Economic and Social Research Council

ESRC research projects are providing insights to tackle local and regional challenges

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This document summarises a selection of current and recent **Economic and Social Research Council** (ESRC) investments which are relevant to identifying, addressing and resolving localised issues, including regional economic and social imbalances. As part of the government's place-based and innovation agendas, the UK is committed to levelling up across the country and implementing place-based approaches to net zero. ESRC funds a broad range of research that is relevant to this agenda and to local and regional challenges.

The document is structured as follows:

- Productivity, innovation and growth

- Infrastructure and services

- Regional governance

- What works at a local level

- Education and skills

- Health and social care

- Ethnicity and race

- Data for regional and local areas

- Wider ESRC investments that support local partnerships, research capacity and capability

Productivity, innovation and growth

The Productivity Institute's (TPI) research theme on **Geography and Place** (McCann, Sheffield University) focuses on **the low productivity levels of some regions or areas of the UK and the resulting disparities in income and wellbeing**. Researchers at TPI are looking at lessons that can be learned concerning the effectiveness of local economic development strategies, infrastructure investment, land use and housing policy, educational and social interventions, and how these factors interact.

TPI also has eight **Regional Forums** to build engagement with regional business and policy communities. It will do this by assessing the productivity issues in the eight regions and co-producing experimental interventions with local stakeholders.

The **Enterprise Research Centre** is the UK's leading centre of excellence for research into the growth, innovation and productivity of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Its research, comprising robust, trusted data and insights on SME performance, helps shape better policies and practices that enable SMEs to thrive. Place is a major theme of the centre's work, and **it produces a high volume of data and other sources on local growth and firm performance**. The project **Local Knowledge Innovation, Exporting and Productivity** (Roper, Warwick Business School), for example, looks at the role of local, regional and broader eco-system factors in supporting innovation and exporting, growth and productivity.

ESRC funds the **Innovation Caucus** (Vorley, Oxford Brookes University) to undertake small-scale research, rapid evidence reviews and roundtables of thought leaders around themes related to innovation. These could be used to build the evidence base which **supports our understanding of local innovation**.

The **Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy** (Winters, Gasiorek, University of Sussex) can play an important role in levelling up as regional outcomes are key to its work. One of the Centre's strategic themes, **People, Firms and Place**, **focuses on the differential impacts of trade policy across locations and the impact of trade barriers on regions**. The team is capable of regional modelling and will create a new dataset on jobs in trade, including regional composition. There is also a clear approach to integrating all parts of the UK into the programme of work.

Infrastructure and services
The **UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE)** is investigating the importance of **Placemaking and 'Design Value'** (Samuel, University of Reading) for health sustainability, social cohesion and the economy. The focus is on **helping**

government, local authorities and developers to take social, environmental and economic factors into account in policy making.

The **Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre**'s (Lloyd, University of York; Crawford, University of Leeds) research looks at how vulnerability (including exploitation by county lines drug networks, online child sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, modern slavery, mental illness and homelessness) develops in urban areas. It uses place-based approaches throughout and **will draw on local public sector datasets (police, health, social services and education) to understand how demands on the police affect the risk of harm to the most vulnerable in society**. The centre will explore partnership working and crime that crosses county lines through its network of 38 regional, national and international project partners.

Regional governance

The **Governance After Brexit** programme (Wincott, Cardiff University) has funded **research into the long-term implications for governance, including regional governance, after Brexit**. Brexit is impacting on a wide range of issues in the UK including the country's constitutional arrangements, local public service provision and delivery, and economic performance across different places and sectors[1].

The **Local Institutions, Productivity, Sustainability and Inclusivity Trade-offs (LIPSIT)** project **aims to identify institutional and organisational arrangements at the regional level that lead to policy-making that increases productivity**. Its final report, '**Delivering Levelling Up**' (Newman, University of Surrey; Seaford, Demos), argues that an attempt by the UK government to deliver levelling up without fixing the problems in subnational governance would be like turning on the taps

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[1] See the following projects, which have local challenges and place as a theme: **Rebordering Britain and Britons after Brexit (MIGZEN)**; **Democracy in the UK after Brexit; A Country Divided? Polarisation and identity after Brexit**; **Northern Exposure: Race, Nation and Disaffection in 'Ordinary' Towns and Cities after Brexit**; **Learning from 'Left-Behind' places: everyday hopes and fears for the future after Brexit in England**

without fixing the pipes – and watching vast resources leak away in an inefficient system.

ESRC's **Industrial Strategy Council Fellowships** have been producing **reports relevant to levelling up and the role devolution and governance structures might play in reducing regional inequalities**. The 2021 research paper '**Devolution and Governance Structures in the UK**' (Regan, et al) argues that devolution of spending and decision-making powers is an essential tool for levelling up. The final research report presented a devolution framework for ambitious and effective devolution and argues that this will help unlock the potential of regions across the UK.

What works at a local level

ESRC funds two **What Works Centres** which directly look at place-based issues.

The **What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth** (Overman, LSE; Centre for Cities) analyses which policies are most effective in increasing local economic growth; for example, the centre is currently **working with the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of the UK Growth Vouchers Scheme** and with the Department for Transport to evaluate the effect of transport funding on new housing developments. Recently the centre has looked at **local industrial strategies** and what locals areas need to do to develop them.

Wales Centre for Public Policy (Martin, Cardiff University) **collaborates with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and public services in Wales with high-quality evidence and independent advice** that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes. The centre's research includes a project that demonstrates **what works** (Williams, Wales Centre for Public Policy) in tackling rural poverty and another that assesses the **changing job market** (Bell, et al) and the possible implications for policy makers.

Education and skills

The **Young Lives, Young Futures** project (Gewirtz, King's College London; The Edge Foundation) is **investigating how England's vocational education and training system can better support the school-to-work transitions of the 50% of young people who don't go to university**. The research compares the opportunities for young people living in different places and the resources they are able to draw on to help them make and exercise meaningful career and employment choices.

The **Transforming Working Lives** programme launches in April 2022 and will include place-related projects such as the **Digital Futures at Work Centre (Digit)** (O'Reilly, University of Sussex; Stuart, University of Leeds), which will examine the **regional and international impact** of digitalisation at work. There is also a current call to investigate **people's use of digital technologies**, which will **explore changes in society affected by digital technologies at national and local levels**.

Health and social care

Delivery of public health and social care services are often local matters with funding, service provision, charities and private providers having regional and local perspectives. ESRC funds the following projects which aim to improve local public and social care services.

The Centre for Care (Yeandle, University of Sheffield) will address the need for new, accessible evidence on the issues facing social care. It will explore how things could be done differently in social care for the benefit of those giving and receiving care. The centre will **examine younger and older people's experience of care, how that experience is different and why including issues of inequality which can be locally patterned**. It will also look at care worker recruitment, employment and working conditions and how technology might support care. **The Sustainable Care Programme** explores how care arrangements, currently 'in crisis' in parts of

the UK, can be made sustainable and deliver wellbeing outcomes. **Several areas of the programme's research relate to local and regional differences in care arrangements** as well as migrants' experience of care systems.

IMPACT (Improving Adult Care Together) (Glasby, University of Birmingham) is a £15 million centre for improving adult social care. The centre will draw on knowledge gained from different types of research, the experience of people using services and their carers, and the wisdom gained by social care staff in their work in the sector. **It will work across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to support the implementation of evidence and innovation within social care** practice and policy. This will improve care in a way that is sensitive to the different policy contexts in the four nations while sharing learning across the UK.

The **MARCH mental health network** (Fancourt, University College London) was set up to investigate **how local community assets (e.g. libraries, museums and parks) support mental health and wellbeing, and build resilient communities**. The network comprises dozens of partner organisations, from national charities to local and minority community groups.

The **SASCI (Supporting Adult Social Care Innovation) project** (Malley, Care Policy and Evaluation Centre) is **producing evidence about how to support the adult social care sector across its regional and local diversity** to start up, implement and spread affordable innovations that work well for everyone and could improve local lives.

The UK Prevention Research Partnership is a public health focused initiative funding a range of large projects which often take a place-based approach. Two research projects are of particular relevance:

- **ACT Early** (Wright, Bradford Institute for Health Research) **aims to improve the life chances of children by focusing on improving the environments that influence their health** and focuses on Bradford and Tower Hamlets

- **TRUUD** (Tackling the Root Causes Upstream of Unhealthy Urban Development Decision-making – Hickman, University of Bristol) **focuses on urban planning for disease prevention** and includes partnerships with Bristol City Council and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Ethnicity and race

The Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity (University of Manchester) – the UK's leading centre of research into ethnic, racial and religious inequalities – is studying **race and ethnicity in four areas of the UK**. The project has four main themes:

- the lived experience of race and ethnicity

- the language of ethnicity and race

- how race and ethnicity are managed in the social and political context

- how neighbourhoods and diversity are understood and remembered in the past

The project will explore how these themes change for people over time, by generation and life stage.

Data for regional and local areas

ESRC's data infrastructure investments **provide insights about place-based differences in opportunities and outcomes for people in the UK** and the socio-environmental contexts in which they live.

The UK Household Longitudinal Study **Understanding Society** (Benzeval, University of Essex) **has enough sample members in each of the UK's four countries to enable comparisons to be drawn between their populations**, and at a regional level within England.

ESRC's plans for future investment in a new **Early Life Cohort** (Dennison, University College London) for the UK **include boost samples in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to enable comparisons of the effects of different early life circumstances**, policies and relevant regional, community, family and individual factors in those nations.

These studies' broad range of measures encompass the challenges that are central to the levelling up agenda: social and economic wellbeing, health, educational aspirations and attainment.

The ESRC-funded **British, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Election Studies** are increasingly coordinating their work to deliver cross-national comparative analyses of political and social attitudes in all UK nations.

The **Urban Big Data Centre** (Bailey, University of Glasgow) and the **Consumer Data Research Centre** (Birkin, University of Leeds; Longley, University College London) support the acquisition and use of geo-spatial, commercial and transactional, sensor and image data that can deliver important insights about the places in which people live. For example, **monitoring data on traffic flows and footfall has helped researchers to understand the impact of the pandemic on the UK's towns and cities**. The **Local Data Spaces** programme used de-identified COVID-19 data from the national Test and Trace programme, from ONS and also the Consumer Data Research Centre, to understand the spread of the pandemic in local areas and its impact on communities.

ADR UK (Administrative Data Research UK) is dedicated to providing good quality evidence for policy makers. The majority of the 300+ administrative datasets ADR UK has made available to external researchers have **potential to support research activity relevant to places, due to existing coding or potential to code geographically (middle super output area, lower super output area, health area, etc).** The full potential of ADR UK's datasets can be framed by the priority

policy questions of place that are emerging from policy partners and the academic community.

Wider ESRC investments that support local partnerships, research capacity and capability

Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) funding builds capacity and creates opportunities for the social sciences to work across disciplines to increase the impact of research. IAAs represent a concentration of capability which is often already engaged with local issues. ESRC is currently running the **Local Acceleration Fund** to build on this. This fund will provide resource to support IAAs to test different ways of engaging and collaborating with local partners. **The aim is to gain local insight which can inform policy solutions that impact local lives, communities and economies**.

ESRC currently supports 14 **Doctoral Training Partnerships** (DTPs) which cover the regions of the UK and partner with over 73 institutions. Within a region the DTP programme often includes a diversity of research organisations (ROs), including traditionally research-intensive universities and institutions that are developing and scaling their research capability. **This infrastructure supports the development of research capacity and capabilities at a regional level**. DTPs develop research and development activities that support local public, private and voluntary sector needs; for example, through collaborating on student research projects (collaborative studentship) or hosting shorter-term student placements.