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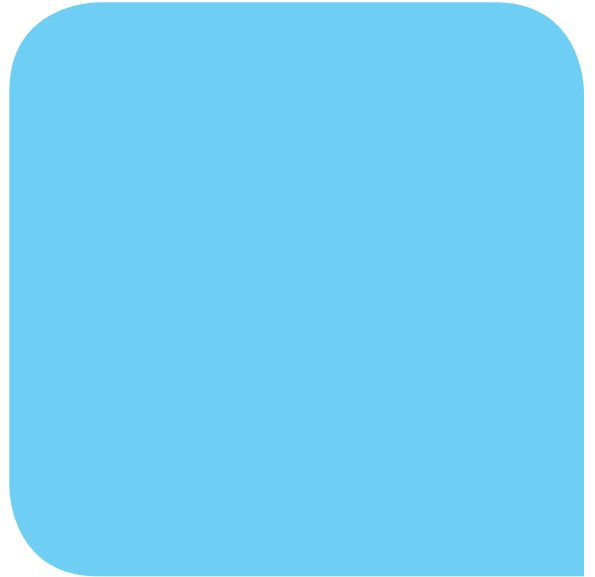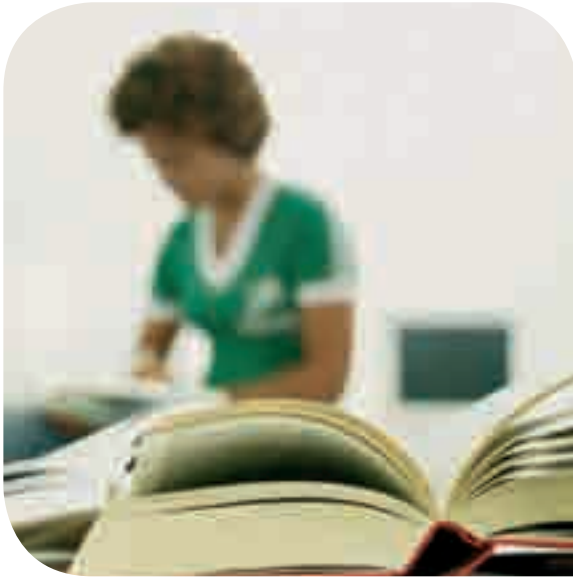# ESRC research, social work and social care

ESRC research, social work and social care

Ian Shaw, Hilary Arksey and Audrey Mullender

**This report is available in print and online
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Preface

The sheer variety and creative energy of social work in the UK is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength in so far as it allows social work to usefully adapt to the ever-changing demands placed upon it. It can be a weakness in so far as a perceived lack of internal consistency and external coherence can weaken our bargaining position when major decisions about the future shape of social work are made. This is as true for social work research as it is for social work practice and for professional education and training.

And yet, social work is increasingly being defined in terms of its relationship to research. There is strong evidence of originality, energy and achievement among the research community but sometimes it is more difficult to define a discrete and distinctive identity of social work research. This is likely to cause difficulties for those bodies who support social work research, including the Research Funding Councils. Recognising this, the Social Work Education Committee of the Joint Universities Council (JUC-SWEC) has successfully campaigned to create a definite 'presence' for social work research within the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The campaign began with the ESRC-funded seminar series *Theorising Social Work* in 2000. It has been encouraged by three annual ESRC-funded doctoral training events. Social work academics now contribute to the committees of the ESRC, including the Training Board and the Virtual College, and 2005 may bring our own social work Training Guidelines – but more remains to be done.

This report makes a persuasive case for expanding the ESRC's understanding of applied research and of user and carer interests; for further consideration of the utilisation strategies employed by projects that the ESRC funds; and for the ESRC to more closely integrate social work and social care research agendas into its programmes. It recognises also that the social work research community must play its part in initiating programme and project ideas that will resonate with the ESRC; social work researchers must increase the quality and the quantity of proposals and play a full part in facilitating the peer review processes of the Council. Perhaps most importantly, the report makes the point that it is for social work to articulate its research support needs and to establish a research agenda of our own.

The report concludes with recommending a thorough profiling of the strengths and limitations of social work research in the UK's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) has pledged to support this and as Chair of SWEC, I too am committed to securing the means to undertake this. This report is firm evidence of what can be achieved when SCIE and SWEC work together and the momentum achieved through this report must not be lost.

Professor Ian Butler AcSS
Chair of the Social Work Education Committee of the Joint Universities Council

Executive summary

This document reports a review, commissioned by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) in late 2003, of the actual and potential coverage of social work and social care research within Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) programmes, and of the implications of that review for social work and social care research in the UK.

The review was conducted through a desk review of ESRC public domain documents, an electronic consultation of the social work research community, an e-mail questionnaire to grant holders on two recent ESRC programmes, a workshop, and key informant interviews with senior ESRC staff and others.

The report needs to be read in the context of the major and fast-moving changes that are taking place within the ESRC. These changes have several dimensions and involve changes in ESRC strategies and structure, the emergence of a concern with 'discipline health' and the recognition within the ESRC that there is a need for capacity building among some of the smaller disciplines.

The experience and views of social work and social care researchers

The following views were expressed:

- much social work research may not be very attractive to the ESRC because of its strong applied agenda
- ESRC programmes are more likely to have an indirect than direct relevance to social and social care concerns
- the ESRC should consider areas of change and development in funding opportunities and assumptions regarding, for example, their concept of research 'users'.

Workshop members highlighted a number of issues they regarded as central:

- the success rates of explicitly social work applications
- the nature of 'relevance' within ESRC programmes
- the degree to which social work offers distinctive methodological emphases
- the allegedly restricted ESRC notion of research users
- the allegedly restricted ESRC understanding of research utilisation
- the ambiguous role of outcome evaluations within ESRC programmes
- the absence of a shared language, illustrated, for example, through the lack of a key word classification and database for academic papers.

Developing research programmes

There was open acceptance of the importance of the invisibility of social work within the ESRC due to its general lack of recognition. ESRC staff readily acknowledge that this creates an acute anomaly. They also recognise that their response to the social work community has been entirely reactive.

A major underlying problem in much of this is how disciplines come to be recognised and accepted within the academic community. There is probably an unresolved question of whether social work is or wishes to be seen as a discipline in quite the same way as, for example, geography or sociology. Also, ESRC awareness of what counts as social work or social care is fairly slight. The social work voice is not widely heard within the ESRC. This doubtless explains the constant request from within the ESRC that the social work community should develop a shared sense of research priorities and communicate those to the ESRC.

Delivering research programmes

It is not easy to identify and enumerate social work or social care 'success' in engaging with the ESRC programme or responsive research opportunities. Disciplines that are not recognised are only semi-visible.

ESRC Annual Reports indicate that between 2.8% and 5.9% of all bids each year are primarily social policy.

The ESRC released to us anonymised information for bids in the three years up to October 2003, including titles and outcomes, and distinguished according to whether they were small grant bids (up to £45,000), large grant bids or applications to the seminar competition.

The volume of business is high. Research grant bids average over 600 per year. Of the 2,538 bids listed in the data supplied by the ESRC[1], 15 (0.6%) appeared to include some link to social work, most commonly to services for children and families. Thirty-two (1.3%) had an obvious welfare policy link, and a further 22 (0.9%) had a possible social work link.

The tentative conclusions from this analysis appear to support the following:

- Bids that are identifiably associated with social work and social care are almost certainly small in number. Bids are not categorised in this list according to the primary disciplines, so it is not possible to be entirely certain, but the conclusion is a safe one.
- The small numbers make it difficult to compare social work bid outcomes with others. However, success rates seem comparable with those for the whole sample.
- Similar considerations apply to the possibility that non-funded social work 'A's' are proportionately slightly higher than for the sample as a whole. Taking the cluster of social work, social care and welfare policy as a group, the rate of non-funded 'A's' is almost identical to that for the whole sample.

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[1] There is a significant level of double counting in the ESRC list. Resubmissions are counted twice. We have not included any double counting in the social work or welfare policy count.

The primary implication of this data may support the views of ESRC staff, that the apparently low levels of ESRC-funded social work research is explicable more in terms of the level of activity of the social work community than in terms of ESRC decision making. However, we do not conclude from this that the resolution of this shortfall lies solely with the social work community.

The 16 respondents from the two programme case studies ('Growing Older' and 'Research Methods Phase 1') had some things to broach regarding the contribution of their projects and programmes to social work and social care knowledge. They had least to say about possible knowledge for direct practice and policy, and most to say about knowledge for better methodology and enhancing general understanding.

When invited to comment on dissemination and utilisation of project findings, there was a general sense from programme grant holders that linkages of this kind are typically seen as a function lying beyond the project.

Asked about specific changes they would like to see introduced in terms of the development, management and outcomes of ESRC research programmes, the central suggestions to emerge were:

• more social care researchers on panels
• resourcing research dissemination
• funding levels
• meetings between research team and project end users should be normative
• more across-programme project meetings
• linkage between programmes.

Dissemination and funding levels were the most often listed, although most of the respondents did not suggest any changes.

Recommendations

• A case should be made for immediate membership of the Research Grants Board, although with the recognition that this should go hand in hand with greater social work application activity, and continuing dialogue with the ESRC. It is a matter for consideration whether social work should capitalise on its relatively effective lobbying and go for full recognition.
• There should be a proactive determination on the part of the social work and social care research community to initiate programme ideas that will resonate with the ESRC stance on programme relevance. There has been an example of such an initiative during the present project. A preliminary proposal for funding a research programme on 'Welfare and Wellbeing in the 21st Century' has been through a preliminary discussion within the ESRC virtual college.
• There should be continued pressure on the ESRC to integrate the social work and social care research agenda into programme development.
• A broader concept of the research user should be developed by the ESRC that recognises the contribution of service user and carer stakeholder interests in all fields of research relevant to service development and delivery.

- It should be a requirement of all ESRC applications to provide evidence that utilisation strategies have been considered and appropriately taken into account.
- There should be an immediate negotiation with the ESRC regarding capacity building resources for postgraduate research in social work and social care.
- There needs to be the early development of a case to the ESRC for targeted postdoctoral fellowships, with the aim of providing appropriate career building opportunities in social work and social care research.
- The social work community should develop and where necessary lobby for a financially feasible means of promoting CASE studentship applications.
- The potential for emerging opportunities for traditional entry routes to doctoral degrees through the new social work degree should be monitored.
- The social work and social care research community should:
  - cultivate an alertness to ESRC announcements
  - offer to act as application assessors
  - facilitate a culture of regular bidding to the ESRC
  - signal clearly in those bids that social work issues are present
  - lobby for a wider notion of research users
  - press for rigorous democratising of the research process
  - continue to develop an informed strategy for research methodologies appropriate to social work and social care research and evaluation
  - develop a stronger consensus on national research priorities
  - facilitate an environment of mutual support in raising research bidding rates and standards.
- The course of action of first resort for social work academics bidding to the ESRC should be research grants rather than research centre bids.
- There should be a continuation of early discussions with the ESRC and the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC SWEC) regarding the resources for and basis of an audit of the strengths and limitations of social work research in British universities. This audit should also consider the implications for developing national research priorities for social work and social care research.

1 Scene setting

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the largest single UK funder of social science research, with a budget in excess of £80 million. Its role has been significantly expanded in recent years with a view to reinforcing the contribution made by social science to evidence-based policy and practice. It is timely, therefore, to ask what contribution ESRC research programmes make – and might make – to the knowledge base for social work and social care. To this end, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) commissioned a review of the actual and potential coverage of social work and social care research within ESRC programmes.

The structure of this report is straightforward. Following this brief scene setting, the first main section of the report gives a synopsis of the social work and social care[2] community's engagement with ESRC research. This sets the context for the second part of the report in which we review relevant policies, structures and trends within the ESRC. We focus on the development of research programmes, followed by an outline of the delivery and implementation of programmes[3]. The final section reviews the issues, themes and directions that emerged during the project, and makes a number of recommendations.

The research team comprised Ian Shaw (Chair of the Research Sub-committee of the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee [JUC SWEC] and University of York), Audrey Mullender (at the time, University of Warwick) and Hilary Arksey (University of York). The research methods are summarised in Appendix A.

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[2] We found the use of the composite phrase 'social work and social care' difficult from time to time. If there is uncertainty about the scope of 'social work' within the ESRC, 'social care' is even less familiar or used by ESRC officers and non-social work researchers. We have aimed to retain the varied usage in the report.

[3] The SCIE brief emphasised ESRC programme research. We have generally adhered to this, although in some respects it proved impossible and disadvantageous to the main thrust of the brief to ignore wider aspects of the ESRC's business, such as postgraduate training.

2 Social work, social care and ESRC research

There were two main parts of the project that focused on the experience and reflections of social work and social care researchers, via the electronic consultation and the open workshop[4]. The electronic consultation (Appendix B) was utilised as the basis for the November 2003 workshop.

There was a general sense of agreement that social work bidders may face challenges arising from the nature of social work research.

"I suspect that much social work type research is not very attractive to the ESRC because of their focus on theory and methodology and a tendency to be averse to practice-oriented research which does not overtly address theoretical issues." (ESRC centre director)

Successful social work linked bids may require tactics that 'hide' or at least subordinate the social work stance. This was expressed most clearly by one recent ESRC grant holder:

"Historically we have needed to fly under flags of theoretical convenience other than purely social work in order to win approval … [C]hoosing the right partners and sounding the right tones about conceptual advances has been critical."

Respondents were not, however, of the view that ESRC research had no relevance to social work. Some suggested areas where they thought ESRC programmes may have direct relevance, for example, evidence-based policy and practice (partly because it provides scope acceptable to the ESRC for ensuring practice developments have theoretical criteria), poverty-linked programmes, and programmes inviting research on family dynamics. Nonetheless, there was a recurring theme that a search for direct relevance in ESRC programmes may not be the obvious way of engaging. As one person remarked, "Mostly I suspect the link is indirect". For another person this was as it should be. S/he was:

"… quite happy that social work research is subsumed under social policy … psychology … sociology…"

We had asked people to comment on methodology as well as substantive questions. On the whole, the tone of replies was that, rather than introduce completely novel methods, social work and social care research has the potential to develop and enhance research strategies and methodology where ESRC research already has modest or potential value. The two areas that attracted most comment were

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[4] The respondents overlapped very slightly but were mostly different people. By the very nature of the exercise we have heard from those within the social work/care research community who are in principle sympathetic with the basic role of the ESRC. Any negative remarks (for example, about ESRC programmes) should be seen in that light.

interdisciplinarity and research rigour. First, comments on interdisciplinarity focused more on 'discipline' as 'profession' rather than as a social science discipline. For example, social work researchers are, it was suggested, well 'set up' to investigate multidisciplinary teams, knowledge transfer, and how multidisciplinary professional teams actually work (as a route to addressing workforce issues). Second, social work engagement with ESRC programme research provides an opportunity to add a needed dimension of theory and rigour to areas where social work/care research is vigorous (for example, action research, user-led research, practitioner research).

Finally, the consultation gave people a moment to suggest areas where they thought the ESRC ought to consider change or development. The main recommendations were that the ESRC should:

• develop Collaborative Awards for Science and Engineerinig (CASE) studentships[5]
• develop a 'teaching company' type scheme in independent/public sectors
• develop exchange schemes
• adopt a less 'elevated' concept of 'research user'
• undertake proactive education to promote social work bids.

Many of the themes from the electronic consultation recurred in the workshop, although with a slightly sharper focus and with some additional points[6]. At the risk of seeming to underanalyse the workshop process, we have summarised it by keeping fairly close to the terms and categories in which the participants talked. Much of the discussion remained at the level of questions. We respond to these standpoints later in the report.

There was some discussion as to whether social work ESRC bids are less successful than other bids of similar quality. Some respondents to the project had suggested this, and it had been raised as a question by SCIE. The relative absence of ESRC assessors and Board members with knowledge of social work may affect the outcome of bids. Also, if ESRC programme specifications are developed largely in the absence of a social work input, does this result in specifications that, by their nature, require more demanding work by social work/care research bidders in order to elicit the relevance of the specification to their research interests?

Having said this, the tenor of the evidence from the workshop and more widely is that the social work community should be circumspect in the way it makes a case for relevant programme research. The argument should not be restricted to programmes that are directly 'relevant'. Programmes are not developed with specific

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[5] However, there is a long-standing problem about the eligibility of social work researchers for CASE funding.

[6] The workshop was attended by 11 people, including Mike Fisher (SCIE), Angela Dale (Director of the Research Methods Programme), Hilary Arksey and Ian Shaw. We would like to express our particular appreciation to Chris Hall, Caroline Holland, Mark Johnson, Jan Waterson, Joan Orme, Mark Doel and Ann Hollows. Thanks are due also to Adrian Lee for recording and reporting the workshop.

disciplines in mind. Specific relevancies emerge, for example, during the development phase. The ESRC needs to ensure there are standing arrangements – probably through the virtual colleges[7] – to consult the social work community during that process. The view was also conveyed that social work educators can no longer hide behind special pleading, but must become skilled at bid making.

The workshop members also considered what research methods approaches and requirements social work/care researchers distinctively emphasise. Examples of these were said to include:

- systematic knowledge reviews
- user research and the democratising of research more generally
- applications of qualitative research to service/intervention outcomes.

There was some consideration as to whether the ESRC holds an unhelpfully restricted notion of 'research users'. While there was considerable support for this, one workshop member engaged in programme research emphasised that social work bidders can (and should) make their own case about users when they bid. Various points were made regarding the democratisation of research:

- it is expensive and hard to do
- there are sometimes distinctive research ethics questions
- the ESRC would be concerned with the research quality of user-led research
- it raises linked questions of research capacity.

The argument regarding 'users' extends to the role of the ESRC in promoting the utilisation of research. A view was expressed on a number of occasions that the ESRC's basic assumptions about the usability of knowledge are unduly restricted. One recommendation was that resources to facilitate utilisation should routinely be part of project grants/programme budgets.

Finally, the workshop members made a point about the relationship between the ESRC and, for example, SCIE or government funding. First, there was broad agreement that the ESRC might not be the forum for the full range of social work research. For example, outcome research is rarely present in ESRC bids[8]. While outcome research is a clear function of government research funding, the ESRC, so it was argued, ought to be more specifically interested in conceptual issues around outcomes. Similar points could be made about other research areas, for example, human resource management. Second, those we consulted supported a general stance that we should look to ESRC funding for analytical and explanatory research about social work and social care. As someone expressed it, "We don't need to know more about the what; we need to know the how and why". For example, there is a need for empirical work on how research is, in fact, used, so that research utilisation is treated as involving more than model building of best practice.

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[7] The ESRC virtual college system is a relatively recent mechanism, with the primary purpose of improving consultation with the social science discipline communities.

[8] A point supported by the database of bids and seminars provided by the ESRC.

Throughout this part of the consultation there was support for the development of a shared language. In practical terms this could mean, for instance, the development of a key word database for social work/care research publications. This would enable more adequate searches[9].

We made no attempt to assess the strengths and limitations of social work research. Views about it did, however, surface from time to time. One non-social work informant expressed the personal view that,

"There's something distinct about social work from other disciplines … that we need to nurture. I also personally have a view that while there are some really truly world class social work researchers in this country the base is fairly fragile and that it is an area where … this is a personal view … we need to have some capacity strengthening."

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[9] This would need careful planning. There would be limited value in a UK-only key word system, and any classification and key word database would need field trialing. A successful system would also need the support of all the main journal publishers, as well as a host site for the system. It may also need a certain level of backdating, and conversion, to avoid the system taking a long time to become useable as a search device.

3 The ESRC and social work research: developing and delivering programme research

3.1 Developing research programmes

The 'tactics' of the early stages of the review led to expressions of views of social work and social care researchers in largely problem-focused terms. In the following section we have tried to view things through the eyes of the ESRC – its management and information systems, public domain information, and the views of key senior ESRC staff. The tone of this section is a mix of problem analysis and prescriptive standpoints[10].

3.1.1 The ESRC stance

There was open acceptance of the importance of social work's invisibility within the ESRC due to its general lack of recognition, outside the postgraduate training sphere, within ESRC management and information categories. It was acknowledged that the ESRC at the moment is not able to say "this is our portfolio of social work research" because information is not collected in that way.

Consequently, the social work picture remains obscured, and the ESRC perforce relies on proxy measures. ESRC staff readily acknowledge that this creates an acute anomaly. Given the partial recognition of social work through, for example, the panel nomenclature in the postgraduate training recognition exercises, the ESRC is posed with the question of how to harmonise the mechanisms for classifying and recognising disciplines between the linked areas of training and research.

It is accepted that hitherto the ESRC response to the social work community has been entirely reactive. While the ESRC response to a proactive line from within the social work community has been tolerant – "we have built a bridge" as one person said to us – it is agreed that the initiative has come from social work and not from the ESRC.

3.1.2 Discipline identities and recognition

The major underlying problem in much of this is how disciplines come to be recognised and accepted within the academic community. We sensed that in some key regards disciplines, once formally recognised, have a taken-for-granted status. Thus, when social work observers might ask how sympathetic the ESRC is towards

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[10] The report follows the conventions of not attributing quotations to individuals. We have gone somewhat further than this, and paraphrased rather than directly quoted interview transcripts. This has been done given the ease with which attributions could otherwise be made, and the extent to which ESRC staff spoke partly with an 'official' voice and partly in a 'personal' voice. This has inevitably led to some data attrition.

funding social work in comparison with other disciplines, a key stance is captured in the realisation that the ESRC does not prioritise and systemise its work around disciplines in a way that says 'this year we are going to focus in and concentrate more research on sociology' or 'we want to do more in politics and international relations'. This makes it difficult for ESRC staff to frame an answer to such a query because it contains a premise that they do not share. It is from this standpoint that the social work community and others ought to read the frequent assertion that the ESRC is 'absolutely blind' on the fortunes of one discipline against another. A similar response was also given when we asked about ESRC dissemination strategies – "We don't segment our audiences in that way".

This is not a question special to social work. The ESRC has 'rehearsed' this debate with other groups as well. The position of the ESRC is not carefully nuanced at this point. On the one hand, it is believed within the ESRC that allegations that this or that discipline loses out in the funding decision-making process are, as one person aptly expressed it, "a triumph of perception over reality". The argument is likely to be put that the data does not support the case for discrimination. Yet it is also accepted that the non-recognised disciplines do not 'count' within the ESRC system and hence evidence is always inferred from stand-in, surrogate data.

There is probably also a concern about transparency and even-handedness with the ESRC. It may be thought that smaller discipline communities believe that social sciences have 'champions' within the system. Council staff would reject this assumption.

Two wider considerations are relevant at this point. First, there is probably an unresolved question of whether social work is or wishes to be seen as a discipline in quite the same way as, for example, geography or sociology. This is probably as much unresolved within the social work community as within the ESRC. We have already quoted the unelaborated view of one non-social work senior academic that "There's something distinct about social work from other disciplines". This claim was often made to us through the project, and from various 'sides'. For example, social work may be seen as "quite different from some disciplines which are more bounded … They have a more defined boundary". On this view of things, the strategies for discipline development may be less complex in disciplines where "the tool kit … is clearer". This perhaps creates an underlying ambiguity within the ESRC as to whether they are the obvious choice for at least some social work bids.

Second, it was clear to us that ESRC awareness of what counts as social work or social care is fairly slight. The social work voice is not widely heard within the ESRC. As a consequence ESRC staff are likely to draw their main understanding of social work from their previous academic experience. If the voice of the social work community is not heard then ESRC staff, even well intentioned, have an endemic sense of information deficiencies, which makes it difficult for them to 'read' the social work agenda. For example, the ESRC has a substantial database regarding bids and outcomes (see below), but is unlikely to know with confidence how much of this would be thought 'mainstream' social work as seen and defined within the social work community. The ESRC (and perhaps social science colleagues) has the

potentially intractable problem of taking a reading on something that, in a real sense, does not exist.

This doubtless helps to explain the repeated requests made to us by ESRC staff that the social work community should develop a shared sense of research priorities and communicate those to the ESRC. The climate of the project was open, and this request was accepted by the project team as a wish for change rather than a pretext for doing nothing. The mood music was upbeat. There is also an invitation from the ESRC for social work academics to put themselves forward as grant bid assessors, although this may stem mainly from pragmatic reasons of needing more assessors, whatever their disciplinary hue.

This part of the report needs to be read in the context of the major and fast-moving changes that are taking place within the ESRC. These changes have several dimensions and involve changes in ESRC strategies and structure, the emergence of a concern with 'discipline health', the recognition within the ESRC that there is a need for capacity building among some of the smaller disciplines (including social work), and finally the strong awareness within parts of the ESRC that the social work community has lobbied hard and with some effect for greater recognition. These wider changes within the ESRC seem likely to prioritise commitments to 'getting research into practice' (GRIP, as the ESRC insider acronym has it). These changes are regarded as having a time scale of months rather than years.

3.2 Delivering research programmes

3.2.1 Inputs and outcomes: social work bids to the ESRC

It is not easy to identify and enumerate social work or social care 'success' in engaging with ESRC programme or responsive research opportunities. Disciplines that are not recognised are only semi-visible. Even if they can be counted by using proxy indicators, the level of activity will still be partly hidden. We have noted already the tactical alliances ('flags of theoretical convenience') used by some social work academics when applying to the ESRC. We have tried to surface some of the evidence in two ways. First, we can accept for the sake of convenience, that almost all social work bids are included under the social policy label[11]. ESRC Annual Reports summarise the numbers of social policy bids. The relevant table (on page 75) in the ESRC Annual Report 2002-03 indicates for 16 subject areas the number of research projects within (eight) research programmes commissioned by ESRC in 2002-03. There were three 'social policy' projects out of a total of 109 projects (2.75%). Two projects were in the Cultures of Consumption Phase 1 programme, and the third was in Environment and Human Behaviour.

The equivalent table in the ESRC Annual Report for 2001-02 (page 49) shows that two projects were commissioned out of 34 (5.9%) in the subject area of

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[11] In reality we think this is very unlikely to exhaust social work linked bids. Sociology, psychology, economics, and other disciplines have all been used, in our own experience, as congenial covers for a social work-driven bid.

Table 1

Outcomes of ESRC bids		Funded	'A' rated – lack of funds	Rejected, withdrawn, no decision	Totals
Social work/social care bids	Number	3	9	3	15
	%	20	60	20	
All definite and possible social work, plus welfare policy bids	Number	12	28	29	69
	%	17	41	42	
All bids	%	26	40	34	

social policy. One was in the Devolution Phase 2 programme, and the other in the Innovative Health Technologies programme. The equivalent table in the ESRC Annual Report for 2000-01 (page 39) shows that four projects were commissioned out of 76 (5.3%) in the subject area of social policy. One was in the Devolution programme, one in the Future of Work programme and the remaining two in the Innovative Health Technologies programme.

It may be thought that these figures confirm the interpretive difficulty associated with the lack of a social work/social care category in ESRC management and information systems. We made efforts to obtain more specific data. Following discussions with their data protection staff, the ESRC released to us anonymised information for bids in the three years up to October 2003, including titles and outcomes, and distinguished according to whether they were small grant bids (up to £45,000), large grant bids or applications to the seminar competition. These figures do not distinguish programme bids.

The volume of business is high. Research grant bids average over 600 per year, and seminar bids are in addition to these, as are postgraduate studentships and the range of postdoctoral fellowships. We have analysed this information in an effort to shed light on three questions, which were also raised in the ESRC staff interviews[12]:

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[12] The bid titles were analysed according to whether they appeared to be focused in the minds of the applicants, in part or whole on social work or welfare policy. Applicants' own categorisations were not available and we deliberately used the narrower, social care-proximate category of 'welfare' policy. Hence the percentages are smaller than the 2.75%-5.9% given earlier in the report for social policy bids. We were not making a judgement as to whether the bids would have potential relevance to social work in the mind of any possible user of the research. We have also identified those where the applicants possibly intended such relevancies. The analysis is approximate, probably marked by some under and over-counting. However, we consider the data robust enough to bear the rather general conclusions sought in this report.

1. How well represented are social work/social care bids within the wider ESRC 'pool'?
2. Do social work bids result in a similar range of outcomes as other bids?
3. Is there any evidence to support the concern sometimes expressed that good quality social work bids (those rated 'A') are less likely to receive funding than other 'A'-rated bids?

Of the 2,538 bids listed in the data supplied by the ESRC[13], 15 (0.6%) appeared to include a link to social work, most commonly to services for children and families. Thirty-two (1.3%) had an obvious welfare policy link, and a further 22 (0.9%) had a possible social work link.

The tentative conclusions from this table appear to support the following:

- Bids that are identifiably associated with social work and social care are almost certainly small in number. Bids are not categorised in this list according to the primary disciplines, so it is not possible to be entirely certain, but the conclusion is a safe one.
- The small numbers make it difficult to compare social work bid outcomes with others. However, success rates seem comparable with those for the whole sample.
- Similar considerations apply to the possibility that non-funded social work 'A's' are proportionately slightly higher than for the sample as a whole[14]. Taking the cluster of social work, social care and welfare policy as a group, the rate of non-funded 'A's' is almost identical to that for the whole sample.

An important insight was provided in our interviews with ESRC staff. We asked if they thought there was any evidence to support the suggestion that Alpha-rated social work bids were less likely to get funded than Alpha-rated bids from the mainstream social sciences. The response was unequivocal. On this occasion we quote directly:

"We're completely blind on that … It's almost never the case that you end up with bids that are absolutely of equal quality … if we really are down to two applications and there's only the money to fund one then that's going to be a judgement but … the judgement will be based as best the panel can be on the science."

Judgements as to whether 'A'-rated bids are funded or not may be unduly simplistic. The process was explained as follows:

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[13] There is a significant level of double counting in the ESRC list. Resubmissions are counted twice. We have not included any double counting in the social work or welfare policy count.

[14] The point at issue here is whether a proportion of social work bids may be rated as high as non-social work bids (that is, 'A'), but at the final committee decision-taking stage lose out through some structural discrimination mechanism.

"… the system starts [with] an A1 grade and works down to an A6 grade. It's differentiated within the alphabet and sometimes the board doesn't get much [beyond] A3 … scores and some very, very good [alpha] proposals … don't end up getting funded."

The data limitations and the associated interview glosses suggest that the figures in Table 1 should be treated with caution. However, the primary implication of this data may support the views of the ESRC staff, that the apparently low levels of ESRC-funded social work research is explicable more in terms of the level of activity of the social work community than in terms of ESRC decision making. However, we should not conclude from this that the resolution – or even the causes – of this shortfall lies solely with the social work community.

3.2.2 Case study programmes

We also looked at social work and social care in programme delivery by starting from a different point – the presence or absence of social work and social care themes within funded programmes. What follows is based on responses to the e-mail questionnaire to principal applicants funded under the two case study research programmes, Growing Older (GO) and Research Methods Phase 1 (RM).

Several of the programme consultation questions invited comments on how programme research might or in fact had contributed to social work or social care knowledge.

a) Knowledge for understanding

Only three respondents made any direct comment on the contribution of their research to the evidence base for social work or social care. Two of these were cautious. Just one respondent made specific and positive suggestions regarding the relevance of their project. However, some respondents from both research programmes suggested other ways in which their work added to the social work and social care knowledge base. For example, issues identified by GO respondents included "challenging and extending ways of theorising later life".

Respondents, especially those working on GO projects, put forward ways in which they believed the research programme as a whole could contribute to social work and social care knowledge. The following comments illustrate the range and emphases of the replies we received.

"… more multi-disciplinary … However … I suspect the findings are not practice based enough to have specific relevance to the social work literature."

"By emphasising cultural diversity … by not over-pathologising later life, by giving older people a voice, by pointing up new areas for research eg widowhood."

"By highlighting the growing diversity of the experience of old age … by drawing attention to the multiple risks faced by some older people…"

These are potentially rich areas of relevance, but they also pose a major agenda for how utilisation and transfer bridges are made. In contrast, RM respondents were generally unable to comment apart from one person who saw their project as promoting a debate about the nature of evidence as it is used in evidence-based practice.

b) Knowledge for policy

Three GO respondents believed that their findings had the potential to inform national and/or local policy. For example, the findings of one study had been presented to local authority and voluntary agencies. Aspects of the work had also been presented to the Cabinet Office. A second respondent claimed that their team's work had already made a contribution by informing debates about poverty and social exclusion.

The sole response to this question from the RM respondents was more a comment on the process of supporting an evidence base. They emphasised the need to influence thinking first about the way in which researchers across disciplines – including those in both social work and social care – think about the presentation of their own research findings, and second about the way in which readers of research reports on social work and social care interpret the texts. They suggested that insofar as national or local policy is influenced by the findings of research studies, then researchers may contribute by sharpening the focus on the way reports are written.

c) Knowledge for practitioners

Some GO respondents also believed that their work could make a contribution to knowledge at the practitioner level through targeted dissemination in professional journals, and conference presentations aimed at practitioner audiences[15].

d) Knowledge for better methodology

Five respondents from the GO research programme felt that their project had extended the knowledge base for research methods in social work and social care. These further developments included:

• building on methods used by previous researchers
• inviting research participants (older people) to a meeting where, once the research findings had been presented, they were then given the opportunity to make verbal contributions from the floor
• gaining access to individuals and groups traditionally defined as 'hard-to-reach'
• adding to the knowledge base of how best to involve research subjects as partners within the research process

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[15] Note that 'knowledge for policy' and 'knowledge for practitioners' are both passive dissemination rather than active utilisation models.

- developing a new research instrument for assessing 'environment' as an aspect of quality of life.

One RM respondent predicted that their work might eventually contribute to social work and social care knowledge through the development of some form of practical application. The intention is that one output of the research will be a monograph discussing the use of research participants' verbatim quotations. Such a volume might include suggestions for 'good practice' in writing about findings, or at least, alerting people to possible negative implications of some aspects of writing practice. The respondent suggested that some readers could use such a monograph to inform their own writing style, while others might use it to help them understand how to interpret reports of qualitative work, in the hope that writing up research (and especially the use of quotes) will begin to be ascribed as much methodological importance as design, and techniques of data collection.

RM respondents highlighted the following methodology and research capacity gains for social work from their projects:

- training present and future social work and social care researchers in the use of qualitative software
- focusing on the issue of informed consent in the research process, and thus revealing the impact of this dimension of how issues are researched on the findings that are generated
- improved methods for collection of small area statistical data
- improved diagnostics for multilevel model specification.

Dissemination

Respondents were asked about the dissemination and utilisation of project findings. There was a general sense that linkages of this kind are typically seen as a function lying beyond the project (for example, "we don't do dissemination"). We also sensed that those who held this view do not express, or perhaps have, views as to how this might be achieved. A distinction can be made between linkage to social work/care at the proposal stage, and linkage to social work/care at data collection/analysis stages. Only one study suggested specific social work links at either of these stages.

ESRC funding for social work and social policy related bids

In addition to comments on the direct relevance of their own projects, programme grant holders were also asked more general questions about the role of the ESRC. Most respondents did not feel in a position to answer this question, and the few replies that were provided seemed to take mutually exclusive positions.

One respondent accused us of asking "a loaded question that assumes a conspiratorial agenda", whereas others considered the ESRC system as:

"relatively unsympathetic… Applications are likely to be read by specialists … who misunderstand the interdisciplinary nature of much social care research."

Applications were likely to be read by specialists, for example, economists, sociologists or psychologists, who misunderstood the interdisciplinary nature of much social care research, or who understood it through the limited lenses of their own disciplines. Two different kinds of points were made in this context. To some, the ESRC "seem more interested in social policy issues than in strictly social work ones". For another respondent, "There's a big hype [within the ESRC] about user involvement… Sometimes it is felt to ring a little false".

The only relevant comment from an RM researcher was that the ESRC appeared to judge applications on their academic merits, and not by other agendas. This person expressed the view that the ESRC's emphasis on users served to encourage research that had social work or social policy relevance.

Changes to ESRC research programmes

The questionnaire asked respondents to suggest up to three specific changes they would like to see introduced in terms of the development, management and outcomes of ESRC research programmes. The central suggestions to emerge were:

- more social care researchers on panels
- to resource research dissemination
- to review funding levels
- to make meetings with end users normative
- more across-programme project meetings
- linkage between programmes.

Dissemination and funding levels were the most often listed, although most of the respondents did not suggest any changes. The final two points emphasise a perceived need for more fully interdisciplinary funding for social care research.

4 Directions, conclusions and recommendations

A preliminary project of this kind inevitably poses as many questions as answers. We have tried in this closing section to suggest areas of general conclusions, and likely directions, in addition to a number of general and specific recommendations.

4.1 Recognition

Social work and social care recognition within the ESRC has two main environments – ESRC structures and disciplinary recognition. On the former, the view likely to hold sway within the ESRC is that social work membership of, for example, the Research Grants Board, should be responsive to social work bids. However, this may be open to negotiation. The ESRC would probably not rule out of court an approach from the social work community along the lines that social work is sufficiently mainstream to what the ESRC is doing and it should be represented on, for example, the Research Grants Board.

We **recommend** that a case should be made for immediate membership of the Research Grants Board, although with the recognition that this should go hand in hand with greater social work application activity, and continuing dialogue with the ESRC. "It is only a constructive dialogue with the social work discipline that can really help us to identify our priorities" is a view likely to be shared between the ESRC and the social work community.

On the issue of disciplinary recognition, the voice of the social work and social care community needs to be heard at all levels. The ESRC is in a highly anomalous position, arising from its positive move to give partial recognition of social work within the training arena. It may not be necessary to press at this stage for social work to be recognised as a social science discipline. First, this could possibly create an unhelpful space between social work and social care research. Second, a rather general distinction was suggested to us between a 'discipline' and an 'area of social science'. In the context of discipline recognition, the ESRC is faced with a constant lobby from numerous academic groups that, if accepted, would lead overnight to a doubling of disciplines from the present 16. It is a matter for consideration whether social work should capitalise on its relatively effective lobbying and go for full recognition, or work within the distinction between discipline and subject area, and explore the gains of pursuing recognition as the latter.

4.2 Programme development

One of the key clusters of conclusions relates to the development of research programmes within ESRC. The social work community should not expect the ESRC in its normal mode (that is, excluding considerations of short-term capacity building and priorities) to support or facilitate programmes that have a specific social work led interest or relevance. The operation of ideas of relevance is not disciplinary-linked in a very specific way, as we have illustrated in various ways in our review of the ESRC stance on disciplines. It seems to us that the social work and social care

research communities should engage with the ESRC on those same terms. This should be a twin-pronged engagement.

First, we **recommend** that there should be a proactive determination to initiate programme ideas that will resonate with the ESRC stance on programme relevance. There has been an example of such an initiative during the present project. A preliminary proposal for funding a research programme on 'Welfare and Wellbeing in the 21st Century' was given its first outing at the November 2003 meeting of the virtual college, and emerged from discussions within the JUC SWEC Research Sub-Committee. This proposal received a fair degree of enthusiastic response from the college members. Taking it forward will require considerable commitment and effort. The JUC SWEC Research Sub-Committee hopes to act as the pivot for the early development of the proposal.

Second, we **recommend** that there should be continued pressure on the ESRC to integrate the social work and social care research agenda into programme development. It may not be so much the ESRC commitment to relevance that is at issue, as the inconsistency and even narrowness with which it is applied. The JUC SWEC Research Sub-Committee may be the best lead grouping to monitor and promote this. Our concern is that awareness of the social work agenda within the ESRC is still restricted to a small number of key staff, and will depend on a wider diffusion of such awareness within the ESRC. Such initiatives should push the ESRC towards greater consistency in how it develops and integrates these principles of relevance into its own work programme.

These recommendations impinge on rather wider issues that we would wish to see the ESRC address with vigour. First, we **recommend** to the ESRC that a broader concept of the research user be developed that will recognise the contribution of service user and carer stakeholder interests in all fields of research relevant to service development and delivery. Second, we believe that the research utilisation process is insufficiently recognised within ESRC research as demanding and needing resourcing more fully as a routine part of grant budgets. We **recommend** it should be a requirement of all ESRC applications to provide evidence that active utilisation strategies have been considered and appropriately taken into account in the costings.

4.3 Capacity building and research training

The SCIE brief was restricted to research programmes. However, several parts of the project have trespassed on wider issues. One of the key issues has been the recognition by the ESRC of the need to address research capacity within small disciplines such as social work[16], although capacity building is part of the wider agenda within the ESRC. The specific areas where we would recommend continued lobbying are as follows.

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[16] The areas the ESRC has identified as needing resources are sociolegal studies, management and business, economics, social work and quantitative methods.

Doctoral training

We **recommend** an immediate negotiation with the ESRC regarding capacity building resources for postgraduate research in social work and social care. Whether this is best done on a 'centres of excellence' model or a diffusion and dispersal model is open to debate. There are important arguments about critical mass, expertise, research capacity and market forces on each side of this question.

However, the current position within the ESRC may have moved close to the acknowledgement that this is one area where the ESRC should be doing more than letting the market drive the allocation of studentships. The distribution of scarce and valued resources is clearly a sensitive issue, and a proactive steer is called for from the ESRC on the way to take this initiative forward. However, the details will need careful discussion, and the outcomes careful monitoring.

Postdoctoral training

There also appears to be general recognition within the ESRC that the development of doctoral opportunities has to proceed hand-in-hand with postdoctoral openings. This may be a helpful approach for the social work community where some doctoral students may well intend to move into or remain in direct practice. There is an apparent openness within the ESRC on this issue. The line of reasoning needs ongoing development. For example, if it is accepted with the ESRC that "this is an area where people [may] want to go into the practitioner end rather than stay as researchers in the [higher education] system" there would be a strong case for developing strategic postdoctoral fellowships that provide social work PhD achievers with a choice. More radical approaches of this kind would also be of interest to other discipline areas with professional agendas.

We **recommend** the early development of a case to the ESRC for targeted postdoctoral fellowships, with the aim of providing appropriate career building opportunities in social work and social care research.

CASE studentships

Collaborative Awards for Science and Engineering (CASE) awards are an under-targeted opportunity within social work. The ESRC has, at the time of writing, announced increased funding for CASE students. There is an opportunity for the social work community to shape the direction of CASE awards. In tune with the willingness within the ESRC to resist some aspects of market forces, the social work community may wish to argue strategic areas, which should be particularly highlighted within the CASE award programme. We **recommend** that the social work community engage in discussion with the ESRC on the future shape of CASE awards, and develop and where necessary lobby for a financially feasible means of promoting CASE studentship applications.

The social work degree

One possibility that we did not raise in the project concerns the implications further down the road of the new social degree. Were this to lead to an increased proportion of people entering social work training at a younger age, this might open up the possibility of more traditional routes to doctoral study.

Early discussion of the project outcomes within JUC SWEC suggests that the likely response will be to press for an integrated overall capacity building strategy within social work.

We **recommend** that the potential be monitored for emerging opportunities for traditional entry routes to doctoral degrees through the new social work degree.

4.4 The social work and social care community

The social work and social care community has the potential to offer a distinctive and valued contribution to social science research strategies. Independently of this project, the ESRC has commented on the value of the social work input to shaping the methodology of the new programme on ethnicity. Methodology areas provide a good example of the actual and potential contribution that can be made, for example, through developing research rigour in the context of a commitment to the democratising of research.

A recurring theme of the report has been the need for the social work community to understand how the ESRC 'system' works. For example, in certain key regards we have seen how it follows rather than leads disciplinary developments. In tune with this understanding we have suggested general ways in which the social work community should aim to shape research programmes. Identifying ourselves with that community, we **recommend** that we:

- cultivate an alertness to ESRC announcements
- offer to act as application assessors
- facilitate a culture of regular bidding to the ESRC
- signal clearly in those bids that social work issues are present
- lobby for a wider notion of research users
- press for rigorous democratising of the research process
- continue to develop an informed strategy for research methodologies appropriate to social work and social care research and evaluation
- develop a stronger consensus on national research priorities
- facilitate an environment of mutual support in raising research bidding rates and standards[17].

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[17] ESRC staff are willing to attend the main social work conferences and give sessions on research bidding.

The question may arise as to the wisdom of pressing for an ESRC-funded research centre. The gradual increase in research networks and groupings across the UK should lead to opportunities for centre funding bids. We **recommend** that the course of action of first resort should, however, be research grants. In this context, we appreciate the force of a point made to us that a funded research centre would not necessarily draw on the full strengths of the community. The case for the relative benefits of engaging with research programmes was made to us as follows:

"A programme … does de-construct and re-construct communities, insofar as if a programme works well you can bring together [those] who might not necessarily work with each other… You have a opportunity to be exposed to a broader range of theoretical approaches, practical approaches and have a … shared set of what good practice is for engaging with the academic community and non-academic community… If you have a really good programme with a good bunch of researchers in it, they can draw upon each other's strengths… The programmes are a good vehicle for bringing different and disparate communities together to work in a different way than they would have if you'd created a centre or you had a stand-alone grant."

Resourcing the development of national social work and social care research priorities will need a joint ESRC/social work community initiative. There is precedent for the ESRC providing matched funding for an audit of research strengths within a small discipline. In the light of this, we **recommend** the continuation of early discussions with ESRC and JUC SWEC regarding the resources for and basis of an audit of the strengths and limitations of social work research in British universities. This audit should also consider the implications for developing national research priorities for social work and social care research.

Appendix A: Summary of research methods

The research design comprised the following data collection activities:

- Desk research involving a review of a range of ESRC documentation downloaded from the ESRC website (www.esrc.ac.uk) which helped to identify those research programmes with a more obvious social work relevance.

- An open consultation exercise carried out via a number of different websites and distribution lists likely to be used by social work and social care academics and researchers: these included JUC SWEC, SWAP LTSN, and SCIE's own site. The consultation aimed to discover the experience and views of the social work and social care community regarding the ESRC's role relating to the generation of social work and social care knowledge.

- An e-mail questionnaire sent to all principal applicants of projects funded under two research programmes: Growing Older: Extending Quality of Life (GO) and Research Methods Phase 1 (RM). Twenty-four projects were funded under the GO programme, which ended in April 2003. The RM programme, with 29 projects, is ongoing. The questionnaire contained 11 questions, and was primarily aimed at finding out about researchers' experiences of being funded by the ESRC in general, and their perceptions of the actual and potential coverage of social work and social care within individual projects, and the two research programmes as a whole, in particular. The GO and RM research programmes were selected as case studies for the present review because a preliminary assessment of all ESRC programmes suggested that projects funded under GO and RM would involve social work and social care academics who had successfully bid for ESRC grants, as well as individuals who were working on potentially relevant projects but who might not have any social work or social care 'identity'.

- A consultation workshop held at SCIE in November 2003 attended by eight researchers who had accepted an open invitation to attend, which was extended through both the open consultation information and the e-mail questionnaire. Workshop members were asked for their responses to preliminary findings, as well as their views about particular subject areas: research investment; methods and instruments for outcome studies; knowledge utilisation; human resource management; and user involvement in research and development.

- Anonymised data on bids to ESRC.

- Face-to-face interviews with two senior ESRC staff.

Data collection took place between October and November 2003. Analysis took place contemporaneously with the data collection. The analytic themes emerged in the early stages inductively from the intentionally open-ended desk research, electronic consultation with the social work and social care community, and the studies of the two research programmes (emergent themes were recorded using Microsoft Excel). The workshop stage and the interviews with ESRC staff were framed around the specific aspects of the SCIE brief and the themes that had begun to firm up from the early analysis.

Appendix B: Electronic consultation exercise

If you have been part of social work-related bids to ESRC programmes, been a programme grant holder, a project team member, or acted as an ESRC advisor, assessor, committee or advisory group member, we would like to hear from you. Send your comments to Ian Shaw by e-mail (ifs2@york.ac.uk) as early as convenient, and not later than 28 November 2003.

We are interested to know your views on the listed topics and any others that you think relevant to the exercise. For each topic we ask you to focus on the particular role that the ESRC might play:

1. The contribution to social work/social care knowledge made by ESRC programme research.
2. To what social work/social care research strategy needs can ESRC programmes contribute? For example, national priorities? Larger-scale programmes? Interdisciplinarity? Cumulative knowledge building? Systematic reviews? R&D approaches to intervention research and model building? Something else?
3. Research methodology. The development of instruments and innovative methods for evaluative research. The methodological advancement of user involvement in research and development.
4. Knowledge utilisation.
5. Research capacity building.
6. The potential contribution of ESRC research programmes to social care workforce issues.
7. The strengths and limitations of social work/social care engagement with ESRC programmes.
8. The social work voice in the development of ESRC thematic and programme priorities.
9. Are there any specific changes you would like to see in the development, management and outcomes of ESRC programmes?

Please tell us your reasons for taking part in the consultation.

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This review focuses on the use of research by social care staff and how this can be promoted in social care practice.

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This report, by the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee, gives for the first time an overview of the contribution the Economic and Social Research Council makes to developing the knowledge base for social work and social care.

The report argues for greater engagement by the ESRC in research for social work and social care, and for researchers to respond positively to this challenge.

This publication is available in an alternative format upon request.