

# Strategic Plan - 2015

A large, diverse crowd of people is arranged in a heart shape, surrounding the ESRC logo. The people are of various ages, ethnicities, and are wearing different colored clothing, creating a vibrant and inclusive visual. The heart shape is formed by the density of the crowd, with the top and bottom points being the most concentrated.

E · S · R · C  
ECONOMIC  
& SOCIAL  
RESEARCH  
COUNCIL

Social science shaping society







# Social science shaping society

Social science helps us to understand how societies work, and how we can help institutions and individuals to flourish. Challenges, such as how to achieve sustainable economic growth and how to improve health and wellbeing for all sectors of society, require interdisciplinary collaboration, with a major contribution from social science. The ESRC supports research which tackles major issues, and makes a real difference to people's lives, both in the UK and globally.

The world has never been as interconnected as it is today. There is hardly an area where political, social and economic transformations are confined to local or even national level. Governance and decision-making is developing into a complex and diverse system where supra-national and sub-national actors often play equally important roles. This is particularly relevant for the UK as its relations with the European Union evolve and greater devolution at national, regional and local level is debated. Conflict and politicised violence can be another result of interconnectedness. The motivations of actors involved in conflicts require close investigation to inform effective interventions.

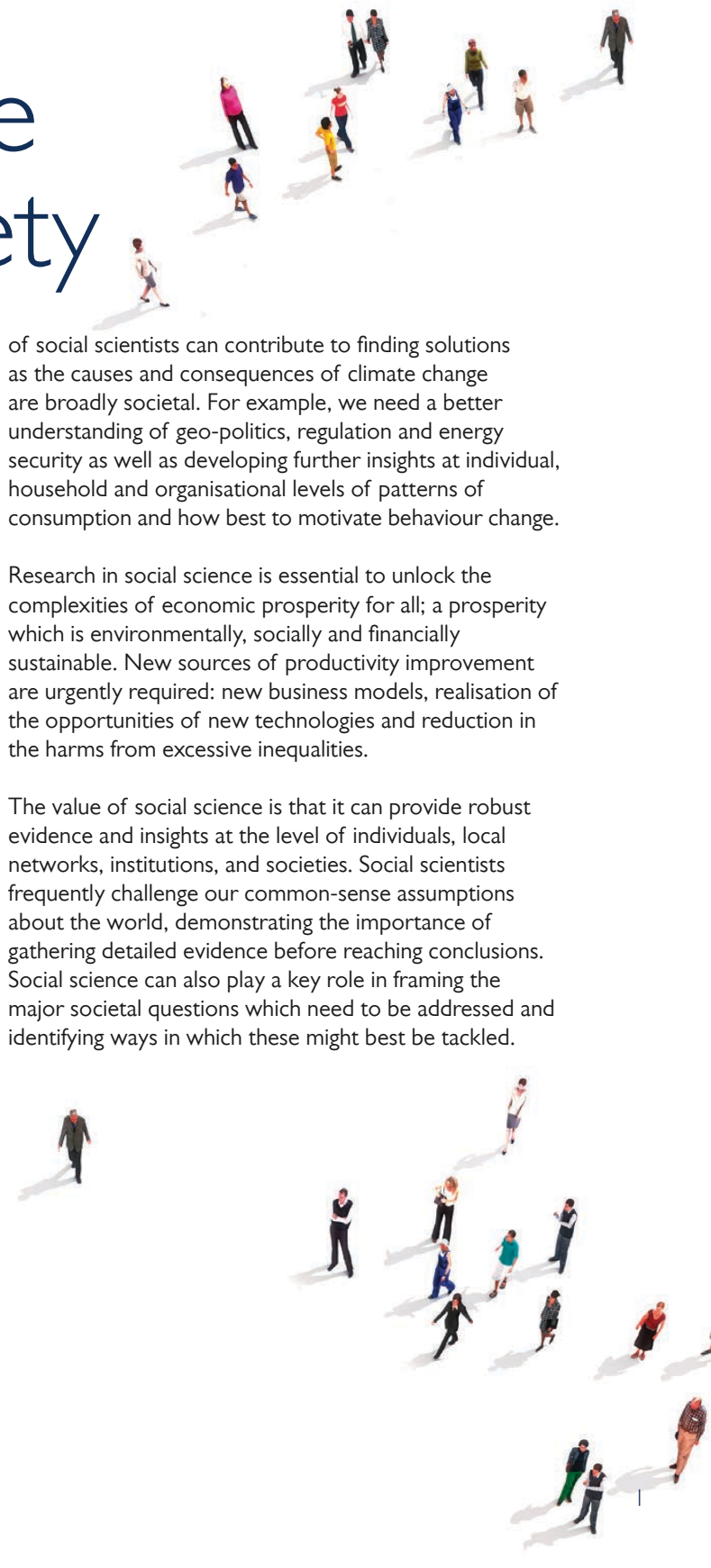
People in the UK and around the globe are living longer. However, major inequalities in life expectancy remain. What are the factors that shape those inequalities and how can we combat them? We need to understand what contributes to the development of individual resilience. How do our social relations, our environment and our biology interact to affect health and behaviour? What are the most effective and cost-efficient ways of providing care and improving the health of the population? New forms of data, new methodologies, and new approaches to the analysis of complex systems are emerging and need further support and development.

The planet's ability to sustain a growing and richer population is being challenged as never before. The work

of social scientists can contribute to finding solutions as the causes and consequences of climate change are broadly societal. For example, we need a better understanding of geo-politics, regulation and energy security as well as developing further insights at individual, household and organisational levels of patterns of consumption and how best to motivate behaviour change.

Research in social science is essential to unlock the complexities of economic prosperity for all; a prosperity which is environmentally, socially and financially sustainable. New sources of productivity improvement are urgently required: new business models, realisation of the opportunities of new technologies and reduction in the harms from excessive inequalities.

The value of social science is that it can provide robust evidence and insights at the level of individuals, local networks, institutions, and societies. Social scientists frequently challenge our common-sense assumptions about the world, demonstrating the importance of gathering detailed evidence before reaching conclusions. Social science can also play a key role in framing the major societal questions which need to be addressed and identifying ways in which these might best be tackled.





The past 50 years have seen a marked increase in global interdependencies with many of the current challenges we face having a global reach, and increasingly the best work is being done by research teams working across national boundaries. The international dimension of our work therefore needs to be in even stronger focus in the years to come. We will work with international funding partners to enable UK researchers to collaborate with the best scholars in their field across the globe, and support research that is world class and informs prosperity, wellbeing and justice on an international scale.

The research we support is all peer-reviewed and only the highest quality work is supported. Decisions about what and who to fund are independent from government and sectional interests of any kind. Maintaining the excellence of the social sciences in the UK is vital to maximising its impact and encourages international collaborations and investment.

We are committed to driving innovation and maximising the impact of all the work that we support, ensuring research outcomes are open and accessible to research users and the public. Impact can be immediate or realised over the longer term, but it is most effective where social scientists are supported to build relationships with relevant stakeholders from the earliest stages of the research process.

Much social science requires high-quality data and a robust infrastructure. We will continue to support a coherent portfolio of data resources, including our world-class longitudinal studies, to allow researchers to answer the fundamental questions facing our society. The ESRC will also play a key role in making new sources and forms of data available to researchers. Analysis of data in real-time will dramatically increase the pace of both discovery and application, enabling researchers to respond quickly to new challenges and opportunities.

Excellent social science needs people with the skills, curiosity and creativity to be truly innovative. It also requires people with the ability to work in interdisciplinary teams and to communicate research ideas and findings clearly. We are committed to working with universities and other research organisations to develop the next generation of social scientists. Together we will ensure

that they are equipped to undertake high-quality analytical work, to handle different forms of data, and to collaborate with others.

Over the coming years we will continue to collaborate closely with a wide range of stakeholders – including the other research councils and Innovate UK, learned societies, universities and other research organisations, and those from business, government and the third sector. Together we will identify key priorities for social science research and work to maximise the benefits of that research for society.

During this period of financial constraint we face a fundamental challenge – demand for social science has never been greater, but our resources are limited. Innovation and efficiency in how we work will therefore be essential. We will focus on where we can add the most value: setting sharply defined priorities which integrate our activities, and collaborating and co-investing with a range of partners to maximise the value of our investment.

In 2015 ESRC marks its 50th Anniversary and we will be celebrating the important contribution of social science to British society over the past half century. This is also a key moment to look forward and provide a strategy for our work over the coming years. Our Strategic Plan 2015 sets out an ambitious and creative vision for UK social science.





**£212 million**  
spent on research and training in 2013/14



**200 events**  
throughout the UK during the Festival of  
Social Science 2014



**15,000 subscribers**  
in 80 countries reading our Society Now magazine

**28,000**  
twitter followers at January 2015



We support research collaboration with  
**62 countries**

**£50 million**  
invested in 2,750 students in 2013/14



**5,780**  
researchers and students supported in 2013/14

**£17.8 million**  
leveraged in 2013/14 from £8.7 million of  
ESRC funding (for every £1 spent  
working with Partners, ESRC leveraged £2)





# Our strategic approach

The ESRC plays a central role in maintaining and advancing the strength of UK social science, making the UK a partner of choice for world-class research. This ESRC Strategic Plan 2015 sets the principles for how we will work over the coming period.

Our mission is central to informing our strategic direction and requires us to:

- **Promote and support, by any means, high-quality research and related postgraduate training on social and economic issues**
- **Develop and support the national data infrastructure that underpins high-quality research**
- **Advance knowledge and provide trained social scientists who meet the needs of users and beneficiaries, thereby contributing to the economic competitiveness of the UK, the effectiveness of public services and policy, and the quality of life**
- **Communicate clearly and promote public understanding of social science.**

Engagement and collaboration with a range of stakeholder groups is fundamental to our work; increasing the scope and quality of the activities we fund as well as maximising their impact.

During the life of this Plan we will work with a range of partners across all areas of our activity. This will include: engagement and co-funding of activity with business, public-sector and civil society organisations; collaboration with other funders (in the UK and overseas), including the other research councils and Innovate UK; engagement and partnership with universities, other research organisations and learned societies; and communication of our work to users and the public.

We will also encourage, and provide opportunities for researchers to work with users of research in the design, delivery and communication of their projects.



## Case study: Finding out what works

A challenge for policymakers and practitioners is navigating through volumes of research to access high-quality relevant evidence. The ESRC is a key partner in the government's What Works initiative to ensure independent, high-quality evidence syntheses across a broad range of social policy areas including local economic growth and crime reduction.

Some of the initial findings from the What Works Network include:

- 'Hot spot' policing – patrolling in small areas where crime has been concentrated – reduces crime and does not simply move it round the corner.
- An Employment Training review, which revealed shorter, more practical on-the-job training programmes to be more effective than longer, classroom-based initiatives.

The What Works initiative is providing clear and accessible advice to decision-makers at local and national levels.

## Our key areas of activity

We provide leadership and support for social science via four main areas of activity:

- **Fostering research and innovation**
- **Creating and maximising data infrastructure for research**
- **Building capability**
- **Facilitating partnerships and realising impact.**

Our investment will be integrated across these four areas. For example, we encourage research proposals that use the high-quality data infrastructure we support, and our plans for building capability will equip researchers with the skills necessary to exploit fully the data that is available. Each area of activity is discussed in more detail below with a focus on our future strategy for strengthening each element.

In addition to the research we fund through our standard research grants scheme we will fund a number of strands of work determined by our strategic priorities. These priorities will be responsive to challenges facing policymakers and practitioners over the coming years, as well as responsive to challenges emerging in social science, and we do not therefore list priority areas in our Strategic Plan. Instead, these will be set out in our Delivery Plans that we prepare as part of each Government's spending review. This will help us to be more agile in meeting the needs of research users and in responding to social-science-led priorities. In the final section of this document we describe how our priorities will be identified and delivered.







# Fostering research and innovation



We are committed to identifying and funding the very best research through the opportunities we offer. This includes innovative and potentially transformative research; research that mobilises the excellent data resources we have in the UK; and work that synthesises and evaluates existing research to provide evidence to guide decision-makers in policy and practice.

We will ensure an international focus is integrated into our delivery of research and innovation by: ensuring our priorities are international in their scope; integrating opportunities for international collaboration in our funding schemes; and partnering with both UK and international organisations to deliver our priorities.

The majority of challenges facing societies today require input from a number of disciplines. We will therefore continue to collaborate with the other research councils, Innovate UK, and other partners to prioritise topics for research and innovation, and to initiate and support interdisciplinary and collaborative programmes of activity.

To maintain the breadth and vibrancy of our portfolio we will support excellent curiosity-driven research as well as research that has clear policy and practice application. We are committed to supporting methodological work that will help us to exploit fully both structured and unstructured forms of data that are increasingly being generated by individuals and institutions.

We will recast the range of funding schemes offered by the ESRC to make it more straightforward for researchers to apply. We will also work with the other research councils to find ways of making our collective schemes more consistent and effective. Our aim is to be

in a position to fund all excellent proposals that reach a quality threshold that is in line with that used by the other research councils.

We will place a greater emphasis on supporting research synthesis. This will include building upon our *What Works* collaborations and recent initiatives such as the Future of the UK and Scotland programme, to ensure that the outcomes of social science research are evaluated and made useful to decision-makers in policy and practice.

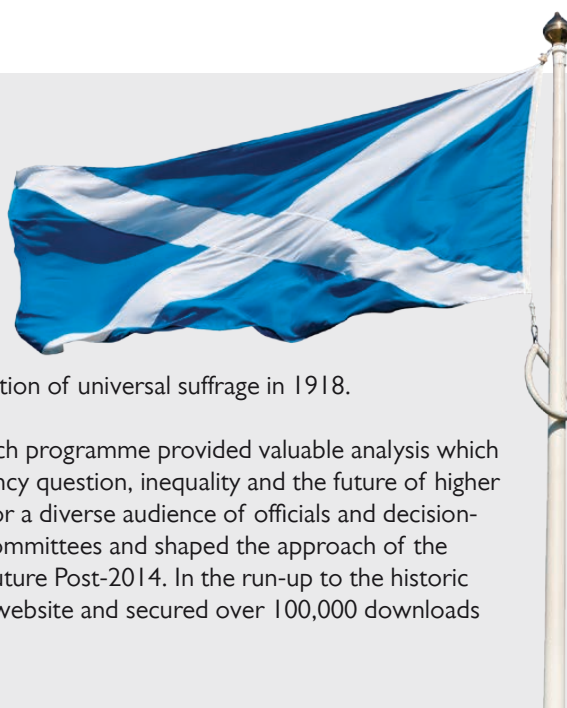
In summary we will:

- **Encourage ambitious and innovative social science**
- **Support research that exploits the UK's excellent data resources**
- **Play a brokering role in identifying priorities for social science research that will deliver useful evidence for decision-makers in policy and practice**
- **Address our priorities through selected competitions and through partnership working with a range of organisations in the UK and internationally**
- **Ensure a portfolio of investment that includes 'curiosity-driven' or 'fundamental' research, applied, synthetic, methodological, and interdisciplinary research.**

## Case study: Helping the public decide

The 2014 Scottish independence referendum relied upon independent evidence to inform the public debate. A total of 3,619,915 people voted Yes or No – a turnout of 84.5% in Scotland as a whole, and a new record for any election held in the UK since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1918.

The ESRC-funded Future of the UK and Scotland research programme provided valuable analysis which played a major role in key debates on the Scottish currency question, inequality and the future of higher education. The programme produced regular briefings for a diverse audience of officials and decision-makers, gave evidence to UK and Scottish Parliament Committees and shaped the approach of the Scottish Parliament's Inquiry into Scotland's Economic Future Post-2014. In the run-up to the historic referendum the programme logged 213,000 visits to its website and secured over 100,000 downloads of its e-book *Scotland's Decision*.





## Case study: Social science is fundamental to tackling Anti-Microbial Resistance

'Anti-Microbial Resistance' (AMR) describes the increasing resistance to our current armoury of antibiotic drugs, a phenomenon that is increasing rapidly around the world. What we currently consider minor illnesses or routine operations could become life threatening – it is already estimated that a child dies every five minutes due to antibiotic resistance.

The development of new drugs, whilst important, is only part of the solution: resistance is a natural phenomenon, and when new drugs are created it will continue to build. It is therefore essential we understand the on-the-ground realities around antibiotic use, and social science is central to this. Strategies and interventions are needed at a variety of levels including: assisting health systems to adapt to the pressures AMR poses; understanding how regulatory frameworks around livestock production incentivise or deter antimicrobial development; and understanding public perceptions of how antibiotics work and how this plays out in GP surgeries.

ESRC-funded research will aim to elucidate the underpinning motivations for human behaviours relating to AMR – relevant to both humans and animals – and how behaviour can affect the development and spread of AMR. It will also explore how to best enable effective behaviour change interventions in a variety of settings.

## Case study: A better measure of poverty

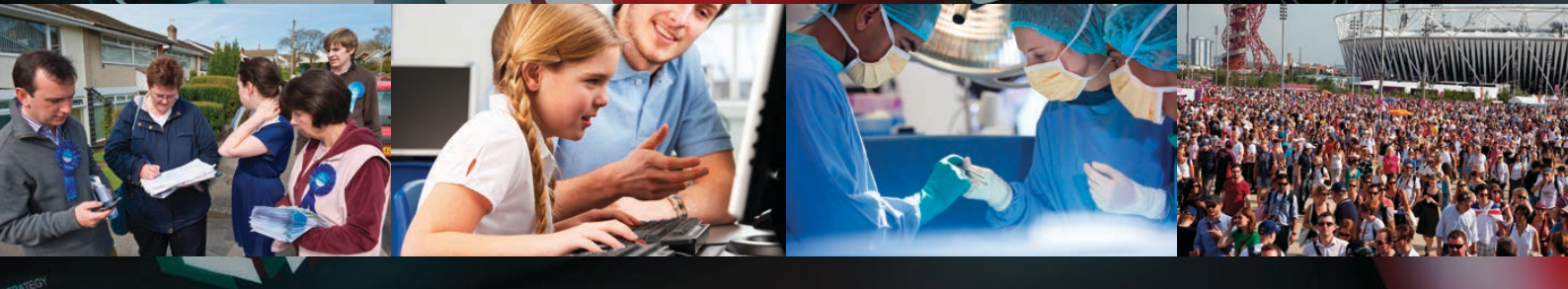
Over three billion people live in poverty – almost half of the world population. Child poverty costs the UK £29 billion a year. Indicators such as this rely upon better measures of poverty that incorporate additional economic costs including: lost output, reduced consumption, and increased health and welfare costs, which in turn can inform how poverty is addressed in particular contexts.

The governments of Bhutan, Colombia, Mexico and the Philippines are using an innovative methodology – capturing many aspects of poverty such as poor health, lack of education and inadequate living standards – to track poverty and improve poverty eradication efforts. More than 25 governments are participating in the Multidimensional Poverty Peer Network – potentially reducing poverty for millions of people through improved policies around these issues.

This measure, and the network, is a product of an ESRC-DFID-funded research project based at the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative.







# Creating and maximising data infrastructure for research



The UK is a world leader in creating and maintaining nationally-representative sources of data and providing researchers with access to that data, while safeguarding the anonymity of individuals.

Based on our excellent existing data resources we will continue to build a world-class infrastructure for research. This will focus on large-scale sources of data including longitudinal, cross-national, administrative, and business data. We will also explore the potential of new forms of data (both quantitative and qualitative), and innovations in data collection, linkage and use. This will ensure that we provide the necessary infrastructure to support bold and innovative social science.

We will work with universities and others to ensure the long-term sustainability and stability of our existing data infrastructure. Appropriate governance structures will be used to maximise the reliability and utility of resources produced.

Working in partnership with a range of stakeholders we aim to maximise the returns on our investment in high-quality data through: consulting academics and research users on their data needs; engaging a broader range of disciplines in data usage; and encouraging international exploitation and cross-national comparative work.

### Case study: The value of administrative data

Routinely collected administrative data have potentially high value for social and economic research. The ESRC funds the Administrative Data Research Network, which provides access to information collected by national and local government and other public sector organisations.

ESRC-funded work by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has used administrative data to find that university students from less affluent backgrounds are more likely to drop out and less likely to graduate with a first or upper second class degree than peers from more affluent backgrounds. But comparing students on the same course who have the same qualifications, those from the worst-performing schools tend to do better at university than students from the best-performing schools. These findings have provided useful evidence to inform universities' admission policies.

In summary we will:

- **Continue to play a leadership role in supporting a robust data infrastructure for social science**
- **Fully exploit the benefits of our data infrastructure through new partnerships and funding opportunities – both in the UK and internationally focused**
- **Work in partnership with universities and others to ensure our portfolio of resources remains sustainable, relevant and innovative**
- **Explore opportunities – in the UK and internationally – to harness new forms of data and to link existing data in new ways.**

### Case study: Taking the long view

The UK is world-leading in the development and use of 'longitudinal' studies which track a sample of people over long periods of time to reveal changes and trends in how we live our lives. Many of the UK's longitudinal studies have been funded by the ESRC. Current major investments include Understanding Society, Life Study and the Millennium Cohort Study.

The Understanding Society study follows 40,000 UK households over time and gathers a wide selection of information via annual interviews, ranging from health and income to education and housing. This data is used by researchers in a variety of ways. One project studied the impact of the financial crisis on middle-income households, and found that the squeeze on living standards for these households has been exaggerated. While previous analyses has tended to focus on 'snapshots' (comparing the amount of middle-income households at the start of the downturn with the amount at the end of it), this research was able to follow the income and spending patterns of actual working households over time. The analysis showed that middle-income households today are not the same households that were in the 'middle' going into the downturn.





# Building capability





A crucial role for the ESRC is to enhance social science capability and build capacity in priority areas. A major achievement in the five years from 2010-2015 has been to create a national Doctoral Training Network as part of a new Postgraduate Framework. In addition, for the first time the ESRC started to provide support for excellent undergraduate training in quantitative methods by partnering on the *Q-Step* initiative with the Nuffield Foundation and HEFCE.

In the future we will continue to work with a network of universities to develop national social science capability within clear strategic areas. We recognise the value of funding cohorts of students and will ensure students across the Network receive high quality training. Our investment in this area will include dedicated funding that focuses on building capacity in our priority areas.

We will also expand access to funding for early career researchers, by embedding dedicated opportunities in our existing funding routes including our standard research grants scheme.

Social science increasingly requires collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches. In the future there will be a need for substantial investment in Centres and large-scale collaborations. Their success will depend on a cadre of leaders who combine an excellent scientific track record, including interdisciplinary experience, with capabilities in communication, project-management and collaboration. The ESRC will play a key role in providing support to develop the capabilities of these individuals.

In summary we will:

- **Support the development of highly capable and innovative researchers for a wide range of careers**
- **Expand support for early career researchers through existing funding routes**
- **Develop capability for social science leadership**
- **Support the development of analytical capabilities required to maximise the existing data infrastructure**
- **Enable postgraduate students and early career researchers to forge links and networks internationally.**







# Facilitating partnerships and realising impact





Our aim is to increase public understanding of social science and what it can offer, and to help maximise the impact of social science research. We deliberately define impact in a broad sense that includes conceptual and capacity-building impact as well as instrumental impact.

Engagement, partnership working, and effective communication of research outcomes are all essential for maximising social science. We act as a broker to ensure that the academic community is fully aware of the ways that social science can help meet the needs of government, business and the third sector, and has appropriate access to data generated by organisations and institutions. We also ensure that research outcomes are useful and accessible to research users and the public through our partnership-working and communications activity. In addition, we support researchers by providing them with tools and resources to engage with user communities and increase the impact of their research.

In summary we will:

- **Engage with a wide range of research users and help build partner coalitions to deliver our priorities**
- **Address our priorities in collaboration with a range of organisations including the other research councils, Innovate UK, as well as government, business, and third-sector organisations**
- **Embed knowledge exchange in all of our priorities – and enable researchers to develop knowledge exchange strategies ‘locally’ through our Impact Acceleration Accounts**
- **Explore and promote new ways of maximising, recording and communicating impact to users of research and the public.**

## Case study: Business is booming - finding the best store location

The retail sector generates five per cent of UK GDP and nearly 30 per cent of all tax revenues; UK annual retail sales were £320 billion in 2013. Store location decisions are frequently considered to be the most important element of retail marketing. Even very small physical differences between stores can exert a major influence upon the stores accessibility, attractiveness to customers and their revenue as a result.

Boots and Sainsbury’s are using research funded by the ESRC to guide their decisions on store location, performance comparisons and investigations about competitors. The ‘Travel-To-Store-Area’ algorithm, which uses geocoded loyalty card data, was used to identify ‘retail conurbations’ – areas where stores share a large number of customers – to inform its business location decisions.

This work was developed as part of a research project funded under the ESRC’s ‘Engaging with Retail’ initiative.





# Identifying our priorities

The ESRC will engage with a range of stakeholders to identify pressing challenges that require a clear intervention from social science. The priorities we identify in each Delivery Plan will form an integrative frame to guide strategic investment in research, data resources, capability-building, and partnerships. At any one time they cannot reflect the breadth and diversity of the important questions that social science research could help to address. They will be clearly defined, limited in number, and regularly reviewed and refreshed. These priorities will not be used to steer our standard research grants scheme.

They will frequently be interdisciplinary and international in their reach, recognising that the most pressing global challenges show little regard for disciplinary or geographical boundaries. A number of our priorities will also require input beyond social science. Hence, in many cases, the activity we take forward will call for collaboration and co-investment with other research councils and Innovate UK, as well as a range of other partners in the UK and internationally.

We will formulate a clear plan of action to address each priority. This may include commissioning new research, synthesising existing evidence, or building capability; and will often entail a combination of activity. Our interventions will be varied in structure, scale and duration to be responsive and flexible to different needs. This will sometimes involve working at pace to ensure high-quality research evidence is available to decision-makers in policy and practice communities.



# Realising our strategy

Below we summarise key indicators of success in each of the main areas of activity. Specific deliverables will be published in each of our Delivery Plans.

Area of activity	Indicators of success
Fostering research and innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Greater agility in how we respond to key societal challenges</li> <li>■ Evidence of high-risk, high-reward social science in our investment portfolio</li> <li>■ We are able to fund all excellent social-science-led proposals at a quality threshold in line with that used by the other research councils</li> <li>■ UK social scientists are working with the best in their field internationally.</li> </ul>
Creating and maximising data infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ High levels of exploitation of our existing data investments</li> <li>■ A sustained data infrastructure for social science based upon a strong stakeholder base.</li> </ul>
Building capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Appropriate critical mass in the UK social science community to address strategic challenges</li> <li>■ Evidence that ESRC funding has enhanced the leadership capability of social scientists.</li> </ul>
Facilitating partnerships and realising impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Measurable social and economic impact on policy and practice in a range of areas</li> <li>■ Improved engagement between social science and business</li> <li>■ Recognition that UK social science – supported by the ESRC – continues to be world-leading and a partner of choice internationally.</li> </ul>









Social science shaping society – past, present and future

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