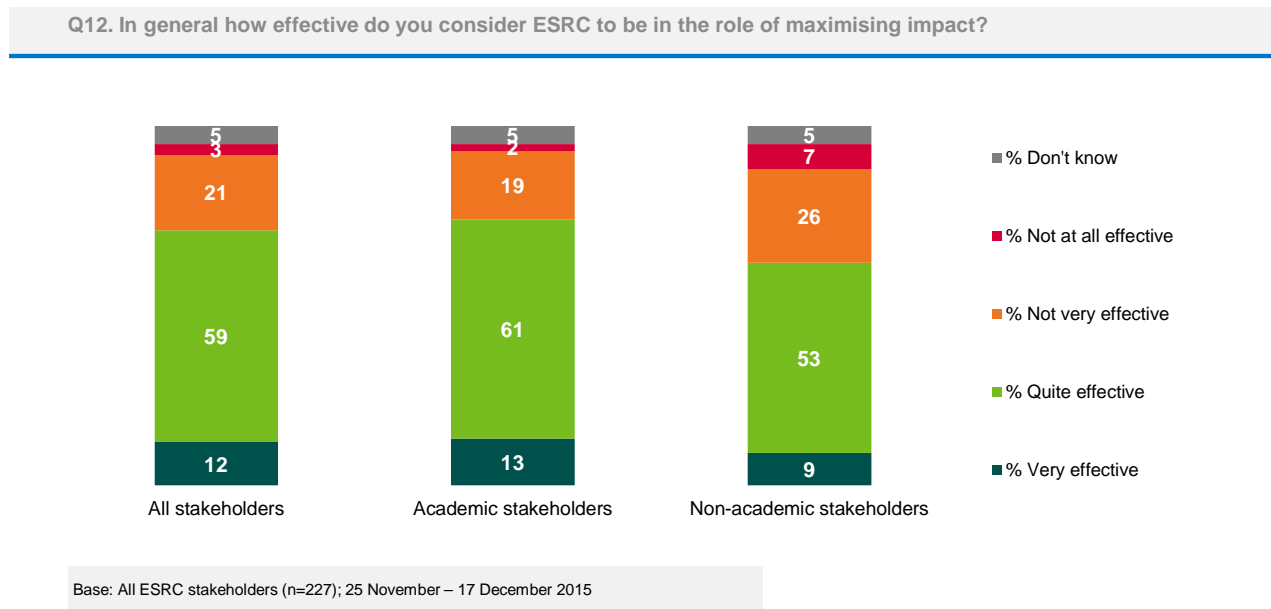
Fig 16: Performance in key areas of activity by sub-group



Overall, the perceived hierarchy of performance in ESRC's key areas of activity is similar to that among academic stakeholders.

Stakeholders from non-academic fields are fairly positive about ESRC's impact, although slightly less so than their academic counterparts. Three in five (62%) say the organisation is effective at maximising impact, compared to three quarters (74%) among academics.

Fig 17: Effectiveness at maximising impact



Indeed, maximising impact is thought to be an area with potential for improvement. While non-academic stakeholders feel that ESRC has made an impact in certain areas, particularly in relation to specific research centres and investments such as the What Works Centres and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), there is a clear sense that it could do more to maximise its impact outside the academic community.



In particular, there is a strong feeling that ESRC could do more to develop its strategic partnerships over the next few years. Non-academic stakeholders would like to see ESRC build or facilitate partnerships with new audiences, and identify new opportunities for partnerships between funders and research-using organisations. It is widely believed that focusing on this area would help maximise the policy relevance and level of impact of ESRC-funded research.

Stakeholders from non-academic fields are relatively positive about the way in which ESRC communicates its impact, and many suggest that it has improved in this area over the past few years. However, there is a clear feeling that ESRC could do more to communicate the findings and impact of the research that it funds.

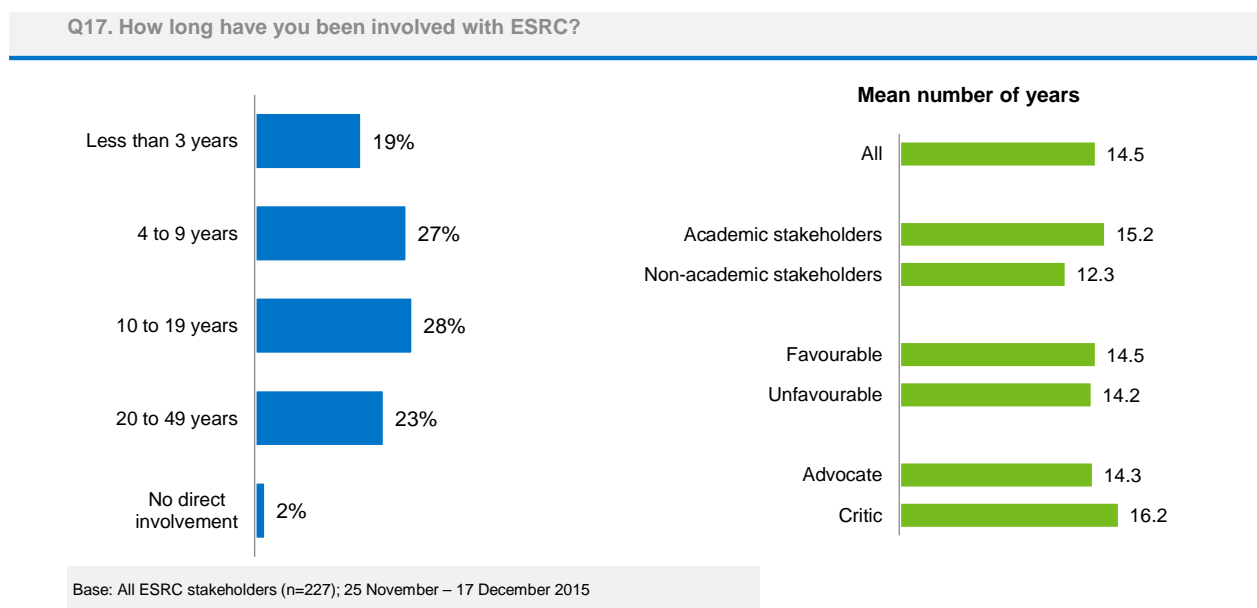
In particular, non-academic stakeholders would like to see more concise, relevant summaries of research evidence which enable users to access knowledge on key issues and topics, including syntheses of existing research and case studies which focus on key messages around efficiency and impact.

In addition, stakeholders from the public sector feel that involving users earlier in the research process would help ensure that more research evidence is focused on important economic and social issues relevant to the UK's policy agenda.

### Communication and engagement

On average, non-academic stakeholders have been involved with ESRC for 12.3 years. Just over a third (36%) are in contact with the organisation at least once a month compared to 44% of academic stakeholders, although this difference is not statistically significant.

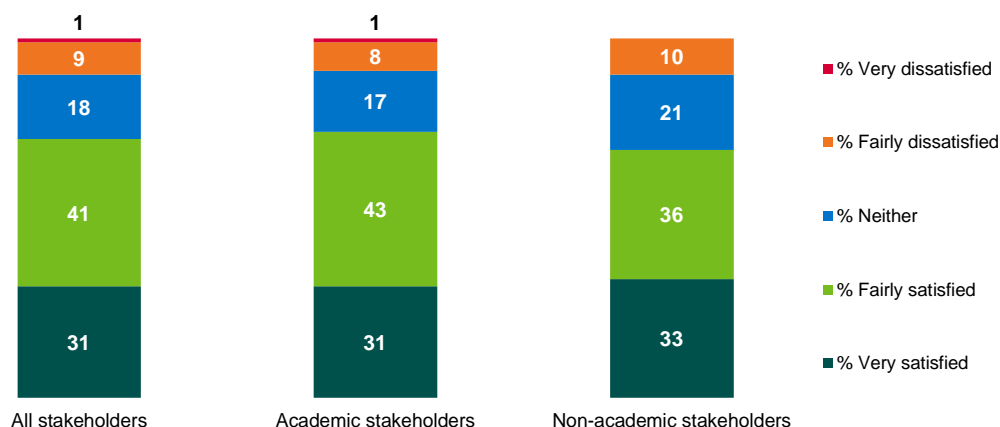
Fig 18: Length of involvement



Despite this, among stakeholders from non-academic fields, there is a high level of satisfaction with relationships with ESRC. Seven in ten (69%) say they are satisfied with their relationship, compared to just one in ten (10%) who are dissatisfied. Indeed, as with academic stakeholders, relationships appear to be improving: a quarter (24%) report that their level of satisfaction has improved over the last two years, while three in five (62%) say it has stayed the same. Just 12% say it has got worse.

Fig 19: Satisfaction with working relationships

Q15. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your relationship with ESRC?



Base: All ESRC stakeholders (n=227); 25 November – 17 December 2015

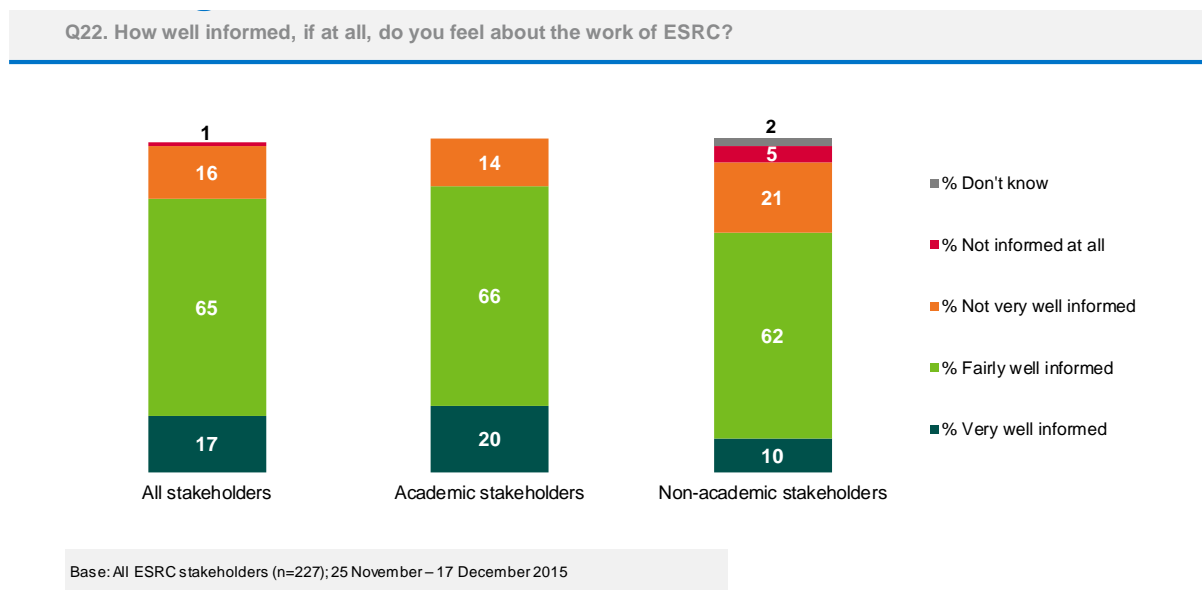
Similarly, in the qualitative research, most express satisfaction with their current relationship with ESRC, and there is a clear sense that the best relationships are characterised by open, honest communication and a willingness to discuss shared issues.

While the majority of non-academic stakeholders feel they are getting the right amount of contact with ESRC (53%), there is a clear interest in more frequent contact (31% would like more frequent contact with ESRC), which suggests that this group in particular would benefit most from increased levels of contact.

Indeed, there is perceived to be some room for improvement in ESRC’s understanding of the needs and issues of user organisations. There is a sense that ESRC is most comfortable in building relationships when it is acting as a research funder, and it can be perceived as slightly inflexible when interacting when stakeholders in a more open two-way dialogue.

When it comes to communications, slightly fewer non-academic stakeholders feel well informed about ESRC compared to stakeholders from academia. Seven in ten (72%) say they feel well informed about ESRC and its work, compared to 86% among academic stakeholders.

Fig 20: Feeling well informed



Currently, non-academic stakeholders use a range of channels to engage with ESRC, with at least half engaging with ESRC via contact with staff by email (71%), the ESRC website (59%), and face to face meetings (57%). Further, two in five non-academic stakeholders engage with ESRC via events and workshops (41%) and contact with staff by telephone (38%).

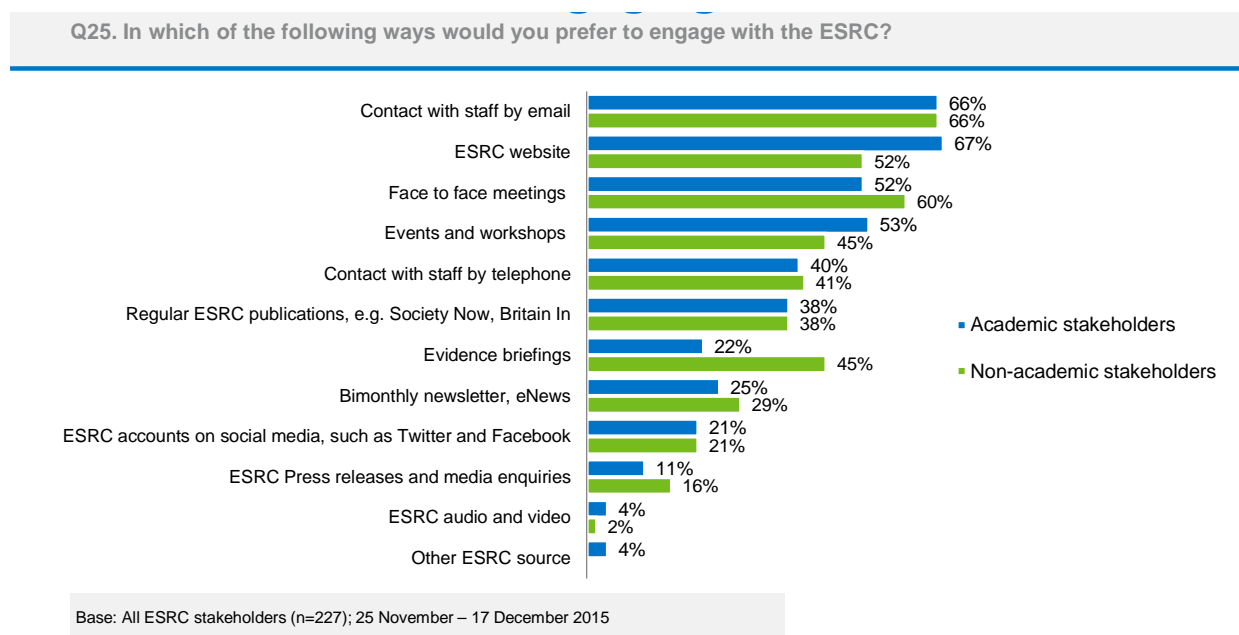
There are clear differences in the channels used by academic and non-academic audiences: around nine in ten academic stakeholders (89%) make use of the ESRC website, compared to just 59% of non-academic stakeholders.

A relatively smaller proportion of stakeholders make use of regular ESRC publications (28%) and ESRC accounts on social media (26%) to engage with ESRC.

Non-academic stakeholders are most likely to say they would prefer to engage with ESRC via personal contact, including contact with staff by email (66%) and face to face meetings (60%). However, the ESRC website (52%), events and workshops (45%), evidence briefings (45%), contact with staff by telephone (41%), and regular ESRC publications (38%) are also cited as a preferred means of engaging with ESRC.

It is notable that non-academic stakeholders have different preferred channels of engagement compared to their academic counterparts. For instance, two thirds (67%) of academic stakeholders say they would prefer to engage with ESRC via the ESRC website, compared to only 52% among non-academic stakeholders. By contrast, just under half of non-academic stakeholders (45%) say they would prefer to engage with ESRC via evidence briefings compared to only 22% of academic stakeholders.

Fig 21: Preferred means of engaging with ESRC by stakeholder group



As with the academic audiences, non-academic stakeholders are generally positive about the quality of these channels of engagement. Indeed, more than four in five rate the quality of face-to-face meetings (84%), events and workshops (83%), and contact with staff by telephone or email (81%) as good. Further, a majority rate the quality of the ESRC website (76%), ESRC social media accounts (71%), the bimonthly newsletter, eNews (70%), regular ESRC publications (69%), and evidence briefings (57%) as good.

Most channels of engagement are also considered useful sources of information about ESRC and its work, with over eight in ten rating as useful face-to-face meetings (85%), telephone or email contact with staff (84%), the ESRC website (77%), and events and workshops (72%). Regular ESRC publications including ‘Society Now’ and ‘Britain In’ (57%), evidence briefings (56%), the bimonthly newsletter eNews (43%) and press releases (43%) are also generally considered useful.

Again, it is worth noting that published forms of communication such as ‘Britain In’ are less widely seen as useful among non-academic stakeholders compared to contact with ESRC staff.

In the qualitative research, a number of stakeholders from non-academic fields suggest that ESRC adds value to their work through their strategic guidance, engagement activities and collaborative working, citing examples such as a joint seminar series and ESRC’s support for initiatives in the area of administrative data. Non-academic stakeholders are clear that they would like to see ESRC continue to focus on engagement and collaboration and share information on its current thinking and its activities.

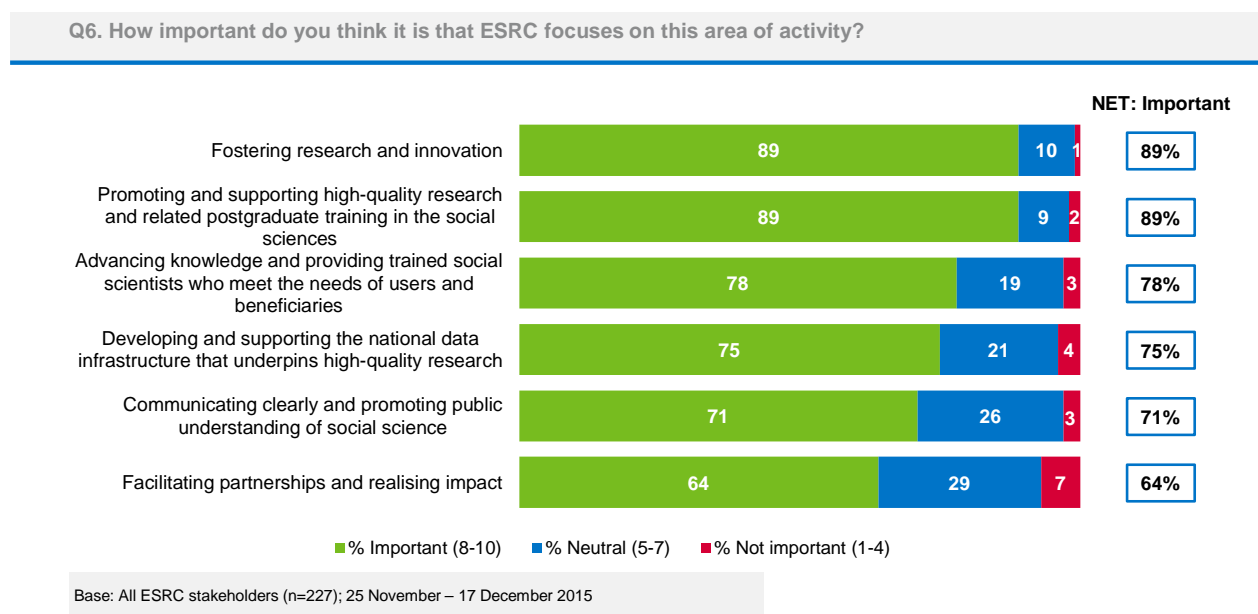
In light of this, there is a clear appetite among this group for more personal contact with ESRC staff, whether face-to-face or by telephone or email. There is a sense that this kind of ongoing relationship can help ensure that relevant information is shared early on, and that stakeholders are directed to specific information on ESRC’s activities when they need it.

## Perceptions of ESRC’s activities

ESRC’s aims are widely supported among non-academic stakeholders, with a majority rating each of its activities as important<sup>4</sup>. However, as with their academic counterparts, it is clear that activities relating to ESRC’s core role as a funder are most frequently considered important.

For instance, nine in ten think it is important that ESRC focuses on fostering research and innovation (88%) and promoting and supporting high-quality research and related postgraduate training (84%). Further, four in five say it is important for ESRC to focus on advancing knowledge and providing trained social scientists (81%) and developing and supporting the national data infrastructure (78%), while two thirds say it is important for ESRC to focus on communicating clearly and promoting public understanding of social sciences (67%).

Fig 22: Perceived importance of areas of activity



However, stakeholders from non-academic fields are significantly more likely to emphasise the importance of facilitating partnerships and realising impact, with three quarters (76%) rating this as important compared to 60% among stakeholders from an academic background. This reflects the high importance this group place on the usability of research findings.

In the qualitative research, non-academic stakeholders highlight the importance of ESRC’s role as a dedicated funder of economic and social science research. Within this role, they identify promoting excellence in research, growing knowledge and understanding in the social sciences, and building capability in the social science sector as key responsibilities of ESRC.

<sup>4</sup> Stakeholders were presented with a list of ESRC’s key areas of activity, including promoting and supporting high-quality research and related postgraduate training in the social sciences, advancing knowledge and providing trained social scientists who meet the needs of users and beneficiaries, developing and supporting the national data infrastructure that underpins high-quality research, communicating clearly and promoting public understanding of social science, fostering research and innovation and facilitating partnerships and realising impact.

## Concerns

Stakeholders from non-academic fields refer to a number of concerns in relation to ESRC's way of working, as well as the external challenges it faces.

There is a widespread perception that ESRC is **most engaged with its stakeholders in academia**, and as a consequence, it is thought to have weaker relationships with research-using organisations, and less understanding of their needs, priorities and concerns. Stakeholders from non-academic fields are clear that they would like to see ESRC build or facilitate closer relationships with research users.

Related to this, there is a feeling that the **impact of ESRC-funded work is often limited** by its focus on academic audiences. A number of stakeholders from non-academic fields believe that ESRC-funded work is **often framed in academic language** and focuses on academic impact, and there is a sense that it could do more to help bring research findings to a wider audience.

Non-academic stakeholders also express concerns over the challenge of ensuring future funding in the context of continuing cuts to public spending. There is a clear feeling that ESRC will have to work hard to communicate the value of social science research, as well as the impact of the research it funds, in order to ensure continued government funding for social science research.

## Potential for improvement

While there is a clear feeling among research users that ESRC tends to have less regular contact and fewer close relationships with stakeholders from non-academic fields, there is also a **strong appetite among this group for closer links with ESRC**.

Policy makers and research users express an interest in more frequent contact with the organisation, and would welcome a two-way relationship with ESRC which involves open dialogue about shared issues.

Overall, there is a clear sense that ESRC could enhance the impact of its work. To address this, stakeholders would like to see ESRC doing more to involve users in identifying strategic priorities for research, and to support more synthesis and evidence review for a non-academic audience.

Given ESRC's central role in the social science community, stakeholders from non-academic fields see it as having a key part to play in evaluating the overall state of UK social science. This involves identifying research strategies and priorities, including emerging issues in economic and social science. It is widely thought that involving research users early on in this process would help address key policy concerns and maximise the impact of ESRC funds.

Related to this, many believe that ESRC could do more to help bring findings from social science research to a wider audience by making them more accessible to research users. In particular, there is a clear feeling that the language and style of communication used in disseminating findings could be more tailored to a non-academic audience.

Research users and policy makers would like to see concise, relevant summaries of research evidence which are clear about the implications of research for policy and practice. An increase in targeted information and summaries of research findings would therefore allow users to quickly access existing knowledge on key issues and topics.

## Conclusion & recommendations

Overall, these findings present a positive picture of ESRC and its work in supporting economic and social science research in the UK. ESRC is clearly well known across a wide range of stakeholders, and there is not only a strong understanding of its core role, but a high level of support for its vision and aims.

As found in previous research, ESRC is held in high regard by its stakeholders. A majority of stakeholders are favourable towards the organisation and would speak highly of it to other people. Further, most believe that **ESRC performs well in its core role and a large majority say it plays a leading role in the UK social science community.**

These positive views are underpinned by a perception that ESRC makes a valuable contribution to economic and social science research in the UK, with a large majority saying that its work benefits the UK as a whole. Stakeholders highlight its reputation for supporting a high standard of quality, and the breadth of its work across the economic and social sciences. It is clear that ESRC is most commonly thought to be performing well in the areas most frequently perceived as important, namely promoting and supporting high-quality research and postgraduate training, and fostering research and innovation. Stakeholders also praise its work in improving and maximising data resources and building capability among social science researchers.

**ESRC also appears to have strong relationships with its stakeholders, with a majority expressing satisfaction with their current relationship.** Those closest to the organisation are most positive about their relationship, and, at their best, relationships with ESRC are characterised by open dialogue, a willingness to discuss shared issues and to work together in identifying new strategies and priorities for economic and social research.

In addition, stakeholders generally feel well informed about ESRC and its work, and **a majority are positive about the quality and usefulness of the communications and information they receive from ESRC.**

Nevertheless, stakeholders do identify a number of concerns. In the context of ongoing budget constraints, **maximising its impact and communicating the value of ESRC-funded research remains a key concern for stakeholders.** While many believe that ESRC has made improvements, there is a general feeling that it would benefit from continuing to focus on this area, particularly in light of the re-structuring of UK research councils which lies ahead.

However, many also express some concern about how ESRC engages with its stakeholders, in particular its engagement with those outside academia. **Stakeholders are clear that they would like to see ESRC become more collaborative, and engage with a wide variety of audiences.**

Below, we discuss these emerging issues and offer recommendations for how they can be addressed.

### 1. Continue to focus on ESRC's performance in core areas

On the whole, ESRC is believed to be performing well in its role in leading and supporting social science research in the UK, and this is reflected in stakeholders' positive views of the organisation. In particular, there is a clear sense among stakeholders that ESRC performs in the areas most frequently perceived as important – promoting and supporting high-quality research and postgraduate training, and fostering research and innovation – which suggests that it is currently focusing its efforts in the right areas.

In light of future challenges relating to ESRC's funding and organisational structure, this suggests that ESRC will need to focus on maintaining its performance in these key areas, and communicating the value of its work in supporting high-quality research.

## **2. Address the future needs of social science in the UK**

ESRC holds a central role in the social science community, and, as such, stakeholders see it as having a key part to play in championing research and evaluating the overall state of social science in the UK. This involves not only anticipating future needs of the sector in terms of data resources and building capability, but also working with a wide range of stakeholders to identify research strategies and priorities, including emerging issues in economic and social science.

As part of this role, ESRC must balance the competing priorities of high-quality research of academic value, and research which has a specific or more immediate political and social impact. While many stakeholders in research-using organisations would like to see ESRC do more to focus on non-academic impact, it is widely acknowledged across all stakeholder groups that ESRC needs to allow for some initiatives or programmes which may not initially appear to have a high level of impact.

In order to meet these expectations, ESRC will need to openly communicate with stakeholders about the future needs of the sector, and be clear about how it evaluates the success of its work.

## **3. Advocate for the value for social science research**

In the aftermath of the Nurse Review of UK research councils; there are substantial concerns among stakeholders about the future position of social science research. In particular, some stakeholders suggest that the ring-fencing of the science budget could pose a problem for social science research, and believe that ESRC will have to campaign harder for its allocation of funding.

In this context, stakeholders from all backgrounds believe it will be vital for ESRC to be a strong advocate for social science research, and play a prominent role in communicating the value of social science in the research community and beyond.

## **4. Build closer links with research users and policy makers**

A clear finding emerging from this research is the fact that ESRC interacts less frequently with non-academic stakeholders compared to other groups. This leads some to say that it exists for academics, rather than to inform policy. While policy makers and research users fairly positive about ESRC in their overall views, they are significantly less likely to feel they know the organisation well, and to feel they are well informed about its work, compared to ESRC's stakeholders in the higher education sector.

There is a strong appetite among this group for closer links with ESRC, with policy makers and research users expressing an interest in more frequent contact with the organisation. More specifically, users and policymakers would welcome a two-way relationship with ESRC, involving open dialogue about shared issues and a willingness to engage early on in the research process. It is widely thought that involving research users in identifying research strategies and priorities would help maximise the impact of ESRC funds and bring findings from social research to a wider audience.

## **5. Cut through academic language to ensure that research findings are accessible to users**

It is clear that stakeholders across all sectors believe that ESRC sets a high standard for the quality of work that it funds, but many believe that ESRC could do more to help bring findings from social science research to a wider audience.



In particular, there is a clear feeling that the language and style of communication used in disseminating findings could be more tailored to a non-academic audience. Research users and policy makers would like to see concise, relevant summaries of research evidence which are clear about the implications of research for policy and practice. Providing more syntheses of existing research, and case studies which focus on key messages, would allow users to quickly access existing knowledge on key issues and topics. An increase in targeted information and summaries of research findings would therefore ensure that ESRC-funded research has a wider impact across a variety of stakeholder audiences.

## **6. Consider how ESRC can be responsive to immediate policy concerns**

At present, many stakeholders feel that ESRC as an organisation can be bureaucratic and process-driven, and, as a result, it is perceived to lack agility. This is thought to have a detrimental impact on its ability to be flexible in responding to current issues and policy concerns, and many suggest that ESRC can be slow to address emerging economic and social challenges.

Further, there is a perception that the focus on large grants has contributed to this lack of immediacy. The move away from smaller grants – those under £100,000 in value – is perceived to have left a gap that other funders are unable to fill, and makes it difficult to pursue short-term research projects addressing an immediate need. Stakeholders are keen to see ESRC explore potential solutions for this issue.

## **7. React to different communication preferences among stakeholders**

On the whole, stakeholders feel well informed about ESRC and its work. Indeed, findings from the qualitative research suggest that relationships with staff are highly valued as a form of engagement with ESRC. When it comes to finding information about ESRC and its work, stakeholders from all backgrounds most commonly engage with the organisation via the website or via email contact with ESRC staff.

That said, there are clear differences in communication preferences between stakeholder groups. Academics are significantly more likely to prefer using the website to engage with ESRC, while their non-academic counterparts are more likely to prefer engaging via face to face meetings and via written evidence briefings.

In order to build on its existing relationships with stakeholders, ESRC should aim to target stakeholders with their preferred type of information by tailoring communications strategies to academic and non-academic stakeholder groups. Promoting the most relevant channels of engagement among each group, as well as highlighting the most relevant information for each stakeholder group, would ensure that stakeholders have a better understanding of ESRC's activity in their area.