

# SOCIAL SCIENCES TAKING THE LONG VIEW



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ESRC Chief Executive

My first year as Chief Executive has been a challenging, but ultimately successful, year for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). In a year of uncertainty the ESRC has proved it has the skills, flexibility and vision to succeed. This year we responded to the Comprehensive Spending Review with a balanced but ambitious ESRC Delivery Plan 2011-2015, which is now starting to be implemented, while increasing the efficiency of our operations. The Plan describes the leadership role we will continue to play to maximise the UK's strength in social science research and training, and to increase the benefits of publicly funded research to the economy and society.

As the national challenges facing the UK have become more acute we have sharpened our focus with the introduction of three strategic priorities: Economic Performance and Sustainable Growth; Influencing Behaviours and Informing Interventions; and A Vibrant and Fair Society. These were developed during a lengthy consultation process and they encapsulate some of the most important issues facing Britain and the wider world. Over the last few months I have been across the country sharing the Delivery Plan with the social science community, government departments, as well as the private and third sectors and I have been grateful for the positive support for our work.

Impact remains a key objective of the research we fund. Social science research plays a key role in developing our understanding of business practices, tactics and the wider social and economic effects. For instance, the collaboration between Future Foundation and the ESRC Centre for Business, Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS) has shown how social science supports some of

Britain's biggest brands. Royal Mail and the travel company Thomson worked with social science researchers to understand better how changing consumer attitudes to climate change may impact on their businesses in the future.

ESRC research also informs policy, both in the UK and internationally. One example of this has been through the introduction of a new police intervention for crowd control across Europe. The study confirmed that by keeping a low profile and intervening early, police can work with crowds to deal with potential trouble more effectively. In the UK, ESRC research has led to a far better understanding of how poverty and low pay persist and the factors that influence social mobility. These findings have informed policies for combating child poverty, the reform of the UK tax system, and the Department for Work and Pensions' *Opportunity for All* programme. ESRC research also changes lives; data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study has recently provided evidence on maternal employment and child socio-emotional behaviour in the UK. The study found that there

are no significant detrimental effects on a child's social or emotional development if their mother works during the child's early years. This is important given some of the mixed messages that exist around the effects of women's engagement with the labour market on their children.

In addition to supporting world-leading social science research, the ESRC funds and maintains some of the world's greatest data resources. In particular, these include world-leading longitudinal studies (where individuals are repeatedly surveyed over their lives to help build a picture of their changing social and economic circumstances) such as *Understanding Society*. This is the largest panel study in the world, interviewing 40,000 households or 100,000 individuals annually, and whose first findings were published in early 2011.

We have learnt, for example, how bullying often begins at home; how certain social groups are excluded from some types of social participation; and how where you live can affect your life chances. Looking forward the

study will continue to contribute to our understanding of how households and families are changing. We were also delighted to receive a £28.5 million commitment from the Government's Large Facilities Capital Fund to establish a new Birth Cohort and a Birth Cohort Facility which will support this and previous cohorts. The Birth Cohort Study will capture around 100,000 children in pregnancy and will follow them throughout their lives, in much the same way as the 1946, 1958, 1970 and millennium cohorts continue to do.

We have also made strategic investments in studies based on routinely collected administrative data, such as the Scottish Longitudinal Study which links census, medical and educational data for a sample of the Scottish population, and we are investigating how we can link further data sources to improve research and policy evaluation. These nationally comprehensive datasets provide exciting new insights which would be impossible to garner from individual surveys.

Partnerships are vital to our work. We work with a range of organisations, increasing the potential impact of our research and creating opportunities to secure funding from outside the research base. This includes working closely with other Research Councils as there is a growing recognition across the breadth of academic enquiry that inter-disciplinary approaches are often required and that social science has a vital role to

play. Take, for example, climate change. We rely on natural scientists to provide reliable evidence on the extent of global warming, and what the contribution of human activity is to this. However, we require social scientists to help us understand how to change people's behaviour so that society becomes more sustainable; to provide advice on how to calculate realistic approaches to carbon trading; and to work with governments to help develop sustainable policies that are acceptable to business and the public.

We also co-fund research and people exchange activities with public, private and third-sector bodies. For example, the Financial Services Knowledge Transfer Network, funded in partnership with the Technology Strategy Board, aims to improve business performance and innovation in financial services by providing a forum for knowledge exchange. The Network has already opened up opportunities for collaboration with the financial services sector, including the development of a new Knowledge Transfer Partnership involving the risk management and insurance intermediary Willis, and the Insurance Intellectual Capital Initiative. The Knowledge Transfer Partnership programme enables organisations across the private, public and third sectors to improve their competitiveness and productivity through accessing the knowledge, skills and technology that reside within UK universities. Over 55

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new partnerships were funded this year; partners included Barclays Bank, AGE UK, Pfizer UK Group Limited, Teenager Cancer Trust, and Birmingham City Council.

Communicating what we do is also essential. As a social scientist it is clear to see how we are shaping evidence based policy but I'm not convinced that the public has a clear understanding of what social science is and the contribution that it is making. We need to engage with the public and explain the value of our work. Hence, we are currently organising the annual Festival of Social Science for the public which helps to promote the work of social scientists beyond the research community. This week-long series of events, which celebrates the breadth of research being undertaken in the UK, runs between 29 October and 5 November and in previous years has involved over 18,000 members of the public.

In January 2011 we also launched our new website which offers improved navigation, greater ease of use and better access to our dynamic research catalogue. Visitors can access topical features, case studies, informed debate and expert opinion on a range of topics including climate change, ageing, employment and crime.

I am pleased to be part of such a dynamic and talented

organisation. We have some exciting new opportunities developing over the next 12 months including the second wave of results for *Understanding Society*, the recruitment of mothers for the Birth Cohort Study, the introduction of our dedicated Future Research Leaders scheme for our early career researchers; a new Secondary Data Analysis scheme which will encourage greater use of the large-scale data resources we fund; and we are exploring the possible development of a 'what works' initiative – the establishment of a network of policy evaluation centres. The development of the social science skills base within the UK continues to be a priority for the ESRC and we are taking a strategic lead to improve the quality of postgraduate training across the social sciences. Our new national network of 21 Doctoral Training Centres will play a pivotal role in enhancing postgraduate training provision and provide the highly skilled social scientists required to meet the research challenges of the future, both within and outside academia.

Our commitment to supporting excellence has never wavered and we will continue to support the pursuit of excellence, ensuring that social science research continues to make a difference to UK society and internationally.

