Green Budget
Which way now to increase revenues and cut spending?

Scotland: Informing the referendum debate
Re-igniting growth: The investment solution
Voices: EU gamble or commitment to change?
Welcome

to the Spring issue of Society Now, the ESRC’s regular magazine which showcases the impact of the social science we fund.

This issue, as the Chancellor delivers his 2013 Budget, the IFS predicts where he will look in future to increase revenues and cut spending.

Work comes under the spotlight of the 2011 Workplace Employee Relations Survey which finds that employee satisfaction and wellbeing at work have increased despite the difficult economic climate of recent years.

Academics offer their views on why children who are eligible for free school meals don’t take them, and why the behaviour of patients is crucial to early diagnosis of cancer. Also, how the public can help scientists by acting as early warning systems for conservation challenges.

And ESRC experts look at the research behind the referendum on Scottish independence and the motivations behind the Prime Minister’s promised referendum on EU membership.

I hope you find the magazine enjoyable and informative. Please do email us with your feedback or ideas for content.

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Breastfeeding has positive effects for children, mothers and employers, according to a major study by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER). Breastfeeding could even help reduce social inequalities as it causes children to do better academically.

Britain has one of the world’s lowest rates of breastfeeding with less than one in three babies exclusively breastfed for the first four months of life. Breastfeeding is also more likely among better educated women from higher socio-economic groups.

As breastfeeding is more likely to be practised by mothers whose characteristics (older, more educated and better-off) favour more positive outcomes for their children, it has not been clear whether the relationship between breastfed and better outcomes is causal (breastfeeding causes children to do better) or whether mothers who breastfeed are likely to have more successful children anyway.

Using state-of-the-art statistical techniques, ISER researchers prove that breastfeeding exclusively for four weeks is responsible for significant positive effects on children’s cognitive development in early childhood and on educational achievements up to their teenage years. Exclusive breastfeeding also affects children’s cognitive development, significantly reducing the probability they will develop emotional and behavioural problems up to age seven. Mothers’ wellbeing is positively affected too, possibly as a consequence of the beneficial effects of breastfeeding on various aspects of child cognitive and emotional development.

Research shows that hospital-based breastfeeding support policies, such as the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative – implemented in the UK since the early 1990s – can increase breastfeeding initiation and exclusive breastfeeding for a few weeks. Women giving birth in hospitals that participated in the Baby Friendly Initiative were up to 15 percentage points more likely to initiate breastfeeding and between eight and nine percentage points more likely to breastfeed exclusively at four and eight weeks than comparable mothers giving birth in non-participating hospitals. Mothers from low-income families and with low levels of education are more responsive to the program than highly educated mothers in more affluent families. This implies that hospital-based policies could reduce early socio-economic inequalities.

There are also benefits for employers. “Women whose employers provide breastfeeding facilities return to work earlier than similar women who have no access to these facilities – although this finding applies only to women with higher levels of education,” said researcher Dr Emilia Del Bono. Non-breastfeeding mothers may also be absent from work more often than breastfeeding mothers because their babies suffer more illnesses.

Given the overwhelming evidence in favour of breastfeeding, researchers urge greater support from government. For example, support from the Health Select Committee is crucial to change cultural barriers that discourage more widespread breastfeeding in the UK.
IN BRIEF

HEALTHIER DIAGNOSIS
Diagnosis is central to the practice of medicine. Diagnosis is a social and medical affair and the costs and consequences of diagnosis affect patients, practitioners, healthcare institutions and policymakers. A series of five seminars will bring academics together with all these groups to discuss diagnostic technologies, policies and practice, as well as practitioner and patient experiences of diagnosis.
ESRC grant number: ES/J022497/1

MENTAL IMAGERY
Adults use mental imagery all the time in daily life, for example, when visualising how to fit a car into a parking space. Researchers aim to establish how children’s mental imagery develops and when children use mental imagery comparable to adults. Ultimately, these findings can be used in an educational setting to aid day-to-day thinking and remembering.
ESRC grant number: ES/J003479/2

JOHN LEWIS LESSONS
The ‘John Lewis Model’ is advocated by some as a possible answer to failures in the prevailing model of what is increasingly termed ‘irresponsible capitalism’. Researchers will work within John Lewis and Waitrose to identify the precise elements of this model and how it works in practice. They will also examine the transferability of the model to other public and private organisations.
ESRC grant number: ES/K000748/1

Politicians fail to win young people’s vote

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE not convinced that politicians have a genuine desire to listen to their concerns and champion their interests, according to a nationwide project, Young people and politics in Britain. Researchers Professor Matt Henn and Nick Foard of Nottingham Trent University argue that this disenchantment with MPs and formal politics is a major concern: “Evidence suggests that either voting or non-voting become ingrained habits,” says Professor Henn. “If young people fail to see the point in voting then this habit may continue as they grow older, with clear implications for our democratic processes.”

Despite attempts by governments to address the problem of young people’s attitudes towards politics, less than half of young people (44 per cent) voted in the last general election. Exploring the reasons for this apparent withdrawal from the democratic process, researchers surveyed 1,024 18-year-olds who were eligible to vote for the first time in 2010. Findings show that only 17 per cent of young people have a positive view of political parties and MPs, while two-thirds see past and present governments as dishonest and untrustworthy.

Only 15 per cent said the government treated young people fairly and only 13 per cent considered there was any opportunity for them to influence the political scene. “Far from being apathetic and apolitical, the majority (63 per cent) of young people said they were interested in political matters,” Professor Henn points out. “Yet their first experience of a general election in 2010 left many feeling deeply frustrated. Young people clearly consider the political system as closed, and we have uncovered a considerable aversion to formal, professional politics which is just as deep now as it was when first measured a decade ago.”

One clear problem is that with limited election campaigning resources, politicians concentrate on those most likely to vote – older groups in the population. “If young people are not acknowledged by politicians then they have no incentive to vote,” explains co-researcher Foard. “This leads to a vicious circle which must be broken. Finding ways to encourage young people to engage with politics isn’t just about making it easier to vote, it’s about changing political culture too; we need parties and politicians to actively listen to young people and champion their concerns, not just in the run up to an election, but beyond. Otherwise today’s voters might be replaced by a future generation that loses faith in the democratic process altogether.”

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High returns from migration

MIGRANTS WHO RETURN to China with western education or working experience are bringing benefits to local Chinese firms and Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) operating in China. Researchers examined data from the Administrative Committee of Zhonghuancun Science Park, the largest science park in China, and found that firms led by Chinese return migrants are more innovative than those without return migrants. In addition, returnee migrants act as a new channel for international knowledge diffusion and help to reduce barriers to the absorption of external knowledge. Government agencies, the study suggests, could provide institutional support to maximise the advantages of return migrants and help build bridges between returnee firms and local non-returnee firms.

Training boosts memory

SCHOOL CHILDREN WITH poor working memory often struggle to achieve academically. Poor working memory creates difficulty for children in following instructions, learning new skills and even keeping up with the normal pace of classroom activities. But new research suggests that teachers may soon be able to deliver memory training that can help reduce the problems associated with poor working memory.

Children with poor working memory have a very high risk – over 80 per cent – of poor attainment in reading, writing or both, explains researcher Professor Susan Gathercole. In recent years, significant advances have been made in understanding how to identify these children and support them in the classroom. Recent studies, for example, show that working memory skills can improve dramatically when children follow a programme of intensive working memory training.

Researchers investigated whether children’s progress in the school curriculum could be improved by a computer programme boosting working memory delivered by teachers to their pupils. Field trials at a primary and middle school as well as secondary technology college suggest positive effects of training on younger children. For example, low-performing children in year six had higher SATs scores in both English and maths compared with those who did not undergo training.

Professor Gathercole concludes: “Primary schools can implement memory training that helps children alleviate their problems and improve educationally-relevant measures of academic abilities.”

ESRC grant number: RES-238-25-0027

Charities Overseas

More than 11,000 charities work internationally. Donations from the public to charities working overseas have grown considerably over the last 30 years. Researchers aim for the first time to provide an overview of the charitable connections between the UK and overseas including information on where UK registered charities work overseas and how many of these are involved in development and relief.

ESRC grant number: ES/K00137X/1

MORALS OF CHOICE

School choice is a hot topic in Britain. Debates have raged over the extent to which parents have a right to buy educational advantage for their children and to avoid local secondary schools in search of a ‘better’ education elsewhere. Researchers have used the 2012 British Social Attitudes survey to explore what the public really think about schooling decisions.

ESRC grant number: ES/H033831/2
**OBESITY PREVENTION**

Food marketing has been associated with growing rates of obesity. A new study will capture existing knowledge on food marketing and provide a better understanding of the constraints involved in regulating food marketing to children. Researchers aim to organise a conference in London to focus on how the UK could comply fully with the World Health Organisation Recommendations on food marketing to children.

ESRC grant number: ES/J020761/1

**REFRAMING RESOLUTION**

The resolution of individual employment disputes is a crucial issue for policymakers and practitioners in the UK. A new seminar series brings together, for the first time, cutting edge research from leading centres of academic research in this area, practitioners and policymakers to share knowledge and identify innovative approaches to conflict management and resolution.

ESRC grant number: ES/J022767/1

**FOOD RIGHTS AND RIOTS**

The challenge of world hunger is not only about growing more food but also ensuring access to it. How can governments be made more accountable for ensuring access to food? To address this question, researchers will focus on the ‘food crisis’ since 2007, examining right-to-food movements and riots over food prices in Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique.

ESRC grant number: ES/J018317/1

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**Outcomes of One Child Policy**

OLDER, UNMARRIED MEN in China’s rural Guizhou province express a profound sense of failure, according to research into the impact of high sex ratios in urban and rural China.

There are currently 120 male births for every 100 female births in China and research from the Institute for Global Health, University College London finds an even higher adult sex ratio in parts of rural China, partly because of the high sex ratio at birth and partly because of hugely disproportionate out-migration of women from rural areas to the cities.

Evidence suggests that by 2020 there will be over 20 million more men than women of marriageable age in China. Two-thirds of Chinese are aware of the high sex ratio and believe it has a negative impact on society particularly in terms of higher levels of crime, aggression and prostitution.

But interviews with 45 older, unmarried men from a rural area of Guizhou Province suggest that high sex ratios have left the majority of them feeling aimless, hopeless, sad, angry, lonely and marginalised in society.

The relaxation of China’s one-child policy, especially in rural areas, could have some impact on sex ratios. Son preference has also weakened considerably in recent years. But, warn researchers, any decline in the sex ratio will not filter through to the reproductive age group for another two decades and it will be several decades before the sex ratio at birth in China could fall within normal limits.

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**Transforming project management**

MANAGEMENT TOOLSETS CREATED as part of the ESRC’s TRANSFORMATION Project are helping public, private and third sector organisations improve their change and project management performance.

Working with eight organisations from all sectors including Warwickshire Police and Associated British Foods plc, researchers from Aston Business School have created two new and innovative products: the Receptivity for Change Toolset and the Actor Analysis Toolset. These toolsets have already successfully improved management practice in specific projects identified by partners.

“We know the toolsets work because of our rigorous development and testing process,” says researcher Dr Michael Butler. “This is the unique benefit of The TRANSFORMATION Toolsets having emerged from a research-led university which values practitioner insight.”

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Students unclear on costs and benefits of university

SCHOOL STUDENTS HAVE significant gaps in their basic knowledge about the costs and benefits of staying in education and going to university, according to researchers from the University of Surrey and the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP). But a fairly light-touch information campaign in schools can reverse some of these negative effects, says professor Sandra McNally.

Researchers set out to discover what school pupils know about the costs and benefits of going to university and the potential impact of an ‘information campaign’ on their knowledge and aspirations. They surveyed around 12,000 year ten pupils (14-15 year olds) in 54 London schools during the 2010-11 academic year.

The state of knowledge in participating schools was poor, say researchers. Fewer than half of students knew that fees are paid after university and once they had a job. One in five students did not realise that staying longer in education increases the probability of finding a job. And many students did not know that expected earnings vary depending on the subject they study and the university they attend.

The study reveals that media reporting and light-touch information campaigns can have quite sizeable short-term effects, although often in opposite directions. “Our information campaign led students to think that staying in education would be affordable (loan conditions and grants were carefully explained) whereas media reporting led students to think that going to university would be ‘too expensive’,” Professor McNally points out.

The perception that university was too expensive was significantly higher in comprehensive schools (compared with independent and selective state schools) and among children eligible for free school meals. “If these perceptions influence effort at school or behaviour post-16, this will increase socio-economic inequality in the future,” she explains. “An information campaign like the one used in this project can be effective and low cost but policy attention should focus on the incentives that schools have to invest time and effort in providing careers information as well as resources to ensure that information is conveyed in an appropriate way.”

Further details on the study can be found at: www.whats4.me.uk

Aiding people with Autism Spectrum Disorder

LIFE’S DAILY CHALLENGES could be slightly easier for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) following new research. ‘Prospective memory’ is the ability to remember to carry out actions that one plans to do. To remember to turn the bath taps off before the bath overflows, to remember to attend an appointment, and to remember to give someone a message are all examples of prospective memory, and serve to highlight how important this ability is for everyday life.

Those with autism have particular limitations in prospective memory, according to recent studies. “But we found that if a cue is provided to signal that an action should be carried out in the near future, people with ASD were actually slightly more likely than comparison participants to remember to carry out their plan subsequently,” says researcher Dr David Williams.

“This suggests that people with autism can be helped with everyday limitations in prospective memory through training in the effective use of diaries and other external aids that can serve as a cue to direct them to carry out their plan in the near future.”

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Farmers fail to grasp methane message

ALTHOUGH GLOBAL WARMING is thought to be caused by energy production, agriculture is also a key component. In 2009, agriculture accounted for about nine per cent of the UK’s greenhouse gas emissions, of which just over a third came from methane produced by cows and sheep.

But research by Dr Ann Bruce of the ESRC Centre for Social and Economic Research on Innovation in Genomics (Innogen) shows that UK farmers find it hard to accept that this methane is a major contributor to global warming. Interviews with more than 40 beef and cattle farmers suggest that they view methane as a natural part of farming sheep and cattle. “They did not find figures for methane emissions, particularly from grass-fed animals, to be credible and are therefore unlikely to be receptive to messages urging reductions in methane,” says Dr Bruce.

The study aimed to discover whether UK sheep and beef cattle farmers would adopt technologies to reduce methane emissions. Farmers expressed varied responses to the idea. Some specialist beef farmers were already using some technologies and were amenable to others, but they justified this on the basis of improved production efficiency rather than methane reduction. Some farmers described themselves as feeling helpless to reduce methane emissions as they feared technologies could only have a small impact.

“The diversity of responses suggests that to reduce methane emissions, policy action needs to be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of farming communities in different contexts,” Dr Bruce concludes.

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Re-regulation not de-regulation required

SMALL FIRMS WANT better regulation not necessarily less regulation, according to a new study. Ask any small business manager what they think about regulation and invariably they say there should be less of it, says researcher Professor Simon Down. But his in-depth study of a dozen small businesses over three years reveals that small firms ‘experience’ of regulation is less clear cut. In reality, most business owners see the need for and benefits of regulation.

“Much of the statistical-survey-based received wisdom suggests that the regulatory burden for small firms is too high,” Professor Down points out. “Yet our findings suggest that while some burdens exist and current policy initiatives to reshape the regulatory landscape in certain areas are welcome (particularly in aspects of employment law which our study shows to be overly burdensome and confrontational), broadly speaking regulation helps to create a positive environment for the development of growth-orientated small businesses. It is not experienced as overly constraining or burdensome.”

In fact, based on his study of small firms in the bio-processing, film and interactive media, environmental services and security sectors in the North East and East Midlands, Professor Down finds that it is government’s lack of enforcement of regulation which aggravates many small business owners most. For example, regulation aimed at raising standards in the security industry and removing ‘cowboy operators’ has, according to some owners, simply not been enforced. As a result, better quality and compliant firms have faced rising costs but gained no competitive advantage.

The study concludes that most regulations are experienced by small firms as everyday, routine and unproblematic. Moreover, regulation is both perceived and experienced as a positive benefit to business, particularly in growth-orientated firms. “Some firms feel that regulation not only helps them to inculcate best practice but can even help create business opportunities,” says Professor Down. “Regulation shouldn’t be seen only as a burden: it can be a core competency of a professionally managed business that adds real value. But it is important that government adopts clearer and better regulatory regimes in order to stimulate small business growth.”

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More male befrienders needed

VOLUNTEER BEFRIENDERS PROVIDE supportive, reliable relationships to individual children who face difficulties at home, in school or in the community. But less than a quarter of the UK’s volunteer child befrienders are currently men. The shortage of male befrienders means many boys in need of a strong male presence in their lives are missing out on the adult male companionship they would like, suggests a new study.

Researchers point out that girls, particularly from lone mother families, could also benefit from a male befriender. More than 75 per cent of children referred to befriending services come from lone mother households. If more male befrienders came forward it would provide welcome options for boys but also for girls.

First time fathers feel excluded

MANY FIRST TIME FATHERS continue to feel like a ‘spare part’ during their partner’s pregnancy, despite increasing recognition by antenatal and maternity healthcare services of the need to involve and engage men throughout pregnancy.

But, interestingly, a small study of first time fathers aged 22-58 found that although men were at times frustrated by their lack of involvement, most participants felt this was entirely appropriate because antenatal and postnatal appointments were primarily about looking after the health and wellbeing of their partner and child.

“Men tended to enter into the process of becoming a father having already determined that they were less important, and that it would be wrong, and inappropriate, for them to try and make healthcare consultations ‘about them’,” explains researcher Dr Jonathan Ives. “By putting aside their own concerns, not raising their own thoughts and fears, and adopting a deferential and supporting role, men felt they were doing the right thing in terms of being ‘good men’ and ‘good partners’.

The study points out that some experiences with health services might re-inforce the perceived appropriateness of this ‘deferential role’ and validate the idea for men that they were less important. Significantly, Dr Ives points out, “routine and apparently innocuous actions by healthcare staff (like pulling a curtain) can be interpreted by men as exclusionary practices because these actions fit their expectations and the role that they feel is morally appropriate.”

Such insight into men’s feeling of exclusion could be usefully incorporated into the teaching of midwives and health visitors, Dr Ives suggests.

IN BRIEF

COPING WITH GRIEF

Everybody will face bereavement at some stage but for some people, this can be a more difficult process. Researchers will examine how factors such as age, gender, family support, employment and religion affect how people cope with bereavement. The study aims to learn more about bereavement, mental health, complicated grief, and longer term outcomes for people who have lost a loved one.

ESRC grant number: ES/K00428X/1

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Western approaches to conflict management have failed to gain support in post-Soviet Central Asia. A new study aims to explain the reasons for, and the consequences of, this failure. Researchers will contrast Western approaches with those promoted by Russia and China, both bilaterally and through regional organisations, and explore the effects of these rising powers on national conflict management strategies.

ESRC grant number: ES/J013056/1

PATHWAYS TO HEALTH

The PATHWAYS project aims to identify pathways that link socio-demographic circumstances and biological disadvantage to adult health, and parental family and socio-economic circumstances to infant mortality. The 2.5-year project will place particular emphasis on the mediating factors that lie on these pathways. PATHWAYS is based at the University of Cambridge and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

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EMPLOYEES’ SATISFACTION AND wellbeing at work has increased despite the difficult economic climate of recent years, according to the initial analysis of the 2011 Workplace Employee Relations Survey. Comparing employee data from 2011 with that for 2004, employees’ satisfaction with most aspects of their jobs increased during that period. The exception was satisfaction with job security which declined. Yet in 90 per cent of workplaces their managers reported that the recession had adversely affected the workplace, and in most cases they had responded with changes in employment practices.

The increase in satisfaction and wellbeing levels is accompanied by changes in management practices, increases in job control for employees, and greater organisational commitment.

“There was a fall in the level of those who were satisfied or very satisfied with their job security.”

Co-funded by the ESRC, the 2011 Workplace Employee Relations Study (WERS) is the sixth in the WERS series. In workplaces with five or more employees around 2,700 workplace managers and 1,000 employee representatives were interviewed and over 20,000 employees completed questionnaires. Previous surveys were conducted in 1980, 1984, 1990, 1998 and 2004.

The managerial respondents were asked whether the recession had affected their workplace ‘a great deal’, ‘quite a lot’, ‘a moderate amount’, ‘just a little’ or had had ‘no adverse effect’ on their workplace. Almost half (47 per cent) of workplace managers said their workplace had been adversely affected ‘A great deal’ or ‘Quite a lot’. But there was diversity in the experiences of both industries and workplaces within industries. For example, the recession has had its most extensive effects in Construction, Transport and Communication, Financial Services and the Public Sector, and even in industries where the impact was less widespread, such as Utilities, there were still many workplaces that were strongly affected by the recession.

Three-quarters (76 per cent) of workplaces changed some aspect of their staffing practices in response to the recession, action that directly affected the wages, hours or job security of their workers. Around two-fifths of all workplaces instituted a wage freeze or a wage cut, around three in ten put a hold on filling vacant posts and around one quarter re-organised work among existing staff. Whilst such measures are not welcomed by workers, they may have helped avert even worse outcomes as only 14 per cent of workplaces made compulsory redundancies and just seven per cent made voluntary redundancies. A greater proportion of public than private sector workplaces have taken such action. The only actions that were more common among private sector workplaces were compulsory redundancies and reductions in basic hours.

Despite the recession, employers’ and employees’ perceptions of the climate of employment relations at the workplace had not deteriorated since 2004 and employees’ commitment to their organisation actually increased.

Satisfaction with a range of aspects of employees’ jobs increased slightly with one exception as there was a fall in the level of those who were satisfied or very satisfied with their job security, from 64 per cent to 59 per cent. The pattern for wellbeing mirrors that for job satisfaction. The proportion of those who either never or occasionally felt tense, worried or uneasy because of their job in the weeks prior to the survey has increased between 2004 and 2011.

Initial investigation of the managerial practice that may lie behind the increasing employee commitment and satisfaction, suggests at least three factors. First, a greater proportion of managers are communicating more with employees, with an increase in those who are sharing financial information with their workforce and holding team briefings. Employees report that managers are good or very good at seeking their or their representatives’ views (52 per cent) but less of them (46 per cent) report that they are good or very good at responding to their suggestions. This suggests that two-way consultation may not be the norm. Nonetheless both figures have increased since 2004.

Second, the proportion of workers receiving off-the-job training in workplaces has increased. In 41 per cent of workplaces training was given to 80 per cent or more of employees in the largest occupational group in 2011, compared with a figure of 35 per cent in 2004. The proportion
of workplaces providing induction training also increased to 82 per cent by 2011, from 78 per cent in 2004. Public sector and unionised workplaces were more likely to provide training than others.

Third, the proportion of workers with high levels of autonomy of workers has increased. The largest increase is in employees who say they have control over their start and finish times and the tasks to be done, but these remain the areas where the fewest employees have discretion. The areas of most autonomy are how tasks are done and the order.

In contrast, the proportion of employees with very high job demands has increased. More employees reported that their job requires them to work very hard: 27 per cent strongly agreed in 2004 and 34 per cent strongly agreed in 2011 to the statement 'My job requires me to work very hard'. This is despite the fact that there has been no widespread increase in hours worked. Work intensity appears to be increasing but hours not.

Any adverse effects of the increased job demands on satisfaction and wellbeing is counteracted to some extent by the increase in autonomy. Moreover, there was also no significant change in the proportion who strongly agree that they never had enough time to get their work done.

Whilst commitment and satisfaction may have increased, there is evidence some employees were affected by the recession. Sixty-one per cent of employees had suffered a change as a result of the recession such as having their wages frozen or workload increased. Satisfaction with pay, with job security and wellbeing levels were lower in workplaces most strongly affected by the recession.

Employees in workplaces that cut back on training in the recession were less satisfied with training than other workplaces (31 per cent compared with 36 per cent). A reduction in training was a response to the recession in 16 per cent of workplaces but only the sixth most popular response.

The level of demands on employees did not differ between those workplaces that had been most adversely affected by the recession. Nor did the level of autonomy. But the proportion of those who never had enough time to get their work done was higher in those workplaces most strongly affected by the recession. Overall, people appear to be working harder, and are more likely to feel pressured in recession-hit workplaces.

Stephen Wood is Professor of Management, University of Leicester and co-author of the 2011 WERS report.
Adequate infrastructure is critical to the performance of any economy. Investing in the right projects will have the short-term impact of giving work to domestic private companies who will create jobs. It will also have the long-term benefit of relieving bottlenecks that may impede private sector activity that will in turn underpin long-term economic growth.

Professor David Newbery of the University of Cambridge says the issue is how to identify the projects and how to finance them given the current constraints of fiscal austerity. “The projects which seem most likely to stimulate private sector activity are those that have a high labour content, and are domestic resource-intensive,” he says.

In the current recessionary environment the public sector should ensure it maintains or increases investment in projects that have a high benefit-cost ratio (BCR), he says. “That means there is more need to commit to investments even if they have a delay before expenditure can be fully committed, while still concentrating on more ‘shovel-ready’ projects that have already been appraised and passed the BCR test.”

On that basis projects that are capital-intensive and dependent on imports, such as offshore wind farms, will do little to stimulate the economy while road improvements that reduce congestion score highly on all counts. “In general, transport projects generate additional spill-over benefits to private productivity, and have remarkably high benefit-cost ratios,” he says. “Infrastructure projects such as transport links require positive public action, if only to release the funds to commission the private sector to undertake them.”

Professor Newbery points out that only the public sector can commission such projects, so a failure to undertake them is “doubly damaging” and it gives the UK’s economic rivals an opportunity to lure business away. He warns politicians not to embrace what he calls “vanity projects” such as the ‘Boris Island’ third London airport or the High speed 2 (HS2) train line.

“The main thing is to switch the money away from politicians’ favourite schemes such as railways that can carry them back to their constituencies at high speed.” Both HS2 and the third airport are unlikely to deliver economic benefits until 2030, which will do little to aid recovery from the current downturn. “A third runway at Heathrow – clearly one of the better placed London airports for accessing the heartland of productive activity in the M4 corridor – should be a high priority.”

He says the Government must move beyond a one-year fiscal planning horizon and instead make long-term commitments to companies that would allow them to invest in skills and build up the scale needed to operate efficiently. “We need to start investing but we also need to say that we will do it better in future by having longer time horizons over which we will plan publicly financed infrastructure,” he says. “That would be nice to achieve in the long run but the beginning of a long journey is the first step.”

Professor Newbery says the debate over austerity is important because it gives an opportunity to establish a new framework to distinguish between economic stimuli that increase consumption and debt liabilities, and...
those that increase productive investment that adds assets to balance the liabilities issued.

“We have an unbalanced fiscal structure in the sense that we are spending too much on consumption relative to taxes,” he says. “The austerity has to fall on consumption but the whole budget ought to be reallocated towards investment and that aspect seems to be missing from the political debate and the public attention.”

He argues that changes to the way that projects are accounted for could help identify areas of under-investment. For instance, the road network remains an under-funded, under-supplied public monopoly even though transport taxes collect about nine times annual road expenditure – of which hardly any is used in expanding the network.

Professor Newbery regrets that insufficient investment is going into some more intangible investments. “What do we have a comparative advantage in? Higher education? What are we cutting like crazy? Higher education,” he says. “What should we be doing? Research and development, because the UK scores low by OECD standards. What are we cutting? Research.”

On the other hand infrastructure such as broadband internet is something that can be best provided by the private sector other than in specific areas such as provision of access for schools.

Similarly intrinsically profitable networks such as gas, electricity and water can deliver efficient investment under private ownership with well-designed incentive regulation.

“If we are asking what the Government should do, the answer is the things that only the Government can do and can finance,” he says. “That means R&D and higher education in considerable parts, and the road infrastructure which is not provided by the private sector except at complicated expense.”

Phil Thornton is Editor of Re-igniting Growth and lead consultant, Clarity Economics

This article first appeared in the ESRC’s report, Re-igniting Growth, published in January 2013. The full report is available to download at www.esrc.ac.uk/publications/esrc-research-publications/reigniting-growth.aspx
Food for thought

Angus Holford looks at the reasons why children entitled to free school meals in English schools do not take them and how this trend can be reversed

A poorer diet makes learning harder and further ingrains the educational disadvantage

Around 1.4 million children in England alone, from low-income households, or without a parent in full-time employment, are entitled to a Free School Meal (FSM) each school day. This entitlement is worth up to £450 per year, but at least 200,000 entitled children are not registered to receive them. And another 100,000 children who are registered do not take their FSM on any given day. Why?

FSMs are meant to ensure a minimum nutritional intake for children who would otherwise not receive it. Those not claiming their entitlement are likely to be from the most deprived, ‘hard-to-reach’ backgrounds, for whom this safety net should matter most. In many cases their FSM would be these pupils’ only substantial meal of the day.

A poorer diet makes learning harder and further ingrains the educational disadvantage observed in children from low-income households. Moreover, it typically costs parents around £400 per year to provide their child with a packed lunch. This is a substantial but unnecessary financial burden.

Maximising take-up should therefore play a key part in efforts to reduce educational inequalities. To do this, those already registered must be persuaded to claim their entitlement, and those who are not registered must be encouraged and enabled to do so.

Maximising registration is also hugely important in its own right: The Pupil Premium of £600 per year is paid to schools for each child registered for FSMs currently, or in the last six years. Targeting additional funding specifically at these children is the government’s leading strategy for tackling educational disadvantage. So schools – by failing to ensure all entitled children are registered for FSMs – are not securing these extra resources.

A major improvement could be made with a national reform to use benefits data to identify people entitled to FSMs and inform their parents, or better still register them automatically. At a more localised level, good-quality, well-targeted information is necessary to ensure parents know they can apply for FSMs, understand how to apply, and believe it worth applying.

The Pupil Premium has given schools and LEAs the impetus to provide this, but it is critical that the focus on Pupil Premium does not detract from efforts to ensure take-up among registered pupils. The combination of additional funding and improved nutrition for the poorest pupils will be much more effective at reducing educational disadvantage than either of these treatments alone.

My own research on peer effects on Free School Meals identifies the following strategies for raising participation and registration:

First, at least in primary schools, children not paying for schools meals should never be identifiable as such. For example, ‘payment’ for school meals can be made by cash in an envelope, which can be left empty if appropriate. But the numbers deterred from claiming FSMs are much smaller in schools with electronic, cashless systems payment. These systems clearly make parents much more confident that their child remains anonymous when claiming FSMs.

Second, many schools deter take-up by, for practical reasons, separating those taking school dinners and packed lunches. Children will be reluctant to take their FSM if it means sitting apart from their friends. Ensuring pupils from the same class can always eat together – even if this entails a heavily staggered lunch break – should remove this issue.

Third, it is evident that seeing more of one’s friends eating school meals (and especially paying for the privilege) sends a much more persuasive message about the benefits of eating a school lunch than anything teachers, caterers or the government can say.

These findings mean that targeting take-up among the better-off (unregistered) group would be effective at raising take-up of FSMs. One practical strategy would be to target a price reduction or universal entitlement at Reception or P1 classes only. This would get children used to school dinners early on, which is easier than changing an established routine, and also avoids ‘singling out’ those from low-income households.

Increasing registration for and take-up of FSMs will have substantial benefits in targeting both child health and educational inequalities. The overriding lessons here are to make it easy to register, to remove parents’ anxieties about stigma and to harness children’s friendship groups to make school meals an enjoyable, social experience.
Cancer survival rates are somewhat poorer in Britain compared to other comparable European countries. Differences in availability of treatments and clinical practice do exist between countries and this contributes to the differences in survival rates. But one part of the problem appears to be that people in Britain are being diagnosed at a later stage, when the disease has spread to other organs and cannot be completely surgically removed. Later stage diagnoses are therefore linked to poorer survival.

The causes of this problem are difficult to unpick, but it is likely that delay in diagnosis has a part to play. This could be related to delays in referrals by GPs, as well as to access to diagnostic tests – but the behaviour of patients is also important in the timeline. It may well be that the people of Britain are simply not going to see their GP in a timely manner.

A series of research studies has been commissioned by the government-led National Awareness and Early Diagnosis Initiative (NAEDI) to explore this issue. This research has shown that beyond a couple of well-known symptoms (eg, lumps, changes in a mole), the general population is largely unaware of the symptoms of cancer.

One issue is that many of the symptoms are ambiguous and could easily be ignored, or misinterpreted as being related to a more benign and self-limiting illness (eg, a persistent cough). This means that people are not sufficiently worried to warrant arranging a visit to their GP.

Interestingly, a recent international survey has shown that British people are more likely to cite not wanting to waste their doctor’s time as a reason for not going to their GP with a symptom, compared to people in other countries. This may reflect a more ‘stoical’ British stance, but could also point towards a slightly flawed GP-patient relationship inherent in our gatekeeper system. Other emotional barriers, such as fear and embarrassment, have also been highlighted as reasons for not visiting a GP in a survey that compared groups of people who either had or had not decided to go to their GP with a recent symptom.

This research is now being used as the basis to inform a number of interventions that encourage early help-seeking for various potential cancer symptoms. There have been national media and social marketing campaigns carried out under the ‘Be Clear on Cancer’ branding that have resulted in additional presentations in GP practices in the target areas.

An alternative approach targeting individuals on GP lists is also being trialled. One project has developed an information leaflet about gynaecological cancers. The leaflet comes directly from the GP through the post to the patient’s door and includes a message from the GP encouraging presentation, together with information that addresses symptom awareness and other common concerns such as fear and embarrassment.

There is also a ‘symptom checklist’ used as a patient activation and empowerment technique. It encourages monitoring of symptoms and provides a tool that can be taken to the GP as ‘evidence’ of the problem. This approach, which uses direct mailing endorsed by the GP, might produce a more powerful behavioural response compared to the more diffuse social marketing approach.

Early results indicate that the leaflet does increase knowledge and reduces perceived barriers to visiting the GP, and that it does not raise levels of anxiety in patients. A mail-out via ten GP practices in and around London has now taken place with anecdotal reports from GPs indicating a positive response. Anonymous data extraction from GP’s patient records will now be used to quantify the impact of the intervention.
More pain, less gain?

The Institute for Fiscal Studies Green Budget examines some of the many issues confronting Chancellor George Osborne as he presents his fourth Budget, discusses the available options and the fiscal choices to increase revenues, and predicts where the UK government may look for further spending cuts.

The UK will see more borrowing to take the strain until the next general election, more pain to come on spending and jobs, and potential tax rises after the election, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) Green Budget.

Published in early February, the IFS Green Budget, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, finds that as economic performance and forecasts have worsened the Chancellor has followed a dual strategy, allowing borrowing to increase substantially in this parliament while promising another dramatic dose of public spending cuts in the next parliament.

The Green Budget warns that current spending plans imply public service spending could be cut by a third on average across all unprotected Whitehall departments. But if defence equipment is added to the protected areas, spending in the remaining services would need to cut further, by around 35 per cent. Public sector jobs could be cut faster than implied by forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility. Over this parliament departments are planning to cut their paybills faster than other spending. If this were to continue at the same rate public sector employment could fall by 1.2 million by 2017-18, rather than 900,000 as forecast.

Avoiding such deep cuts to public services, whilst sticking to fiscal plans, would require substantial and additional cuts in social security spending; or further tax rises would need to be implemented. Historically, tax rises announced in the year after a general election have averaged £7.5 billion so in the context of the current fiscal situation, the IFS says that it would not be surprising to see further tax rises following the next election.

The Green Budget also shows that due to the weak economy the government will need to borrow £64 billion more than previously planned in 2014-15, if there are no further tax rises or spending cuts. There is a ‘better than 50-50 chance’ that the government will borrow more this year than last year, according to the analysis.
The IFS finds that despite cuts in benefits the spending on social security is rising, from 28.5 per cent to 32.5 per cent of all public spending between 2010-11 and 2017-18. Even the largest cut in benefits, to families with children, will only partly offset the spending increases since 1997-98 – while spending on pensioners has risen by over 60 per cent over the same period, and is still going up.

In spite of the austerity programme, the overall effect of tax and benefit changes due to be introduced in 2013-14 will be a small net ‘giveaway’ to households of about £6.9 billion – or about £33 per household. This is because significant tax cuts, particularly the increases in the income tax personal allowance, will outweigh the revenue effects of benefit cuts. On average households with someone in work will gain from these changes while households without anyone in work will lose.

But according to the Green Budget the set of tax and benefit changes introduced between the start of 2010 and 2015-16 will hit the richest households hardest. Falls in the point at which 40p tax is due, increases in NI contributions, withdrawal of child benefit from those on higher incomes, restrictions on pension tax relief, the withdrawal of the personal allowance for those on over £100,000 and the additional income tax rate for those on over £150,000 combine to ensure that the highest income ten per cent lose much more than any other group from tax and benefit changes introduced as part of the consolidation.

Next hardest hit are working-age families towards the bottom of the income distribution dependent on benefits. Those who have escaped with the smallest hit from tax and benefit changes, on average, are households in the upper middle parts of the income distribution. This is due to the increases in the personal allowance, from which basic rate taxpayers have gained substantially and two-earner families have gained twice. Many of those in work, though, have seen substantial falls in the real value of their earnings.

The big increases in the income tax personal allowance have benefited most basic rate taxpayers, although at a net cost of £5 billion. But the policy ignores National Insurance Contributions which simply act as another tax on earnings so no earners have been taken out of the direct tax net.

The IFS finds that if government intends that the richest continue to bear the greatest burden it should reform existing taxes, such as Capital Gains Tax, inheritance tax, pension taxation and Council tax. For example Ministers need to recognise that the top half of taxpayers already contribute 85 per cent of revenue that can be assigned to households. But several elements of Capital Gains Tax, inheritance tax, pension taxation and Council tax, need reform and could, if desired, be made to hit richer individuals more.

Corporate tax revenues remain robust despite concerns about corporate tax avoidance. According to the IFS it is genuinely difficult to tackle corporate tax ‘avoidance’ relating to international activities. The UK attempts to tax profits created in the UK but, especially for multinational companies, these can be hard to measure and there is no reliable estimate of how much is lost to corporate tax avoidance. These practical and conceptual difficulties in defining and tackling tax avoidance are inherent to the current tax system and arise from the way it attempts to measure profits created in the UK. A more radical change in the corporate tax system – for example, moving to a common European tax base – could merit consideration.

IFS Director Paul Johnson suggests that the Chancellor is likely to delay further dramatic spending cuts in the public sector for now. “A more likely scenario perhaps is that other choices will be made after the next election. Taxes could rise, hitherto protected elements of public spending, like the NHS and pensions, could be hit, or the date at which we reach fiscal balance will be pushed further out,” he says.

“If taxes are to rise, or social security spending is to be cut, then a much clearer strategy should be set out. There are important ways in which the tax system could be made more efficient and be reformed to bear more heavily on ‘the rich’, but there are also damaging options. And we do need to recognise that we are already very dependent on a small group for a lot of tax revenue.”

The 2013 IFS Green Budget was produced in collaboration with Oxford Economics with funding from the Nuffield Foundation. The ESRC funds two research centres at the IFS. For more information or to download a copy of the full report, go to: www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6362
In October 2012, two weeks after Dr Hilary Geoghegan began her ESRC Future Research Leader award, Chalara ash dieback was confirmed in the UK. Ash dieback is caused by the fungus Chalara fraxinea and can decimate ash tree populations. The disease has since spread across the UK putting 80 million ash trees at risk. Ash, one of Britain’s few native tree species, is of significant economic, social and environmental importance. The Government has estimated that reducing the spread of C. fraxinea by one per cent each year for 25 years would generate public welfare benefits of between £40 million and £130 million.

But the sudden spread of this deadly disease was the perfect opportunity to kickstart Dr Geoghegan’s research exploring the role of enthusiasm in motivating and sustaining public participation in tree health monitoring. She explains: “Trees are integral to the UK’s rural and urban landscapes, national heritage and rural economy, and can help mitigate climate change by capturing and storing carbon. Trees are particularly important as culturally visible markers of environmental stress, but emerging tree and plant pests and pathogens are a significant risk. Monitoring is an important step in assessing a tree’s condition, as well as identifying and responding to any threats to tree health.”

In the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ (Defra) Interim Chalara Control Plan, published in December 2012, the Government highlighted that alongside legislation, practical action and additional research, the public and other stakeholders need to be mobilised to help respond to the problem and to source trees and plants responsibly from suppliers.

Dr Geoghegan has been working in partnership with Forest Research and the Sylva Foundation. Both organisations recognise the importance of public engagement in tree health, and also the need to understand more fully what motivates and sustains public participation in tree health monitoring. As Dr Geoghegan sees it, co-ordinated approaches are essential for conducting research responding to environmental challenges: “My research will hopefully help government to find ways of incorporating the social sciences as an interdisciplinary thread through the physical sciences to understand the environment and impacts upon it.”

Scientists have warned that the consequences of Chalara ash dieback could be similar to Dutch elm disease, one of the most serious tree diseases on the planet: “In developing my ESRC research, I considered the impact that Dutch elm disease had on the UK: in the 1960s and 70s, Dutch elm disease killed 30 million trees, affecting the provision of multiple economic, social and environmental benefits,” says Dr Geoghegan. She adds: “My ESRC award continues a longer-standing collaboration I have with the Science Museum’s Research and Public History Department to consider more fully how our understanding of past events informs our decision-making today.”

Trees are a particularly emotive issue in the UK, with many organisations and charities involved in protecting trees and forests and helping the public experience them. Dr Geoghegan explains, “If we look at previous tree diseases, it is clear that the public have played a significant role in reporting suspected sightings.” Dr Geoghegan points out that the public have never been asked to monitor trees in quite this way before: “Technology, in the form of apps for phones, means that scientists can set the parameters of data collection.” She continues: “Chalara ash dieback can be reported and identified much more quickly – this is surely something scientists would have benefited from in the 1970s.
The use of technology in tree health and plant biosecurity monitoring will only increase. The smartphone app ‘Ashtag’ had a significant effect on the reporting of Chalara ash dieback sightings. The Forestry Commission recently launched its own Tree Alert app, which allows people to report details of suspected Chalara ash dieback, along with an image and location, direct to the Forestry Commission for investigation.

Some warn crowdsourced science poses quality and reliability issues when non-experts collect scientific data with important policy implications. Dr Geoghegan believes that, when done properly, public participation is valuable. “Citizen science is nothing new. Volunteers, amateurs and enthusiasts – so-called ‘non-experts’ – have participated in scientific enquiry since the mid-19th century. Scientific institutions continue to harness citizen knowledge and enthusiasm, and some environmental risks are only learned about through the response of citizens.”

Dr Geoghegan acknowledges that there are drawbacks to the increased use of technology in citizen science. Only 40 per cent of the UK population own a smartphone, raising questions of geographic coverage and participation across society. She adds “Opportunities to participate using a freepost survey should not be underestimated.”

She continues “In the case of Chalara ash dieback, the need to act quickly and on the scale required has meant that citizens are predominantly employed in the collection of data through observation rather than identification, which is the domain of scientists at Forest Research. But the most pressing question at this point is whether the resources are in place to respond to the increase in scientific data collected by the public.”

The Forestry Commission has identified the scale of the problem on its website, acknowledging that it is unable to respond to each report individually. In Dr Geoghegan’s opinion, data needs to be more readily shared between organisations: “Here a collaborative approach is required across the field of tree health.”

The involvement of civil society has identified the problem that most people know relatively little about trees. As part of her award, Dr Geoghegan is researching the development of the Open Air Laboratories’ (OPAL) new tree health survey outlined in Objective 3 of Defra’s Interim Chalara Control Plan. With the increase in pests and diseases affecting iconic trees such as oak, horse chestnut and ash, she believes the public will demand more information about biosecurity and participate more in environmental monitoring. “An important aspect of the OPAL tree health survey is to help highlight these issues and in turn how both living and dead trees can form important habitats for wildlife,” she says.

Dr Geoghegan concludes: “Citizens, or rather people – that’s you, me, your next door neighbour and Defra’s chief scientist – are all in a position to act as early warning systems for future conservation challenges in the UK.” She adds: “My ESRC Future Research Leader award gives me the time and resources to build on research in the area of people and science, exploring the dynamics between citizen scientists as data producers and complex subjects, and an institutional need for environmental data in the face of growing concerns.”

Jennifer Garrett is an ESRC Communications Officer
We present an at-a-glance overview of the key issues in Britain today. In this issue our focus is on Employment. All statistics are from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

**Unemployment duration**

For September to November 2012 1.18 million people had been unemployed for up to six months, up 8,000 from June to August; 434,000 people had been unemployed for over two years, down 10,000 from June to August. Unemployment by duration for September to November 2012

**Earnings by occupation**

Median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees were highest for Managers and Senior Officials, at £738 (46% higher than the median for all employees), and lowest for Sales and Customer Service occupations, at £323 (36% lower than the median for all employees) Median full-time gross weekly earnings by major occupation group, UK, April 2012, £ per week.
**Employment status**

Between September to November 2007 and September to November 2012, the number of people in full-time employment fell by 341,000, the number of people in part-time employment increased by 660,000, and the number of unemployed people increased by 854,000.

**Young people in employment**

For September to November 2012 there were 3.72 million 16- to 24-year-olds in employment, up 12,000 from June to August. There were 957,000 unemployed, up 1,000 over the same period.

**UK labour productivity**

On an output per hour basis, UK labour productivity fell by 0.2 per cent in the third quarter of 2012. Market sector productivity fell by 0.6 per cent on this basis, to its lowest level since 2005.

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“A professional is one who does his best work when he feels the least like working.” — Frank Lloyd Wright

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**Public sector employment**

The number of people employed in the public sector was 5.75 million in September 2012, down 24,000 from June 2012. Public sector employment by industry for September 2012, seasonally adjusted (thousands of people):
Next year’s referendum on Scottish independence isn’t just a political, constitutional and civic milestone in the history of what historian Norman Davies carefully terms the northwest European archipelago. As a case study in the formation and perhaps deconstruction of states it is a first-rank social science event and for that reason alone would merit close study.

But it’s also an occasion when information and understanding – about the economics, social conditions and political structures of the UK and Scotland – will be at a premium. The ESRC recognises it as a huge opportunity for knowledge exchange and has geared up accordingly.

Support remains where it was, at between a quarter and a third of the electorate"

Of course the Scotland referendum is not unique. The devolution votes in 1997 on a parliament for Edinburgh and assembly for Wales broke the UK’s constitutional mould, and big popular choices have been made in Ireland, north and south, during the 20th century. For many, the proposed referendum on UK membership of the European Union is another first-order political and constitutional event.

It’s also true that the Scotland referendum may not be definitive. Political analysts look to the scheduled 2016 elections to the Scottish parliament and prospects beyond of further appeals to the public over Scottish statehood, the independence question repeated as it has been in Quebec. Devolution is still unfolding in Wales, with the independent commission chaired by Paul Silk pondering new powers for the assembly.

Nonetheless, the ESRC considers the 2014 Scotland referendum a significant event, worthy of a special effort to study and contextualise. We want to mobilise knowledge and data, making them available to electors, pundits and opinion formers over the next 18 months or so. Outside as much as inside Scotland, that is. The event may change the UK; it also reverberates not just in the other countries of the union but elsewhere in Europe (where secession is a live issue in several countries) and overseas.

If I say the ESRC’s response has been ‘gleg’, speakers of Scots will recognise its meaning as speedy. As last year the Westminster and Edinburgh governments approached agreement on the fact and timing of a referendum on independence, which they concluded in October, the ESRC decided to commit to a programme of work costing £4 million, to come on stream in time for the campaign and decision. Pulling together research infrastructure, advisers and a programme of action in a matter of weeks, staff went out to the research community with an open request for fellowships and projects. A second phase is now being commissioned, looking for research ideas around the future of public services, demographics and foreign and defence policy.

Overseen by an advisory committee headed by Professor John Beath, secretary-general of the Royal Economic Society and emeritus professor at the University of St Andrews (and chair of the ESRC training and skills committee), we have put some solid building blocks in place, including the appointment of a research co-ordinator, the hugely experienced Professor Charlie Jeffery, a political scientist and vice-principal of the University of Edinburgh, a former member of the ESRC council.

Expertise about Scotland is of course not confined to Scotland. The first round of research commissions included the Institute for Fiscal Studies in London and one of the first ‘Scotland Fellows’ is Angus Armstrong of the National...
Institute of Economic and Social Research, also in London. The IFS will set out the fiscal choices that an independent Scotland would have to make, comparing tax and spending options and long-term projections on revenue, on the back of varying assumptions about North-Sea hydrocarbons.

Inevitably, much of the legwork will be done by social science experts in Scotland’s finance, economics, policy and politics, who are based in Scotland. Fellows, who are appointed for a year, include Professor John Curtice, the elections and polling expert, of the University of Strathclyde and the Scottish Centre for Social Research. Curtice is an accomplished disseminator of research and regular broadcaster. He makes a distinction between regard for the Scottish National Party, of which the public approve as a provider of effective government for the country, and support for the SNP project of independence. “There isn’t any clear evidence that either one side or the other, over the whole period of devolution, has made significant progress either in reducing support for independence or succeeding in increasing it,” he told the BBC recently – and support remains where it was, at between a quarter and a third of the electorate.

Another Scotland Fellow, Professor David Bell of the University of Stirling, is likely to be called on for expert views on his subject, the financial dimensions of changing the constitutional setup for Scotland and the UK, drawing on his knowledge of how spending is allocated.

Social, demographic, political and fiscal trends in Scotland were already, explicitly and implicitly, the subject of attention in several of the ESRC’s research centres. They have been invited to open out new but related workstreams. So, for example, the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society at the University of Oxford will focus more heavily than it would otherwise have done on patterns of migration into and out of Scotland, comparing them with the UK as a whole and, where the data permits, other parts of the UK. Perspectives on migration will also come from the Centre for Population Change at the University of Southampton – in collaboration with researchers from the Universities of St Andrews and Stirling: how different are the views of Scottish political and business leaders?

Another centre, Applied Quantitative Methods Network at the University of Edinburgh, will survey young people in Scotland, trying to fathom their views on the country and independence, and how they form political identities: this work could be especially interesting if the voting age in Scotland drops to 16.

The ESRC is of course not alone in trying to inform debate around independence. Our research is matched by analyses from the Scottish and UK governments – HM Treasury is sponsoring a series of colloquiums. We are drawing on the networks of Paul Grice, a member of the ESRC council and chief executive of the Scottish parliament, to involve researchers and officials from Whitehall and the Scottish government. Thinktanks are busy and the multitude of organisations in the private and third sector that could be affected by a reconstitution of the UK are starting to work through scenarios and gather information. Nor is the Future of the UK and Scotland programme exclusive: the ESRC will continue to expect and assess applications for research grants on and around Scottish institutions and socio-economic questions; the team behind the British Election Study is naturally going to be interested in Scottish voting trends.

The impact of research of course depends on how imaginatively and energetically it gets disseminated. From the start of the initiative, we have been thinking about communications and getting the fruits of research in front of opinion formers, politicians, analysts, the media and, directly and indirectly, the public. A communications adviser is coming on board, versed in the ways of Scottish bloggers, editors and broadcasters, but also aware that material about Scotland is also about the UK, and may merit an effort to get it noticed and discussed in London, elsewhere in England, in Wales and Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the European Union.

We hope to get the ball rolling with an international conference that pulls together lines of existing research and poses questions – that will take place in Edinburgh in early May. If, thanks to the programme, answers are forthcoming by the autumn of next year, Scottish voters will face their choice as well informed as can be.

David Walker is a member of the ESRC council and chairs its methods and infrastructure committee.

For more information on the Future of the UK and Scotland programme, see: www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/what-we-do/our-research/future-of-uk-and-scotland/index.aspx
In May 2011, the European Union and the International Monetary Fund lent Portugal €78 billion to help the country cope with its budget deficit. Reforming the Portuguese VAT system was one of the conditions of the loan. Like most European countries, the Portuguese VAT system was highly inefficient and if reformed offered potential to help the Portuguese Government reduce its budget deficit.

In August 2011 Professor Rita de la Feria, who at the time was working at the ESRC-funded Centre for Business Taxation, was asked to advise the Government on its VAT reforms. Portugal’s VAT reform pulled on all De la Feria’s expertise and knowledge generated from over a decade of in-depth research into VAT systems around the world.

European governments have traditionally applied different rates of VAT on different goods in order to achieve social and distributional aims. For example, exemptions or lower rates on essential products such as food or healthcare and on merit goods such as cultural events, sports and books.

This policy is unsound as it assumes a decrease in VAT leads to lower consumer prices and so achieves the distribution and social aims. But the evidence does not support this argument – multiple rates of VAT cause definitional and interpretative problems and often lead to legal costs. One example is the case between the biscuit manufacturer, McVities and the UK’s HMRC over whether Jaffa Cakes were a cake and therefore VAT free, or a biscuit and subject to the standard rate of VAT (at the time 17.5 per cent).

The difficulty in establishing which VAT rate to apply to a product increases a company’s compliance costs. Multiple rates also raise the tax collector’s administrative costs compared with collecting a fixed rate across all goods. In addition to these costs is the potential loss of revenue emerging from applying reduced rates rather than standard rates.

De la Feria used her expertise to recommend four principles to broaden the VAT’s tax base that took into account local conditions, to subject more goods and services to taxation without causing undue hardship or threaten economic recovery. The first principle eliminated reduced rates of VAT for certain ‘merit’ products such as cultural events. As consumption of these products was mainly by high-income households, keeping VAT low on such products was hardly a priority in times of economic hardship.

The second principle was to maintain reduced rates of VAT for essential goods and services such as food and medication. Higher VAT on necessity items risked increasing prices and severely affecting low-income households as essential goods are consumed regardless of price. The third measure maintained reduced rates of VAT on items that could jeopardise jobs or exports, for example keeping lower rates of VAT in the labour-intensive tourism sector.

The final principle focused on removing different rates of VAT for goods or services that fall within the same category, like eliminating different rates for ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ food. These distinctions only encourage fraud and avoidance as well as creating high compliance costs.

De la Feria’s recommendations helped shape the country’s VAT reforms, which were implemented in the 2012 State Budget. Together the measures resulted in “a big reduction in the goods and services with reduced rates of VAT”, said Michael Keen, Deputy Director in the Fiscal Affairs Department at the IMF, in the IMF Country Report on Portugal at the time of the reforms: “The VAT tax base levied at the standard rates will be enlarged from 60 to 80 per cent of the total base. This will generate savings of about 1.2 per cent of GDP.”

The success of these measures in reforming VAT allowed De la Feria and the Portuguese Government to focus on introducing changes to promote growth, in particular by helping small and medium-sized businesses in the subsequent State Budget for 2013. Measures included allowing companies to recover VAT on bad debts in a simplified manner, and allowing companies to pay VAT only when payment is received – rather than when the invoice is issued – thus removing existing cash-flow problems for these companies were payments are delayed. The new policies were introduced on 1 January 2013.

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ESRC IMPACTS

Taxing matters

Research by Professor Rita de la Feria at the ESRC-funded Centre for Business Taxation informs reform of the Portuguese VAT system to make it fairer and increase revenue.
The referendum gamble?

Professor Paul Whiteley explains the reasons behind the Prime Minister’s commitment to hold a referendum on the UK’s EU membership, what the referendum might seek to decide and the possible outcomes for the UK’s politics and people. Is it a political gamble to win over Conservative eurosceptics or a real commitment to changing the UK’s destiny?

In January 2013, in a long-awaited and much-publicised speech on the UK’s future in Europe, Prime Minister David Cameron said that the British people must “have their say” on Europe and pledged an in/out referendum if the Conservatives win the next general election. The referendum would take place during the early part of the next parliament and by the end of 2017 at the latest.

Recent polls indicate that a significant block of Britons want an EU exit regardless of renegotiation results. How reliable are such survey findings in terms of actual voting?

Paul Whiteley: Our polling for the election study shows that UKIP support has been growing significantly and most of it comes from the Conservatives so they have a real problem for the next election. We have seen a big rise in the number of people who blame the EU for the financial crisis as well as a surge in people who think that Britain would be better off outside the EU, so this is not an issue which will go away. The problem is that the austerity policies pursued by governments in the EU and also in Britain are toxic and so instrumental support for the EU among UK voters is ebbing away. Britons never really bought into the continental image of the EU as a barrier to further war in Europe and a source of solidarity between nations, since membership was very instrumental from the beginning and based on the perception that we would be better off economically to be inside rather than outside. These perceptions have gone into reverse because of the crisis in the Eurozone.

There is the additional point that UKIP is now no longer a one trick pony since it has exploited discontent over immigration very effectively. In our January survey only four per cent of respondents thought that the government had handled the issue of immigration well and 65 per cent thought they had handled it badly. UKIP’s argument that we cannot control immigration inside the EU has traction and helped them greatly in the Eastleigh by-election. Ironically, the surge in support for UKIP will help the Lib Dems to retain some of the seats targeted by the Conservatives in 2015, just as it did in Eastleigh – so the least eurosceptic party has a reason to be grateful to the most eurosceptic party!

Your research indicates that in a referendum voters tend to stick with what they know and don’t vote for change. But in the case of a referendum on EU membership it is likely that the UK voters will break with tradition, vote against the status quo and go for withdrawal from the EU in at least some form?

PW: As regards a possible referendum, as you say the research shows that there is a status quo bias in referenda when people face a question which is complex and highly uncertain. They don’t know what to do so they either abstain or opt for the status quo. It means that the question cannot really be a complex series of alternative choices but has to be a straight up or down choice.

What exactly would the referendum seek to decide: Is it to restrict centralised powers over domestic labour law, for example, or is it a full withdrawal from the EU? And, as there is some confusion over what a referendum could deliver, should the Prime Minister start to work on limiting expectations now?

PW: If there is a referendum on membership it is by no means certain that people would vote to leave, despite the current discontent. If they feel that the risk of leaving outweighs the risks of staying in they will reluctantly vote to stay in. The referendum campaign will be crucial to the outcome – to win the campaigners need to frame the outcome that they dislike as being the
most risky. In a continuing recession there is a reasonable chance that advocates of staying in will be able to do that. But it is true that we could find ourselves outside the EU in five years time, but as a number of people have pointed out this would not mean being free of EU regulations since as long as we trade with Europe we will have to abide by their rules (much as the Norwegians have to).

Would it be a bad thing not to be a full member of the EU – countries such as Switzerland seem to do well just by being members of EFTA and signing up to some EU laws.

PW: This is an effective campaign argument that EU supporters can deploy – ‘you can’t really leave even if you want to as long as 50 per cent of our trade is with Europe’. Equally leaving the EU would not be catastrophic, although it would have some undesirable consequences. Firstly it would mean that the US would downgrade Britain as being its most influential ally in Europe after Germany. Secondly, it would mean that the EU would tighten regulations over the financial sector quite a lot because Britain would no longer be there to oppose such a move. Thirdly it would weaken the EU and might lead to copycat departures by countries like Italy and Spain. Fourthly it would have serious budgetary consequences for the EU because Britain is a big net contributor and German voters are not in the mood to subsidise southern and eastern Europe any more.

There would have to be a significant cutback in the [EU] budget would be my guess. But whether support for science and innovation would win out over support for cows in that exercise is an open question. But this would reverberate back to Britain because it is hard to see the EU recovering from the present crisis if it is the process of breaking up and so our largest trading partner would continue to stagnate for the foreseeable future.

Paul Whiteley is Professor of Government, University of Essex and co-director of the ESRC-funded British Election Study

www.essex.ac.uk/bes
Britain in 2013 is available from WH Smith Travel and High Street shops, Waitrose, Waterstones and Marks and Spencer. And Society Now subscribers can order a copy at the reduced price of £3.95 by calling 01793 798177 and quoting SN15 OFFER.

The Britain in 2013 iPad app is also available on the Apple App Store or iTunes.
News briefs

TAX ADMINISTRATION RESEARCH CENTRE LAUNCHES
The official launch of the Tax Administration Research Centre (TARC) took place on Tuesday 12 February in Westminster. The centre is a joint partnership between the University of Exeter and the Institute of Fiscal Studies, and received funding of £2 million from the ESRC, HM Revenue and Customs, and Her Majesty’s Treasury. TARC will support high-quality research and related activities on tax administration, with a view to strengthening the theoretical and empirical understanding of the delivery and design of tax operations and policies.

The centre pursues a multidisciplinary research programme with a research team that includes economists, accountants, experimentalists and psychologists, and engages with tax administrations, the media and researchers to disseminate this information throughout the policy and academic world. TARC also has exceptionally strong international connections and is developing links with experts at home and abroad, whose visits to the centre provide a forum for sharing knowledge and collaborating on new ideas.

For more information, see: www.esrc.ac.uk/news-and-events/press-releases/25020/official-launch-of-the-tax-administration-research-centre.aspx

NEW CENTRES AND LARGE GRANTS FUNDING ANNOUNCED
Following the latest call for the centres and large grants competition, the ESRC announced overall funding of nearly £30 million for a series of new investments. These investments will focus on a range of subjects: the impact of welfare; understanding human behaviour, including behaviour change and decision making; dynamics of ethnic identity and relations; the use and manipulation of language in society; applying quantitative methods to complex social issues; and the global economic crisis and risks to the UK’s financial system.

The winning centres/large grants include:
• Systemic Risk Centre – London School of Economics and Political Science: Dr Jon Danielsson and Dr Jean-Pierre Zigrand
• Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) – Lancaster University: Professor Tony McEnery
• Network for Integrated Behavioural Science – University of Nottingham: Professor Chris Starmer
• Centre for Macroeconomics (CeM) – London School of Economics and Political Science: Professor Wouter Den Haan
• Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE) – University of Manchester: Professor James Nazroo
• Applied Quantitative Methods Network: Phase II – University of Edinburgh: Professor Susan Mvis
• Sanctions, support and behaviour change: understanding the role and impact of welfare conditionality – University of Salford: Professor Peter Dwyer

For more information, see: www.esrc.ac.uk/news-and-events/press-releases/24715/new-centres-and-large-grants-funding-announced.aspx

RE-IGNITING GROWTH REPORT PUBLISHED
The ESRC has published a new report, Re-igniting Growth, that examines some of the challenges the UK faces after the economic downturn and explores a range of initiatives or changes to policy that could help kickstart growth.

The report includes a series of interviews with key academics funded by the ESRC and, as well as giving the recession historical context, many of the interviews take unconventional approaches to a range of issues and provide objective – and sometimes controversial – responses to the economic problems the UK is experiencing.

Many of the themes in Re-igniting Growth are taken forward by the LSE Growth Commission, funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) and the ESRC, and co-chaired by Professor Tim Besley and Professor John Van Reenen, Director of the ESRC’s Centre for Economic Performance. The Growth Commission’s Report, Investing for Prosperity, was launched on 31 January.

See pages 12-13 of this issue of Society Now for an interview with Professor David Newbery on investment in infrastructure, reprinted from Re-igniting Growth.

The Re-igniting Growth report can be downloaded from the ESRC website at www.esrc.ac.uk/reigniting-growth. Please email Debbie Stalker (debbie.stalker@esrc.ac.uk) if you would like to receive a printed copy.

FINDING OUT HOW TODAY’S TEENS TICK
The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) will be conducting an age 14 survey after receiving funding of £3.5 million from the ESRC.

Scheduled for 2015, the survey acts as the next phase of the birth cohort study. The MCS follows the lives of 19,000 children born in the UK in 2000-01. Five surveys of cohort members have been carried out so far at the ages of nine months, three, five, seven and eleven years.

The survey will extend understanding of risk behaviours, educational choices and aspirations, peer and family relationships and their consequences in later life.

For more information, see: www.esrc.ac.uk/news-and-events/press-releases/24949/finding-out-how-todays-teens-tick.aspx
People

PROFESSOR PHILIP LOWE

On 28 January 2013 Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) programme Director Philip Lowe was awarded the Bertebos Prize for his significant contributions to sustainable rural development and land use management. Professor Lowe has encouraged an interdisciplinary approach towards the achievement of a sustainable rural economy and taken an active role in rural policy development, both in the UK and Europe.

RELU investigates the social, economic, environmental and technological challenges faced by rural areas. The programme is a collaboration between the ESRC, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

The Bertebos Prize is distributed by the Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry every second year for outstanding contributions to the research areas of food, agriculture, ecology or animal health. The Prize of 300,000 Swedish krona and a diploma was presented to Professor Lowe by the King of Sweden, Patron of the Academy, in Stockholm.

PROFESSOR STEVE YEARLEY

Professor Steve Yearley, Director of the ESRC Genomics Policy and Research Forum, has been nominated in the Best Research or Dissertation Supervisor category of the Edinburgh University Students’ Association Teaching Awards 2012-2013. Held annually since 2009, the awards are created and run by students, and designed to recognise and reward those academics who are committed to delivering great teaching. The winners of the Teaching Awards will be announced at a ceremony that will take place in Edinburgh on 3 April 2013.

www.genomicsnetwork.ac.uk/esrcgenomicsnetwork/news/latestnews/title,26555,en.html

DR ALAN GILLESPIE

“I am delighted that Dr Alan Gillespie has agreed to remain as chair of ESRC,” commented David Willetts in the press release from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. “His public and private sector experience as well as his successful academic career make him very well placed to serve the council.”

“I am honoured to be invited to chair the Economic and Social Research Council for a further four years,” said Dr Gillespie. “I look forward to continuing my work with the council and management team in setting the agenda for policy-relevant research over the coming years.”

NEW YEAR HONOURS 2013

Knights Bachelor — Knighthoods
Professor Ian David Diamond, FBA FRSE, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of Aberdeen; Former Chief Executive of ESRC. For services to Social Science and Higher Education.

Professor Simon Charles Wessely, Vice Dean in Academic Psychiatry at the Institute of Psychiatry, King’s College London; ESRC grant holder. For services to Military Healthcare and to Psychological Medicine.

Professor John Richard Britton, Honorary Consultant in Respiratory Medicine and Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Nottingham, Director of the UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies; ESRC grant holder. For services to Respiratory Medicine.

Commanders of the Order of the British Empire
Professor Muriel Anita Robinson, Vice-Chancellor, Bishop Grosseteste University; ESRC seminar grant 2005-2007. For services to Higher Education.

Professor David John Hand, Senior Research Investigator, Imperial College London; ROPA grant 1996-1998. For services to Research and Innovation.

Professor Judith Anne Freedman, Professor of Taxation Law, University of Oxford; ESRC grant holder. For services to Tax Research.

Officers of the Order of the British Empire
Professor Ian Bateman, Professor of Environmental Science and Economics, University of East Anglia; ESRC grant holder. For services to Environmental Science and Policy.

Members of the Order of the British Empire
Professor Linda Woodhead Professor of Sociology of Religion, Lancaster University; Director of the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme (2007-2012). For services to Higher Education.

KTP WINNERS

The ESRC’s winning KTP (Knowledge Transfer Partnership), with KTP Associate Harriet Knowles (pictured below), Falmouth Harbour Commissioners and the University of Plymouth, was among the eight finalist Best Partnership teams at the November 2012 KTP Awards. Business Leader of Tomorrow awards were also presented to KTP Associate Kate Jones for her work with Newcastle University and the Northumberland Church of England (NCEA), and Katie Flaherty for her work with Leicester De Montfort University and Leicester-based digital media centre Phoenix.

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships is a UK-wide programme overseen by the Technology Strategy Board, and aims to help businesses improve their competitiveness through partnership collaborations.
Representing Europeans, A Pragmatic Approach

Representing Europeans makes a fresh assessment of the challenge facing the European Union today: it can no longer carry out integration by stealth. The book’s approach recommends that enhanced European integration should be based on coalitions of the willing and accommodation of the unwilling; and that the EU should pay more attention to the half a billion people it claims to represent.

Contemporary apprenticeship: international perspectives on an evolving model of learning

Researchers show how apprenticeship remains a vibrant part of the vocational education and training systems of many countries and also key to the development of social theories of learning and identity formation. The concept of apprenticeship is being stretched in response to social, political and economic challenges, some of which come from countries themselves, while others reflect the pressures of globalisation and the current crisis in global capital.

The sociolinguistics of writing

This book puts writing at the centre of sociolinguistic inquiry drawing on a range of academic fields including New Literacy Studies, semiotics, genre studies, stylistics and new rhetoric. The key question the book explores is: what do we mean by ‘writing’ in the 21st century? This book uses a wide range of examples to argue that writing, involving both old and new technologies, is a pervasive and complex communicative feature of contemporary life.

The BUGS Book: A Practical Introduction to Bayesian Analysis

Bayesian statistical methods have become widely used for data analysis and modelling in recent years, and the BUGS software has become the most popular software for Bayesian analysis worldwide. Authored by the team that originally developed this software, The BUGS Book provides a practical introduction to this program and its use. The text presents complete coverage of all the functionalities of BUGS, including prediction, missing data, model criticism, and prior sensitivity. It also features examples and a wide range of applications from various disciplines.

EVENTS

16 APRIL
Social Enterprise and environmental sustainability: challenges and opportunities
There are many examples of social enterprises creating positive environmental impacts. While they are not all motivated by environmental concerns, social enterprise may offer a model that enables business success to be combined with sustainability.

www.tsrc.ac.uk/Newsandevents/events/research-seminars/index.aspx

2 APRIL
Older bisexual lives - current initiatives and future directions, Seminar 1
This ESRC research seminar brings academics together with individuals and advocacy groups, activists, policymakers, service providers and third-sector organisations to explore gaps in current knowledge and research concerning older (50-plus) lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

www.esrc.ac.uk/newsandevents/events/research-seminars/index.aspx

24-25 APRIL
Looking after and managing your research data
New data management requirements are challenging for early career researchers, as the necessary skills are often not taught in PhD programmes. To fill that gap, the UK Data Archive is offering an in-depth, two-day course where researchers can develop their knowledge and professional skills in handling and managing the research data they produce.

www.esds.ac.uk/news/eventdetail.aspx?id=3364

9–10 MAY
Keeping philanthropy’s promises – today’s austerity, tomorrow’s riches?
The Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy (CGAP) is holding a major conference which will bring together leading-edge UK and international expertise in research, practice and policy to discuss the response of philanthropy to the rapidly-changing social landscape of need and opportunity.

www.cgap.org.uk
Know society. Society Now

The ESRC magazine Society Now aims to raise awareness of our research and its impact. It addresses a wide range of readers, from the MP to the businessperson, the voluntary worker to the teacher, the public through to the social scientist, and is published three times a year (spring, summer and autumn).

Society Now offers a readable, intelligent, concise overview of current issues concerning society.

To subscribe to the magazine, please send an email including your full name and address to: societynow@esrc.ac.uk

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