Economic and Social Research Council

MINUTES OF THE 20th MEETING OF COUNCIL
HELD ON 20 OCTOBER 2022 VIRTUALLY

Present:	Professor Diane Coyle (*Chair, Senior Independent Member*)
	Professor Rachel Brooks
	Professor Jane Duckett
	Mr Mike Emmerich
	Professor Dame Rachel Griffith
	Professor Lasana Harris
	Ms Desirée Lopez
	Mr Ben Page
	Professor Todd Landman
	Professor Jackline Wahba
	Professor Sir Simon Wessely
	Professor Alan Penn
Apologies:	Professor Sir Bernard Silverman
	Sir Chris Wormald
Office:	Alison Park *(Interim Executive Chair)*
	Claire Graves (*Chief Operating Officer*)
	Jeremy Neathey *(Director of Strategy)*
	Jen Gold *(Director of Research)*
	Peter Ethelston *(Associate Director for Governance and Policy)*
	Oliver Hill-Andrews (*Private Office*)
	Gillian Bartoszewska *(Secretariat)*

These minutes do not necessarily reflect the precise order in which items were discussed.

1.	**Welcome and apologies**
1.1	Diane Coyle welcomed members to the 20th meeting of ESRC Council.
1.2	Council noted apologies from Bernard Silverman and Chris Wormald.
1.3	Diane thanked Alan Penn for his contributions to ESRC Council as he steps down as the Chief Scientific Adviser network representative at the end of 2022.
1.4	Diane informed Council that Todd Landman would assume the role of deputy Chair and Senior Independent Member (SIM) with effect from the February 2023 Council meeting and would take over as Chair and SIM from June 2023.
2.	**Minutes of the previous meeting**
2.1	The minutes of the previous meeting were **agreed** as an accurate record.

3.	**Matters arising**
3.1	Members were updated on the status of matters arising from the previous meeting.
4.	**Interim Executive Chair's business and update on context**
4.1	Alison Park flagged key highlights from the Executive Chair's report, which had been circulated before the meeting. Many of the highlights illustrated how ESRC was leading on convening and catalysing cross-UKRI and government activity:

- A second round of ESRC's successful Policy Fellowships programme was planned. The 2021 policy fellows were already having impact by informing decision making on the most pressing policy problems and strengthening engagement between government and academia.
- Three appointments had been made to the new Digital Footprints Strategic Hub in advance of the investment's launch in 2023.
- A new round of the Skills and Employment Survey had been commissioned and would take place in 2023 (the first round to capture data since the pandemic).
- A new funding model for Understanding Society had been agreed, which would enable its grant to cover up to 6 waves of data collection. ESRC had also agreed a £6 million investment to update the biosocial data collected in waves 2 to 3, introducing some new measures on an experimental basis (such as the gut microbiome).
- ADR UK announced data linkage projects being funded through the ADR England Research Ready Data call, including new data linkages for the ADR UK programme related to environment and health, a project to facilitate wider research use of the longitudinal education outcomes dataset, and further funding for flagship programmes such as Ministry of Justice's Data First programme and ECHILD.
- ADR UK's International Population Data Linkage conference brought together over 500 researchers from across 14 different countries to showcase the research that ADR UK facilitated, and to learn from research groups across the world working on linked administrative and health data.
- ESRC initiated a cross-UKRI initiative called 'Local Policy Innovation Partnerships' (LPIPs) to strengthen the role that data, evidence and expertise played in local policymaking and practice. LPIPs would strengthen relationships between local authorities and researchers, generate insights into local challenges and opportunities and provide local policymakers with actionable policy solutions to drive sustainable, inclusive growth. Innovate UK and AHRC agreed to contribute funds to the scheme.
- ESRC was funding three mid-career academic 'Thematic Research Leads' within the ESRC-funded Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology to ensure that research evidence is fed into scrutiny, legislation and debate.
- ESRC's 2022 Centres competition had been pre-announced, to be followed by pre-announcements for three additional strategically focused centres. The strategically focused centres would deliver on commitments within the UKRI strategic themes on sustainable and equitable low-carbon living (building a green future theme), social cohesion (creating opportunities, improving

outcomes theme) and climate change and health (health, ageing and wellbeing theme).

- ESRC's National Capability in Behavioural Research programme funding opportunities were live for the leadership team and Centre for Doctoral Training. The programme aimed to support evidence-based decision making through high-quality research on human behaviour.
- A second series of ESRC's successful 'Think Policy' seminars was planned, which would focus on UKRI's five strategic themes.
- The Actionable Insights seminars, which connected UKRI-funded researchers with policymakers across government, had been extended to cover a broader range of pressing cross-cutting issues such as energy security and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Building on work from the ISCF Next Generation Services Research Programme, ESRC and Innovate UK launched a call focused on the creation of hubs of excellence which would support the professional and financial services to apply knowledge in the social sciences, adopt technologies and undertake innovation.

5.	**UKRI operating model**
5.1	Alison Park outlined UKRI activity of relevance to ESRC, speaking to slides that would be shared with Council after the meeting. Alison placed UKRI's organisational change activities in the context of external reviews and challenging Operational Expenditure targets across government and UKRI. The targets were partly in recognition of existing UKRI activity whose justification was streamlining and improving processes. The future UKRI Operating Model work was a key part of this activity; it consisted of 10 work strands, each guided by design principles and overseen by a Design Authority (which includes Claire Graves).
5.2	Claire Graves outlined work on UKRI's vision for a Simpler and Better Funding programme, which aims to create a funding service that is easy to use and supports everyone involved in research funding. Claire highlighted the benefits users were seeing so far and next steps during the transition.
	Claire then provided further detail on the "Funding Ideas" Operating Model workstream, which aims to optimise the delivery of UKRI's funding of research and innovation (covering both responsive and strategic modes) and strategy, policy and external engagement in this area.
5.3	Alison highlighted other ongoing UKRI activity, including:

- work within the ESRC Senior Leadership Team on ESRC resourcing and priorities
- a new pilot cross-council responsive mode scheme to encourage interdisciplinary research focused on proposals that cross council remit boundaries
- a review of peer review and a harmonised approach to responsive mode assessment
- contingency plans should we be unable to associate with Horizon Europe

5.4	Council members said they would welcome further engagement on the cross-council responsive mode scheme and recognised the need to prioritise activities.
6	**Workshop: future of responsive mode and PhD stipend**
6.1	Claire Graves introduced the future of responsive mode activity and Alison Park introduced the PhD stipend activity. Council considered the strengths and weaknesses of a range of scenarios in two groups.
6.2	Jen Gold reported that the future responsive mode scenario with evolutionary change maintained process integrity but might not be radical enough given current operational expenditure challenges. Concern was expressed on the potential impact of a lack of feedback on Early Career Researchers. The possibility of streamlining peer review forms was considered as a middle ground. The future responsive mode with revolutionary change scenario showed promise. Simplification and streamlining was required, however in order to understand the options under this scenario, Council members needed more information and evidence.
6.3	Jeremy Neathey reported that there was reluctant acceptance of the PhD stipend scenario to reduce PhD numbers to live within the existing budget. However, Council members noted the potential loss of ESRC influence, which might affect research organisations' engagement in the Doctoral Training Partnerships application process. Consideration would need to be given on the mechanism for reducing numbers, particularly for disciplines that needed support.
6.4	Alison thanked Council members for their participation in the workshop and outlined the timeline for future communications.
7.	**Annual self-assessment of the effectiveness of ESRC Council**
7.1	Claire Graves reported on the findings of the Council self-assessment and highlighted Council endorsement of the buddying system; the impartial, objective and effective chairing of Council; and Council's understanding of ESRC's strategy and performance against its Strategic Delivery Plan.
7.2	Jeremy Neathey reflected the ongoing value of Council's wide expertise and positive engagement in ESRC activities, including in the development of the Strategic Delivery Plan. Council members agreed that they had a good relationship with ESRC and felt that they made a beneficial contribution to its objectives.
8.	**Any other business**
8.1	Alison Park paid tribute to Jeremy Neathey, who was retiring at the end of 2022. Council thanked him for everything he had done for ESRC and social science over the last 32 years.
9.	**Close**