

Item 1
ESRC 2026-01
13.02.26
Author: Sophie Kirby
First presentation of this paper
No conflicts of interest have been identified

ESRC Council Meeting Minutes 20.11.25

Members: Todd Landman (Senior Independent Member - SIM), Anita Charlesworth, Andrew Dilnot, Jane Duckett, David Halpern, Ben Page, Cecilia Wong, Becky Francis

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

Attendees: Peter Ethelston, Caitlin Tickell, Ellen Pasternack, Geoff Mulgan (for item 7), Professor Alissa Goodman (for item 6), Professor Lisa Calderwood (for item 6), Professor Pasco Fearon (for item 6), Beccy Shipman (for item 6)

Apologies: Kim Scharf

Secretariat: Sophie Kirby

Agenda Item #1-4: Chair's Welcome & Council Business

Todd welcomed the group to the 32nd meeting of Council and invited the Council members to introduce themselves.

- The SIM welcomed the group, noted Kim Scharf as giving apologies and reminded members to complete Declarations of Interest.
- The minutes from July Council were noted as approved and Flo Bradley-Sutton was thanked for her work as Council Secretariat which has now been handed to new Council Secretariat, Sophie Kirby.
- All actions were noted as closed.
- Members were invited to look at the forward schedule and note any future item suggestions.
 - Members noted that changes to applicant-led funding is an important agenda item.
 - Members noted that changes to curiosity driven research including changes to peer review is an important item for future discussion.

- The Council members discussed the importance of ensuring and measuring impact within ESRC.
 - The importance of noting a 3–5-year timeline and ensuring projects being undertaken now will facilitate impact at the end of that timescale.
 - Council members discussed how ESRC’s most impactful recent work could be summarised in a hypothetical ‘elevator pitch’.
 - ESRC Colleagues noted the Decision Maker Panel, the recently funded ‘Using AI for evidence synthesis’, and the first birth cohort survey in 25 years, Generation New Era.
 - Council members noted the importance of investing in excellent people as a pillar of impact in addition to important and impactful projects.
 - JG noted Metascience’s importance and effect on the science landscape more broadly, noting an upcoming announcement regarding Metascience next week.

Agenda Item #5: To Note: Executive Chair’s Business

SW presented the Executive Chair’s Report

- SW noted the launch of the AI Evidence Synthesis Study at the UN General Assembly, which Dr Jen Gold attended, and mentioned the launch of the Generation New Era cohort study at UCL.
- SW detailed recent progress being made within Economic Growth projects led by the ESRC Productivity and Growth team.
- It was noted that Professor Philippe Aghion, an ESRC Research Fellow at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Centre for Economic Performance, was a joint winner of the 2025 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel recently.
- SW noted that high-level budgetary allocations will be published next week, focusing on three areas, noting that these are still subject to final agreement by the DSIT Secretary of State so details cannot be shared at this time:
 - Protecting Curiosity Driven, Foundational Science
 - Supporting Strategic Government and Societal Priorities
 - Targeting Innovative, UK-Based Company Scale-Up and Growth
- SW noted an optimism and energy for the future from UKRI’s new Chief Executive. SW noted the importance of ESRC maximising opportunities for involvement across UKRI.
- Council members noted the value of being kept apprised of relationships that ESRC maintains across government. SW noted involvement of the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation in the R&D MAP Programme and involvement in social science discussions.

- It was agreed that any developments within the Data Space would be brought to Council for discussion if relevant. SW noted involvement of ESRC across this space, including his membership of the National Data Library Expert Advisory Group.
- Council noted the importance of talent funding, identifying UK university funding factors which are important to consider, requesting that the Talent funding space could be a future item for Council.
 - AP explained planned changes to the Doctoral Training Programmes and Centres for Doctoral Training, noting that a conversation regarding these plans at Council could be helpful for garnering advice.
- Council continued a conversation surrounding impact, where SW noted a focus for ESRC internally on looking at monitoring and evaluation processes.
 - Council noted that it would be interesting to discuss at Council the balance between a national and regionalised nature of research.

Agenda Item #6: To Discuss: Generation New Era team at UCL

Beccy Shipman, Professor Alissa Goodman, Professor Pasco Fearon, Professor Lisa Calderwood presented the Generation New Era (GNE) study

- Beccy Shipman presented background on the GNE study, noting that ESRC is the lead funder and that this is co-funded by the UKRI Infrastructure Fund. It was noted that Birth Cohorts in the UK have set a global standard, noting the underpinning nature of these studies for social science research more broadly, leading to many marked policy improvements such as protecting vulnerable children and women's maternal health.
 - It was noted that risks and related mitigations have been a major focus of this Cohort, noting the feasibility study that was undertaken in preparation for the GNE.
 - It was noted that the need for GNE is constituted by the breadth of changes to effects on childhood since the last ESRC-funded birth cohort study commenced 25 years ago. BS noted that the partnership between the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and ESRC has been crucial in working together to build this current Cohort. BS thanked the UCL team for their efforts in building this Cohort.
- The GNE Team from UCL presented a deep dive into the GNE Cohort, noting multiple partners involved in this piece of work. It was noted that this Cohort Study will be a central infrastructure resource for research into the lives of children, specifically focusing on inequalities within childhood.

- It was noted that 30,000 babies will be involved in this study, with a specific focus on ensuring diversity across races, socio-economic groups, and other factors.
- Participating families will be invited to use the 'Baby Steps' app, which will allow continuous data collection and connection with the research team.
- The team asked for input regarding scientific priorities and stakeholder engagement.
 - Council noted the level of granularity surrounding geographical data, the sampling plans within the Cohort Study, and whether the impact of COVID-19 had been considered by the team. Members also noted the importance of admin data and engagement beyond the social science in looking at the extension and expansion of the study.

Agenda Item #7: Informal Lunch Time Session with Geoff Mulgan (An ARIA for social issues?)

Geoff Mulgan came to ESRC Council to facilitate an informal session with Council Members

- Geoff Mulgan provided a presentation to Council Members over lunch, which provided the starting point for a broad conversation on the potential for ambitious, far-reaching research in the social sciences that aims to provide solutions to problems (such as population ageing) that we expect to face in the medium- to long-term future.

Agenda Item #8: How can Social Sciences respond to spending review opportunities, in particular the Industrial Strategy?

SW presented current information in relation to UKRI changes and invited Council members to provide advice on this topic.

- SW noted that Curiosity Driven Research is under review, and that the details of this will be discussed at February Council.
- SW informed Council members of changes to funding structure within UKRI.
- SW explained UKRI's plans around the Industrial Strategy Government Priorities, noting that each area will have a UKRI Executive Chair as its Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) with cross-UKRI work across all areas and their directors, noting the importance of strengthened programme management as these develop.
 - SW noted that the SROs for each of the Industrial Strategy areas will be developing the cases, and these will be shared for information in due course.
 - Council noted concern around the focus of these Industrial Strategy areas in practice, including noting areas of omission. SW explained the collaborative working approach which these areas require between the Executive Chairs, and the importance of weaving social science through these areas as there is clear

relevance across the priorities. It was felt that the interdisciplinary approach could have significant benefits for UKRI and the wider research community.

- Council noted that the public sector is not included in IS8 categories. SW responded that there will be a category for non-IS8 areas for research, and subcategories within the IS8 categories, some of which will include areas of research relevant to the public sector.
- SW noted appreciation for Council’s thoughts and advice, noting that as soon as information is ready to be shared it will be cascaded with Council members.
- Council members suggested that they would value the opportunity to be involved in the Industrial Strategy areas to support interdisciplinary ways of working.

Agenda Item #9: AOB

The Chair opened for any other business from Council members

- There was no AOB to share.

Papers for Discussion by Exception:

- Council Effectiveness Review
- Draft February Council Agenda

Actions to Note:

1	ESRC Directors will share further information on budgetary allocations when it is ready to be shared.	ESRC Directors facilitated by Council Secretariat
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Future Agenda Items Raised:

1	Changes to Applicant-Led Funding Mode (February Council)	February Council
2	Changes to curiosity driven research including changes to peer review	Forward Look
3	Ensuring and measuring impact of ESRC Research	Forward Look



4	The tension between regionalised and nationalised research	Forward Look
5	How does social science weave through all IS8 categories?	February Council
6	Garnering feed-in for the 2030 Landscape Awards from Council	Forward Look