WELCOME TO Britain in 2008, the second of the Economic and Social Research Council’s annual looks at the UK and its place in the world. In the ever more complex global society of which the UK is a part we need to be able to base decisions and understanding on the best available evidence. Britain in 2008 provides the facts on contemporary concerns ranging from religion to the emergence of China as a world power.

The following pages draw upon the work of the UK’s top social scientists, many supported by the ESRC. Working individually or as members of national or, increasingly, international teams they bring new insights to many of the critical issues facing the UK and beyond. These insights have an important role in helping to ensure that Britain is the country we want it to be in future years, with a successful economy, a healthy population, a sustainable environment and an education system that provides opportunities for all.

Some of the work we describe here illuminates very specific current concerns. One is the need to ensure that the 2012 Olympics provide continuing benefits to the people of East London. Another, in a very different field, is work designed to solve employers’ worries about the poor mathematical skills of their staff.

But often the messages are of wider concern. For example, the fascinating question of why there is so little envy of the growing numbers of very wealthy people in British society.

An even broader issue for the UK, and other countries around the world, is ageing, a social, financial, commercial and medical issue on which health providers, government departments, and a wide range of industries from banks to house builders and appliance makers need evidence.

In addition, the social sciences look at important but less tangible concerns. One is the complex range of ways in which we think about who we are. The deceptively simple term ‘identity’ is often used to describe this complex social question. As we explain here, it encompasses and affects people’s religious choices, their ethnicity, their tastes and their actions.

ESRC’s research also casts a bright light on British politics and society. Research we explore here suggests that while people across the UK share common values, they are not likely to be satisfied with the amount of devolution accorded to them at present. The only certainty is that there will be pressure for more change and that it will come from England as well as the other nations of the UK.

Evidence from social science is also vital if we are to make sure Britain profits from today’s vast growth in human knowledge. We are finding out how the UK’s expanding medical databases can be used, in an ethical way and with public support, to advance health research, how advances in neuroscience can inform classroom teaching, and how findings in economics or management can lead to better-run governments and companies.

So the social sciences do more than provide a picture of the world we live in. They also point to ways of improving it.

We hope you enjoy Britain in 2008 and we welcome your response via the editor at britain@esrc.ac.uk
INSIDE BRITAIN IN 2008

ENVIRONMENT
9 FEATURE The UK’s food
Our changing attitudes to food
(see Cover Stories)
12 OPINION Plane stupidity?
Giving up flying
13 THE LOWDOWN Climate change
NEWS
14 Valuing the Arc
15 Extreme weather
16 Waste management
16 Planning for a land with a changing climate
17 Energy efficient social housing
18 Energising communities
19 THE LOWDOWN Cloned meat
20 OPINION Climate change policy
Three critical questions

SCIENCE
21 FEATURE Genetic databases
Are genetic databases good for us? (see Cover Stories)
24 OPINION Neuroscience and education
How learning occurs
25 THE LOWDOWN Stem cell research
NEWS
26 The future of ageing research
27 Is ethical controversy costing lives?
28 The colour of our skins
30 The human zoo
30 Sperm donors
31 OPINION Why social science?
How research is essential
32 THE LOWDOWN Astronomy

WORLD
33 FEATURE China – the rising power
China’s phenomenal economic progress
36 OPINION Science and poverty
Sustainable pathways to development

NEWS
37 Freedom fries
38 The waste of the world
39 Youth poverty across Europe
40 Golden years
41 Migrant workers
42 OPINION Iraq – four years on
What went wrong and what did we learn?

POLITICS, RELIGION AND IDENTITY
43 FEATURE Religion in British society
‘Fuzzy fidelity’ is undermining the churches
46 OPINION FEATURE Brown, Britishness and devolution
The state of the union
NEWS
49 Brits, terrorism and the telly
50 The ideal community
50 British attitudes to race
52 Anti-war activism
53 An image of soldiers
54 Civil liberties or civil liabilities?
55 OPINION Atheism
Are we a nation of non-believers?
(see Cover Stories)

ECONOMY
67 FEATURE Social enterprise
Businesses delivering lasting social and environmental change
70 OPINION Britain’s tax system
The agenda of the Mirrlees review
NEWS
71 Is distance dying at last?
72 Private equity, public gain
73 Banking on housing
74 Digital TV
74 Inequality trends
76 OPINION Growing inequality
Do people know what is going on?
77 THE LOWDOWN
Mechanism design

BRITAIN AT A GLANCE
56 From our growing and ageing population to spending, happiness, health and education
Who we are
Where we live
Home and family
Work
Income and spending
Happiness
Health
Education
Crime
Economy

(Top) Farmers and producers are facing pressure to restore trust in the food they sell as well as to encourage healthier eating – page 9.
(Above) – China’s phenomenal economic progress has been the big story of recent years – page 33.
LIFESTYLES
79 FEATURE Working for baby
   Why is motherhood such hard work?
82 OPINION Problem internet gambling
   How common is it and who can help the victims?
NEWS
83 Do fats make you fat?
84 Living apart together
85 Men’s housework could reduce divorce rates
86 Living together, but planning to marry
88 Life chances
89 Delayed motherhood
89 Naming children of mixed heritage
90 Parents’ income and kids’ outcomes
91 OPINION The 2012 Olympic Games
   Sports, families and children – the Olympic promise

PUBLIC SERVICES
92 FEATURE Radical changes in the NHS
   60 years in the life of the National Health Service
95 OPINION Social housing in the 21st century
   Four key issues that need urgent attention
NEWS
96 Tuition fees and bursaries in England
97 Is matron the best weapon against MRSA?
98 Care for the learning disabled
99 Reducing crime by targeting prolific offenders
100 NHS dentistry: the power of incentives
100 Segregation in schools
100 Can NHS pay regulation kill?
102 OPINION British transport policy
   Problem areas that have not been addressed

BUSINESS AND WORK
103 FEATURE In search of Britain’s knowledge economy
   Britain’s productivity record
106 OPINION Management thinking
   World-class standards at UK business schools
NEWS
107 Technical know-how in the workplace
108 Policymaking in the knowledge economy
109 The gender pay gap
110 When mergers go wrong
110 Risk management
110 Buying electricity: where consumers go wrong
112 Dreaming up a business
112 Strategy workshops
113 OPINION Work skills
   Where are we in the skills league?

COVER STORIES
9 THE UK’S CHANGING ATTITUDES TO FOOD
   The British have always liked their food, but now they want to know about it before they eat it – where it comes from, how it is produced and how it has been traded.
21 ARE GENETIC DATABASES GOOD FOR US?
   Can medical records make a healthier Britain? Several innovations are needed if the UK is to make the most of its strong market position in medical data linkage.
55 ATHEISM – ARE WE A NATION OF NON-BELIEVERS?
   The recent flurry of books on atheism suggests a new militancy, yet the percentage of people identifying themselves as atheists in Britain remains low at around eight per cent.