



## **Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace) submission**

### **Economic and Social Research Council Consultation: Informing the future strategic direction of the Economic and Social Research Council**

July 2014

#### Introduction

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Solace is the representative body for over 1200 Chief Executives and senior strategic managers working in the public sector in the UK. We are committed to promoting public sector excellence. We provide our members with opportunities for personal and professional development, and seek to influence debate around the future of public services to ensure that policy and legislation are informed by the experience and expertise of our members. Whilst the vast majority of Solace members work in local government we also have members in senior positions in health authorities, police and fire authorities and central government.

As the membership body of Chief Executives and senior managers in local government, we have a keen interest in the future sustainability of the health and care system. The Society has a particularly keen interest in health and social care integration and believes that only through radical reform will we secure a service for our communities that we can be proud of. We are also very interested in how we can promote more sustainable and resilient communities which are better able to assure the wellbeing of our residents without the need for statutory services.

#### Response

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**Question 1: In which areas of activity, and/or in what ways, do you judge that the ESRC currently adds most value?**

Solace is keenly aware of the role of the ESRC in relation to public policy and public services as set out in its 2011-2015 Plan, and its 2015-16 Delivery Plan. It sees the new Strategic Plan which this consultation will inform as an opportunity for the ESRC to build on its 'impact' focus, and in particular to increase impact in relation to local government and local communities. We have long noted the role ESRC plays in informing government policy on a variety of issues, and where it ensures a sound understanding of how markets and social attitudes influence the application of science and technology.

We see the most value from the ESRC portfolio of activity where there is direct resonance and relevance to local government, as the effective application of knowledge and research to public challenges, policies and services can play an important role in achieving more effective and less



costly outcomes at the local level. ESRC represents a useful asset and plays an important role in informing and shaping debates around the shifting nature of society and community, the changing relationship between state and citizen, how individuals and communities are developing, and how economies evolve and function. Of importance to Solace, we see ESRC as delivering this with a view to the diversity of the areas local authorities exist in across geographic boundaries.

**Question 2: Looking ahead, and in the context of on-going funding constraints and our commitment to make best use of public funding, what would you like to see us doing differently, better, more or less of?**

Solace believes that there is scope to further develop relationships between local government, local public services and ESRC activity and programmes, and would see material benefits for both, and for the research community more widely.

We support the direction of the ESRC as set out in the Charter; in promoting and supporting, high-quality basic, strategic and applied research, advancing knowledge and providing training for social scientists and to provide advice on, and disseminate knowledge and promote public understanding of, the social sciences. We see it as important for this direction to continue with a local focus at the local level, so that sustainable links between higher education institutions and local authorities can be developed. With this in mind, there is a strong case for the ESRC to develop its strategic engagement with the local government sector over the medium term, especially given its scale and diversity of responsibility. The KN First Report underlines this and provides examples of where there is added value to be gained both for local government and the research community. Indeed ESRC engagement with central government looks to be in striking contrast to that with local government, notwithstanding the broad and significant commitment across the political and governmental spectrum to 'localism'.

The ESRC should consider whether the 5% of its spending devoted to Knowledge Exchange (£8.5m of £172.4m) is the right proportion given its Charter objectives, its commitment to optimising impact, and the way in which Knowledge Exchange goes beyond 'dissemination' and helps researchers frame better and relevant questions, leading to greater impact.

We would very much welcome the continuation and development of a co-production approach, whereby local government and ESRC work together across the whole research lifecycle from programme and individual priority shaping, project inception and development, fieldwork, analysis, output and outcomes/dissemination. One way of helping towards this programme is through a continued sector presence on ESRC committees, advisory boards and selection panels. This being said, we are very keen and see the benefits of the ESRC contributing to work with wider societal issues such as health and social care integration and the ageing population.



We would be keen to see how ESRC currently engages with local government, and how ESRC commissions could be made more attractive to non-research partners with fewer resources to developing research proposals and responses. Similarly, we can see real benefits to structuring outputs to make them more accessible for practitioners, and whilst there is clearly an importance of peer-reviewed journal and other academic outputs, Solace members would benefit most significantly from more practitioner-focused outputs that can be consumed and acted upon with few resources. We have seen this focus within our own corporate outputs, and have seen better effect from this; and whilst we appreciate the different nature of publications, there may be scope to incorporate this to maximise benefit for practitioners.

We acknowledge that the local government sector needs to expand in its use of evidence in policy making, and Solace would very much welcome continued collaboration between the LGA and ESRC. We see this as vital to further develop the relationship between the sector and research and to see how we can best infuse local government decision making with evidence and targeted research.

**Question 3: What do you anticipate will be the major priorities requiring a response from social science over the next five to ten year period?**

Solace recognises that there has been considerable development in ESRC thinking and strategies over the past 5-10 years in terms of engagement and impact focus. In some ways it is incumbent on the local government community to itself pay greater attention to research and evidence to inform both policy and delivery at local level. There have been positive developments in this regard in local authorities and its representative bodies, and in Solace and some other representative bodies of practitioners. Those developments can usefully be encouraged and supported as part of the broader ESRC strategy over the coming period.

We see the major priorities as the following:

| Priorities for social science                 | Priority One   | Priority Two  | Priority Three   |
|---|--|---|--|
| Research                                      | Local public service intergration  | Preventative services   | Demand Management  |
| Data Infrastructure                           | Big data   | Information sharing standards   | Practical applications to ease the use of public data  |
| Social Science capability                     | Capacity building in public services   | Using evidence in a political environment   |  |
| Non-academic partnership & knowledge exchange | Development of practitioner focused outputs from publically funded research focused on issues relevant to local government action. This will support evidence based policy making and practice | Development of the relationship between the research councils, research institutions and agencies and local government - potentially through a local government brokerage service   | Development of tools and approaches that support partnership between academic institutions and local government.   |
| International                                 | Developing a method of sharing international learning effectively in a way that is relevant to local government or the interested practitioner.  | Learning from international examples of local government dealing with funding reductions in contributing to house-building and providing affordable living. Similarly, learning from international examples of how local governments are tackling aging populations in austere times. | Learning from across the UK nation-states and further afield to ensure that ESRC and other publically funded research adds to, rather than duplicates, the current knowledge base. |



**Question 4: How can we better enable interdisciplinary working in the social sciences, and between the social sciences and other areas of the science base?**

We accept that this is a challenge, but see opportunity through learning from best practice and promoting this where possible. We look to promote best practice and effective evidence-based work to members where possible, and echo the LGA response to this consultation incentivising interdisciplinary activity as one possible avenue for better cross-discipline work.

As outlined above, we would be keen to see the development of sharing international learning in a way that is relevant to local government and/or the interested practitioner, and we would be keen to collaborate with our international sister organisations to this extent.

**Question 5: In which areas of activity, in particular, should ESRC promote innovative approaches?**

We support the three strategic priorities that currently focus the work of the ESRC that have resonance with local government, focussing on economic performance and sustainable growth, influencing behaviour and informing interventions, and creating a vibrant and fair society. A number of research areas have already been flagged up by ESRC as being priority areas for funding, and those with direct relevance to local government include civil society, new dynamics of work, and the green economy. We are very pleased to note that health and social care, big data, and cities are included, and we would welcome innovative approaches in these areas.

**Question 6: What value does ESRC's role in funding major infrastructure investment have for you or your organisation? How might this value be maximised?**

Solace would suggest that being open and transparent with data and information should be the default position, and would therefore encourage the ESRC to continue in this way. With the Transparency Agenda encouraging a wider release, publication and use of public data we can see the benefits for the local government sector in maintaining this as the status quo. The ESRC clearly has a strong track record in this area, and we are pleased that it continues to act with integrity and inclusion. As mirrored in the LGA response, Solace is also keen to ensure that progress in big data areas are kept realistic, that they work to meet the demands of the data consumers whilst the capabilities and limited budgets of the local data custodians are considered. We agree with the premise that ESRC is best placed to continue this work with its excellent links with academia and government groups, and would welcome for this to continue with Solace.

**Question 7: What roles should ESRC play in the development of social science capability and skills? (Please also provide input on the priority areas for developing social science capability under Q3)**

Solace supports the role that ESRC plays in developing social science capability and supports its continuation through backing for PhD studentships and MSc placements, and through the Training



Centres. Given the regional basis of these training centres, we see that as a good opportunity to engage with councils in the vicinity, as well as through the collaboration between councils and research institutions and other students.

**Question 8: How might our strategic relationships with universities and other research organisations be developed further?**

We would suggest that the ESRC could work more closely with the local government sector professional bodies such as ourselves to align the issues local authorities are facing with plans for future research.

We would endorse a two-way relationship with sector bodies to then be able to provide intelligence to ESRC around the funding priorities that would have the greatest impact in the sector.

**Question 9: How can we further strengthen our relationships with our partners beyond academia, particularly in the business area?**

The Society urges the ESRC to consider how professional societies like Solace (both in local government and otherwise) could be more effectively engaged in the ESRC's work and ambitions. Professional bodies have a core commitment to developing a relevant corpus of knowledge to better design and deliver their professional services and contribution. They are a natural confluence of knowledge, research, and practice, and could be stronger partners to ESRC.

**Question 10: How should we engage stakeholders in identifying longer-term research, infrastructure and capacity priorities?**

The Society welcomes opportunities engagement across the research and local government sector, and engagement with the ESRC is no different. As always, it is useful to ensure engagement at an earlier point in the commissioning process, to enable high level buy-in. We would urge ESRC to consider local government representation in advisory boards and committees, to ensure that research is kept relevant for the sector wherever possible.

**Question 11: Are there challenges introduced by the co-production of knowledge and partnership working that we should take notice of?**

We fully support the role that the co-production of knowledge and partnership working can have, and foresee a handful of particular areas to be aware of; such as around ensuring that a joint understanding of research aims and objectives are held across partners, paying special attention to the end users. Another key challenge we foresee could be around the financial demands of partners, especially given the increasing demands on time within the sector. For real results to be



met, we would suggest that partnerships need to be manufactured in such a way to ensure that all members have the resources to engage in a meaningful way.

**For further information please contact:**

Name: Graeme McDonald

Title: Director of Solace

0845 652 4010

[graeme.mcdonald@solace.org.uk](mailto:graeme.mcdonald@solace.org.uk)