

LARGE SCALE FACILITIES ROADMAP 2010 CONSULTATION.

Response from the Academy of Social Sciences

1. The Academy of Social Sciences exists to be the voice of the social sciences in the UK for the public benefit. Membership comprises 34 Learned Societies and 641 individual Academicians. The latter are nominated because of their significant contribution towards advancing the cause of the social sciences and the conferment of the award of Academician is by peer a process involving peer group review. Academicians include researchers, practitioners and policy makers. It is the largest and most diverse body representing the social sciences community in the UK. The Academy welcomes the publication of the Roadmap and the opportunity to contribute to its development.
2. In relation to the overall balance of activities represented, the Academy endorses and strongly supports the mix of facilities currently funded. A great deal of progress has been made in assuring funding for core facilities that are essential for basic and policy oriented social science research. The Academy and the social science community that it represents appreciates the effective work by ESRC and other funders to ensure that the development of leading edge social science data resources and analysis is an important component of maintaining and enhancing the excellence of the UK science as a whole, both in relation to UK public policy and to its contribution globally to the development of knowledge.
3. It is particularly important at a time of difficulty and recession to sustain authoritative, evidence based social science research. In the last century at similar periods of social and economic disruption, in the 1930s and during post-war reconstruction for example, the work of social scientists such as Keynes and Beveridge was a key resource for government. The need for and the ability of the social sciences to contribute to analysing and helping to shape public understanding and policies in the current era is no less evident.
4. We also note that many of the major issues for research in the contemporary world (e.g. water, food, climate, energy, poverty, global pandemics, migration, and security) necessarily involve the analysis of social relations; and that this presumes major collaborations across disciplines and Research Councils. So social scientists need to be involved in future discussions relating to large facilities that are of a cross-cutting nature. An example of this in the list of emerging projects is Life Watch.
5. In the current financial climate, our first priority is to ensure the continued funding of the key facilities that are already established. Many of them, for example the Census Programme and the UK Longitudinal Study, would be irreparably damaged if their funding was severely reduced and the contribution that they make to our understanding of major and emergent issues of society and key public policy choices would be lost – at a time when such issues and policy choices are more acute than ever.

6. Others such as the Economic and Social Data Service and the National Centre for eSocial Science are crucial to the maintenance and further improvement of the research infrastructure for the social sciences and to ensuring that the UK maintains its position of internationally excellence and world leading social science.
7. These points also apply to the facilities listed under the heading of Renewals and Updates. Additionally, the Academy strongly supports the proposals for the Council for European Social Science Data Archives and the European Social Survey, both of which are included in the ESFRI Roadmap. UK social scientists have contributed greatly to the development of these initiatives and the UK's acknowledged leadership in European social science is reflected in this. These facilities are world leading as, for example, a recent evaluation of the ESS, chaired by the Director of the US Census, confirms. The project is led by a distinguished UK social scientist and Academician, Professor Roger Jowell, It is regarded as the most successful transnational social science survey in the world and has received the Descartes Prize for international scientific and collaboration (across all areas of science).
8. However, one surprising omission is another key project of the highest quality (which is included in the ESFRI Roadmap) – the Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). However, this may be a misapprehension as the English Longitudinal Study of Aging is included and it is noted that there will be collaboration with SHARE. The Academy strongly supports the UK's full participation in SHARE.
9. This list also contains other projects which exemplify and support areas of social science research in which the UK currently leads and whose maintenance is of the greatest importance. The British Election Study has been the cornerstone of the UK's leading international reputation for this area of political science and its impact on the public and informed discussion of elections and political opinion over the past half century has been manifest. More recently the UK's reputation and expertise in the field of longitudinal studies has been strongly boosted by key projects listed in the Roadmap. They have added greatly to the ability of social science research to understand the nature and dynamics of social change across key fields of central concern to policy makers – such as health, poverty, education and aging. Taken together the longitudinal projects listed in the Roadmap are central to our ability to track and understand social change.
10. Social science projects are less strongly represented in the list of emerging proposals but, as noted above, the Academy's first priority is to ensure that the projects referred to above continue to be funded. However, the 2012 Birth Cohort Study is also a major opportunity to continue the sequence of such studies that have been internationally recognised as world-leading and whose findings have continually informed social and public policy.
11. The Academy notes the proposed arrangements for the allocation of the Large Facilities Capital Fund and especially the indication that the costs of such projects would not be expected to be less than £25m or 10% of the relevant RC budget. The Academy does though suggest that there ought to be some clearer recognition and acceptance of the major differences in scale between what should count as 'large scale' in relation to the social sciences in comparison with the other sciences. The costs of even the most major social science facilities will always be some magnitude smaller than those for other disciplines (excluding the humanities where similar concerns of scale apply). It follows of course that the funding likely to be available for social science research infrastructure is far smaller too and the capacity of the ESRC and other funders to support major facilities from within their own budgets is similarly constrained. So what is to count as 'large scale' must take these factors into account and be defined in relative rather than absolute financial terms. Especially in the current climate, the Academy is concerned that the eligibility of social science for infrastructural support is not squeezed out by the demands of other disciplines,

using an argument that no social science infrastructure is truly large scale and thus worthy of LFCF support. Some clearer recognition in the Roadmap of this difference of scale and the appropriateness in principle of continued LFCF funding for the social sciences would be welcomed.

5th November 2009