

# UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

## Minutes of the ESRC Council

Date: 17 July 2025

Location: Online via Microsoft Teams

### Attendees

#### Members of ESRC Council

Todd Landman (Chair, Senior Independent Member)

Andrew Dilnot

Jane Duckett

David Halpern

Kimberley Scharf

Cecilia Wong

#### UKRI/ESRC attendees

Stian Westlake (Executive Chair)

Jen Gold (Executive Director of Research)

Claire Graves (Chief Operating Officer)

Alison Park (Deputy Executive Chair)

#### Secretariat/Observers

Flo Bradley Sutton (Governance Manager, Council Secretariat)

Peter Ethelston (Deputy Director of Governance and Policy)

Ellen Pasternack (Senior Manager, Executive Office, London)

Sam Richardson (Senior Manager, Executive Office, Swindon)

### Apologies

Lasana Harris, Sarah Sharples and Ben Page

### **Welcome and apologies**

Todd Landman (TL) opened the 31st meeting of Council.

Members were reminded to check their current details on the conflicts register and update as necessary and asked to raise any conflicts during the meeting. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 May were agreed as an accurate record, with comments raised.

### Matters arising

All outstanding actions have been completed or are in progress. A detailed table is provided in the papers.

### ESRC Council Planner Forward Schedule

Suggestions are welcome at any point, please contact the secretariat team.

### Executive Chair Report

Stian Westlake (SW) presented his Executive Chair report.

SW noted that the draft strategy would be approved formally by UKRI Board in September and would be published soon after that.

SW updated Council members on the Research and Development Missions Accelerator Programme (R&D MAP), noting that Harry Turnbull-Jones had been appointed as the Programme Director, and that individual Challenge Directors are also currently being recruited. SW will continue to be the UKRI SRO for this work and will keep Council members updated with its progress.

Council members discussed the division of the R&D MAP work across UKRI and DSIT, making use of both to support an effective and positive programme of work, delivering benefits to the public. Council members also discussed how there could potentially be innovations already in process that could be picked up and developed quickly to help deliver benefits.

SW noted Jen Gold's recent MBE Honor as part of the King's Birthday Honours.

### To agree: Overview of ESRC's portfolio and key facts

Alice Summers (AS) joined the meeting to support CG on risk management as part of ESRC's portfolio and key facts.

Claire Graves (CG) presented the annual ESRC portfolio of key facts and figures, offering to meet with Council members individually if they would like to discuss any of the content further.

Council members were keen to discuss peer review and CG offered to speak with them after this Council meeting to offer context.

AS discussed how UKRI Risk is moving to a more Objective Centric Risk Management model. She stated that the re-framing has been agreed across UKRI, with regular risk register and risk deep dive conversations at Board and Executive Committee level. CG confirmed that ESRC would embrace the objective-centric approach, through the utilisation of a 9-box grid or similar tool, with a view to implementation in the second half of the year, alongside the reviewing of the UKRI risk appetite statement.

Council reflected on risks to UKRI and discussed a way of using the risk framework to better understand investment management of grants across UKRI. Council thought that this subject may be a useful one to have at their in-person meeting in November. Council acknowledged that risk management was a useful management tool but that investments could still fail. It was also agreed that identification of opportunities is a useful component of risk management for ESRC to explore.

TL and Council members agreed that this item was an important annual Council agenda item and that the new approach to risk seemed positive for UKRI.

#### To discuss: ESRC Strategic Delivery Plan (SDP) 2022-25

SW and CG introduced the item, noting the 2022-2025 SDP. Council welcomed and commended ESRC on the effective delivery of the 2022-2025 SDP and on the burgeoning outcomes.

CG noted that she would be bringing a performance plan for 2025 – 2027 to Council in November which will demonstrate an enhanced approach to monitoring investments.

Council members suggested that ESRC's external communications could place more emphasis on real-world impacts of the research ESRC has funded in its 60-year history, so that this information could be understood by a wider audience. CG confirmed that some of the content would be shared as part of ESRC's 60th anniversary celebrations.

#### 8. ESRC's Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Public Good Programme

Juan Mateos-Garcia (JM-G) joined the meeting. JG introduced the item; after hearing from JM-G, AP offered her reflections and invited Council members' views.

Council members discussed possible research areas of relevance to the 'social science of AI' and the lack of clear market signals as to where research about AI implementation is needed. They noted current ESRC activity in 'AI and social science', and the challenges that currently exist regarding the use of AI within a Trusted Research Environment.

The impact of AI on labour markets was identified as a particularly relevant area for social science.

The importance of capacity building was noted, and the value offered by social scientists who bring technical understanding of AI along with core social science skills. Council members agreed that there is often a lack of understanding in relevant areas of how AI can be useful, since the field is moving so fast. AC noted the importance of university courses adapting to this fast-changing technology so that newly graduating students are not left behind. SW noted that UKRI's new Metascience AI early career fellowships may help to connect new AI developments to relevant areas of research.

#### **Papers for discussion by exception and any other business**

Council thanked Lasana Harris and Sarah Sharples' for their time with ESRC Council, as this was their last Council meeting.

Council members noted the Data Strategy annual update and the November Council agenda that appeared below the line.