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Item 2 Paper: ESRC 2024-11

MINUTES OF THE 26th MEETING OF COUNCIL HELD ON 16 May 2024 in person

Present:	Professor Todd Landman (<i>Chair, Senior Independent Member</i>) Professor Rachel Brooks Professor Anita Charlesworth Professor Lasana Harris Ben Page Professor Kimberley Scharf Professor Sir Bernard Silverman Professor Jackline Wahba Professor Sarah Sharples (<i>CSA</i>)
Apologies:	Professor Jane Duckett, Sir Chris Wormald, Peter Ethelston
Office:	Stian Westlake (<i>Executive Chair</i>) Alison Park (<i>Deputy Executive Chair</i>) Claire Graves (<i>Chief Operating Officer</i>) Jen Gold (<i>Director of Research</i>) Emily Clarke (<i>Deputy Director of Strategy and Partnerships</i>) Sam Richardson (<i>Senior Manager Executive Office</i>) Flo Bradley Sutton (<i>Secretariat</i>)
Guests:	Professor Sir Ian Boyd (UKRI Board) Professor Linda Bauld (Edinburgh) – Co-Director of BR-UK (hub) Dr Sharon Cox (UCL) – Deputy Director of BR-UK (hub) Professor Jessica Woodhams (Birmingham) – Director of CENTRE-UB (CDT+).

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 26th meeting of Council. Council members welcomed Anita Charlesworth to her first formal Council meeting. Todd expressed his thoughts and thanks about the workshop from the previous day and successful dinner.
1.2	Members were reminded to check their details currently being held on the conflicts register portal and update as necessary. Members were asked to raise any conflicts arising during the course of the meeting.
2.	Minutes of the previous meeting

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2.1	The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as an accurate record.
3.	Matters arising
3.1	There were no previous matters arising.
4.	UKRI Board update
4.1	<p>Council welcomed Professor Sir Ian Boyd.</p> <p>Ian spoke about the changing research and policy landscape, and updated Council on the UKRI board held the day before. Ian discussed UKRI Board structure and function, and strategic UKRI projects, including UKRI's work to deliver the recommendations of the Grant Review</p> <p>Other topics that were discussed by the Board on 15 May were a security briefing from an external guest, a high level risk update and legacy systems.</p> <p>Ian spoke about sustainability of education providers and place base funding and explained how the research landscape had changed since UKRI was created. Ian stated that he felt that UKRI is moving in the right direction with systems and infrastructures in place, and helping join up across central government. He feels that UKRI Board should be driving councils to empower disciplines.</p> <p>Council thanked Ian for joining their meeting today and providing a high-level update of UKRI Board.</p>
5.	Executive Chair's business and update on context
5.1	<p>Stian Westlake highlighted the following points from the Exec Chair's report, focused on his 2024 priorities for ESRC:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Impact, flagging ESRC work on policy impacting.• Simpler and Better Funding (SBF), and engagement with research offices about The Funding Service (TFS).• Data and infrastructure, and ESRC's productive engagement, via ADR UK, with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Integrated Data Service which was now bearing fruit. He noted Jen Gold's work on ESRC plans around AI evidence synthesis. <p>Council discussed the Executive Chair's update. Jen Gold noted the challenge with regards to success rates on responsive mode. Claire Graves explained ESRC has now returned to not having responsive mode application deadlines; these were introduced temporarily in the process of switching over to TFS and we expect the spike in applications received when deadlines were introduced to return to the previous steady state. Stian stated he would be happy to hear any challenges linked to TFS and would welcome any feedback direct to him.</p>

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	<p>Council asked about any additional burdens resulting from TFS, for example, resulting from additional asks concerning research culture, noting that some funders had providing additional funding so support work in this area.</p> <p>Council discussed Quality Related (QR) funding and asked to discuss this at a future Council meeting.</p> <p>Claire spoke about how SBF will reduce the burden on administration, referencing the Operating Model update and confirmed that she would be keeping Council up to date. Claire explained SBF were looking at one way of working, with fewer calls for a more targeted approach.</p> <p>Claire asked Council to revisit the 'state of the nation' papers from last July, and welcomed feedback ahead of July Council. Secretariat to follow up with link.</p>
6	Strategic Delivery Plan
6.1	<p>Stian introduced the likely timelines for the development of ESRC's next strategic delivery plan and presented an an overview of ESRC's current portfolio. The key discussion points were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A desire for clarity about ESRC's role in the wider R&I ecosystem (for example, in relation to government-funded social science).• Council pointed to the need for greater consistency on the UKRI website in how ESRC's purpose and priorities are set out t• In relation to PhDs, Jackie Wahba asked whether ESRC DTPs are funding the right disciplines and whether ESRC should be more directive <p>Council discussed the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The division between managed and responsive mode (including the allocation of staff time and operating expenditure to these categories)• Future size and structure of responsive mode (building on our discussion at February's Council meeting)• How to manage managed mode• Managed mode priorities<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ How many of them there should be○ Broad themes versus narrower missions? Should the themes be collectively exhaustive of important areas affected by social research? <p>The key messages and discussion points were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• It was noted that this is a classic multicriteria optimisation problem• There is a false dichotomy between priority areas: important question is whether we support excellent social science or meet global challenges. There is support for responsive mode/discovery, with other research much more focused• Suggest we are more ambitious and engage with UKRI, government and industry as well as CSAs to identify what research needs to be done. Where ESRC sets priorities, these should be focused to send a clear signal

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	<p>as to what we want to emerge from the social science community. If thematic priorities are too broad, it will diminish the impact of ESRC's managed mode funding. How can we best coordinate across the R&I system? Does ESRC have a role as a convener? Organisations like AcSS can be a more honest/neutral broker than ESRC. How best do we work across the system in partnership and collaboration with others? Do we understand the role and impact of different organisations, and therefore what's unique about ESRC?</p> <p>ESRC will continue to engage Council in the development of our next Strategic Delivery Plan at meetings over the coming year</p>
6.2	<p>Jen Gold presented to Council on 'Innovations in funding' and whether the types of funding we offer and our assessment processes deliver against our strategic objectives. Bernard Silverman provided an initial response, expressing support for more radical experiments in our funding processes. He also supported the expansion of existing pilots using partial randomization to award funding and provided advice on how this mechanism should be implemented.</p> <p>Council members also commented that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ESRC is not a monopoly provider of social science research funding, which strengthens the case for experimenting with the types of funding we offer and assessment processes• When reviewing the types of funding we offer, there appears to be a gap around available support for new methods or advances in methods• While ESRC offers an urgent grants mechanism via Impact Acceleration Accounts, though only a select number of Research Organisations hold these• Innovations in funding might require thought to be given to some of UKRI's policies (for example on reapplication for applications unsuccessful as a result of a randomized process). <p>ESRC agreed to come back to Council with an initial proposition on how our funding offer could evolve based on their comments and an internal review of our responsive mode strategy.</p>
6.3	<p>Alison Park presented to Council on the importance of ESRC social science data infrastructure activity to gain Council insight on key future needs and opportunities. Kimberley Scharf provided an initial response, suggesting that ESRC should invest more in data infrastructure, and flagging the importance of the UK as a "global hub" for data. This could attract collaboration and co-investment from businesses and other organisations</p> <p>Council discussed the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Should ESRC be directing more of ESRC's core budget into data infrastructure investment?• Should ESRC continue to pursue new data infrastructure funding opportunities via routes like the Infrastructure Fund, accepting that it will need to find other routes to support their future funding once their initial funding ends?

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can we collaborate more with other disciplines and funders also are grappling with how best to support work in this area?• The legislative framework surrounding data severely constrains what is currently possible; should ESRC be more openly trying to steer debate in this area?• How do we collectively reach a greater number of students through training, so they enter the workplace (academia and beyond) with data skills? Should ESRC be more directive in its talent and skills funding, with a view to increasing the pipeline of researchers with data skills?• Beyond training, what are the other barriers to data use within the social sciences, and what can ESRC do to address these? <p>As we were running behind at this point it was agreed to bring this item back to the next Council agenda.</p>
7.	Behavioral Research Leadership Team
7.1	<p>Council welcomed Professor Linda Bauld, Dr Sharon Cox and Professor Jessica Woodhams to the meeting.</p> <p>Linda introduced Behavioural Research UK (BR UK) and its aims to harness, connect and extend the UK's existing capacity and capability in interdisciplinary behavioural research and to facilitate evidence-based decision making through timely, high impact, and independent research on human behaviour that meets the needs of policymakers, industry, and civil society.</p> <p>Sharon presented details of the scoping that BR UK is undertaking to establish a capability building strategy, national network and set of strategic priorities for BR UK's future work and commissioning fund. This work includes conducting a national survey of behavioural researchers and research users across a range of sectors.</p> <p>Jessica presented on the Centre for Doctoral Training Plus in Behavioural Research, setting out its network of partners, the studentships on offer, and the centre's strategy. Jessica highlighted significant co-funding offered by the University of Birmingham in the centre's studentships and the range of national and local partners involved in collaborative PhD studentships.</p> <p>Council praised the investments for the network of partners involved and the work programme they had set out.</p> <p>Sarah Sharples provided insight into the importance of this type of responsive behavioural research investment to the Department for Transport.</p> <p>Council asked about the governance involved in these investments and ESRC's role in providing ongoing support. The speakers outlined how governance processes had evolved as their programmes had got up and running and that ESRC staff had played an important supporting role.</p> <p>Both investments set out how they planned to use embedded posts in government – facilitated by ESRC – to ensure they delivered impact and understood user needs. Alison Park noted fruitful connections to existing UKRI investments, such as</p>

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	<p>Smart Data Research, which will enable the study of human behaviour via digital footprint data.</p> <p>Council thanked Jessica, Linda and Sharon for attending ESRC Council.</p>
8.	Papers for discussion by exception and any other business
8.1	No AOB. No comments on papers by exception.
9.	Close of Meeting