

Item X
ESRC 2026-XX
26.02.26
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First presentation of this paper
No conflicts of interest have been identified

ESRC Council Meeting Minutes 26.02.26

Members: *Todd Landman (Senior Independent Member - SIM), Anita Charlesworth, Jane Duckett, David Halpern (in part?), Ben Page, Cecilia Wong, Becky Francis, Kim Scharf, Catherine Hutchinson (CSA)*

ESRC Directors: *Stian Westlake (SW), Alison Park (AP), Claire Graves (CG), Jen Gold (JG), Joe Cuddeford (JC)*

Attendees: *Peter Ethelston, Caitlin Tickell, Ian Chapman (IC) (for item #3)*

Apologies: *Andrew Dilnot*

Secretariat: *Sophie Kirby*

Agenda Item #1: Chair's Welcome & Council Business

Todd welcomed the group to the 33rd meeting of Council and introduced both Catherine Hutchinson and Joe Cuddeford to their first meeting of ESRC Council and noted advisories and apologies.

- The Council SIM asked for any contributions to AOB, and none were noted on this occasion.
- The minutes of the 32nd meeting from November 2025 were approved and accepted as a record of the meeting.
- No matters arising were noted, and no comments were made on the forward schedule for future meetings.
 - SW noted that comments have been engaged with and that portfolio scanning will be addressed for future meetings.
 - Council members noted that it could be helpful to invite to an in-person meeting some guests that are involved in the foundational work across the social science space. It was noted that organisation such as Nuffield Foundation and Leverhulme could be helpful contributors to this conversation.

Agenda Item #2: To Note: Executive Chair's Business

SW presented the Executive Chair's Report

- SW noted that the current major focus of ESRC is progressing with the practical implementation of the spending settlement, including the refresh of applicant-led mode and input into the Industrial Strategy and government priorities programme. It was noted that areas outside of the scope of the Industrial Strategy are being given thought to including education and crime and justice, for example.

- SW noted that several institutes funded by ESRC such as the Centre for Economic Productivity and Programme on Innovation and Diffusion (POID) at LSE are having traction, with senior academics from these institutions taking on government roles in productivity and growth. Examples include Anna Valero, appointed Industrial Strategy Adviser to HMT in October 2025; Henry Overman, Member of Industrial Strategy Advisory Committee for Department of Business and Trade; John van Reenen, Growth Adviser, HMT.
- SW noted that ESRC is partnering with the Home Office to support the commissioning of research on Recommendation 10 of the National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse ("the Casey Audit") to further social science research in the area of violence against women and girls (VAWG)
- SW thanked the three demitting Council members, Ben Page, Jane Duckett, and Kimberley Scharf for their helpful thoughts and committed service to ESRC and UKRI.

Questions:

- Council members noted that the focus on the Industrial Strategy indicates that government departments will be the primary funder for research priorities which fall outside of this funding scope. SW noted that he is in the process of coordinating with relevant government departments to ensure there is a unified message around the areas which fall outside of IS-8 categories (especially regarding education and crime and justice). AP noted that a big part of this discussion is in connection with ESRC's big data investments.
- Council members noted the focus on the productivity gap and the integral position of place and the resulting impact and influence on government policy. SW and council members discussed the success of productivity research within local areas and on national levels.
- Council members discussed the Spending Review settlement for Metascience and what the outcomes planned are for this programme. JG provided context of planned activity within this space, noting a programme of work underway to improve metrics utilising AI to improve metrics used to measure impact.

Agenda Item #3: CEO Update: UKRI Vision

UKRI CEO, Ian Chapman, attended to speak to UKRI vision and take questions from Council

- Ian Chapman presented his thoughts on UKRI Strategy, and noted the clarification of the refreshed UKRI mission, 'To advance knowledge, improve lives and drive growth'. IC noted that he is keen to ensure transparency of spending helps strategy clearly linked to spending. IC noted the importance of specialisation, noting that making choices means that some miss out, however when choices aren't made, everyone misses out.
- IC noted his focus on wanting to improve operational efficiency and decrease the inertia in the system. IC noted that in breadth of an organisation, UKRI equates to a FTSE 100 and needs to model productive corporate behaviours like focusing on impact and outcome, rather than inputs.
- IC noted his focus on improving the relationship and partnership with government partners, especially DSIT. IC also noted the importance of relationships with those we fund; funding and walking with our delivery partners, rather than funding and walking away.

Questions:

- Council members appreciated for IC's focus and strategy, noting the inevitability of prioritisation and that Councils are behind this strategy.

- Council members posed a question regarding timescales of research and research relevance; IC noted that the aggregate risk of losing relevance is higher than the risk of moving at pace. IC noted the average award timeline is 190 days currently, and that reducing this is a major focus.
- Members asked IC about his opinion of the role of social science within the Industrial Strategy. IC noted that Bucket 2 is 'societal priorities', and that he believes social science should be horizontally supporting every area, embedded in all the Industrial Strategy sectors.
- Members asked IC about conversations with ministers and other government departments. IC noted that there is a noticeable increase in engagement from government departments, and that there is a member from the relevant department on the board of the relating IS-8 area. Members noted the importance of the R&D Missions Accelerator Programme for these relationships too. SW noted that the structure of these missions is to have government departments articulate what they want each mission to invest in and work on, and for the missions to go ahead and action it.
- Members noted that universities are going through similar refocusing and restructuring in tandem to the changes ongoing in UKRI, asking if a team comes together with a cross-Council, IS-8 idea, how will they know where they go? IC noted that his desire is for there to be a pipeline planner showcasing focus for the upcoming 6 months, clear direction and public clarity on what will be (and not be) funded.
- Members noted that there is still some concern around visibility of social sciences within the strategy landscape, and that they are heartened to hear IC's focus on ensuring it integrates through all areas. A request was made to publicly flag this horizontal integration of social science, this was noted and members were asked to ensure they also communicate this as ESRC and UKRI ambassadors.
- Members questioned how UKRI will navigate government uncertainty and its influence on the Industrial Strategy areas. IC noted that the areas will be unlikely to change significantly even with change, as they are strategic priorities for the UK.
- IC noted through the questions that IS-8 programmes are desired to be fully integrated across Councils, not that there is just some bidding in from different councils on some projects which fit under these areas.
- Members noted the importance of having colleagues, council members, and other stakeholders sit across Councils in the governance structure of UKRI as well as the implementation of IS-8 programmes in practice. IC thanked Council for this challenge and noted he would take it away to think about it.
- Members asked IC if International (as an area) is a future focus for him and his strategy. IC noted the importance of prioritisation for excellence in this sphere, mentioning that there are ongoing conversations.
- IC thanked colleagues for their questions and contributions to ESRC and UKRI.

Agenda Item #4: ESRC's Contribution to the Industrial Strategy

How does Social Science weave into each IS-8 category? How does ESRC Contribute to 'Bucket 2' – Delivering Government Priorities Mission

- SW introduced this item, noting that both advice on the specifics of what ESRC will do and the process of how we do this would be appreciated. SW noted that the 'emerging and other' category is an area which ESRC has responsibility.

Questions:

- Council members asked SW for progress within IS-8 involvement, noting the importance of being 'at the table' for important areas. SW noted that ESRC is engaged and working across all relevant areas. SW noted that there is ongoing work within health, life sciences, and climate change in ESRC; and that all avenues of involvement across areas are being explored.

- SW noted that UKRI is thinking through a lens of a theory of change led by the Industrial Strategy, and that this is an ongoing thought process.
 - JG noted that programme boards were intentionally built to have a few Council representatives and involve cross-Council memberships across the programmes at different levels. JG also noted the factor of committed headroom within a lot of these IS-8 programmes over the coming years, meaning that large pots of new funding are further down the line.
 - Members noted that this is an institutional re-design point and provided challenge to ESRC to use the council members in different areas across the new structure to advance social science and add to the different areas.
- Members noted the importance of staying relevant academically and intellectually, as this drives policy interest; as well as aligning horizontally to government priorities.
 - SW agreed and noted the relevance of the central ESRC funding for Curiosity Driven Research for ensuring this challenge is met.
 - The importance of getting leading academics involved in and invested in the development of government priorities was noted. SW raised an idea of workshoping with academics for future planning of interdisciplinarity and IS-8 working.
 - Council members noted the importance of social science being involved in AI commentary, especially in relation to social commentary and disruption.
- The recent white paper focused on the needs of young people with special educational needs in the education sector was noted, including the value of further research in this space. Members also noted the crucial factor of talent and skills in this area as these people move out of education and into civic life.
- **SW agreed that ESRC will provide a progress update on ESRC's involvement in the Industrial Strategy areas at the next Council meeting in May.** SW noted that council members will be approached for involvement in conversations and workshop sessions for the May Council.
 - Council members offered to help with the workshoping previously mentioned across academic fields.

Agenda Item #5: ESRC's Curiosity-Driven Research Strategy

Jen Gold presented slides to Council members detailing ESRC's Curiosity Driven research strategy refresh

- JG provided information to members on the five programmes within this refresh, including two pilot programmes that are already in the public domain following the publication of pre-call announcements for 'React' and 'Connect'. JG noted that this refresh has been undertaken in consultation with stakeholders both inside ESRC and externally. JG asked Council members to note that there are no plans to pause current response mode schemes ahead of launching new schemes and that the research community would be given advance notice of any changes.
- TL asked Council members to ensure that they are reassuring colleagues and stakeholders that media reports of a pause are inaccurate.

Question and comments:

- Council members endorsed the refresh plans, noting the coherence of the proposed portfolio of funding opportunities.
- Members asked whether there is an intentional stepping or pathway between the different schemes. JG noted that the funding opportunities offer a pathway between schemes (e.g. moving from securing a 'Connect' award that seeds a new research area to submitting an application to 'Explore' or 'Grow' that allows research activity at a larger scale) but that there was no requirement or expectation for applicants to follow this route. SW also noted that funding to support early-stage activity could also result in

applications for follow-on funding being sought from other funding agencies. Council members noted enthusiasm for this ‘staircase’ support option for researcher ideas and careers.

- Members asked about whether the ALM portfolio still supported Centres. JG noted that the refresh offers the research community the continued opportunity to apply for funding Centres but had the advantage of offering greater flexibility. In particular, rather than the research community having to wait for periodic dedicated Centres competitions, applications can be submitted at any point via the Challenge awards. The Challenge scheme has a similar outcome of interest to the former Centres competition (i.e. a time-bound challenge that can be addressed within a five year period) but was more flexible – rather than prescribing the need to apply for a centre, applicants could also propose other activities such as networks or large research projects that would address the challenge set out in their applications.
- Council members noted the role of the universities in supporting ESRC’s React and Connect schemes. Delays caused by issues such as issuing cost codes in response to award letters needed to be monitored. JG noted that turnaround times would be looked at in the review of the pilot schemes.
- SW provided context to Council members on anticipated risk within these refreshed schemes. Members requested to information on how ESRC is going to manage the transition to the refresh. JG noted extensive internal planning around internal resource, process, and communications. However, it was noted that some risks, such as potential surges in applications to schemes that are closing, cannot be fully mitigated and will be built into ESRC’s resource plans.
 - Council members requested understanding of the timelines around the rollout of these schemes. JG noted that the pilots are being launched in April, and that other schemes will be launching towards the end of 2026 and early 2027. Timelines will be shared with the research community in the coming months.

Agenda Item #6: AOB

The Chair opened for any other business from Council members

- Council’s CSA, Catherine Hutchinson, provided reflections from her first meeting, including thinking about what CSA networks and government departments can do to assist in all of these conversations.
- Council members asked for an update on the funding of PhDs at the next meeting of Council. AP thanked Council members and noted it will come to either the May or July meeting.

Papers for Discussion by Exception:

- Draft May Council Agenda

Actions to Note:

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| 1 | SW agreed that ESRC will provide a progress update on ESRC’s involvement in the Industrial Strategy areas at the next Council meeting in May | Stian Westlake and ESRC Council Secretariat |
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Future Agenda Items Raised:



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| 1 | Council members noted that it could be helpful to invite to an in-person meeting some guests that are involved in the foundational work across the social science space. | Forward Look |
| 2 | ESRC will provide a progress update on ESRC's involvement in the Industrial Strategy areas at the next Council meeting in May | May Council and ongoing |