UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

Minutes of the 24th meeting of ESRC Council held on 30 November 2023 virtually via Zoom

Present:	Professor Todd Landman (*Chair*, *Senior Independent Member*)
	Professor Rachel Brooks
	Professor Jane Duckett
	Mr Mike Emmerich
	Professor Lasana Harris (items 4, 6 & 7)
	Ms Desirée Lopez
	Professor Kimberley Scharf
	Professor Sir Bernard Silverman
	Professor Jackline Wahba
	Professor Sarah Sharples (*CSA*)
Apologies:	Mr Ben Page and Sir Chris Wormald
Office:	Stian Westlake (*Executive Chair*)
	Alison Park *(Deputy Executive Chair)*
	Claire Graves (*Chief Operating Officer*)
	Jen Gold *(Director of Research)*
	Peter Ethelston *(Associate Director for Governance and Policy)*
	Oliver Hill-Andrews *(Senior Manager, Secretariat)*
	Gillian Bartoszewska *(Secretariat)*
	Flo Bradley Sutton *(Secretariat)*
	Teresa Griffiths *(Deputy Director of Planning, Operations and Governance) – item 4*
	Alex Hulkes *(ESRC)* – item 5
	Nina Marshall *(ESRC)* – item 5
	James Canton (*Deputy Director of Public Policy Engagement*) – item 6
Guests:	Matt Clifford (Chair, Advanced Research and Invention Agency) – item 4
	Professor Dame Jessica Corner (Executive Chair, Research England, UKRI) – item 6

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

1.	**Welcome and apologies**
1.1	Todd Landman welcomed members to the 24th meeting of Council.
1.2	Apologies were noted from Ben Page and Chris Wormald.

1.3	Members were reminded to check their details held on the declaration of interests register and update as necessary. Members were asked to raise any conflicts arising during the meeting.
2.	**Minutes of the previous meeting**
2.1	The minutes of the previous meeting were **agreed** as an accurate record.
2.2	There were no outstanding matters arising from the previous meeting.
3.	**Executive Chair's business and update on context**
3.1	Stian Westlake reflected on his first six months in office and flagged current activity and key highlights from the Executive Chair's report, which had been circulated before the meeting. He noted: • Engagement with government and ESRC's research community, including preliminary discussions on a statutory body to monitor, evaluate and report on policies for productivity and growth • A new £10 million Metascience unit in collaboration with DSIT, to support UKRI's role as an expert, evidence-based, innovative investor • Engagement with the Office for National Statistics regarding concerns over the transition from the Secure Research Service to the Integrated Data Service • Work on the Simpler and Better Funding cross-UKRI programme and delivering improvements to the new Funding Service. Stian confirmed that University College London was in the process of applying for UKRI funding for research support for the independent review into research data and statistics on sex and gender. The application would be undergoing review before a decision was made.
3.2	Council discussed the exchange of letters between the Secretary of State and UKRI CEO. Stian stressed that UKRI was adopting a well-governed process to support evidenced, principled decisions to bring clear resolution in a way that would best support all of those who serve on UKRI's advisory groups. Council welcomed UKRI's ongoing programme of work to clarify the role of its various boards and advisory groups.
4.	**Advanced Research and Invention Agency**
4.1	Council welcomed Matt Clifford to present on the Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA). Matt gave a brief history of ARIA, explained ARIA's unconventional approach, and outlined the challenges involved in evaluating ARIA's performance. He also provided detail on how Programme Directors develop a problem thesis before launching a programme for solicitation.
4.2	Council thanked Matt and discussed the place of social science within ARIA programmes. Council discussed:

	• Examples of where technological innovations developed without significant social science input had failed • How social scientists could support Programme Directors to ask the right questions, and the need for systematic ways to embed social science throughout programme stages • The desirability of tailored communications to encourage social scientists to engage with advertised opportunities • How opportunities to engage with those outside of academia could be supported.
4.3	Council agreed it would welcome further engagement between ESRC and ARIA and noted the potential for collaboration, such as on metascience or on creating opportunities to support community participation.
5	**ESRC responsive funding workshop**
5.1	Council welcomed Teresa Griffiths, Nina Marshall and Alex Hulkes to the meeting.
5.2	Claire Graves outlined ESRC's current vision for responsive funding and the key issues and challenges associated with the different approaches to how ESRC delivers an exciting and relevant research portfolio for UKRI. Council discussed what characteristics they most valued about responsive funding in two breakout groups.
5.3	Council reconvened to discuss their appetite for change and agreed they would support meta-research initiatives, testing and evaluating the effectiveness of new approaches to inform future responsive funding strategy. Claire thanked Council members for their input, invited Council to provide further reflections after the meeting, and reminded colleagues of the publication on UKRI's review of peer review.
6.	**UKRI policy on place funding followed by ESRC-focused Council discussion**
6.1	Alison Park introduced Professor Dame Jessica Corner, who situated UKRI's policy on place in the context of broader cross-UKRI activity.
6.2	Jessica spoke on the DSIT target to increase funding outside the greater south east, the UKRI place funding policy and the four dimensions for considering place in funding calls and programmes.
6.3	Alison provided an update on the UKRI 'creating opportunities, improving outcomes' theme, which seeks to understand the causes and effects of place-based disparities and identify empowering new solutions that promote prosperity and improve outcomes for people and communities across the UK. Alison highlighted the role cross-UKRI activity can play to amplify the impact of investments including the ESRC-initiated Local Policy Innovation Partnerships.

6.4	James Canton spoke on ESRC challenges and opportunities and highlighted ESRC's research to enhance our understanding of place and drive impactful place-based outcomes, including fostering place-based partnerships, deepening our understanding, generating solutions and impacts and piloting funding distribution methods.
6.5	Council thanked Jessica, Alison and James and discussed how the DSIT target was situated in the wider narrative following the Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper. Council noted: • The limitations of baseline data and the value of impact case study analysis • Clustered communities of research excellence could be balanced with strong nationwide collaborative networks, coalitions and partnerships • ESRC has an important role in developing place-based capacity building and skills training. Alison thanked Council and suggested cross-UKRI opportunities to develop positive and proactive messaging on Place.
7.	**Papers for discussion by exception and any other business**
7.1	Council noted the annual update on Administrative Data Research (ADR) UK.
7.2	Council noted the appointment of Frances Morton as Deputy Director for Talent, Skills and Methods. Council said it would welcome a future item on how ESRC supports career progression for early career researchers and to address the grant capture process; does ESRC have a role to play in mitigating career pressure for excessive grant applications particularly for early career researchers.
7.3	Council noted the next meeting would be held virtually on 22 February 2024.
8.	**Close of Meeting**