

# ESRC – Ideas for potential future social science data infrastructures

## 1. Summary

ESRC is seeking ideas from the research and innovation community for major future social science data infrastructures which have the potential to be developed into an ESRC application to the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Infrastructure Fund (see below).

Proposed ideas should, with development, be capable of leading to future large-scale initiatives that would provide a transformational change in capability for social science data infrastructure and enable significant public benefit. We are asking for inputs as to where such opportunities may lie, identifying the gap in provision, the need and potential in social science, and how the gap may be addressed.

ESRC is keen to hear from those with a strong understanding of social science and its relevance to policy and practice, as well as the UK data infrastructure landscape. To submit ideas here, you do not need to be based at an organisation eligible to receive UKRI funding.

**This is an invitation for ideas, not a funding opportunity.**

This survey will be open for submissions until February 2025, although early submissions are strongly encouraged. ESRC will review submissions on a regular basis for the duration that the survey is open. A small number of selected ideas may be further developed and then assessed for potential submission by ESRC to the UKRI Infrastructure Fund or other appropriate initiatives. For any proposal submitted to the UKRI Infrastructure Fund that successfully secures funding, ESRC may commission a project through an open competitive process.

## About the UKRI Infrastructure Fund

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is committed to creating and supporting [world-class research and innovation infrastructure](#). The UKRI Infrastructure Fund is a vital component of this, supporting significant transformational infrastructure investments.

The main aims of the UKRI Infrastructure Fund includes:

- To ensure the UK remains a partner of choice for collaboration
- To demonstrate that the UK is a global leader in infrastructure
- To put our infrastructure to use in tackling global challenges

The Infrastructure Fund supports step changes in infrastructure capability and capacity, including:

- new infrastructure
- major upgrades
- repurposing

- transformative developments
- scoping, design studies and pilots
- decommissioning

It covers investments across the complete disciplinary spectrum, from fundamental research to innovation-focused activities, located across the UK's regions and nations, or which form part of major international collaborations. Further information about the Infrastructure Fund can be found [here](#).

Only UKRI constituent bodies can submit an application to the UKRI Infrastructure Fund, meaning that **this is not a funding opportunity open to researchers and users**.

In the past few years, ESRC has successfully secured Infrastructure Fund support for new data infrastructure capacities that facilitate innovative and transformative research in and beyond social science. Previous successful ESRC applications include [the Early Life Cohort](#), [Smart Data Research UK](#) and (jointly with Medical Research Council) [Population Research UK](#).

## 2. What we are looking for

As part of ongoing scoping work, ESRC is seeking ideas from researchers and data users to help us influence the future development of social science research infrastructure in the UK, including new opportunities and the identification of significant needs that are not currently being met. Here, data infrastructure refers to capabilities to support the collection, management, access to or use of data that enable and facilitate a range of research questions over time.

Eligible ideas should have the potential to lead to creation of either:

- new collections of data that to fill gaps in provision.
- new or better data services to help support researchers discover, access and make the most of data.
- a new data infrastructure that would lead to a significantly improved UK data infrastructure landscape, leading to better and more efficient research outcomes.
- a significant step change to an existing capability (in data collection or data services provision).

### Ideas that can be implemented in the medium term

The lead time for the development of Infrastructure Fund proposals through to establishing a new infrastructure is significant with a number of stages in the process. Therefore, we are looking for ideas which could be developed into infrastructure provisions that would be commissioned and delivered in the medium term. It is very unlikely that ideas which are heavily timebound or need funding in the near term will be feasible as potential Infrastructure Fund projects.

### Ideas for scoping

We are seeking ideas that ESRC can scope and demonstrate where a significant opportunity or unmet need lies in the UK data infrastructure landscape, but not well-developed project proposals. ESRC may develop further a small number of submitted ideas, which process may involve some modifications.

Ideas must relate to infrastructure projects that would enable novel and innovative [social science](#) research, addressing needs in the research and user community, although multi- and interdisciplinary ideas are welcome and encouraged.



This opportunity does not guarantee that proposals we receive will be developed further by ESRC into an application for the UKRI Infrastructure Fund, nor that in the event of a successful bid by ESRC to the Infrastructure Fund, those who proposed the initial scoping project would be invited to lead the project for which ESRC secured funding.

#### UKRI Infrastructure Fund funding parameters

There is an expectation that proposals to the Infrastructure Fund would meet key UKRI and ESRC strategic themes. Further details of this can be found below.

[UKRI infrastructure roadmap - Progress report](#)

[UKRI strategy 2022 to 2027 – UKRI](#)

[ESRC strategic delivery plan – UKRI](#)

[ESRC data infrastructure strategy – UKRI](#)

ESRC does not have a maximum funding limit for potential Infrastructure Fund proposals. In general, the Infrastructure Fund is designed to support large projects each requiring in excess of £10 million in funding over its initial funding period (typically five years), although smaller funding can be sought for scoping activities and de-risking of potential projects. Therefore, proposed ideas should be appropriate for this size of funding.

#### Funding opportunity for data collections infrastructure

There is [a live funding opportunity](#) (closing date 16 April) which, among other things, would allow applicants to seek funding to develop and scope initial ideas with the potential to be taken forward by ESRC as future proposals to the Infrastructure Fund. In the case of an individual/team with an idea which they wish to actively scope themselves, we recommend considering that funding opportunity rather than responding to this request.

### 3. Who can respond and how

#### Who can respond?

Ideas are welcomed across the remit of ESRC. Respondents are expected to have a good understanding of social science, future research and policy needs, the existing social science data infrastructure landscape in the UK, and the potential future challenges it faces. There are no institutional restrictions on responding to this exercise (i.e., you do not have to be based at an organisation eligible to receive UKRI funding to contribute a response) as there will be no expectation for you to undertake the work either to develop the potential Infrastructure Fund proposal or to deliver the infrastructure should funding be successfully secured. Both individual and organisational level responses are welcomed, particularly from those who have not had prior engagement with ESRC.

#### How to respond

Responses are invited to be submitted via the online form linked at the bottom of this page.

This invitation for ideas is expected to remain open until February 2025, however early responses are strongly encouraged. ESRC will review submissions throughout the period during which this invitation is open.

Respondents may provide more than one submission so long as they set out different visions and approaches.

Please provide a succinct and compelling narrative for your/each idea which must include:

1. What need or gap in social science research is the proposed infrastructure intended to address? Why is it important? (Maximum 5000 characters)
  - Please also demonstrate why it is timely and appropriate to address it over the medium term.
2. What new research or practice would be enabled? What benefits would it bring to the social science research and user community? Why is this important? (Maximum 5000 characters)
  - Please also outline how the proposed infrastructure addresses UKRI and ESRC strategies and priorities.
3. What infrastructure or capabilities would address the need or gap? (Maximum 5000 characters)
  - Please describe why and how.
4. What approach should be taken to establish the proposed infrastructure? (Maximum 5000 characters)
  - Please provide information to demonstrate the likely feasibility.
  - Please identify ethical and legal considerations, and if relevant, outline how any challenges may be addressed.
5. Please indicate the approximate timescale and cost required to set up the proposed infrastructure for an initial period (typically five years). (Maximum 2000 characters)

If you have any questions, please contact [DataInfrastructure@esrc.ukri.org](mailto:DataInfrastructure@esrc.ukri.org). Please note that we are unable to discuss the scientific quality of your ideas.

#### 4. After you submit

You will receive an automated response acknowledging your submission. Unfortunately, we will not be able to provide feedback on the scientific quality of your submission.

We will use the information provided to help:

- identify future areas of need for potential investment in social science infrastructure
- lay the groundwork for potential future ESRC-led proposals to the UKRI Infrastructure Fund
- identify potential partnerships and collaborations that could be supported by the UKRI Infrastructure Fund, or other appropriate initiatives

Submissions will be reviewed internally by ESRC and by an external expert advisory group. ESRC will decide whether to take an idea forward to be developed into a full proposal for funding from the UKRI Infrastructure Fund. Should suggested projects be of interest to ESRC in terms of taking forward, ESRC may contact you to discuss further.

If your submission is not considered for the UKRI Infrastructure Fund but may be suitable for other funding opportunities, ESRC may contact you to discuss potential submission.

We will not publish any information regarding submissions made.

All personal data provided to UK Research and Innovation via this form will be processed in accordance with current UK data protection legislation. Further information on how we use personal data can be found in the UK Research and Innovation Privacy Notice (<https://www.ukri.org/privacy-notice/>). If you have any questions about this engagement exercise, please contact [DataInfrastructure@esrc.ukri.org](mailto:DataInfrastructure@esrc.ukri.org).

We thank you for your interest and look forward to receiving your ideas.