Key themes from ESRC Applicant-led mode virtual town hall, 30 September 2026

On 30 September 2026, ESRC held a virtual town hall to provide more information about the wider ESRC applicant-led mode refresh and to provide an opportunity for participants to ask questions. Recordings of the two town hall sessions held on 30 September are now available on YouTube (session 1 and session 2). This document summarises key question themes from both town hall sessions.

1.Where does my project fit: Grow, Explore or Challenge?

For each of our new ESRC applicant-led funding opportunities, we welcome proposals across the full range of the available funding scale and award duration. To determine which opportunity is the best fit for your project, please carefully consider the aims and scope for each opportunity.

- **Grow** supports researcher development and progression at key career stages, helping individuals strengthen or redirect their skills and experience in ways that support the wider UK social science research base.
- **Explore** supports novel and ambitious curiosity-driven social science projects from across ESRC's remit that are led by individuals or small teams and aim to advance knowledge and reshape understanding.
- **Challenge** supports ambitious, larger-scale programmes that bring together the people, expertise and ideas needed to tackle major research, economic and societal challenges.

To be competitive, your application must clearly demonstrate fit to the specific opportunity, and you should carefully consider the requirements set out. Find more details in the pre-announcements:

- Pre-announcement: ESRC applicant-led: grow awards – UKRI
- Pre-announcement: ESRC applicant-led: explore awards – UKRI
- Pre-announcement: ESRC applicant-led: challenge awards – UKRI

2. Am I eligible for funding?

All our new ESRC applicant-led funding opportunities will be subject to standard ESRC and UKRI funding rules and eligibility criteria. The Project Lead must be based at a UK higher education institution or a research organisation eligible for ESRC funding.

You should carefully review the specific eligibility requirements and objectives of each opportunity to determine the best fit.

There are no disciplinary restrictions in these applicant-led schemes; they are open to researchers from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds as long as the proposed work aligns with the aims of the scheme and falls within ESRC's remit.

There are no career stage restrictions on these opportunities. This includes those at early career stages, who are eligible to apply to or be included within applications to all these opportunities. Grow does specify three significant career development and transition points, including those establishing their independence; it is up to Grow applicants to make a case for how they meet the definitions of at least one of the career development and transition points.

You can participate in more than one application to ESRC applicant-led schemes at the same time, providing the projects are substantially different from one another. You should bear in mind that if successful you must have capacity to fulfil all necessary commitments. No more than 100% of full time equivalent (FTE) can be claimed as salary for any individual across all grants funded by UKRI.

In addition to the specific eligibility criteria set out in the Funding Finder documents for each opportunity, please see some helpful additional guidance below for more details:

- Organisation eligibility
- Individual eligibility
- ESRC Research Funding Guide
- UKRI roles in funding applications

3. Who can I include in my application and how should I structure my team?

The composition of your team will be determined by your project's needs.

It is up to you to demonstrate the value and meaningful expertise, skills and experience that each member of the team will bring to your project and how this will support you in achieving the aims and objectives of your application. All members of the project team must be fully justified and meet the requirements set out in the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) roles in funding applications.

Explore applications can only be submitted by an individual researcher or a small central research team consisting of no more than one project lead and up to three project co-leads. Additional research and innovation associates, grant managers, specialists, technicians and professional enabling staff **do not** count towards the team of four and can be included. International project co-leads and business, third

sector or government body project co-leads **do** count towards the limit. **This restriction on team size applies only to Explore**.

Grow awards must focus on the development of the project lead. Other members of the project team are permitted if their contributions are required for the development project. Mentoring is not a prescribed requirement for Grow and the decision to include a mentor should reflect the needs of the individual applicant and application objectives.

Challenge aims to accelerate collaborations within and beyond the social science ecosystem and enhance national capability, so the team you propose should enable this. Successful awards will need to mobilise collaborations between researchers from across disciplinary and methodological boundaries, across national borders, and/or between academic and non-academic partners in order to enhance the relevance, reach and impact of the project.

Applications to all new applicant-led funding opportunities can include international researchers as project co-leads (international) and business, third sector or government body project co-leads based in the UK. In line with current UKRI and ESRC guidance.

- Project co-lead (international) policy: ESRC guidance – UKRI
- Including project co-leads from business, third sector or government bodies – UKRI

4. Is my project in scope?

ESRC's applicant-led funding opportunities support both basic and applied social science research. There are no thematic or methodological restrictions, and proposals can be submitted across a range of available funding scales and award durations, depending on the opportunity. Your application will be assessed on its individual merits against the published assessment criteria.

Find more details on the specific aims and scope of each funding opportunity in the pre-announcements:

- Pre-announcement: ESRC applicant-led: grow awards – UKRI
- Pre-announcement: ESRC applicant-led: explore awards – UKRI
- Pre-announcement: ESRC applicant-led: challenge awards – UKRI

Applications that include secondary data analysis are welcome in all opportunities. You are encouraged to make use of the UK's extensive social science data infrastructure, which provides access to high-quality datasets and specialist expertise to support impactful research. Where your project includes new data

collection, you should clearly explain why this is appropriate to achieve the intended outcomes.

You must ensure that any submission complies with the UKRI resubmission policy.

5. Can my research have an international focus?

Yes. These opportunities support you to address important social and economic questions wherever they occur, provided the proposed work falls within ESRC's remit and meets the objectives of the funding opportunity. There are no limitations on geographical area or focus.

Applicants must be based at a UK research organisation that is eligible for ESRC funding. You will be able to include international researchers as project co-leads (international) in applications for all our new applicant-led funding opportunities in line with current UKRI and ESRC guidance.

You should be mindful of any requirement in the opportunity that relates to the UK, for example in Challenge being clear about how your programme of activity will enhance UK national capability.

ESRC responsive mode lead agency opportunities with other international funders will continue alongside the new applicant-led opportunities, with no changes planned in the aims or scope.

6. Is interdisciplinary research eligible?

Yes. ESRC welcomes interdisciplinary research in all these opportunities. The balance of disciplines represented in your project should be appropriate to your objectives and intended outcomes. However, the social sciences within ESRC's remit must represent more than 50% of the research focus and effort.

7. How will you assess my application and make funding decisions?

The assessment process being used for Explore and Grow is described in the individual funding finder texts under 'How we will assess your application':

- Pre-announcement: ESRC applicant-led: grow awards – UKRI
- Pre-announcement: ESRC applicant-led: explore awards – UKRI

Final funding decisions may adopt a portfolio approach to ensure a diverse range of projects in accordance with How we make decisions, balancing novelty, research significance, approach and impact potential in a way that is appropriate to the opportunity aims. Applications will receive reviewer comments as feedback in line with the assessment process for the opportunity.

We will hold regular decision points and will initiate the assessment process once your application is received, ensuring you receive a timely decision. You should submit your application when it is ready rather than waiting for specific decision points.

We are working to deliver UKRI commitments to reducing grant processing times and expect the first decisions for Grow and Explore to be made in Spring 2027. As the new opportunities establish themselves, we will provide appropriate updates on decision timelines.

For Challenge, applications will be assessed using a multi-stage process and we expect to update the pre-announcement with further information on the application and assessment process in late 2026.

We will keep the effectiveness and efficiency of our processes under review and make adjustments as necessary.

If you would like to explore previously funded research, you can visit What we've funded – UKRI to view examples of successful projects across UKRI portfolios.

8. How much funding is available and how competitive will it be?

We are maintaining levels of investment in curiosity-driven research. Applicant-led decisions and budgets are managed on a rolling basis. We will be adopting a more flexible approach to how the budget is allocated across opportunities so that we can ensure resources align with demand, quality and needs as they evolve.

We do not anticipate that demand management will be applied, but if the level of interest exceeds what can be managed within the assessment process, we may introduce limits on the number of applications that can be submitted. Further details will be clearly communicated where this is the case.

We strongly encourage organisations to support applicants in preparing well-planned, high-quality applications that are competitive for funding relative to the funding opportunity.

9. What is happening to the existing responsive mode schemes?

Current responsive mode schemes – Research Grants, New Investigator Grants, and Secondary Data Analysis – will all permanently close on 4 November. All applications we receive into the existing schemes before they close will be processed as usual and we expect decision making to be fully completed by summer 2027.

We are not making additional funding available so please consider carefully which scheme best suits your needs. Normal resubmissions policy applies – you can

withdraw applications to our current responsive mode schemes, but if it has already entered assessment, submitting it to a different opportunity would not be possible unless it changed substantially.

10. What is happening to React and Connect?

React and Connect were established as pilot opportunities. We will review both schemes in Spring 2027 to inform future decisions on these opportunities.