MINUTES OF THE 27th MEETING OF COUNCIL
HELD ON 18 July 2024 VIRTUALLY VIA ZOOM

Present:	Professor Todd Landman (*Chair*, *Senior Independent Member*)
	Professor Rachel Brooks
	Professor Jane Duckett
	Professor Kimberley Scharf
	Professor Jackline Wahba
	Professor Sir Bernard Silverman
	Anita Charlesworth
Apologies:	Professor Lasana Harris
	Professor Sarah Sharples
	Sir Chris Wormald
	Mr Ben Page
	Claire Graves
Office:	Stian Westlake (*Executive Chair*)
	Alison Park *(Deputy Executive Chair)*
	Jen Gold *(Director of Research)*
	Beccy Shipman (*Deputy Director Data Strategy and Infrastructure*)
	Frances Morton *(Deputy Director of Talent, Skills and Methods)*
	Damien Smith *(Deputy Director of Research Economics)*
	Peter Ethelston *(Associate Director for Governance and Policy)*
	Sam Richardson *(Senior Manager, Executive Office)*
	Flo Bradley Sutton *(Secretariat and minutes)*
	Pam Jones *(EA to Executive Office) observing*
	Lucy Thorne (Head of Leadership and Skills), Tracy Davies (Head of Early Career Support), Chelsea Cinquegrani (Senior Policy Manager) and Lynette Preston (Policy Manager) - Item 9
Guests:	Professor Stacie Conchie, (Director of Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats - CREST) – Item 7
	Dr Julia Ebner (Postdoctoral Researcher at the Calleva Centre for Evolution and Human Sciences, Magdalen College, Oxford) – Item 7

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

1.	**Welcome and apologies**
1.1	Professor Todd Landman welcomed members to the 27th meeting of Council.
1.2	Members were reminded to check their details currently being held on the conflicts register and update as necessary. Members were asked to raise any conflicts during the course of the meeting.
2.	**Minutes of the previous meeting**
2.1	The minutes of the previous meeting were **agreed** as an accurate record.

3.	**Forward Schedule of Council Agenda Items**
3.1	This is a new standing item on the agenda that gives Council members sight of what we are proposing comes to future Council meetings, this is an evolving document and will continue to be refined and Council members can suggest items for upcoming meetings by contacting the Council Secretariat team.
4.	**Matters arising**
4.1	Members were updated on the status of matters arising from the previous meeting.
5.	**Executive Chair's business and update on context**
5.1	SW welcomed everyone to the meeting and reported on his main priority areas which included the work on ESRC's Strategic Delivery Plan (SDP) and work post-election, engagement with the new Ministers, the National Data Library (NDL), a Labour manifesto commitment and ESRC's work to support the application of AI technologies in addressing real world societal and economic challenges
5.2	SW invited Council members to get involved in the SDP process: those interested in particular workstreams should email the secretariat team or their council buddy.
5.3	SW stated that ESRC is providing input into the planning process and is sharing lessons with government stakeholders from our own experience as regards how a NDL might work (including questions of changes to regulation and culture to enable more data linkage and sharing).
5.4	Council asked about the implications of the Government stopping using the term 'levelling up' for ESRC's investments in this area. SW responded that relevance of the local economic growth and in particular regional growth disparities will continue to be a major policy issue. AP noted the relevance of the UKRI creating opportunities, improving outcomes strategic theme, which covers areas such as health inequalities and local growth that remain central to the new government's agenda.
5.5	Council discussed policy interest in housing and land use/planning, noting that this is a multi-discipline issue and research opportunities focused on rebuilding social trust. SW noted the risks of spreading a limited budget across too thin an area, and the fact that in some fields a relatively small investment could go a long way.
5.6	Council asked whether MRC had stopped funding research in areas that had traditionally attracted social science researchers. JG responded that MRC still had a strong interest in areas such as public health and prevention. Recent changes to MRC's units model had resulted in a change in portfolio away from public health in some instances, but MRC have also been leading a range of new public health initiatives, including research clusters to address important population health challenges.
5.7	Jane Duckett provided an update on the Grants Delivery Group meeting held earlier in the week, and discussed the high number of rejections in the recent round. JD suggested that the introduction of a deadline may have led to rushed and therefore poor quality applications. Council formally thanked the ESRC Grants Delivery Group for their work in dealing with the significant surge in applications.
5.8	SW stated that ESRC will launch a new investment in AI-driven evidence synthesis at the UN Summit of the Future in New York as well as co-host an event in London with Google DeepMind to raise awareness of the current 'AI for Social Science' highlight notice in ESRC responsive mode funding opportunities in 2024/5.

5.9	Council asked what role ESRC is playing in supporting the uptake of research into policymaking, particularly in the context of a new government. JG shared details of key existing initiatives under ESRC's public policy and engagement portfolio, including schemes to embed academic expertise in government departments (Policy Fellowships) and Parliament (Thematic Research Leads). She also detailed current work to scope how best to support the evidence needs of the Government's Missions.
6.	**To discuss: Security and Risk: National Security Network Plus (Stacey Conchie from CREST and Dr Julia Ebner).**
6.1	Council welcomed Stacey Conchie and Julia Ebner to the meeting. Council noted the aim of the session: to give Council an insight into our research portfolio in this area, give them an opportunity to feed into the network plus scoping activity, and discuss the shape of ESRC's security and risk portfolio.
6.2	Stacey presented an overview of CREST's programme of work covering research projects (covering both online and offline behaviour), evidence reviews, products, events, and PhD practitioner training.Stacey introduced the 'NetworkPlus' for 'Analytical Behavioural Science for Security and Defence Deliver'. She highlighted a number of key features, including embracing new forms of data and analytics in behavioural science, while acknowledging emerging possibilities can be a source of insecurity and vulnerability as well as social benefit. The NetworkPlus will be delivered by a community of experts from academia, government and industry. Stacey noted the core CREST team sits within Lancaster University but researchers sit across the UK.
6.3	Council were introduced to Julia Ebner, who was a finalist in ESRC's Early Career Impact Prize 2023, and provided an overview of her PhD project and new research plans. Council were shown the video that ESRC commissioned of Julia's work that was used at the Impact Prize ceremony last year. Julia presented slides on 'Is There a Language of Terrorists? Assessing Risk of Violence in Online Discourse'. Julia noted that while her research is focused on extreme right, her findings have relevance toother groups and populations. Julia discussed creating the 'violent extremism Lab' at the CSSC and the Calleva Project "When Despots Become Deadly: The psychological foundations of institutionalised extremism in autocratic states".
6.4	Council asked how researchers arrive at 'national security' as a research area? Julia responded that some are focused and some arrive there by association. She noted that though CREST brings in non-obvious researchers, there are not many from an economics, ethics, law or humanities background.
6.5	Council asked about the link to data, accessible data and the access to wider audiences. Stacey confirmed CREST wants to avoid duplication and focus on skills crucial to end users to ensure that work is impactful.
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6.7	Council thanked Julia and Stacey for attending ESRC Council.
7.	**To discuss: Data Infrastructure Paper**

7.1	Council welcomed Beccy Shipman. Alison Park gave a brief introduction, noting that the paper picks up on the discussions held in Edinburgh in May, and asked Council to help advise ESRC on how we can deliver the best infrastructure ecosystem in the next ten years. The focus is on three areas and how we should balance these as priorities.
7.2	Council asked about the incentives for reserachers at any career stage to use ERSC funded data sets, and noted the challenges that some students (in particular) can have in timely access to data. There was an appetite to further discussion of how to incentivise use of ESRC funded data collections, particularly in relation to PhD and ECRs.
7.3	Council noted the potential to contribute to learning about, and the evaluation of, digital and public services. In this context, rapid data flows, high quality data and the need to resolve issues regarding data equality and integrity are vital. The relevance of possible legislative change was noted, to ease data access and linkage.
7.4	BS presented on data services, noting a further paper would come to Council in November about ESRC work in this area. Council were interested in whether a lean review on processes would be useful as a way of understanding the user experience. They noted the complexity of different platforms and the difficulties users can experience of knowing where to go for which data.
7.5	Safepods were mentioned as an area of focus, and whether we are making the best use of these facilities. There was concern about a possible two-tier system, depending on the location of the Safepods. How can technology help us ensure data access more smoothly.
7.6	BS discussed data talent, including the skills required for more technological roles and management of large infrastructure, as well as the data skills required for research more generally. Council noted the usefulness of existing ESRC work in this area, including that covering data driven research and the new Research Skills hub, the call for which is currently open.
7.7	Council discussed the use of AI within data sets and as a research tool noting this is a new skill for everyone and evolves quickly. BS mentioned the Highlight Notice currently in place for ESRC responsive mode, seeking applications using AI tools.
7.8	BS presented a number of broader strategic questions, including the balance of spend within ESRC's data infrastructure portfolio, and the role that ERSC might play in building a coalition of organisations that care about data infrastructure.
7.9	Points from Council included the importance of ESRC leaning into discussions about a possible National Data Library and the desire to see a greater array of economic data collection. The tension between continuing with existing collections vs investing in new data was noted. There was an appetite for ESRC to be more forward facing in relation to the importance of social science data infrastructures. It was noted that improved insight about the use of ESRC data infrastructures would be invaluable – for example, better quality data, and more comparability across investments.
7.10	AP noted that it would be useful to bring Smart Data Research UK to council next year so they can update on their work to date.
	ACTION: AP and BS to include these insights in ongoing ESRC data focused work.
7.11	Council thanked Beccy and Alison for providing an interesting set of questions.
8.	**To discuss: ESRC's Research Talent Development Strategy**
8.1	Council welcomed Frances, Tracy, Lucy, Lynette and Chelsea. Council were asked to note the development and context of an ESRC Research Talent Development strategy.

	AP gave an introduction. FM introduced the slides and purpose. FM discussed the rapid evidence assessment and research culture
8.2	Council discussed the bullying, harassment and discrimination issues flagged within the REA, acknowledging positive changes over the years, including those driven by REF, and variation both in terms of EDI characteristics and discipline. Council noted how the REF influences research environments, with a focus on documentation of practices and policies. Council acknowledged the importance of driving structural change and suggested that ESRC could leverage their role in the R&I environment to address structural issues that exist in the system and research talent.
8.3	FM discussed career development. Council highlighted a gap in support for mid-career researchers despite extensive provisions for ECRs; and emphasised the need for systematic support to help mid-career researchers to progress to the next stage of their career. Council discussed improved exit options in the civil service and questioned if there was enough awareness in academia about the broader ecosystem for researcher mobility. Council proposed engaging with the Society of Professional Economics (SPE) to address the recruitment challenges faced by non-academic economists. FM discussed the next steps and asked Council to contact her if they would like to be further involved.
9.	**Papers for discussion by exception and any other business**
9.1	No AOB was raised.
	Close of Meeting