Funding opportunity

Pre-announcement: ESRC Connect Awards: pilot

Opportunity status:	Upcoming
Funders:	**Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)**
Funding type:	Grant
Total fund:	£1,500,000
Award range:	£50,000 - £150,000
Publication date:	23 February 2026
Opening date:	To be confirmed
Closing date:	To be confirmed

Apply for funding to connect with other researchers to scope, seed and grow emerging research fields and new areas of inquiry.

This pilot opportunity will support researchers to collaborate on novel, exploratory and high-risk ideas, building the foundations for future research and innovation.

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) will fund 80% of the project's full economic cost (FEC). Awards can last up to six months. Projects will be expected to start on 1 October 2026.

> ⓘ This is a pre-announcement and information may change. The funding opportunity will open in April 2026.

Who can apply

This opportunity is open to organisations with standard eligibility. **Check if your organisation is eligible**.

Who is eligible to apply

This funding opportunity will be open to researchers based in UK research organisations, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) institutes, NHS bodies, independent research organisations, public sector research establishments and Catapult centres. We encourage:

- applications from diverse groups of researchers
- applications from those who have not previously held ESRC grants
- applications from individuals at any career stage, subject to ESRC eligibility

Applications must have a project lead from the social science disciplines within **ESRC's remit**.

Who is not eligible to apply

The ESRC project co-leads from UK business, third sector or government bodies policy will not be able to apply for this funding opportunity.

International researchers

International researchers can apply as 'project co-lead (international)'. You should include all other international collaborators, or UK partners not based at approved organisations, as project partners.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

We are committed to achieving equality of opportunity for all funding applicants. We encourage applications from a diverse range of researchers.

We support people to work in a way that suits their personal circumstances. This includes:

- career breaks
- support for people with caring responsibilities
- flexible working
- alternative working patterns

UKRI can offer disability and accessibility support for UKRI applicants and grant holders during the application and assessment process.

What we're looking for

This opportunity is one of two pilots ESRC is launching in spring 2026 designed to fill gaps in our applicant-led funding offer.

Aim

Connect awards foster connections between researchers to scope, seed and grow emerging research fields and new areas of inquiry. The opportunity provides a space for early collaboration on ideas within and beyond the social sciences that are novel, exploratory and high-risk, helping to build the foundations for future strategically important research and innovation.

Scope

We will be looking for applications that bring researchers together, forming new collaborations across disciplines, or bringing together different fields of research to develop high-risk, exploratory or unconventional research ideas and approaches.

The size and length of awards will give researchers from different backgrounds the space to test the potential of emerging research fields and new areas of inquiry. Proposals should outline how collaborations will be developed and new areas of inquiry tested, for example, by applying ideas or methodologies from one field to another to stimulate new insights and challenge existing assumptions.

This is an applicant-led funding opportunity. The primary focus of the proposed activities should be on the social sciences. However, we encourage collaborations with disciplines outside of the social sciences where it could lead to development of novel approaches.

Applications must have a project lead from the social science disciplines within **ESRC's remit**.

Duration

The duration of this award is a maximum of six months, with projects expected to start on 1 October 2026.

Funding available

The FEC of your project can be between £50,000 and £150,000.

ESRC will fund 80% of the FEC.

What we will fund

You will have a wide scope to propose activities that scope and foster novel connections, which may include but not be limited to:

- networking
- seminars and workshops
- focused events or conferences
- knowledge exchange activities
- scoping and initial pilot studies
- initial data collection

What we will not fund

The following cannot be funded through this opportunity:

- duplication of collaborations and research that already exist
- literature surveys
- research proposals that could be funded through other more appropriate funding opportunities, for example, research grants and new investigator grants
- collaborations that do not have a project lead from social science disciplines

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Trusted Research and Innovation (TR&I)

UKRI is committed in ensuring that effective international collaboration in research and innovation takes place with integrity and within strong ethical frameworks. Trusted Research and Innovation (TR&I) is a UKRI work programme designed to help protect all those working in our thriving and collaborative international sector by enabling partnerships to be as open as possible, and as secure as necessary. Our **TR&I Principles** set out UKRI's expectations of organisations funded by UKRI in relation to due diligence for international collaboration.

As such, applicants for UKRI funding may be asked to demonstrate how their proposed projects will comply with our approach and expectation towards TR&I, identifying potential risks and the relevant controls you will put in place to help proportionately reduce these risks.

See further guidance and information about TR&I, including where you can find additional support.

How to apply

We are running this funding opportunity on the new UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Funding Service so please ensure that your organisation is registered. You cannot apply on the Joint Electronic Submissions (Je-S) system.

We will publish full details on how to apply when the funding opportunity opens.

How we will assess your application

Assessment process

We intend that applications will be assessed by distributed peer review (DPR). In DPR, applicants also act as assessors and review other applications submitted to the same funding opportunity. You must therefore be available and commit to undertake the reviews, which will like take place during July, although this is subject to change.

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Contact details

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The funding opportunity will open in April 2026, and further information will be published on this page by then. We are unable to provide any further details or answer any queries about this funding opportunity beforehand.

Guidance on good research

Good research resource hub

https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/esrc-connect-awards-pilot