

Introduction

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the primary UK funder of long-term, strategic social science research, identifying key societal challenges, co-ordinating the national social science research capacity to address these challenges and ensuring a continuous supply of skilled people to address them in the future.

ESRC-funded research and data resources have had significant impacts on policy, practice and business across all sectors of the UK's economy and society, and beyond. We set out key ways for the UK to re-ignite growth, the likely consequences of a failure to grow, and how these effects might best be addressed. We are also providing the evidence on how to seize opportunities for more sustainable growth.

The UK has an outstanding social science research base, with sustained performance far in excess of the world average, and a significant concentration of competencies at the global leading edge, as confirmed by the recent Elsevier Report to BIS on the International Comparative Performance of the UK Research Base¹. Our own International Benchmarking Reviews have confirmed UK Social Science as exceptional by world standards, with the latest review in the series – Human Geography – concluding that the UK is ranked first in the world.

Our research plays a major role in informing government policy, from welfare and benefits (where ESRC-funded work paved the way for Universal Credit) to health (where we have responded to the Prime Minister's 'National Dementia Challenge' by launching with NIHR the world's largest programme of social science research on dementia) and education (where ESRC researchers have advised the Department for Education on ways to improve post-16 participation in STEM subjects). The new 'What Works' initiative, in which we are a leading partner working closely with co-funders across government and elsewhere, will deliver better evidence for policy across areas as diverse as local economic growth, ageing and crime reduction, whilst our major programme of activities on the Future of the UK and Scotland will both inform the debate in the run-up to the referendum and assist in planning across a wide range of areas which will be affected by the outcome of the vote. Our research also ensures that we understand how markets and social attitudes influence the application of science and technology - whilst climate experts identify the scale of global warming, it is social science that helps understand people's behaviours, and identifies potential interventions for behavioural change, influencing the development of policies that will command the confidence of governments, business and the public. We work seamlessly with other Research Councils, through a wide range of bilateral and multilateral partnerships, in addition to ESRC involvement in each of the six cross-Council themes, to address those questions that require holistic, multidisciplinary responses.

We also help to create a skilled workforce for the UK economy with significant numbers of the social scientists we train or fund gaining employment outside Higher Education in research, development and decision-making roles across the public and private sectors and civil society, where their knowledge and skills are valued highly by employers. ■

¹ International Comparative Performance of the UK Research Base 2013 www.gov.uk/government/publications/performance-of-the-uk-research-base-international-comparison-2013

Our future plans

This one-year Delivery Plan extends and builds upon the ambitious programme of social science research outlined in our Delivery Plan 2011-2015. Our proposals for 2015/16 will support an outstanding portfolio of activities to achieve our objectives of delivering scientific excellence whilst promoting growth, maximising efficiency and increasing value for investment in research through leveraging co-funding from partnerships with a range of organisations, with a particular focus on continuing to expand our portfolio of work with the private sector. Our vision will deliver more ‘transformative’ research, which pioneers theoretical or methodological innovation; revolutionise the UK’s data infrastructure through greater use of transactional and administrative data; identify and support ‘frontier science’; embed an international perspective in everything we do; and promote bold new approaches to knowledge exchange and engagement with business. To achieve this we will:

- Invest in selected priority areas.
- Increase our engagement with business through delivery of a new, more effective approach to knowledge exchange.
- Strengthen the contribution of social science within the Technology Strategy Board’s (TSB) activities, increasing our commitment for joint work.
- Extend our partnerships to a wider range of UK and international partners in priority areas, including playing an active role in developing science and innovation partnerships with emerging partners through the Newton Fund.
- Work closely with other Research Councils across a wide range of areas of mutual interest, and to develop joined up provision for greater efficiency.
- Build capacity and capability to ensure widespread use of our growing UK data infrastructure. ■

Delivering Scientific Excellence - Our Priorities for 2015/16

Our Delivery Plan 2011-2015 sharpened our strategic research focus around three priorities:

- Economic Performance and Sustainable Growth
- Influencing Behaviour and Informing Interventions
- A Vibrant and Fair Society

These priorities encapsulate some of the biggest social science issues for Britain and the wider world, as identified through a widespread consultation with academics and other stakeholders, and guide our work towards maximising the impact from existing research,

resources and training investments.

Our annual review of developments under each of our three strategic priorities shows that we have made excellent progress in addressing many of the key themes under each; have extended the infrastructure that supports research; and have increased capacity for new research through our Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs). Any ESRC-funded research is renewable only by open competition, which means that we have grants coming to an end giving useful but necessarily limited scope to invest in new areas, whilst also responding flexibly to research and leverage opportunities identified through discussions with the UK social science community, with research users and with funding agencies in the UK and overseas. Through this review we have identified a number of areas within and across the current three strategic priorities where we will focus our efforts.

The activities we fund in these areas will take various forms: the synthesis of existing evidence; the funding of new research initiatives or international collaborations; the creation of new data resources; developing research capacity through studentship funding and networking initiatives; or focussing on exploiting an existing body of recently completed ESRC research through knowledge exchange activities. Taken together, this package of activities will deliver scientific excellence with impact, prioritising work that is world leading and has global reach, whilst promoting growth and increasing value for investment in research through leveraging co-funding from partnerships with a range of organisations.

In 2015/16, we will focus funding in these areas:

- **Big Data** – We are investing substantial capital funding in the creation of the Big Data Network, comprising investment in the Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN), Business and Local Government Data Research Centres, and in third sector and social media data. As a priority, we will ensure that we build capacity to make the best use of these investments.
- **Business Innovation** – We will support growth by improving our understanding of how businesses, especially small businesses, identify and take advantage of new market opportunities; how the UK can seize benefit from increasingly open, global and digital innovation systems; and how new business models and working practices can be best implemented across private, public and civil society sectors.
- **Social Science of Environmental Change** – This priority will establish how new green business

models in conjunction with behaviour change and smarter public policy will deliver growth that is both profitable and reduces the impact of the economy on the environment. The investments will be co-created with business, reach right across disciplines within and beyond social science and provide good opportunities for working with TSB and other Research Councils both within and outside the cross-Council themes. Further, in recognition of the global nature and interconnectedness of the challenges that cut across the energy, environment and food security nexus, we will scope opportunities for enhanced international collaboration utilising the Newton Fund in this area.

- **Urban Transformations** – Major changes are taking place in cities and urban centres across the globe, both in developed countries and in the developing world where the pace of change is accelerating. The majority of people now live in urban areas and the urban population in developing countries will cross 50% by 2030. Urban transformations are increasingly seen as the causes and potential solutions of broader economic and environment change, playing a fundamental role in shaping patterns of growth, innovation and adaptation. This is an area of strong research interest across a range of UK and international funders and a social science perspective is vital for understanding the significance of urban transformations for the welfare and wellbeing of urban citizens globally. We will therefore seek to work with a range of collaborative partners in the UK (including our sister Councils and the TSB) and overseas (utilising the opportunity of the Newton Fund to develop a strong international collaborative element) to support work to better understand urban transformations and how they are generating complex opportunities and challenges for policy makers, practitioners and local communities.
- **Epigenetics** – It is now acknowledged that gene expression is not fixed and can be influenced by the social and physical environment, hence there is significant opportunity for social science in this exciting emerging field. Working with partners in the US and with BBSRC, we will bring together rich sources of longitudinal data and researchers from both countries to facilitate significant advances in this area of frontier science. Activities are currently aimed at building interdisciplinary and international networks, leading to substantial collaborations by 2015/16.

- **Education** – We will invest in a number of areas under this theme, which will complement and support the government's international education strategy, including research on Higher Education to address questions around some of the recent radical changes in the system, such as new business models and the shift towards innovative forms of education provision. Additionally, recognising that sustainable economic development requires substantive development in human capital, and that education plays a crucial role in economic and social progress and alleviating poverty this is also an area where we will seek to build upon existing collaborations with DFID, scoping opportunities for further international collaboration utilising the Newton Fund.
- **Europe** – This is an important research agenda even if no referendum on the UK's membership takes place. Work here will be focussed around the political, social and economic implications of the UK's relationship with a changing EU, including the single market, regulation, labour market dynamics, migration and identity. ■

Supporting Growth

With the UK still only beginning to recover from one of the deepest and longest economic downturns of the past century, social science research is at its most valuable helping policymakers and business put the UK economy back on the pathway to steady growth, contributing to reducing the budget deficit and boosting consumer confidence. In recent months, ESRC has supported the LSE Growth Commission, which provides an authoritative contribution to the formulation and implementation of a long-term growth strategy in the UK, whilst other ESRC funded researchers have explored a range of policy initiatives which could help to kickstart growth².

Delivering research to support growth is a thread running throughout our priorities, as highlighted above, with targeted new investments to be made in areas that will increase our understanding of business innovation, and improve learning and life chances for the next generation of employees and business leaders. We will continue to maximise the impact of our existing investments including the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), and two new centres funded in partnership with BIS which will strengthen the evidence base to inform policies for growth – on SMEs in the Enterprise Research Centre and the 'What Works' Centre on

² *Re-igniting Growth* (2013) www.esrc.ac.uk/publications/esrc-research-publications/reigniting-growth.aspx

Local Economic Growth (also partnered with the Department for Communities and Local Government). Our recently appointed Local Government Navigators will ensure that social science research informs policy and practice in the Local Government sector – a sector that is of increasing significance to growth given the Government’s acceptance of nearly all of the recommendations from Lord Heseltine’s review. Our commitment to partnership working, in particular to increasing the social science collaboration with the private sector and the TSB will underpin successful delivery of our objectives, resulting in better informed innovation policy, supported by strong social science evidence. In 2015/16 we will:

- Increase the access to our research and data resources for business, ensuring social science is contributing to economic growth in the UK. This will include use of our longitudinal studies, our Big Data investments and research in innovation and behaviour.
- Provide access to a powerful set of evidence, data tools and resources which will support local economic growth, Local Enterprise Partnerships and local authorities through our Business and Local Government Data Research Centres.
- Support research across our priority areas with a focus on incentivising sustainable growth.
- Increase our collaboration with the business sector, in particular across our current priority areas for private sector engagement of Retail, Financial Services and Green Economy; we will continue to prioritise engagement with these areas, with a strong data focus, given the importance of the professional and services sector of the economy to the government’s Industrial Strategy for supporting growth.
- Strengthen the contribution of social science within the TSB’s activities, increasing TSB’s access to social science expertise in 2015/16 through commissioning a small group of leading experts, with support from a knowledge exchange fellowship, to advise on strategic engagement with the social sciences and provide an array of materials and support to TSB. The group will initially focus on engagement in the areas of Big Data, Future Cities and Innovation with participation from a range of social science disciplines. ■

Leverage

Through collaboration with partners we can use our resources to draw in those of others, extending the

breadth of research which can be supported, avoiding duplication of effort and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of our funding, whilst always retaining our commitment to the values of Quality, Impact and Independence. We have a proven track record of leveraging resources from partners to deliver mutual priorities, bringing in extensive additional funding for high-quality social science from partners in government, business and charities, both within the UK and internationally. Our longstanding collaboration with DFID has more than tripled the value of our own investment in the social science research base to date, whilst an ESRC contribution of £8m has anchored £12m from Department of Health budgets for work on dementia. This leveraged funding is not just confined to the value seen in our reported accounts – our managed investments annually bring in direct additional support at a level at least equivalent to our own investment in them, and the value of ‘in kind’ contributions from partners across our portfolio represents a substantial asset.

Business leverage remains challenging, though we have already exceeded our 2010-15 Delivery Plan target to increase by 5 per cent co-funding with the private sector. Strong successes in this area include the End Use Energy Demand Centres, funded jointly with EPSRC, which have attracted almost £15m in support from Utility Companies, and our recent Retail Sector Initiative, which attracted interest from 35 private sector partners, leveraging funding of £2.7m, against an ESRC investment of £1m. By refocusing our future business engagement activities to better align with the Big Data agenda, we will not only support the major capital investment in this area, but will increase opportunities for private sector leverage.

To maximise opportunities for leverage in 2015/16, we will:

- Broaden and deepen partnerships with business by devolving many responsibilities to Universities and our major investments, while focussing our efforts on developing partnerships with a small number of businesses who share our excitement for social science, and engaging in RCUK-wide endeavours to deliver remit-free business engagement across all Research Councils.
- Build upon our ongoing work to develop the Big Data Network, working closely with the other Research Councils, the TSB and other organisations to ensure that the establishment of Business and Local Government Data Research Centres enables business to access skilled people, and social science

is afforded access to business data in financial services, retail and environment.

- Reinforce our strong public sector partnership with DFID by continuing to develop collaborative opportunities in new areas, including a programme of work on international education systems and learning outcomes.
- Develop and extend the ‘What Works’ Network. We have played an integral role in developing the ‘What Works’ Network, which will provide robust evidence to guide decision making within government. We will continue to develop appropriate opportunities to expand the initiative, moving into new policy areas such as wellbeing.
- Extend our partnerships to a wider range of international partners in priority areas. For example, with our European ORA partners we are developing new joint activity with the Natural National Science Foundation of China on the Green Economy and on Understanding Populations. In 2015/16, we will support new research with European partners through the Joint Programming Initiative on Urban Europe and will announce a new jointly funded multinational call on Sustainable Urban Development, supported by the Newton Fund. We are also now implementing our new lead-agency agreement with the NSF which will encourage even greater social science collaboration with the US.
- Support the development of international centre partnerships, utilising opportunities offered by the Newton Fund and working with overseas funding agencies to facilitate partnerships between UK centres of excellence and existing and emerging centres of excellence overseas. ■

Skilled People

We play a key role in promoting and supporting training for the UK social science community throughout their careers. We invest in high-quality research training and development opportunities to produce skilled researchers who are able to tackle the most pressing social and economic challenges and who have a broader impact on society. The researchers that we support go on to successful careers not only within academia, but also within government and business, where the skills that they have developed, such as project management, report writing and delivering presentations, as well as their subject specific knowledge, are highly prized by employers.

In 2010 we established a new national network of 21 Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) through which we now deliver all our studentship funding. Our DTCs cover the full disciplinary range of the social sciences as well as areas of interdisciplinary research. In 2015/16 we will begin commissioning the next phase of DTCs, informed by an independent evaluation of the current network, and shaped by the priority areas identified earlier. In particular, there will be a strong focus on developing further capacity to make best use of investments funded under the Big Data Network. We have already shown strong leadership in advancing this agenda, for example in establishing the Administrative Data Taskforce, and will continue to take the lead in delivering a package of co-ordinated activity in this area. Data is the currency of social science and holds the key to delivering wider benefits of the Information Economy; new methodological advances, such as the linkage of transactional, administrative and survey data, hold huge promise for policy and practice as well as social science. The data deluge – whether environmental, geospatial, financial trading or retail transactional data – offers unique opportunity for understanding our society and economy as well as building high-level skills that are in great demand by business, and our significant investment in this area will ensure that we are well placed to make an integral contribution to delivering the Government’s Data Capability strategy.

To continue to generate multiple benefits from our highly skilled people in 2015/16, we will:

- Develop Data Science skills and capacity in partnership with other funders to deliver a coherent package of training for understanding and working with open data, addressing potential capacity issues.
- Focus on skill development at all career stages from doctoral training through to mid-career stage, with the aim of matching up those skilled people with business needs through the Business Data Research Centres, enabling the flow of skilled people into businesses through a range of mechanisms (e.g. collaborative studentships, KTPs, placements, catapults).
- Continue to work in collaboration with other partners to tackle skills shortages, for example, the Q-Step initiative which we have co-funded with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Nuffield Foundation aims to build quantitative training for social science undergraduates.

- Work closely with other Research Councils in areas of mutual interest to develop joined up provision for doctoral training, for example co-funding Centres for Doctoral Training with EPSRC and studentships with NERC in areas of cross-cutting priority. ■

Maximising Efficiency

With continued reductions in administrative budgets and outstanding opportunities for excellence with impact, we will continue to develop and implement new ways of working smarter, devolving more decision-making and responsibility to research organisations and leaders of our major investments. The ESRC will continue to operate as a lean and tightly run organisation with low staffing numbers and careful financial management. We have already streamlined over the last year our senior management team and internal directorate structure, reducing our Directorates from three to two.

We also have established this year a joint Professional Services Unit with AHRC and EPSRC, the two other 'non-institute' Councils, to combine our strategic support in HR, finance and IT/IS and will realise continued economies of scale over the next two-three years for this area of our activity. We have in place a process of regular internal review involving all of our staff to identify opportunities for streamlining and efficiency in relation to activities and processes that do not add value. We will also continue to argue for greater earned autonomy as an organisation with a proven track record of good internal governance thus allowing us to reduce the burden of frequent reporting and data collection.

One of the principal changes that we put in motion at the start of the current spending review period was to achieve improvements in the efficiency of the science funding system by working with Research Organisations (ROs) to manage demand. This was intended to reduce both time and cost for the community in terms of preparing applications and carrying out peer review and also to improve our success rates; we have seen a 41 per cent reduction in application numbers since the introduction of measures in June 2011, resulting in an increase in success rates from 14 per cent to 31 per cent, and a 38 per cent reduction in the requests we make for peer review.

RCUK has worked hard to identify and implement efficiency savings through the RCUK Efficiency Programme 2011-15. Recognising the continued need for efficiencies, this programme will be extended into

the 15/16 SR period, building on projected savings of over £400M. Based on draft projections, extending Wakeham savings into 2015/16 will generate over £100M. Councils are also working together to harmonise processes, encouraging efficiencies in their funded resources, for example, through collective approaches to asset sharing in the Research Organisation sector, and identifying synergies for closer working and greater efficiency, allowing the Councils to continue to deliver 'excellence with impact' in the face of reduced budgets. We will contribute fully to all RCUK initiatives designed to achieve greater operational efficiency, including implementing those recommendations from the Triennial Review of the Research Councils that are designed to achieve this objective.

In order to deliver further efficiencies across our portfolio, we will:

- Empower ROs to develop and respond to opportunities for knowledge exchange through the implementation of Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs). By giving ROs the opportunity to develop bespoke, local partnerships, IAAs will increase the likelihood of impact, whilst reducing the level of central administration required to support knowledge exchange.
- Continue to work closely with ROs to reduce the number of lower quality applications that we receive and to further increase scheme success rates, if necessary by the introduction of additional measures.
- Review our existing Committee structure, implementing measures to streamline our governance arrangements whilst retaining robust arrangements for advice and strategic decision making.
- Continue to refine and streamline our approach to grant processing, working in tandem with our sister Research Councils to deliver increased efficiency.
- Deliver a harmonised system to capture evidence of Research Outcomes, in partnership with all Research Councils.
- Implement recommendations arising from the Triennial Review and BIS Strategic Review, ensuring greater consistency across Research Councils.
- Develop further our use of strategic evaluation to ensure that we are better able to learn lessons from existing and previous initiatives to inform future development. ■

Supporting Multidisciplinary Research

ESRC supports and encourages multidisciplinary research through all funding routes from grants and fellowships, and much ESRC-funded research is undertaken by cross-disciplinary research teams, either within or beyond the social sciences. We recognise that novel, multidisciplinary approaches are needed to solve many, if not all, of the big research challenges over the next ten to 20 years, and are committed to working closely with our sister Research Councils to support research that will address these challenges head-on, whilst facilitating greater efficiency in working practices by funding seamlessly across traditional Research Council boundaries.

Research Councils work collectively to support multidisciplinary research through cross-Council initiatives and through formal cross council programmes – where joint development of new strategies, larger scale investment, and new decision-making frameworks may be needed. In response mode and through the cross council funding agreement (CCFA) at an individual grant level, mechanisms exist to ensure excellent research which needs cross- Research Council review and funding is supported. With RCUK and bilaterally, ESRC will further ensure that policies underpinning approaches to multidisciplinary research more widely are further considered, communicated and implemented smoothly, and that Council remits and strategies are more clearly articulated.

In 2015/16, we will:

- Continue to invest in the cross-Research Council activity, including, but not limited to the cross-Council themes, evolving our partnership with sister Research Councils by promoting ESRC engagement with a broader set of partnerships led by social science priorities than the formal cross-Council programmes themselves.
- As lead for the Global Uncertainties Programme, deliver changes to the way we organise and run this theme, informed by the recommendations from the recent independent evaluation and learning from other cross-Council themes, including Living with Environmental Change (LWEC), streamlining the administration of the programme and focussing on core priorities for delivery.
- Develop greater capacity for cross-disciplinary research through increasing levels of collaboration in the provision of doctoral training across Research Council boundaries. ■

Enhancing Partnership Working and Impact

We are able to maximise the impact from our investments by engaging closely with the users of our research, through our commitment to knowledge exchange, our proven ability to work in partnership with a range of organisations and our effective strategy for communications and public engagement. We are well-placed to address issues of national importance in collaboration with a range of government, business and civil society organisations and we will continue to engage in joint funding of research, particularly where there are opportunities for cross-sector collaboration. We communicate our findings widely using a range of mechanisms, including maintaining an active presence on several social media platforms.

Our partnerships include co-funding of research and people exchange with public, private and civil society bodies; joint initiatives with the other research councils, funding councils and the TSB; work with our academic community, ROs and learned societies; and promotion of our research to the public. Partnerships are so central to our work that our standard investment model is collaboration and agile co-funding through our Venture mechanism.

As we extend our collaborations with policy, business and civil society organisations we will continue to be innovative in our support for knowledge exchange and impact. We have a strong track record in this area and we will maintain our commitments. In 2015/16, we will:

- Emphasise impact as part of all research projects, from application to communication, monitoring and support during and after research activities, and post-award data collection and evaluation, with a maintained focus on Pathways to Impact as our principal funding route for impact-related activity.
- Deliver a wide-ranging programme of knowledge exchange activity to create impact from existing and recent investments around our three key priorities, supported by the shift to Impact Acceleration Accounts.
- Maximise the impact from Understanding Society, our birth cohort studies and other social science datasets through targeted research and training opportunities.
- Ensure widespread use of our UK data infrastructure. We will direct a proportion of our research and training awards towards the use of existing national datasets to create opportunities for researchers to realise the analytical potential of these resources. We will be reviewing our

mechanisms (Navigators, Impact Fellows, placements and internships) to ensure we have in place the best instruments to exploit our data infrastructure.

- Work with our RCUK partners to develop a common approach to International PhD Partnering and international Centre partnerships. Using the opportunity of the Newton Fund, we will support the development of an international cohort of early career researchers with the skills, links and contacts to operate in the global research environment, fostering the development of long-term international research collaborations on issues of global concern and with strong potential for international impact, and will facilitate partnerships between UK centres of excellence and existing and emerging centres of excellence overseas.
- Continue to explore new ways to promote the impact of social science research to users of research and the public, particularly through activities to celebrate our 50th anniversary in 2015, through our annual Festival of Social Science, and through the use of innovative and engaging mechanisms such as our photographic competition, annual Impact Prize and social media. ■

Annex 1: Financial Table

Income and Expenditure (£m)			
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Programme Near Cash Resource			
Responsive Research	38.3	43.9	44.1
Strategic and Collaborative Research	52.5	50.8	51.2
Methods and Infrastructure – Resource	10.5	6.4	7.0
Training and Skills	52.7	54.9	51.6
Other Programme and International	8.2	9.4	10.0
Knowledge Exchange	7.7	6.9	8.5
Gross Expenditure	169.9	172.3	172.4
Income	17.2	19.0	19.2
Net Programme Near Cash Resource	152.7	153.3	153.2
Capital Expenditure	47.1	56.7	25.0
Administration Near Cash Expenditure	3.4	3.3	3.3

