



Economic
and Social
Research Council

Strategic Delivery Plan

2022—2025



Contents

Strategic Delivery Plan 2022–2025

Foreword	3
What we will achieve	5
How we will achieve this	
Objective 1: World-class people and careers	7
Objective 2: World-class places	10
Objective 3: World-class ideas	16
Objective 4: World-class innovation	18
Objective 5: World-class impacts	21
Objective 6: A world-class organisation	27
Our budget	30
References	32
Image references	33



Professor Alison Park (*Interim Executive Chair, ESRC*)

Foreword

We live in a world of uncertainty that is shaped by global challenges, ranging from climate change and the threat of new pandemics to the consequences of major shifts in geopolitical relationships and the transformative impact of new technologies. Responding to these challenges requires a deep understanding of human behaviour – of how we live, work, and make critical life choices – and of what fuels innovation and growth. Economic, social and behavioural research provides this understanding. It has the power to build a better future – to create a more sustainable, stable and inclusive world.

The UK's world-leading social science research base is well placed to understand and address the challenges facing society, and to chart the route to a better future. The Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC's) role is to harness the immense power of our many disciplines – from economics, management and psychology to sociology, politics, and anthropology – to enable change and real-world impact that improves outcomes for individuals, levels up society and boosts the economy both across the UK and beyond.

Never has there been a time when science is discussed so often and by so many, across all walks of life. There is also recognition of the need for exceptional data-driven social science – enabling decision makers to understand and predict, for example, how individuals and groups interact with public services or use new technologies.

Our community of social scientists is in an excellent position to respond to the need for rigorous, innovative and impactful research. The UK has some of the most talented researchers in the world, often working within interdisciplinary teams, and supported by a globally recognised portfolio of datasets, services, and methodological advances and innovations. The social sciences can offer an increasingly sophisticated array of tools and techniques to unravel and analyse the most complex, seemingly intractable, challenges.

This Strategic Delivery Plan sets out ESRC's ambitions for social science and our role in contributing to both the successful delivery of [UKRI's five-year Strategy](#) and the government's commitment to increase R&D spend to 2.4% by 2027. It describes how we will build on our strengths, sustaining the UK's excellence in social, behavioural and economic research.

To achieve our ambitions, we will continue to support the health of all our disciplines, maintaining a high-quality and diverse talent pipeline and a resilient, modern and innovative data infrastructure. We will fuel both curiosity-driven research and

strategic programmes that build new knowledge and address the most pressing societal challenges, whether local, national or international in scale and scope.

A key theme running through our plan is an emphasis on connectivity and partnerships, both across UKRI and with other national and international funders and stakeholders. The plan also highlights our ambition to optimise engagement and impact, and to connect the rich evidence we are generating to policymakers, public sector practitioners, businesses and third sector organisations.

ESRC's mission is to harness the power of social science to drive change that makes a difference to all our lives, improving outcomes for individuals, society and the economy. Supporting our community is fundamental to achieving this ambition and I look forward to working with you all in the future.

Professor Alison Park
Interim Executive Chair, ESRC

September 2022

The social sciences can offer an increasingly sophisticated array of tools and techniques to unravel and analyse the most complex, seemingly intractable, challenges



What we will achieve

Our vision is to create a more prosperous, healthy, sustainable and secure society.

Economic, social and behavioural research provides an integrated approach to understanding how society interacts at every level, from the individual to whole systems and from the local to the global. Our research is designed to make a difference. It provides the evidence and independent expert insight necessary to understand how society and the economy are changing, how aspirations can be realised and how people, households, communities, businesses and governments can work to create positive change.

Our plan describes the role we will play in the successful delivery of UKRI's objectives, building on the UK's reputation as a global centre of excellence in social, behavioural and economic research. It describes our ambitions and actions across UKRI's six strategic objectives over the next three years (2022-25). Our plan sets out how we will advance these objectives for the social sciences, and deliver against government and National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) priorities, guided by UKRI's four principles for change: diversity, resilience, connectivity and engagement.

Our purpose

To create a more prosperous, healthy, sustainable and secure society.

Our principles for change – we will embed the principles of diversity, resilience, connectivity and engagement across all our work, to drive change and create the conditions for an outstanding research and innovation system

Our strategic objectives provide the framework for how we will achieve our vision and realise our principles, through world-class:

People and careers	Places	Ideas	Innovation	Impacts
<p>Sustaining a world-class, diverse and inclusive social science research base that supports talent across the entire research career through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • talent, skills and leadership. • equality, diversity and inclusion. 	<p>Enabling social science to flourish in all places across and beyond the UK, delivering research, data and partnerships through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • research institutes and centres. • data infrastructure. • international collaboration. • impact and engagement. • place-based initiatives. 	<p>Capturing and catalysing diverse and excellent ideas across all disciplines, schemes and research career stages, creating new scientific knowledge and real-world impact through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • research grants. • research methods. • horizon scanning. 	<p>Providing a powerful evidence base which drives innovation across different organisations, sectors and regions to achieve UK-wide growth and prosperity through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • innovation research and evidence. • commercialisation. • knowledge exchange. 	<p>Ensuring that the full power of UK social science is brought to bear in tackling the most pressing global, national and local challenges through new strategic priorities in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Net Zero, environment, biodiversity and climate change. • digital society. • health and social care. • security, risk and resilience. • understanding behaviour.

Supported by **a world-class organisation**: building an inclusive and diverse workforce empowered to deliver sector-wide leadership by catalysing new ways of working and bringing people together.



Objective 1: World-class people and careers

The UK is a global leader in social science research, second only to the US in terms of publication output and outstripping the US, China and Germany when it comes to research impact¹. ESRC-supported research is shown to have been more highly cited than any other national social science funder in the G20.

This success depends on well-trained and highly skilled people with a diversity of knowledge, expertise and experience. To further realise the potential of the social sciences we will build and sustain a talent pipeline that supports diverse career pathways and powers the best research across the full breadth of our disciplines. To succeed we will need to nurture and attract talent wherever it may be found – both within and beyond the UK – to fully harness creativity, work across disciplines, capture a wide array of ideas and understand multiple perspectives.

1.1: Talent, skills and leadership

We aim to sustain a world-class, diverse and inclusive research base that supports talent across the entire research career, building the skills needed to lead large interdisciplinary, cross-sector and international projects and to maximise the value of our data resources.

Researchers at all career stages need cutting-edge skills to push forward the frontiers of social science across the UK and to excel in an increasingly interconnected, digitised, data-rich environment. Advanced methodological training and leadership capabilities are essential to meet the future needs of the academic community and of practitioners in the public, business and the third sectors. We have a critical role to play in enhancing the breadth and diversity of the UK social science research base. We are therefore committed to working in partnership across UKRI as part of a collective approach to people, culture and talent to develop a New Deal for Postgraduate Research.

We will:

- launch a new Postgraduate Training Strategy in response to the findings of our [Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences](#) to ensure the UK PhD remains globally competitive and offers enhanced graduate employability.
- launch a £250 million UK-wide, open competition to fund a network of Doctoral Training Partnerships in the social sciences.

- take a whole career perspective in supporting data-driven research with additional studentships to capitalise on the value of the rich data generated by our data infrastructures.
- promote the continuing professional development of researchers through our guidance and policies, and by investing in new pilot initiatives to strengthen leadership capabilities at the mid-career stage.
- invest up to £28 million in early career research through our Postdoctoral Fellowships to support flexible, dynamic careers.



New skills for data-intensive social science

In the last decade there has been an explosion in the volume and variety of data available for social science research. This ranges from ESRC's own transformative programme in administrative data linkage ([Administrative Data Research UK](#)) through to unstructured commercial data and the digital footprints we all leave behind through our daily lives. We will create a national capability which facilitates the safe and secure realisation of the potential contained within these rich datasets by investing in PhD training and skills development, targeted studentship and fellowship programmes, including our data science fellowship initiative with the Cabinet Office.

1.2: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

We aim to embed Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in all we do, working in collaboration across the Research and Innovation sector to promote inclusive research cultures where diverse talent is valued and supported, and to generate research evidence that informs policy and practice.

The [UKRI EDI strategy](#) sets out our ambition for an inclusive research and innovation system, by everyone, for everyone. We will help to champion this within the social sciences using our role as a leader, investor and employer to catalyse, influence and make change. We can go beyond this, however: social science research is uniquely placed to help us understand the systemic issues of inequality across the sector and to generate insights into how they can be addressed.

We will:

- launch an ‘EDI Caucus’ – a network of expert advisors – which will work across UKRI and the British Academy to support the UKRI EDI strategy by creating an interdisciplinary evidence base on diversity and inclusion.
- implement an EDI action plan setting out our short-, medium- and long-term actions as a leader, investor and employer.
- collaborate with the Academy of Social Sciences to embed good EDI practices across our disciplines.

Flexible, globally competitive doctoral training

We are the largest single funder of social and economic research training in the UK, currently supporting around 2,700 studentships through 16 Doctoral Training Partnerships and Centres for Doctoral Training, spanning 73 universities. It is critical that the UK offers flexible and globally competitive doctoral training to meet the evolving demands of the UK social science research base and the wider needs of policymakers and practitioners across all sectors. We have always played a national leadership role in driving up standards in doctoral provision, regularly reviewing the content and structure of training to ensure that students are equipped with a wide array of the most up-to-date skills and experiences to realise their potential, whatever their chosen career path. In response to our review of social science doctoral training, we will continue to innovate by:

- extending the length of ESRC doctoral training from three to 3.5 years.
- designing more bespoke training packages for individuals.
- offering a new placement scheme to all students to create greater fluidity across different sectors and research environments.

Objective 2: World-class places

The enduring strength of UK social science is founded on world-class universities and institutes distributed across all our four nations. Based on citation analysis², six of the top ten social science universities in Europe and three of the top ten in the world are based in the UK. ESRC's global centres of excellence are backed by internationally renowned data facilities and infrastructure.

It is critical that we continue to support the conditions which enable world-leading social science to flourish across the UK. We will do so by providing opportunities to sustain and connect existing research excellence whilst creating the potential for diversity and new growth. Fundamental to success is investment in the development of cutting-edge data facilities, data infrastructure and national capabilities. Our ambition is to enable partnerships and collaboration which are local, national and international in their reach and which bring together researchers, policymakers and innovators to maximise impact and help to level up society across the UK.



2.1: Research institutes and centres

ESRC has a long tradition of helping to build and sustain world-class institutes. Our ambition is to support the long-term resilience and sustainability of a world-leading social science research base by strategic investment in both existing and new institutes and research centres across the UK.

We invest in globally recognised centres of excellence, including the [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#), the [Institute for Social and Economic Research](#), the [Centre for Economic Performance](#), the [Welsh Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data](#), and [The Productivity Institute](#). This sustained investment has created a resilient and stable environment in which to incubate talent and leadership, forge trusted partnerships, work with other disciplines, connect to key policymakers and practitioners, and create critical national capability.

By expanding this infrastructure we can continue to tackle new and unfolding societal challenges. We can then also connect and cluster major centres of excellence at both a local and national level to optimise scientific discovery and impact.

We will:

- extend our investment in institutes to sustain long-term national, globally-recognised research infrastructure and maximise the impact of social science.
- partner with Research Organisations to embed our national network of research centres into the social science research landscape, helping ESRC-supported research to address local, national and global issues.
- run a further round of our research centres competition, investing at least £36 million, to nurture new cutting-edge social science and address important societal challenges at scale.

Case studies

Long-term investment for academic excellence and policy impact

ESRC has supported the [Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy \(CPP\)](#), based within the [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#), for over three decades.

Researchers at CPP have helped shape the design of key economic policies: CPP analysis on the impacts of junk food was central to the government's obesity strategy and the NHS long-term plan, providing evidence on the design of alcohol and soda taxes; research on in-and-out of work transfers was used as a primary source of evidence by HM Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions to reform tax credits; and rapid work on the unequal impact of the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown on educational attainment provided key evidence in shaping the government's decision to prioritise reopening of schools before other restrictions were lifted.

2.2: Data and infrastructure

ESRC-supported infrastructure has underpinned key scientific breakthroughs such as the identification of the health impacts of smoking during pregnancy, the early warning signs of adolescent self-harm, the scarring effects of long-term unemployment, and how to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Without such infrastructures, critical research like this would not be possible, or it would take longer and cost more owing to the need to collect new data.

Recognising the unique role ESRC has in building and sustaining the UK's world-class social science data infrastructure, we have an annual investment of over £50 million in data collection, curation, access and data services. Through our plans we will further develop our support for this crucial and influential infrastructure to enable robust research that addresses major societal challenges that we face now and in the future.

We will ensure that our investment in data infrastructure continues to represent and serve the needs of people and places across the UK. For example, our £100 million investment in the groundbreaking [Administrative Data Research UK \(ADR UK\)](#) programme funds major data hubs in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that are creating new, linked administrative data assets, and funding policy relevant research.

By continuing to invest in our major national data collections, such as our longitudinal studies, we will innovate to unlock the untapped value of additional public and wider data assets. This includes

harnessing the power of emerging digital forms of data and linking datasets in novel ways to reveal new policy insights and to support businesses. This drive to expand the UK social science data infrastructure will be supported by further investment in modern, integrated data services and facilities, such as the [UK Data Service](#), providing researchers with the best possible access for analysis and evidence generation.

We will:

- boost investment in ADR UK, expanding our innovative programme of linked administrative datasets on key public policy issues, and collaborate with the Cabinet Office to facilitate

the use of administrative data in evaluating the impact of government policies and programmes.

- launch rounds 16-18 of data collection for [Understanding Society](#), our longitudinal study tracking the lives of 25,000 UK households.
- launch a pioneering new 'Digital Footprints' infrastructure, which will transform access to and analysis of new data types and sources, including internet and social media data, geo-spatial data, commercial and transactional data, and sensor and image data.
- lay the groundwork for a new Early Life Cohort study, informed by a major feasibility study.

Better data for better policies across the UK

The administrative data collected by public services contains huge untapped potential to provide decision makers with the evidence they need to inform key policy questions. ADR UK is a flagship data-sharing partnership with UK government departments, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the devolved administrations, which is revolutionising the way policymakers and researchers access the UK's wealth of public sector data.

By linking de-identified administrative data, ADR UK has created a new way of gathering insights into how our society and economy functions. This enables researchers to reveal how different parts of our lives impact on one another. By

linking health and education data we can better understand outcomes from a national, down to a local authority level, giving more depth to policy decisions. When administrative data is linked to other sources of data, such as surveys and longitudinal studies, the possibilities expand even further.

For example, Data First is an innovative initiative led by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and funded by ADR UK that links existing data from across the justice system for the first time, to build a much better understanding of which MoJ policies and services are most effective. Ultimately, Data First aims to support a better quality and more cost-effective justice system for everyone in the UK.

2.3: International collaboration

Many of the biggest questions facing society are global in their reach and are best tackled through international collaboration. UK social science is deeply embedded in the global research ecosystem and has played a leading role in connecting and coalescing international research teams and consortia around major transnational challenges. It is vital ESRC acts to sustain the UK's reputation as a centre of excellence in social science by connecting the best minds, talent and infrastructure across the world. Over 75% of all proposals to recent international multilateral calls in which we have participated have involved UK applicants, and over 80% of successful projects include a UK-based investigator – more than any other participating country.

Through programmes such as the Global Challenges Research and Newton Funds, and consortia such as [NORFACE](#) and the [Transatlantic Platform \(T-AP\)](#), we have expanded and created partnerships at scale from Africa and Asia, to Europe and the Americas. Working with other international funders and global partners, we will continue to play a key role in building and leveraging these relationships through large-scale multilateral strategic programmes and researcher-led international projects. We will fund the creation of new datasets and provide UK researchers with access to the best international data resources and facilities.

We will:

- fund discovery-led international research through a further round of the Open Research Area scheme and our international co-investigator policy.
- invest in major international strategic initiatives to support our own priorities, working through multilateral platforms such as NORFACE and T-AP.
- continue our commitment to working in partnership with low- and middle-income countries through such programmes as the Raising Learning Outcomes initiative, a collaboration between ESRC and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.
- support the continued development of major international data infrastructure projects, such as the [European Social Survey](#).



Connecting the power of global social science

The [Transatlantic Platform \(T-AP\)](#) is a unique interdisciplinary global consortium which brings together funding agencies from Europe and South and North America. The platform has incredible reach, spanning 25 countries and connecting over half of the world's total social science research capacity. With more than £22 million of investment over the last six years, T-AP has launched three major multinational programmes, with the most recent in direct response to the pandemic. The COVID-19 Recovery, Resilience and Renewal initiative is bringing together researchers from 25 countries to provide critical evidence on the medium- and longer-term global effects of the pandemic, thereby supporting the UN's ambitions as set out in its [Research Roadmap for the COVID-19 Recovery](#). UK investigators are working on 14 of the 19 projects funded under the initiative, more than any other nation.

The need for sustained investment in data infrastructure to meet policy needs

Our longitudinal studies collect detailed data on the lives of people and households over their entire life course and have been a fundamental evidence source for policymakers for decades.

Long-term investment in longitudinal studies has also been vital in meeting unforeseen and urgent policy needs. Our flagship study, Understanding Society, has been regularly collecting data from 25,000 UK households for almost 15 years. It was able rapidly to pivot its activities during the pandemic to expose the highly uneven vaccine uptake amongst different ethnic groups across the UK population. This evidence was used by the SAGE committee to support its strategies to reduce vaccine hesitancy. Understanding Society datasets also provided evidence underpinning government interventions such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme and COVID-19 additional welfare payments, which supported the poorest working households in the UK.

2.4: Impact and engagement

We are an international leader in maximising impact from social science research and we aim to optimise the impact of our research, data and people by deepening links and partnerships with policymakers, businesses and third sector organisations across the UK.

We played a founding role in establishing the UK government's What Works Network of evidence centres which translate research into evidence for policy and practice. We introduced Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAA), which enable Research Organisations to design and deliver responsive knowledge exchange activities with local policymakers, innovators, businesses, other practitioners and the public. More recently, we have initiated 'people flow' schemes, bringing the expertise and knowledge of social scientists directly into central government and the devolved administrations through our Policy Fellowship Programme.

Our major research centres and grants, alongside our investment in data infrastructure, have led to environmental, educational and monetary policy changes; improved the life chances of some of the most vulnerable in society; and informed the government's response to COVID-19.

Creating a national infrastructure that seeks to optimise engagement and impact remains fundamental to ESRC's mission. Our aim is to systematically deepen our partnerships with national and local policymakers and convene new relationships with innovators and third sector organisations.

We will:

- expand our support for policymakers in areas such as the cost-of-living crisis, levelling up and climate change through knowledge exchange programmes, new placement and fellowship schemes, and via our Actionable Insights Seminar series working in partnership with the Government Social Research and Policy Professions.
- maximise the use of evidence in policy and practice through a refresh of our What Works Centres, and deliver flexible, agile responses to evidence needs through our International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO), Economics Observatory (ECO) and UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE).
- continue to work in close partnership with UK Government departments and the devolved administrations to create policy-relevant linked administrative datasets for research use and build UK-wide capability and capacity to address and inform policy priorities.
- maximise the impact of social science research in policy, third sector organisations and across businesses through a new IAA competition.
- create new thematic hubs to inform scrutiny, legislation and debate that addresses key economic and societal challenges, such as on Climate and Environment, International Affairs and Defence, and Parliament, Public Administration and Constitution, through the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.

Connecting talent with government policymakers

Our Policy Fellowship Programme launched in 2022 is designed to accelerate the adoption of cutting-edge methods and research in national decision-making. A cohort of 24 academics, embedded in 11 departments across the UK (including central government and the devolved nations), are spending a year working in real time on policy challenges of national importance, including reducing inequalities, Net Zero, and national security. In addition, our programme of Actionable Insights Seminars, delivered in partnership with the Government Social Research Profession for the Government Analysis Function and the Policy Profession, is providing time-critical evidence to help address pressing policy challenges such as energy and food security, levelling up and climate change. The first set of seminars, which focused on COVID-19, attracted over 2,500 attendees in total.

2.5: Place-based solutions

The UK faces major place-based challenges, including reducing inequality, driving local economic growth and productivity, and responding to Net Zero. These are unambiguously social science challenges where high-quality insight and evidence can power the development of responsive and diverse place-based solutions with the potential to make a real difference to both people's lives and the places and communities they live in. The UK government's [Levelling Up White Paper](#) creates a need to make connections across multiple policy areas and to understand the development needs and social resources of different regions.

By working in partnership with academia and policymakers – national, devolved and local – and engaging innovators and public and third sector practitioners we will support and inform place-based policy and decision making. Our approach will involve investing in people and collaborations at a local level, in infrastructure that supports the local translation of research, evidence and data, and in place-focused research.

It is our ambition to embed place considerations across a wider range of our work by encouraging a greater number of our programmes to consider spatial dimensions in their research and impact activities.

We will:

- address local challenges by facilitating collaboration and connections between local policy stakeholders, academics and innovators, by launching Local Policy Innovation Partnerships, with the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Innovate UK, and continuing to support the Regional Productivity Forums run by [The Productivity Institute](#).
- invest in major place-based What Works Centres such as the [Wales Centre for Public Policy](#) co-funded by the Welsh government, and the [Centre for Local Economic Growth](#).
- build new datasets, data services and analytical capability which provide an evidence base upon which to understand and find solutions to local challenges.
- implement UKRI's 'Places Toolkit' to support embedding place considerations across a wider range of our work.
- inform policy interventions on levelling up by working in partnership with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) on its short- and long-term evidence needs.

Objective 3: World-class ideas

ESRC-supported research captures and catalyses diverse and excellent ideas across all disciplines, schemes and research career stages, creating new scientific knowledge and real-world impact.

We remain committed to a balanced portfolio that includes fundamental, curiosity driven research as well as strategically focused programmes. This breadth is critical to drawing upon the full talents and creativity of the social science research base, to sustaining the diversity, long-term vibrancy and resilience of our disciplines, and to connecting with a broad swathe of the UK's universities and institutes. This balance ensures we reach out and capture a rich and diverse array of great ideas, covering both blue skies and applied research, alongside new conceptual thinking and novel methodological approaches. We will embrace high risk, high reward research to help inspire breakthrough social science.

We will offer opportunities for curiosity-driven research across all career types, from our postdoctoral fellowship and early career researcher schemes through to our large grants and centres competitions. It is our ambition to draw systematically upon the ideas and inspiration of the social science research base to help shape our thinking on long-term societal challenges now and for the future. This will be enhanced by ambitious inter- and multidisciplinary approaches, including working across UKRI to pilot a new interdisciplinary responsive mode funding scheme.

We will:

- catalyse new ideas and creativity in discovery research by investing over £40 million a year in our Research Grants, New Investigator Grants and Secondary Data Analysis Initiative schemes.
- invest in research and sustainability by launching a new ~£10 million round of our Large Grants scheme.
- push forward the frontiers of methodological research through a new collaborative research initiative.
- continue to horizon scan for long-term, global, societal challenges, and innovative ways to tackle them.

Case studies

Integrating newcomers and vulnerable migrants

There are over 280 million migrants across the world, representing 3.6% of the global population, with numbers accelerating in recent years. Many migrants are displaced by conflict or natural disasters or seek a better life to support themselves and their families. In partnership with the Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity, the ESRC-funded [Centre on Migration, Policy and Society](#) has developed ground-breaking research into integration theory and municipal initiatives, which is informing policy and practice across more than 60 European cities and beyond. Programme findings prompted the European Commission to commit for the first time to a dedicated EU strategy aimed at finding solutions for long-term irregular migration status.

Big impact ideas

The ESRC [Decision Maker Panel](#) supplies time-critical data on business confidence and operating conditions to the Bank of England and UK government. Around 10,000 Chief Executives and Chief Financial Officers from a representative sample of UK businesses are surveyed each month about current business conditions and future expectations. Data from the Decision Maker Panel informed the full spectrum of HM Treasury's COVID-19 support schemes, from the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to business grants, and supported monetary policy responses to COVID-19 and rising inflation. Originating as a proof-of-concept grant supported by the University of Nottingham's ESRC-funded Impact Acceleration Account, the Decision Maker Panel was awarded larger-scale funding through our responsive mode scheme.



Objective 4: World-class innovation

Innovation lies at the heart of the UK's recovery and return to full economic growth and prosperity. Successful innovation is a socio-technical challenge, meaning that social science has a vital role to play in every stage of the innovation lifecycle, providing critical insights into what works, where and why. We want our supported research to provide a powerful evidence base that identifies the optimal conditions for this innovation. Only by adoption and diffusion of ideas and people across different firms, sectors and regions, and by driving development in policy and practice can we improve productivity, scale-up businesses and create new jobs, and maximise the potential of all parts of the UK.

Our role is to invest in new research that evidences how to remove barriers and create the best conditions for a thriving innovation ecosystem. We will concentrate our work on understanding key innovation drivers such as finance and business models, labour markets and skills, consumer behaviour, supply chains and regulation.

To support this ambition, we will seek to better connect the social science research base to business by driving pioneering new approaches to knowledge mobilisation, including commercialisation. We will work closely with Innovate UK and other partners to maximise impact.

We will:

- build a powerful evidence base around what works in innovation through over £40 million of investments, including [The Productivity Institute](#) and the [Programme on Innovation and Diffusion](#).
- invest in Local Policy and Innovation Partnerships, in partnership with AHRC and Innovate UK, to translate research insights into practical measures for boosting productivity and scaling up businesses.
- fund a new [UKRI Innovation and Research Caucus](#), collaborating with Innovate UK, to support the whole of UKRI in its innovation policies and decision making.
- accelerate the adoption of innovative business practices in the business and financial services sectors by investing over £3 million in partnership with Innovate UK.
- catalyse new approaches to exploiting the direct value of social science for commercialisation and knowledge exchange, in partnership with Innovate UK.

Case studies

Creating partnerships to support microbusinesses

Productivity from Below, an ESRC-funded collaboration between researchers (from the universities of Aston, Birmingham and Warwick), innovators and civil society partners has helped to grow and create ethnic minority microbusinesses in the Midlands. The partnership began before the onset of COVID-19 but pivoted its support during the pandemic to launch a business leaders' group to help retailers access government emergency funding. The project has continued to provide evidence-based practical business support, such as an entrepreneurship development programme and wider commercial advice and has enabled peer learning between ethnic minority microbusinesses. The partnership has helped to secure access to small grants with a combined value of over £3 million and has supported over a thousand entrepreneurs who are women or migrants.

Commercialising social science

There is considerable potential to use the knowledge and skills created by social science research to develop commercial products and services. For example, the Galatean Risk Screening Tool (GRiST) provides a web-based decision support system that enables mental health and social care professionals to better understand the risk of serious incidents such as suicide, self-harm and harm to others, and how to assess and manage these risks effectively. Developed with support from ESRC and other parts of UKRI by social and computer scientists at Aston University and the University of Warwick over a period of 17 years, GRiST has recently spun out into its own company, [eGRiST Ltd](#). It is used by thousands of mental health and social care professionals in care trusts across the UK. eGRiST Ltd is still expanding, having received sponsorship from a range of sources, including the European Institute of Innovation and Technology.



Solving the productivity puzzle, driving innovation and growth

Unravelling the complex factors that have left UK productivity lagging behind other leading industrialised nations remains critical to the nation's future growth and prosperity. Our flagship £30 million Productivity Institute brings together over 40 world-leading experts across many disciplines, from economics and management science to engineering and environmental science, who work directly with national, regional and local stakeholders to pinpoint the causes of productivity stagnation across many parts of the UK. The Institute's approach puts the importance of place at the heart of its analysis of productivity performance, and seeks impact by building relationships between researchers, businesses, and other stakeholders. Meanwhile, the Programme on Innovation and Diffusion (POID) is focused on how innovation is created and spread across the economy. POID will undertake the World Management Survey in 2022–23, creating the largest transnational longitudinal survey of management practices in the world.

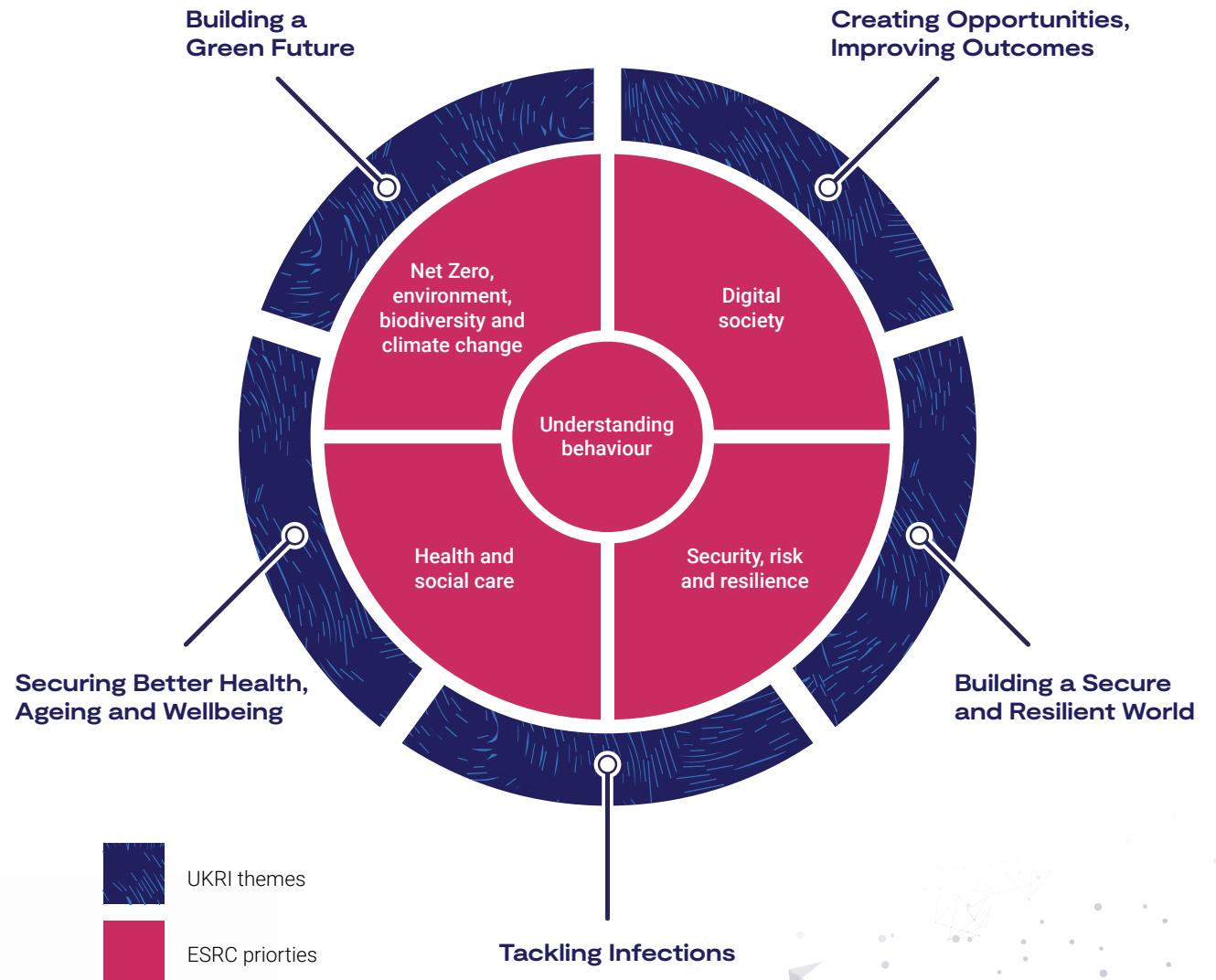
Objective 5: World-class impacts

Our aim is to ensure that the full power of UK social science is brought to bear in tackling the most pressing global, national and local challenges.

As part of UKRI we have identified five key strategic themes for future collaborative working: Building a Green Future; Securing Better Health, Ageing and Wellbeing; Tackling Infections; Building a Secure and Resilient World; and Creating Opportunities, Improving Outcomes. All five have deep social, economic and political components, and will only be understood and addressed through a deep knowledge of human behaviour. Within ESRC we are committed to working across UKRI and with a wide range of stakeholders to maximise the value and reach of these programmes.

These cross-cutting UKRI themes connect clearly with five priority areas that will shape ESRC’s strategic research investment over the coming years. Each requires urgent action if we are to create a more sustainable, stable and equitable future. Our first four priorities: Net Zero, environment, biodiversity and climate change; digital society; health and social care; and security, risk and resilience are connected and underpinned by a critical fifth priority, understanding behaviour, which shapes and informs how we respond to these challenges.

ESRC’s programme of strategic research will be driven by these five priorities. They will marshal the breadth of the social science research base, harnessing its power in novel interdisciplinary ways and drawing on the full range of our data infrastructure assets. It will be vital to connect beyond the boundaries of social science, drawing on the complementary strengths of the broader UK science base to generate fresh concepts and perspectives, novel data and methods, and new national capability. We will put policymakers and practitioners at the heart of all these programmes, from co-producing their design through to ensuring real-world impact.



Priority 1: Net Zero, environment, biodiversity and climate change

Population and economic growth over the past century have been unprecedented. The world's population is expected to increase by a further two billion people in the next 30 years, putting even more pressure on land use, water supply and the demand for currently carbon-intensive services such as energy, transport and housing. The UK government has set a clear direction in its [Net Zero Strategy](#) for steps to be taken by this country in responding to the challenge of controlling carbon emissions, and social science has a major contribution to make in supporting those actions.

We will fund research that generates the evidence needed to build resilience to environmental damage and climate change, drives a successful social and economic transition to a Net Zero society and a sustainable and biodiverse environment, and informs sustainable growth and desirable social outcomes. Delivering these ambitions will require major changes in the behaviour of people, firms and governments around the world. We will work across UKRI to develop and contribute to UKRI's Building a Green Future strategic theme.

We will:

- connect existing research findings on climate change to policymakers and practitioners, and identify the demand for new evidence, led by our interdisciplinary environment leadership team.
- invest in ambitious new interdisciplinary programmes on climate change mitigation and

adaptation, including a new programme on energy demand reduction with EPSRC, as well as the economics of climate change.

- work with international partners to launch a major multidisciplinary programme on finding solutions to climate change, including through the International Initiative for Research on Climate Change (IIRCC).

Priority 2: digital society

The increasingly rapid advance of technology such as artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing is transforming the world in which we live. New technologies are providing huge benefits across the economy and society. However, they also have the potential to cause damage and division, ranging from online bullying, mass deskilling and job loss through to fake news and threats to the foundations of the democratic process and national security. Digital skills and access to technology are also increasingly required to access public services and employment, which is serving to widen a 'digital divide' in society and runs the risk of exacerbating inequalities.

Our role is to ensure that social science guides the adoption of new technologies, charting a path which identifies and amplifies their positive societal outcomes whilst exposing and mitigating potential harmful effects. This will involve collaborating with a wide range of disciplines across the science base and combining fundamental research with public-facing and public-policy-oriented work.

We will:

- explore people's relationships with digital technologies and inform public understanding and decision making in the public and business sectors by investing in a £5 million programme led by an interdisciplinary network of researchers.
- invest £3.75 million in a new European programme with AHRC on digital transformations ([CHANSE](#)), exploring how digital innovations affect, and are affected by, economic, social and cultural change.
- launch a new education research programme, up to £6 million, focused on the impact of technology on teaching and learning in schools, and further build on our investment in research on the impact of digital work and remote working.
- further understanding of the societal outcomes of different potential 'digital futures' shaped by cutting-edge technologies such as AI, robotics and virtual reality by investing in research of these areas.

The uses of technology in education

How technology is used in teaching and learning shapes the impact it can make. ESRC's new £6 million Education Research Programme will invest in understanding the uses of technology in teaching and learning. Key themes include:

- the use of digital technologies to support learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and any longer-term implications.
- approaches to teaching in a digitally connected world.
- how to teach young people to use technology effectively, safely and responsibly.
- the impact of digital inequalities on pupils, and ways to mitigate them.

Projects are taking a comparative approach across the four UK nations to find new ways of working collaboratively with practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Priority 3: health and social care

Individual characteristics and the broader social context shape everyone's health and wellbeing. Educational background, the homes and neighbourhoods in which we live, what we eat, the jobs we do, our access to services and support, all affect our physical and mental health. The wider environmental context plays a key part too: many factors vary across regions and local areas, and the subsequent differences in health outcomes have widely varying impacts on local economies. Increasingly the changing climate is also directly impacting health, and we know that infectious diseases are more likely to emerge or spread under certain environmental conditions. Research evidence can be used to prevent ill health, to tackle its impacts, and to maximise the support that people from all backgrounds receive, wherever they live.

COVID-19 shone a light on the entrenched nature of inequalities in health and highlighted the intense pressure on the social care system. ESRC will support the use of evidence in social care to unlock the opportunities that research and innovation can offer to improve delivery of services and drive improvements in health and social care. Our long-term investment in data infrastructure, including ADR UK, and new underpinning behavioural research capacity supports the delivery of these ambitions. We will work collaboratively across UKRI to support and develop the health and social care elements of the UKRI Securing Better Health, Ageing and Wellbeing, and Creating Opportunities, Improving Outcomes strategic themes.

We will:

- strengthen social care research and evidence infrastructure through investment in our ongoing major investments in the Centre for Care and the Centre for Improving Adult Care Together (IMPACT).
- accelerate insights and innovations from the UK's wealth of social and biomedical longitudinal population studies by commissioning Population Research UK in partnership with the Medical Research Council (MRC) – a £9 million data infrastructure investment.
- launch a major £450,000 programme of food system research trials to transform the evidence base for addressing place-based inequalities in healthy diets, in partnership with six government departments and agencies (including Defra and the Cabinet Office).

Priority 4: security, risk and resilience

It is vital that we advance understanding of the shifting geopolitical order and the UK's evolving role within it, providing evidence to help create a more stable, resilient and secure global future. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and recent global conflicts have exposed the highly interconnected and interdependent world in which we live and have demonstrated how events can escalate quickly into major international social, political and economic crises. Future disasters cannot be avoided, and neither can shifts and shocks to the international geopolitical landscape or the economic system.

The UK needs to build societal and global resilience to these shocks, playing a leading role in maintaining a secure international order and managing impacts across the world.

ESRC's role is to improve understanding of the complex, and often interacting, risks that fuel social, political and economic instability and uncertainty. Our supported research will provide new evidence to anticipate, manage and reduce future threats, improving local, national and international resilience. Delivering our ambitions will require cross-UKRI collaboration as well as partnerships spanning government and a wide range of international agencies. This will include developing and contributing to UKRI's Building a Secure and Resilient World strategic theme.

We will:

- invest in research that aims to improve human security, supporting work that builds resilience to withstand, adapt to, and recover from acute or chronic shocks.
- expand our research programme and knowledge exchange and fellowship activities that focus on the UK's international role in a post-Brexit, post-pandemic world.
- develop new policy-facing research on global trade to support the UK's development of, and capabilities for, new international trading partnerships.

Policy advice in an uncertain and unstable world

Amidst growing geopolitical uncertainty, the UK must continue to navigate the political and economic implications of exiting the European Union and address new foreign policy challenges. We will extend the evidence we can offer on key foreign policy risks and opportunities by renewing our £4.5 million investment in the highly acclaimed [UK in a Changing Europe](#) platform. Since 2015 this has been widely acknowledged as a major source of independent, impartial and robust evidence on the EU referendum. To support the platform, we will fund a new cohort of academic fellows who will be charged with bringing their expertise to bear on the evolving geopolitical and economic shifts, shocks and challenges which face the UK and the rest of the world.

Case studies

Tackling the challenges of adult social care across the UK

Finding effective approaches and policies to delivering high-quality but affordable social care has been an enduring challenge for governments across the UK. [IMPACT \(Improving Adult Care Together\)](#) is a £15 million centre for improving adult social care, funded in partnership with the Health Foundation. The centre will draw on knowledge gained from different types of research and the experience of service users, their carers, and practitioners working in the sector. It will work across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to support innovation within social care practice and policy, taking account of different policy contexts in the four nations as well as sharing learning across the UK.



Priority 5: understanding behaviour

Understanding human behaviour is fundamental to each of the four preceding priorities and how we respond to major global challenges, from how society most effectively responds to climate change through to how we harness positive impacts and mitigate harm from new technologies, merging trends or new markets. There is substantial demand for behavioural research from policymakers, practitioners and industry leaders across the UK and globally. This comes at a time when scientific and technological developments, for example in data science and methods, provide exciting possibilities for advancing research in this field.

Behavioural research was critical to the UK's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with new collaborations and advisory structures supporting evidence-based decision making in government. Our ambition is to build on this legacy and create a lasting national capability for behavioural research which informs policy and practice and directly addresses the toughest policy challenges that we face nationally. This will involve bringing together the wide range of disciplines which study human behaviour, working closely with the public, policymakers and other practitioners.

We will:

- establish a new £15 million national capability in behavioural research, building a critical mass of researchers to convene and catalyse new fundamental and applied research using a wide range of data and cutting-edge methods.

Using AI to understand human behaviour

ESRC's data infrastructure investments enable councils across UKRI to support research on human behaviour. Our [Millennium Cohort Study](#), which follows the lives of 19,000 young people, was recently used by MRC-funded researchers at Cambridge University to understand the early warning signs of self-harm in adolescents. Using machine learning techniques, the team were able to detect risk factors, such as emotional regulation difficulties, risk-taking behaviours, and poor sleep, up to a decade before respondents reported self-harming. These findings offer health and education professionals an expanded window of opportunity to support at-risk young people before problems escalate.

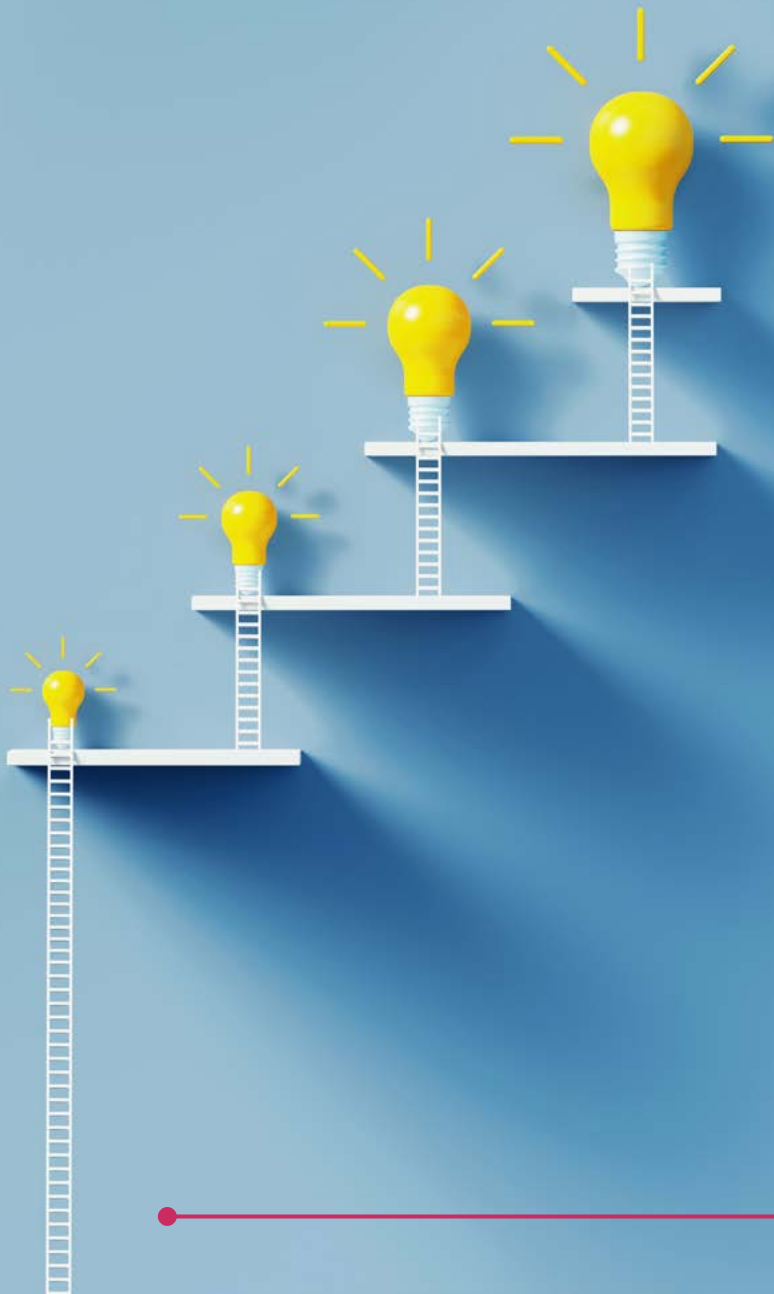
- strengthen the talent pipeline for the future by creating a new £5.5 million interdisciplinary Centre for Doctoral Training in behavioural research.
- invest in a behavioural research programme that addresses core policy challenges in line with UKRI strategic themes such as Net Zero, security, and health.

Case studies

How prison design can support offender rehabilitation

ESRC-funded research on the role of prison design in offender rehabilitation has transformed the architecture and design of prisons across five countries. Researchers at the University of Bath have supported architectural firms, prison services, and ministries of justice to adopt insights into trauma-sensitive design practices that improve prisoner mental health and behaviour, including creating outdoor family visiting spaces and using reinforced glass rather than bars in windows. Nine new prisons and 12 refurbishment projects across England, Wales, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand have been commissioned using these design principles.





Objective 6: A world-class organisation

ESRC's role is to support world-class social, behavioural and economic research. Working across UKRI we are committed to being an efficient, innovative, resilient, agile organisation. In the next three years we will deliver our ambitions in the most effective ways and within our agreed operating expenditure budget. By becoming more outcomes-focused, we will ensure our investments and collaborations deliver maximum impact with minimum bureaucracy. To ensure the researchers we support can focus their time on what they do best, we will reduce the burden on applicants for our funding, only collecting necessary and proportionate information through simplified and better systems.

We aim to build an inclusive and diverse workforce empowered to deliver sector-wide leadership by catalysing new ways of working and bringing people together. We will invest in and empower our talented people to collaborate and thrive. We will do so through close working across UKRI, with the research and innovation community and with all sectors to improve standards, maximise the impact of our investments and deliver change. We will seize the opportunity to build a more diverse and inclusive research community, and to embed environmental sustainability across everything we do.

To empower talented people to collaborate and thrive, we will:

- develop and implement an ESRC People Priority Plan to support an inclusive culture and diverse workforce, improving performance management, creating an agile and efficient workforce, and improving opportunities for career development.
- implement an ESRC EDI Action Plan as part of [UKRI's EDI strategy](#) and objectives, and covering our role as a leader, funder and employer.
- upskill UKRI staff in policy engagement through the joint ESRC/Government Policy Profession 'Think Policy' programme.

Evidence for action on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

ESRC, in partnership with AHRC, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), Innovate UK and the British Academy, is investing around £4 million over the next three years to establish a new EDI Caucus to harness academic expertise and research evidence to advance EDI in research and innovation. The EDI Caucus will be an interdisciplinary network

of academics funded to provide research insights that inform policy and practice on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. By reviewing, synthesising and generating new evidence, the Caucus will support decision making within UKRI and the British Academy, and across the wider research and innovation sector. The Caucus will be agile and flexible, enabling its funders and the wider sector to access rapid advice and evidence briefings when needed.



To make UKRI an efficient, effective and agile organisation, we will:

- review and streamline our operations, governance and stakeholder engagement to ensure that they interface seamlessly with UKRI's new operating model.
- support delivery of a single funding service, through the Simpler, Better Funding programme and a new Enterprise Resource Management system through the Services for HR, Accounting, Reporting and Procurement (SHARP) programme.
- respond to all the relevant Grant Review recommendations through our wider Reforming our Business and Operating Model organisational change programmes by continuing to streamline our systems, simplify and improve policies and processes, and reduce the administrative burdens on our communities, staff and partners
- continue to pilot innovative ways of working to reduce bureaucracy.

To catalyse change and impact through partnership and leadership, we will:

- increase engagement and dialogue with diverse stakeholders to sustain a resilient, trusted and world-leading research base.
- showcase social science impacts and successes through our annual Celebrating Impact Prize and impact engagement campaigns on place, climate change and sustainability, the post-pandemic future of the UK, and social sciences and innovation.
- improve the sustainability of our operations as part of UKRI's environmental sustainability strategy.

'Think Policy' programme

As part of our cross-UKRI training offer, ESRC has launched a Think Policy seminar series featuring prominent speakers who bring to life how decision makers in government engage with research and academic expertise. Attended by over 500 staff, the virtual seminars have been designed to support UKRI with policy engagement activity. Topics include the Chief Scientific Adviser network, Parliament, policy and strategy, and the government analytical professions. ESRC will extend the series to feature the work of devolved administrations and local government.



Our budget

Budget category ^{i ii}	2022-23 (£m)	2023-24 (£m)	2024-25 (£m)
Core R&I Budgets	121.50	118.78	121.95
Existing cross-UKRI Strategic Programmes	36.94	35.88	37.88
Fund for International Collaboration	4.36	1.42	0.91
Strategic Priorities Fund	11.02	11.32	11.58
Administrative Data Research UK	21.57	23.14	25.39
Infrastructure*	36.02	41.47	40.60
World Class Labs	35.88	41.39	40.60
Digital Research Infrastructure Programme – phase 1b pilot projects (2022-23 – 2023-24) An additional project in collaboration with MRC is captured in the MRC Strategic Delivery Plan	0.17	0.08	0.00
R&I Budgets – existing time-limited commitments	2.10	0.00	0.00
COVID interventions	2.10	0.00	0.00
Grand Total	196.56	196.13	200.42

Notes

- i. The figures provided in this document are in line with the 2022-23 – 2024-25 budget allocations for UK Research and Innovation. These are broken down by our budgeting and reporting categories, and exclude funding for ODA, Financial Transactions, and BEIS Managed Programmes. Figures are indicative and may vary over the course of the three-year period due to budget adjustments made as a part of on-going financial management and planning processes to maximise the use of our total funding.
- ii. From 2022-23 UKRI talent investments are managed collectively across the Research Councils. The funding for collective talent activities outlined in this delivery plan are accounted for in the broader collective talent funding line included in our Corporate Plan.

* Infrastructure projects are detailed separately below. Note that further infrastructure allocations to Councils may be made during the Spending Review period from the Infrastructure Fund, Digital Research Infrastructure Programme and Carbon Zero Fund Programme.

Infrastructure Fund projects include:*	Total lifetime allocation (some in future SR periods)
Infrastructure Fund: Wave 1 – Full project – Early Life Cohort Subject to business case approval	28.00
Infrastructure Fund: Wave 2 - Full project - DigitalFootprints Subject to business case approval	49.30

* Further allocations may be made during the Spending Review period. Excludes wave 1 preliminary activities where spend was in 21-22 only. Allocations include contingency, which may be returned if unused.

References

1. Figures were derived from citation analysis of all global publications published between 2017-21 (inclusive) and associated with at least one of ESRC's constituent disciplines. This analysis was obtained using data obtained on 31/03/2022, from Digital Science's Dimensions platform, available at <https://app.dimensions.ai>. Access was granted to subscription-only data sources under licence agreement.
2. <https://www.leidenranking.com/ranking/2021/list>

Image references

- Page 3 Interim ESRC Executive Chair, Alison Park.
Credit: Adam Gasson
- Page 20 Image of Professor Bart Van Ark on a purple and grey sofa, talking to a colleague.
Credit: Matt Beech
- Page 26 Redesigned prison.
Credit: ESRC
- Page 29 ESRC Festival of Social Science, Cardiff University – Reuse and Repair Workshop, 24 November 2021.
Credit: Matthew Horwood



**Economic
and Social
Research Council**

Economic and Social Research Council
Polaris House
North Star Avenue
Swindon SN2 1UJ

esrcenquiries@esrc.ukri.org

ukri.org/esrc

