ESRC Delivery Plan 2016-20

Social science shaping society
ESRC Delivery Plan 2016-20

Our Vision
At the core of our increasingly interconnected planet and our advanced industrial societies are human-dominated and human-influenced systems. Social science provides robust evidence and insights at the level of individuals, communities, institutions, and societies. Social science plays a key role in framing the major societal questions which need to be addressed, and in identifying ways in which these might best be tackled. Social scientists often challenge common-sense assumptions about the world, demonstrating the importance of gathering detailed evidence before reaching conclusions. If we want new technology and scientific breakthroughs to deliver for society, we also need the capacity to understand that society. Close collaboration is needed between the social sciences and the natural sciences to address major challenges such as how to ensure access to energy, food and water across the globe. These problems require more than technical solutions. Throughout this Delivery Plan period, we will invest in the highest quality social science with the power to aid growth, promote innovation and to shape society.

Our 2015 Strategic Plan, developed in consultation with our research and user communities, set out our commitment to provide leadership and support for social science across four main areas of activity:
- Fostering research and innovation
- Creating and maximising data infrastructure for research
- Building capability
- Facilitating partnerships and realising impact

We are committed to driving forward a range of integrated activities and investment across each of these areas during this Delivery Plan period.

Over the next four years and beyond, we will deliver an ambitious programme of social science with direct benefit to the UK economy and society, working closely with our community of world-leading social scientists, and with experts from business, policy and the civil society sector, to develop and refine our strategic priorities over the course of the Delivery Plan period. Our initial priority areas for investment across all areas of our portfolio are:
- Productivity
- Understanding the Macro-Economy
- Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Housing
- Ways of Being in a Digital Age

Further details of these priorities are set out below, and we will be announcing opportunities in each area over the coming months and throughout the Delivery Plan period. In addition, we will play an integral role in developing and delivering both the £1.5-billion Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), and the extended Newton Fund, working alongside other delivery partners from RCUK and elsewhere.
Delivering National Needs

We have a powerful track record of delivering excellence with impact across the social sciences, and will continue to build on this throughout the Delivery Plan period. Our grant funding is highly competitive and those applications that are successful are of the very highest quality, as assessed through our rigorous, independent peer-review processes. The results of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 provided a strong endorsement of the overall high quality of UK social science. Main Panel C, which assessed the majority of social science disciplines, concluded in its Overview Report that the research outputs assessed were of higher quality than in previous exercises, concluding that UK social science has demonstrable resilience and strength in depth. The high quality of UK social science has also been endorsed by the biennial report International Comparative Performance of the Research Base, with the 2013 report demonstrating that the quality of UK social science continues to rank well above the world average based on field-weighted citation impact. Our own evaluation evidence provides further validation of the high quality of UK social science, with over 96 per cent of individual projects rated good or better by an independent peer review process. Nevertheless, the majority of the high quality social science proposals that we receive cannot be supported, and the constraints of our research budget over the next four years mean that this will continue to be the case, with our total annual resource spend remaining broadly flat between now and 2019/20. However, the new GCRF will provide us with the opportunity to fund new activities of global impact, building on our strong track record of support for international development research.

It is also evident that this excellent social science research has delivered significant impact on society and the economy. We work closely with our community to support, deliver and assess the impact of our funding, and the extensive and varied range of impact case studies (www.esrc.ac.uk/news-events-and-publications/impact-case-studies) that we can showcase from our research is testament to the ability of ESRC research to make a genuine difference at the local, national and international level. At least one in three REF Main Panel C Impact case studies was underpinned by ESRC funding, and more than three quarters of these were based on interdisciplinary research.

Over the next four years, whilst we will continue to pursue innovative approaches to leverage additional funding to support social science, we must make some difficult decisions to meet our ongoing commitments and to invest in new priorities. We will therefore focus our resources on those areas where we feel we can make the greatest difference, whilst retaining our intention to deliver a broad portfolio of investment across all areas of activity to deliver our priorities as set out in our 2015 Strategic Plan. Our commitments for this 2016-20 Delivery Plan period are set out below.

Fostering Research and Innovation (c.47 per cent of overall budget: 17 per cent Responsive Mode, 25 per cent Strategic Mode, 5 per cent International)

We will protect funding for our responsive mode Standard Grants scheme, ensuring we continue to be able to support the highest quality curiosity-driven social science. (c.17 per cent)

We remain fully committed to maintaining a vibrant, curiosity-driven funding scheme, and will preserve funding for our Standard Grants scheme in real terms, to mitigate against a further drop in the success rate which has been affected by successive years of flat cash funding.

We will continue to fund ambitious, impactful, and cutting-edge social science across all funding modes, including our Transformative Research scheme, which supports research designed to be at the frontier of innovation.

We will continue to encourage and incentivise proposals for cutting-edge social science in all areas of our portfolio, ensuring that our peer-review processes do not prejudice those applications which hold the greatest potential for innovation. Whilst we strongly support innovative social science wherever it is found, we will also deliver further rounds of our pioneering Transformative Research scheme, which has so far funded 45 projects which have been recently assessed by an independent evaluation to have represented genuinely transformative ideas, based on a peer review exercise of submitted proposals. We will also continue to support cutting-edge methodological innovation in strategically important areas via our investment in the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM), enabling social scientists to address key substantive and policy-relevant research questions.

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1 14,413 research staff, some 27 per cent of the total submitted to the REF exercise
2 Main Panel C Overview Report (January 2015)
3 International Comparative Performance of the UK Research Base 2013
5 Strategic Plan 2015
We will deliver high-quality, independent evidence in challenging and topical areas of public debate.

Building on the success of our Future of the UK and Scotland programme, we are currently supporting a high-profile programme of authoritative research and synthesis on the UK in a Changing Europe.6 This initiative will provide independent, reliable and impartial evidence to underpin the public debate in the run up to the EU referendum and beyond, helping to deliver our Royal Charter objective to promote public understanding of social science. In the coming years we will remain alert to any further high-profile public debates to which social science research could contribute and will continue to work with partners to identify the topics and challenges facing society; taking action to address gaps with high-quality and independent evidence that will inform public debate.

We will invest in areas of national priority, mobilising social science evidence to address significant social and economic challenges.

We will prioritise support for research and related activities which address some of the major challenges currently facing society, launching new initiatives in each of the areas outlined below. Opportunities will range from small-scale, capacity-building opportunities to substantial new grants, with the first funding calls to be launched early in 2016/17.

Our initial priority areas for investment across all areas of our portfolio are:

**Productivity** – the UK has experienced a long-term slowdown in productivity growth and, since 2008, the ‘productivity puzzle’ of exceptionally weak growth compared to international competitors – behind all but one other G7 country. There is a pressing need for further research evidence to explain productivity levels and to provide the basis for development of new policy measures to support and foster productivity.

**Understanding the macro-economy** – long-standing criticisms of the economics profession, and particularly mainstream academic macroeconomics, were given impetus by the perceived failure of macroeconomists to anticipate the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession. The apparently limited relevance of mainstream macroeconomic theory to policy debates underlines the need for innovative work in this area to address this, whilst ensuring that new approaches are scientifically rigorous and retain the best of previous scholarship.

**Mental Health and Wellbeing** – it is estimated that 23 per cent of the UK population is directly affected by mental health problems at some point each year and the economic cost of mental illness in England is estimated at £105 billion. Around 75 per cent of people with mental health problems live in low- and middle-income countries, and 25 per cent of the global burden of disability comes from mental disorders. However, compared with investment in physical health, investment in mental health is relatively low. Much current research is medical or clinical in nature and the majority is UK focused. New investment in research that takes a more global and social scientific perspective is therefore a priority.

**Housing** – the supply, accessibility and affordability of housing influences the wider economy, the financial system and the wellbeing of citizens. The quality, tenure, price and location of homes all have implications for other outcomes including; shelter; wealth, health and education. We have identified a clear gap in the translation of research to provide robust evidence to inform housing policy and practice across the UK. The ESRC will add real value by working with a range of partners to bring this research together to generate a better and more comprehensive understanding of the complex housing market and policy environment.

**Ways of Being in a Digital Age** – digital technology is present in all aspects of our lives, whether we actively engage with it or not. It affects the way we communicate, and the ways we receive, consume and process information. It influences routine behaviours – the way we travel, shop and work. The presence of digital technology mediates our perceptions, behaviours and practices across these different domains and thereby influences our ways of living. This raises a number of fundamental questions about our ways of being in a digital age, the risks and opportunities associated with digital living, and our understanding of the individual, community, and society.

We will review our priority areas annually, and will work in an agile and responsive manner to identify further selective priorities for investment over the course of the Delivery Plan period.

We will deliver a significant contribution to international development goals through our support for international development research and related activities. (c.5 per cent)

We have played an important and unique role in international development research over the past decade, in particular through our longstanding
partnership with DFID. The new Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) presents an opportunity to build on this further, recognising the fundamental importance of local context, expertise and knowledge in delivering successful, high-impact research for development. We are well placed to move swiftly to support new activities funded under the GCRF umbrella, with our initial priorities for 2016/17 as follows:

- Commission a new round of urgency research grants on refugees and migration, focused on research that informs support for refugee populations in the region around Syria.
- Launch a competition for Research Centres focused on GCRF priorities.
- Commission a Strategic Networks competition to support the UK social science community to develop links with international researchers, policymakers and practitioners that will underpin future high-impact research under GCRF.
- Provide additional support through our Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) to enable Research Organisations to establish international partnerships to deliver impact.
- Fund our Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) to support a cohort of early career researchers in areas relevant to the GCRF.
- Employ the Secondary Data Analysis Initiative to support research that uses previously unharnessed data sources relevant to GCRF.

Creating and Maximising Data Infrastructure for Research (c.15 per cent of overall budget, plus additional allocated capital funds)

We will continue to take a strategic lead in expanding the UK’s world-class infrastructure for research, focused on large-scale sources of data including longitudinal, international, cross-sectional, administrative, and private sector data. (c.15 per cent)

We are dedicated to ensuring the UK remains an international leader in the design, delivery and use of large, complex, innovative data resources. These resources are essential to enhance our understanding of the ways in which past experiences and influences shape outcomes for individuals and society. Over the course of this Delivery Plan we will work closely with other funders, national and international, so that our continued and future investment in longitudinal studies and cross-sectional studies addresses academic and research user needs; the changing context of participants and availability of data; and the need for data to support research into emerging global challenges.

We will carefully consider new approaches to data collection, emerging technologies and opportunities to link with administrative, biological, and other data in a way that ensures highly efficient data collection, support for pioneering research methods, and the collection of robust data upon which future science will be built. In 2016/17 we will review our current practices for the commissioning, governance and funding of longitudinal studies and ensure these meet the future needs of such investments. We will evaluate the continued relevance, practice, impact and value for money of our existing portfolio of longitudinal studies. And we will assess the ways in which access to and use of administrative and private sector data can best be developed through our investment in the Big Data Network, including the development of collaborations between these centres and investments in the wider data landscape.

We will explore the potential of new forms of data (both quantitative and qualitative), and innovations in data collection, linkage and use, providing the necessary infrastructure to support bold and innovative social science.

Through our Big Data Network we have ensured that researchers have the ability to access and use a growing range of data resources not originally collected for research purposes. Many new forms of data – especially internet-generated data such as social media interactions – are offering exciting new potential for research, along with associated technological and ethical challenges. Subject to final approval of funding, we will invest in a new International Interdisciplinary Centre in Real-Time Analytics, to complement existing investments in the Big Data Network and ensure that the research community has access to the tools, technology, skills and expertise needed to exploit ‘new forms of data’. We will also evaluate and reinvest in data support services as the core of the UK social science data infrastructure. The UKDS supports access of researchers to social and economic data, and is an innovative hub to support and signpost the growing range of big data resources available for social science research.

We will identify further opportunities for exploitation of our existing investment in datasets, including greater integration of our unique portfolio of data infrastructure with that of others, ensuring seamless access for academic and non-academic users alike.

The huge wealth of data resources established and developed by the ESRC offers enormous opportunities for answering core social science research questions, as well as major interdisciplinary research challenges.
Many of the most exciting opportunities lie at both the boundary between disciplines and through the combination of different data resources, and through enhancing collaborations across different infrastructures. To maximise the use of diverse ESRC and other data resources, including through leveraged support from different partner organisations, we will invest in further projects through our Secondary Data Analysis Initiative. We will also continue to lead co-ordinated RCUK activity to convene and catalyse the UK's research data stakeholders so that, as a nation, we have the tools and skills needed to use our e-Infrastructure portfolio, and to position ourselves at the forefront of the research data revolution.

**Building Capability (c.30 per cent of overall budget; 25 per cent Doctoral, 5 per cent Postdoctoral)**

We will launch our new Doctoral Training Network, including thematic Centres for Doctoral Training, to support the development of highly capable and innovative researchers for a wide range of careers. (c.25 per cent)

Our current Doctoral Training Network provides excellence in postgraduate training, equipping cohorts of social science postgraduates with exceptional research skills and training for all aspects of academic or other careers. We are currently refreshing our Doctoral Training Network through an open and competitive process for new Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTP) and a limited number of targeted Centres for Doctoral Training that will build capacity in key areas (initially Biosocial and New Forms of Data) which cut across the boundaries of social science and other disciplines. The new Network will be announced in September 2016, with the first cohort of students commencing a year later in September 2017.

We will develop new opportunities to support early career Researchers allowing us to develop a strong cadre of leaders for the future. (c.5 per cent)

We recognise the many and varied challenges faced by those embarking on the early stages of their postdoctoral careers; in this context we are undertaking a thorough review of our current early career provision. In late 2016, as part of our overall approach to building capability, we will be announcing new initiatives in this area which will aim to recalibrate the balance between our current levels of doctoral and postdoctoral support and to address the challenges in the transition between these two career stages.

We will enable postgraduate students and early career researchers to forge links and networks internationally.

We are committed to developing researchers who can operate in a global context, and will ensure that all ESRC-funded doctoral students are given opportunities to acquire the cultural and methodological skills required for working with international partners. This will encompass the provision of funding for overseas fieldwork, language training and the overseas institutional visit scheme. We will also use the Global Challenge Research Fund to generate new partnerships and develop existing links between our DTPs and research organisations to build the capacity and capability to address the problems faced by developing countries.

**Facilitating Partnerships and Realising Impact (c.5 per cent of overall budget)**

We will support further opportunities for partnership working, knowledge exchange, and co-funding with a range of partners to tackle pressing societal issues.

Effective knowledge exchange is embedded and enabled throughout all stages of our funding – from the way we develop and commission research, to peer review and our support for Pathways to Impact – and it is integral to excellent research and impact. We will continue to invest in strategic knowledge exchange and impact via other routes, frequently in partnership. We will use our 24 Impact Acceleration Accounts to extend university social science partnership working and to leverage at least 25 per cent of the overall IAA budget. We will also review the Social Science Section of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) with a view to re-commissioning for a further three years to continue to build on and enhance the knowledge exchange activities and impacts achieved in the UK Parliament, including leveraging funding for at least five placement fellows within POST. We will identify and work with a breadth of partners across civil society and the private sector in order to enable effective knowledge exchange and impact as well as leverage co-funding where there are shared strategic objectives to tackle challenges faced by society.

We will maintain and extend investment in the innovative ‘What Works’ network, providing robust evidence to guide decision-making on public spending.

As one of the core funders of the ‘What Works’ initiative, we will continue to work in partnership with government departments and other funders by investing in an increased understanding of what makes effective knowledge exchange. We will undertake a review of
ESRC-co-funded ‘What Works’ Centres to inform future selective investments in new and ongoing Centres, to support the delivery of high-quality evidence for public policy, such as the Business Advice Toolkit\(^1\) produced by the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth.

We will continue to communicate with and engage the public to raise awareness of social science research, delivering on our Royal Charter objectives.

Our highly-regarded annual week-long ESRC Festival of Social Science, held in November each year; across the length and breadth of the UK, celebrates the social sciences with events conceived and delivered by our funded investments, other researchers and external organisations from civil society and the government departments with an interest in communicating the social sciences. The Festival provides opportunities for the public to engage with cutting-edge social science research via debates, conferences, workshops, interactive seminars, film screenings, virtual exhibitions and much more. Alongside this, we will continue to explore new ways to promote the impact of social science research to users of research and the public, particularly through social media, our press campaigns, our magazines and events, and in the development of our website and other digital output.

We will also continue to offer opportunities for specific publics to increase their engagement with social science, introducing alternating biennial competitions for 14-18 year olds to demonstrate creativity by using photography to explore the relevance of social science to their lives and for our next generation of social scientists to write about what social science means to them. We will also recognise and reward impact via our annual Impact Prize, which celebrates outstanding ESRC research and success across a number of categories, including interdisciplinary, collaborative working, partnerships, engagement and knowledge exchange activities that have led to significant impact.

Effectiveness through Partnerships

Supporting Interdisciplinary Research

The UK Research Councils are recognised internationally as leaders and innovators in supporting interdisciplinary research. Many other funders look to us for best practice. At any one time, more than 50 per cent of Research Council grant portfolios are interdisciplinary\(^2\).

We have a strong track record of co-facilitating and co-funding interdisciplinary research, innovation and PhD training – through individual Council investments and through multi-agency ‘grand challenge’ programmes. We are agile in responding to emerging UK needs and new partnership opportunities.

We will now use our experience and convening power to help design and implement the new, multi-agency Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), working with BIS to develop a consistent approach to the GCRF and to maximise the fund’s impact for success in meeting combined UK aid and research goals. Within our own budgets, Research Councils will continue working together to address complex UK and global challenges that require interdisciplinary approaches, including issues and themes as varied as anti-microbial resistance; urban living; agri-food systems and data for discovery.

Working Collaboratively

We support independent, high-quality research with impact across all policy areas. Over the previous Delivery Plan period we substantively engaged with every government department, devolved government as well as many major agencies, establishing valuable and long-term relationships, many of which included co-funding. This level of collaboration with public-sector partners is expected to continue and extend across the duration of the 2016-20 Delivery Plan period. We will also continue and expand our partnership working with a range of other organisations from the private and civil society sectors through tailored strategies that will support research and other activities in areas of mutual interest, sustaining current rates of leverage (both financial and in-kind) and enhancing the potential impact of our funding. Specifically, we will:

- **Strengthen the contribution of social science with Innovate UK** – we will review the impact of the jointly funded Caucus (a group of leading social science experts to support Innovate UK) and refresh and enhance the model for the next three years.
- **Enhance and improve collaborations with key partners**, prioritising knowledge mobilisation through our new priority areas, with research agendas co-produced with research users and designed to address key policy and practitioner needs.
- **Provide access to a powerful set of evidence, data tools and resources which will support local economic growth**, Local Enterprise Partnerships

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\(^1\) www.whatworksgrowth.org/resources/business-advice-toolkit/

\(^2\) RCUK analysis of open data available on Gateway to Research (gtr.rcuk.ac.uk), based on active grants in 2014 where investigators come from different departments.
and local authorities through our Business and Local Government Data Research Centres.

- Increase the access to our research and data resources for business, ensuring social science is contributing to economic growth in the UK. This will include use of our longitudinal studies, our Big Data investments and research in innovation and behaviour.

In addition, we will enhance and develop our streamlined and strategic approach to working with key Research Organisation partners and Learned Societies. Through collaborative working with our partners we will seek to address sector challenges, including scheme success rates, in an effective and cost efficient manner; and build on the progress of the past four years in improving the quality of proposals and the effectiveness of peer review.

**Global Social Science**

We will increase investment with international partners, providing significant leverage on UK investment and enhancing the global standing of UK social science. (c.5 per cent of overall budget)

We are committed to creating opportunities for UK social scientists to collaborate with researchers on excellent and innovative research projects in all parts of the world, and to funding research that has global impact. We continue to be active partners in NORFACE (New Opportunities for Research Funding Agency Cooperation in Europe), currently in its fourth round of commissioning, focused on Dynamics of Inequality Across the Life-Course (DIAL), with decisions to be announced in 2017. We will lead on the next commissioning round for the Open Research Area (with France, Germany and the Netherlands, due to launch in 2017). We will also continue to create and strengthen partnerships and funding opportunities through the Newton Fund and the Global Challenges Research Fund with a suite of activities planned for the months ahead, including a workshop on longitudinal research in partnership with the National Science Foundation (NSF) in autumn 2016.

**An Effective and Efficient Organisation**

**Reforming the Research Councils**

The Research Councils together will continue to participate actively in a suite of government reforms involving BIS partners across the UK research and innovation funding landscape. These reforms aim to ensure the UK is the best place in the world to do research, to innovate and to grow businesses, whilst delivering the best return on public investment. They include: reform of higher education; implementation of the Nurse Review recommendations; BIS 2020 organisational and efficiency reform; BIS common technology platform; BIS grants programme.

We will work with government and BIS partners to bring together the seven Research Councils and dual support system as ‘Research UK’. This new organisation will take responsibility for national research strategy, simplify transactional operations and reduce administration costs. In parallel we will work with Innovate UK to address the recommendations of the Dowling Review to simplify public support for innovation.

To ensure successful reform, we will be mindful of key principles identified by Sir Paul Nurse, government and the Research Councils. These principles include: commitment to the dual support system for funding UK research; clear delegation from government for research-funding decisions and their management; commitment to the Haldane principles; recognition of the breadth and scale of research investments within and across disciplines.

In preparation for reform, the Research Councils will plan and implement internal change and cost-reduction measures from 2016, ensuring that our changes support wider government reforms. We will continue to engage actively with this agenda, seeking further opportunities for efficiency and reform, building on changes that we have implemented in recent years, including the introduction our new streamlined Committee structure and the implementation of a restructured Peer Review College to improve response rates for peer review requests.

**Evaluating Research Council investment**

The UK’s dual support system for publicly funded research provides a holistic and efficient investment appraisal and evaluation cycle compliant with HM Treasury guidance. Playing complementary roles, Research Councils focus on prospective quality assurance through rigorous peer-reviewed competition for grants, while Higher Education Funding Councils...
focus on retrospective quality evaluation through the research excellence framework (REF). Besides informing Funding Council allocations, REF evaluates the excellence and impact (economic and societal benefit) of university research supported by all funders, including Research Councils.

Research Councils also evaluate or audit specific investments and processes, during or after their lifetimes. Large capital proposals require business cases and economic valuation to inform investment decisions and to evaluate benefits realised. We use our own and independent evidence, including REF, to evaluate long-term outcomes and performance against Royal Charter objectives.

Driving an Efficient Research Base

UK research is the most productive in the world. The Research Councils, including the ESRC, will continue to work with BIS, HEFCE, Universities UK and the HEI sector to promote collaboration and sharing of infrastructure, data assets and other resources to further raise efficiency and productivity across the sector. Using our expertise as funders of research and facilities, we will work with the sector to pioneer policies, incentives and performance measures for efficient sharing and use of research assets.

Data Management and Analysis

The ESRC is committed to improving our own management information and our ability to analyse and visualise our portfolio. In the past year we have already introduced and will continue to develop our approach to classifying and recording the data we received from applicants, developing new management information reports and tools to extract and analyse the data we hold, and invest in new software to visualise our portfolio. Such improvements and use of a wider range of tools and software packages will help us to improve the quality of our strategic decision-making. Beyond utilising our own data we will increasingly make use of data and knowledge produced about the sector and social sciences by partner organisations and the wider knowledge landscape. We will increase and enhance our use of our website to communicate our analyses and strategies to the widest audiences.

Equality and Diversity

The Councils have collectively developed an action plan for equality, diversity and inclusion and the ESRC is committed to promoting this across all of our activities in terms of, for example, membership of our decision-making bodies, applications for funding and within our own workforce.

Staff Development

The ESRC is committed to regular engagement with, and the development of, all its staff. We will continue with our monthly all staff meetings and the CEO’s weekly news email. We will use the Civil Service People Survey over the SR period and will build on the outcomes of the 2015 survey which indicated high levels of employee engagement.

See, for example, Research Council impact reports: www.rcuk.ac.uk/media/news/impact/

Based on article volume and citations per pound invested: www.gov.uk/government/publications/performance-of-the-uk-research-base-international-comparison-2013
## Financial Allocations

### Resource

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### Capital

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### ESRC Major capital projects

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*indicative funding