



‘Social Science of the Nexus’ Network Plus Call for proposals

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Summary

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has recently undertaken a consultation exercise to identify the social science research priorities that emerge from a holistic assessment of the interrelated challenges of Energy, Environment and Food Security. This exercise has identified an interconnected set of social science challenges – the Social Science of the Nexus - from which ESRC, working with a range of partners, will be taking forward a programme of research and capacity-building.

The first of these activities is designed to foster linkages between research activities that can contribute to addressing the challenges of the Social Science of the Nexus, engaging the research community with business and other users of research, and developing richer thinking across the nexus through establishment of a well-resourced networking capacity and leadership.

ESRC is inviting Expressions of Interest for the establishment of a Network Plus (NW+) to build 'nexus thinking' capacity and leadership for the social sciences in identifying and addressing the challenges of the Energy-Environment-Food Nexus. The call is for a single Network Plus (NW+) that will bring together researchers from across the Nexus, funded to the level of up to £1.875 million (100 per cent fEC) over 36 months.

What is a Network Plus?

A Network Plus plays a strategic role in ensuring that research is both of excellent academic quality AND is aligned with user needs. It plays a key role in reaching out to potential users, interacting with them and providing them with access to research, ensuring research addresses questions that are relevant to them, and uses the concepts and language that users understand and can apply. This is intended to be very different from the traditional process of dissemination which occurs after the research has finished. Instead, with a Network Plus, the research communities' engagement with research users is at its highest before the main body of research begins, and research users often play an active role in research design and its co-production.

The NW+ will have open, interdisciplinary membership, and will engage a wide range of relevant stakeholders, from academia, business, policy and other sectors. The NW+ will engage, build and support a new research community, drawing on existing and future investments both within and beyond ESRC's portfolio. To enable this, the funding for the NW+ includes placement and pilot project budgetary allocations.

The successful proposal will be led by a strong, interdisciplinary team who can articulate a clear shared vision for the NW+ and the community of research users. They will engage beyond the "usual suspects", supporting interdisciplinary approaches in novel ways. The leadership team should have expertise that can be brought to bear across the nexus; because of the breadth and complexity of this space, this may require a new grouping of researchers, drawing on strong, existing leadership in the social sciences across related areas. The team will have demonstrable experience of working with a range of partners, and supporting novel approaches to emerging problem spaces. Given the challenges of

undertaking engaged or co-produced research, they will need to be unbiased and independent and able to act as figure heads for the Social Sciences.

The ESRC is administering the commissioning process in accordance with its Research Funding guidelines (www.esrc.ac.uk/RFG). Queries regarding the commissioning process should be addressed to the ESRC project team, see contact details at the end of this document.

Expressions of Interest should be submitted by **3 October 2013 by 16.00**. Expressions of Interest will be shortlisted, and shortlisted applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal by 16.00 on 12 December 2013.

After peer review successful applicants will be invited for interviews on 21 January 2014. Final funding decisions will be available by 31 January 2014, and the NW+ will be expected to start no later than 1 April 2014.

Background

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the leading funder of high quality, independent, basic, strategic and applied social science research and training in the UK addressing issues of importance to business, government, the public sector and society more generally. The three strategic priorities of the ESRC are to fund research on 'Economic Performance and Sustainable Growth', 'Influencing Behaviour and Informing Interventions' and 'A Vibrant and Fair Society' (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/mission-strategy-priorities/refining-priorities/index.aspx>), which would be highly relevant to the work of the Network.

What is the Nexus?

ESRC wants to support research that addresses a set of challenges that cut across the Energy- Environment-Food Security Nexus. The challenges recognise the connectedness and global nature of the issues around eg equitable access to resources; understanding and encouraging sustainable behaviours; cost-benefit analysis of climate change mitigation and adaptation interventions; economic threats and opportunities of the sustainability agenda; security of and competition for resources, and understanding trade-offs; green growth and innovation; financing the green economy; new technologies and public acceptance; and how to promote effective interdisciplinary working to address these complex and connected issues. Successful research will require a process of continuous and deep engagement with the non-academic community rather than an isolated series of events.

The uniquely complex nature of these interdependent issues has been recognised in a number of key international meetings where the opportunity for social science to make ground-breaking contributions to addressing the challenges facing humanity has been highlighted.

“The urgent global risks and challenges facing all nations are interconnected: poverty alleviation; the financial crisis; economic development; political stability; pollution; food, water and energy security; health; wellbeing; climate change; ocean acidification; and loss of biodiversity, to name just some. Understanding this interconnectedness is crucial for tackling these challenges and improving the wellbeing of all societies.”¹ The call for nexus thinking across water, food and the environment recognises the potential for a “Perfect Storm”², a confluence and mutual exacerbation of challenges in these areas in the next few decades. The nexus approach can boost potential by addressing externalities across sectors.³

Through its programme of Nexus activities, ESRC is seeking to drive forward social science thinking to meet these challenges.

Social Science of the Nexus: ESRCs “Big Idea”

ESRC has sought to define the new and emerging social science priorities in the Energy-Environment-Food space to take forward both in its own research programmes and as part of our commitment to the Living with Environmental Change Partnership (LWEC - www.lwec.org.uk/), the Research Councils UK Energy Programme (www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/xrcprogrammes/energy/Pages/home.aspx) and the Global Food Security Programme (www.foodsecurity.ac.uk/).

These interdisciplinary programmes are tackling complex, global challenges that have social science at their heart. ESRC has been instrumental in integrating social science with the work of other disciplines in these programmes. We now want to take this a step further and take a view of the three Programmes as a whole and the interacting social science agenda that fundamentally underpins them.

In January 2013, ESRC held a ‘Big Ideas’ workshop to engage key social science academics, government departments, businesses and other stakeholders around the question

“What are the future Social Science challenges that cut across the Energy-Environment-Food Nexus?”

The workshop identified a set of interconnected social science priorities for ESRC to take forward, shown in Figure 1. At the workshop senior academics and research users started to scope out possible research questions across the nexus. Following this, ESRC identified

¹ Interconnected risks and solutions for a planet under pressure, Rio +20 policy Brief, Planet Under pressure www.planetunderpressure2012.net/pdf/policy_interconissues.pdf

² Professor Sir John Beddington, Speech at the Sustainable Development UK Conference, 19 March 2009. Available at: www.govnet.co.uk/news/govnet/professor-sir-john-beddingtons-speech-at-sduk-09

³ Hoff, H. (2011). Understanding the Nexus. Background Paper for the Bonn 2011 - www.water-energy-food.org/en/news/view_255/understanding-the-nexus.html

what investments within its current portfolio address these questions, and where gaps and challenging research problems lie, and used this to inform an associated programme of research and capacity-building activities that ESRC will be taking forward.

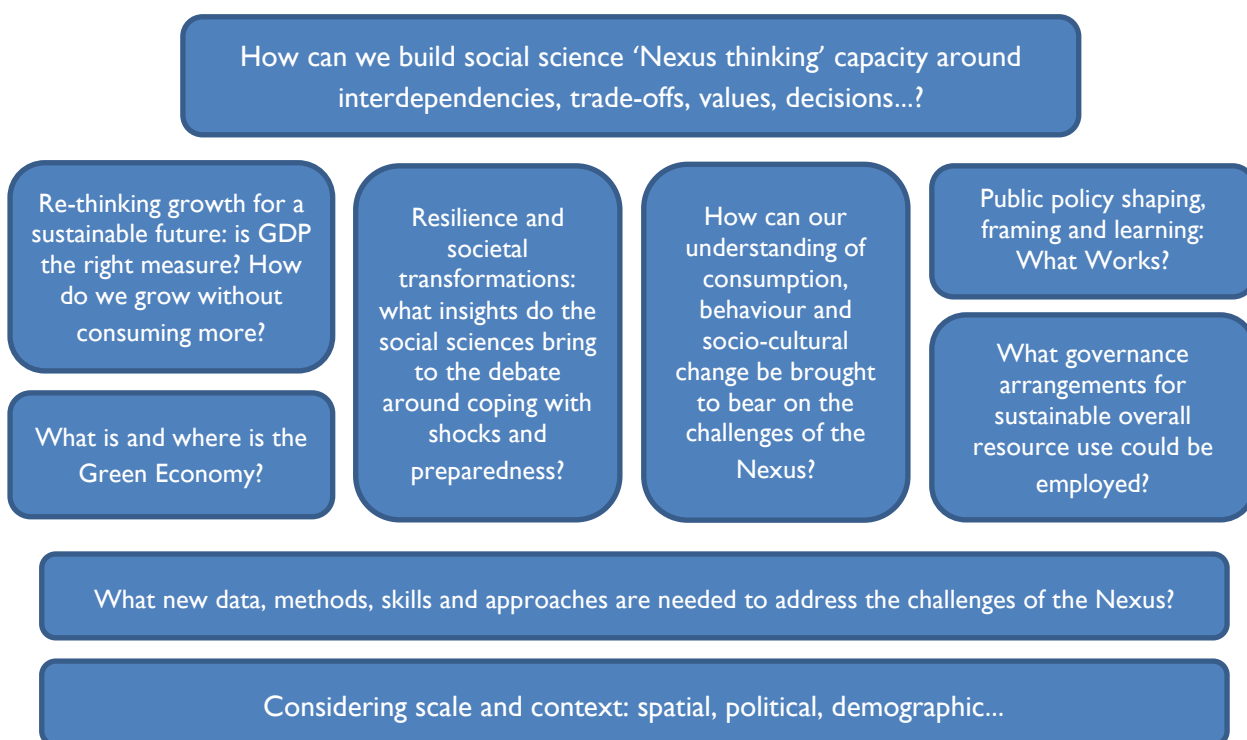


Figure 1: Interconnected social science challenges that cut across the Energy-Environment-Food Nexus.

One major finding of this exercise was that whilst the existing ESRC portfolio tackles parts of the Nexus, there is currently nothing bringing these areas all together. It was identified therefore, that there was a need to create a 'Nexus thinking' capacity that actively spanned across these domains. This focus would more accurately reflect the scale and nature of the research in the wild and is likely to be better placed to begin to tackle some of the social science challenges associated with 'interdependencies, trade-offs, values and decision-making processes'.

Role of the Network Plus

To address this set of issues, we intend to fund a Social Science of the Nexus Network Plus (Nexus NW+) that will:

- Proactively engage the social science community with the challenges of the Nexus and link them to research users, making, maintaining and growing links with new network members, whether academic, business or other research users to reflect issues around 'interdependencies, trade-offs, values, decisions' and the expertise required to address them
- Build greater expertise in this area to address the (social science) challenges of the 'Nexus', working closely with ESRC throughout the life of the network, forming an

integral part of the interface between ESRC and the interdisciplinary community in this space

- Commission small pilot studies to provide additionality to the network concept, enabling testing of new ideas that arise from the network and an incentive for people to join the network. These studies could bring the opportunity to enable both interdisciplinary research and co-produced research
- Build a richer picture of value systems across the nexus, exploring the future direction of 'nexus thinking', develop a narrative for interdisciplinary research in this area, identify and prioritise future research challenges
- Establish and maintain appropriate links with existing networks (eg Valuing Nature Network, Digital Economy Sustainable Society NW+) and other investments (eg Sustainable Practices Research Group and Sustainable Lifestyles Research Group) where research issues overlap.

Expected outcomes from the proposed NW+ will include:

- Creation of a strong leadership profile for the social sciences (and ESRC) in this interdisciplinary space
- Building interdisciplinary capacity around social science contributions to nexus thinking
- Production of position papers and other outputs from the network throughout its life
- Identification of pilot projects to test risky research ideas before submission to conventional peer review
- Commissioning pilot projects with strong user engagement and high impact within and beyond academia
- Identification of potential future areas of focus for ESRC and strategic engagement with the formation of research priorities.

Structure of the Network Plus

Expressions of Interest to lead the NW+ are invited from strong, interdisciplinary teams of social science researchers who can articulate a clear vision for the NW+.

Up to £1.875M (100 per cent fEC) funding is available for a 3 year grant. The NW+ should:

- Employ an academic Network Coordinator
- Administer a competitive selection procedure to support pilot studies, for which a ring-fenced budget of £500,000 at 100 per cent fEC will be held by the NW+ lead institution as part of the NW+ grant allocation, to be awarded to applicants from across the research community. ESRC expects that each project would be for no more than 6 months at up to £50,000 each. The NW+ will be required to develop a robust governance process (eg assessment, monitoring), for approval by ESRC, for administration of this part of the budget.

Placements to and from industry and other stakeholders are encouraged to support knowledge exchange and to provide enhanced understanding of real-world scenarios and

issues of putting nexus approaches into practice. The experiences of the Digital Economy (www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/xrcprogrammes/Digital/Pages/home.aspx) Theme NW+s show that small £3,000 grants provide an excellent and very cost effective way to engage new researchers on NW+ themes. The grant would not pay salary of any placement into academia, but would cover overheads. Salary and overheads will be covered for academic placements out of academia (full or part time, usually up to a year). International placements are also encouraged.

Resources

Proposals are invited for a 36 month period up to £1.875 million (100 per cent fEC) of core funding to which the ESRC will contribute up to £1.5 million (80 per cent fEC); the remaining balance must be guaranteed by the host research organisation.

The grant for the NW+ will be issued and managed by the ESRC in accordance with its normal Research Funding guidelines and procedures as stated on the ESRC website. Proposals should therefore be costed on a full economic cost (fEC) basis within the budget stated above.

Leadership team

Expressions of interest will be expected to identify a leadership team with a Principal Investigator who will be required to contribute a significant proportion of their time to the overall leadership and direction of the NW+ (1-2 days per week) and to outline a clear management structure for the NW+.

The PI would take the lead in the administration of the grant and collaboration arrangements. The division of roles within the management team and nature of the PI's own responsibilities should be clearly explained.

There is no formal restriction on who may constitute the leadership team, the ESRC terms and conditions on eligibility apply, but it is likely that the successful application will be led by a team who:

- can articulate a clear vision for how the NW+ will engage beyond the established communities in the areas of the nexus, drawing in new partners and supporting interdisciplinary approaches in novel ways
- can lead the development of new approaches and paradigms across the nexus
- can act as inspirational leaders, as credible figureheads and advocates for the role of the social sciences in addressing the challenges of the nexus
- have a demonstrable track record of delivering complex projects to timetable
- have experience of working with a range of partners, and supporting novel approaches to emerging problems
- are internationally recognised with a well-established publication record within their field of study that can be brought to bear across the nexus.

This may require a new grouping of leaders, drawing on the strong, existing leadership in the social sciences across related areas.

Application process

- This open call for 2-page expressions of interest closes on 3 October 2013
- Expressions of interest will be shortlisted by an expert group to identify 3-5 teams to be invited to prepare and submit full proposals through Je-S
- Shortlisted applicants will be invited to generate full proposals via Je-S that are sent out for Peer Review
- Applicants will have the opportunity to respond to reviewer comments
- Interviews and Panel decision meeting will be held on 21 January 2014
- Final funding decisions will be available by 31 January 2014, and the awarded NW+ is expected to start no later than 1 April 2014

Expressions of interest are invited from multi-disciplinary research teams which will most likely be drawn from a consortium of organisations, potentially including user and business representation. The PI should be from Research Organisations eligible for ESRC funding. The Network will, however, be open to members from the social science community and the wider research community.

Successful applicants will also need to demonstrate a capacity and strategy for drawing in leading expertise relevant to the NW+'s agenda from outside of the core organisations and consortia involved in the proposal, for drawing together appropriate expertise, and for building research capacity in the field.

Application deadline: expressions of Interest

The closing date for expressions of interest via email esrcnexusnetworkplus@esrc.ac.uk is **16.00 on 3 October 2013**. Emails received after this time will not be accepted. Please note expressions of interest are not to be submitted through Je-S.

Upon sending an expression of interest to ESRC you acknowledge that you have read and understood the instructions and the "what we will do with your information" section below.

The Expression of Interest should comprise a maximum of two A4 sides, minimum font-size 11pt, and minimum margins 1cm, and should detail:

- The names and affiliations of the leadership team members and an articulation of why this is the right team, web links should be included for CV/biographies
- A clear articulation of the leadership team's vision for the NW+
- A concise description of how the leadership team will build a community of practice including initial plans for user engagement and facilitate emergent thinking around the challenges of the nexus.

Applicants should note that supplementary documentation **will not** be accepted, and the selection panel will make its decisions based solely on the 2-page Expression of Interest document.

What we will do with your information

In accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998, the personal information that you provide within the Expression of Interest will specifically be used for the purpose of administering the NW+ call. The information will be viewed by ESRC staff and expert panel members and your information will not be used for any other purpose without your specific consent.

For further information on how your information is used, how we maintain the security of your information, and your rights to access information we hold on you, please contact the Joint Information Services Unit (jisu@epsrc.ac.uk).

Assessment of expressions of interest

The criteria for short-listing of the Expressions of Interest are as follows:

- Appropriateness, expertise and track record of the leadership team
- The power of the leadership team's vision for the NW+, and alignment with ESRCs stated aims for the NW+
- Articulation and creativity in how the leadership team will build a community of practice and facilitate emergent thinking around the challenges of the nexus.

Event for potential bidders

The ESRC will be hosting an event for potential bidders on 2 September at 76 Portland Place, London.

This will provide an opportunity for potential bidders to learn more about the expectations of the ESRC, and hear perspectives from Network Plus members in other areas. Further details and application procedure for the event may be found on the ESRC website (www.esrc.ac.uk/). Note that attendance at the event by at least one member of the leadership team is strongly advised before finalisation of an Expression of Interest.

Contact

If you have any questions or would like further information about the scheme, contact:

- Teresa Tucker or Charlotte Dormer
Email: esrcnexusnetworkplus@esrc.ac.uk
Telephone: 01793 442858

Additional information for invited full proposals

Management plan

Applicants should explain how they will provide leadership to a diverse group of network participants, how the proposed programme of network activities, outputs, pilot studies and placements will be managed and the role and function of any advisory or management groups (including the steering board required by ESRC - please see below). Proposals for how the relationship between the NW+ and ESRC can be strengthened to enable both the NW+ and ESRC to gain maximum benefit are also encouraged.

The NW+ will be expected to propose its own internal management arrangements to ensure delivery of the agreed programme. A detailed description of the proposed principles and structure of these arrangements, including the proposed division of major management and leadership roles and responsibilities and proposed time commitments of key individuals, is required. These arrangements will need to be set out in the Case for Support in the full proposal. Further guidance is provided in the Guidance for Applicants -

www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/guidance/applicants/index.aspx. Please note that specific guidance for the full stage will be provided when the call goes live in October.

Impact Plan

Applicants should explain how they will engage with a range of stakeholders from different disciplines and sectors. Outreach and communication plans, proposals for the development of communities of practice, and the fostering of dialogue to inform the work plan for the Network should be articulated. Applicants are invited to identify the key issues and barriers they might anticipate in the engagement process, and how they would propose to overcome these to ensure that the NW+ reaches beyond those who routinely engage with these activities.

Organisational support

ESRC will be looking for evidence of strong organisational commitment to hosting the NW+, for example, through the provision of high quality infrastructure including web and communications. This institutional commitment will need to be set out in the Case for Support. Further guidance is provided in the Guidance for Applicants – www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/guidance/applicants/index.aspx.

Governance

Steering committee

An independent steering committee must be appointed to provide advice on the conduct and content of the NW+. This steering committee should have a membership drawn from the academic, industrial and international scientific community and include a representative from ESRC. The steering board should meet at least once every six months.

- A member of the ESRC Research Committee will be appointed as Chair.

- The steering committee Terms of Reference are to be agreed with ESRC.
- The membership of the advisory group will have a mix of academics and at least 33 per cent non-academic membership. Please refer to the ESRC Research Funding Guide - www.esrc.ac.uk/RFG.

Publication and IP

The Network is expected to produce position papers, syntheses and other outputs as part of its work. Responsibility for the final content of outputs, quality control and peer review arrangements will rest with the Network. Publication and IPR will be handled in accordance with normal ESRC guidelines outlined in the Research Funding Guide (www.esrc.ac.uk/RFG). All NW+ findings should be made freely and openly available.

Research ethics

All applicants must comply with the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics - www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/research-ethics.aspx

Assessment of full proposals

Shortlisted applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal through Je-S by **16.00 on 12 December 2013**. The proposal will be peer reviewed by against the criteria identified in this call. These include the criteria below, all of which are considered of high importance:

- Clearly articulated strategy and vision for the Network+, with clear objectives and a well-defined purpose
- Proposed programme of activities and events to deliver the objectives of the NW+ including clearly identified process for commissioning and managing a suitable range of pilot projects and placements
- Track record of applicants and composition of leadership team that demonstrates their ability to galvanise and create an effective interdisciplinary community
- Appropriateness of membership and recruitment strategy for building, maintaining and managing a membership with appropriate critical mass that evolves with the NW+.
- Clearly articulated vision, strategy and mechanisms to deliver engagement with users, including industry and government, at all stages of the process.
- Demonstration of robust management plan, including role of coordinator, governance, managing relationship with ESRC and managing for impact.
- Expected outcomes, likely impact and appropriateness of the routes identified to achieve this.

In considering proposals ESRC will make the final decision over which, if any, proposal to fund and reserve the right to propose reconfigured consortia and work plans.

The ESRC anticipates being able to announce formal decisions by 31 January 2014.

The NW+ grant will commence by 1 April 2014. Once the grant has been issued ESRC must receive the start confirmation for a grant within 42 days of the date on which expenditure actually commences, and within three months of the start date indicated in the grant letter (please refer to the ESRC Research Funding Guide - www.esrc.ac.uk/RFG).

We anticipate that some initial activity can begin as soon as possible after the announcement of the successful Network+ (**Note** - no monies will be paid until the grant has officially started and the start certificate and abstract has been received).

Application procedure: Full proposals

Applicants short-listed from the Expressions of Interest stage will be invited to submit full proposals through Je-S by **16.00 on 12 December 2013** and after full peer review, successful applicants will be required to attend an Interview panel on 21 January 2014.

The interviews will consist of a five minute oral presentation during which applicants will be invited to pitch their vision and explain why they should be chosen to lead the NW+, followed by 25 minutes Q&A with the panel. Applicants are invited to field up to three representatives for this, one of whom must be the Principal Investigator.

All full proposals **must** be made on the **Je-S Proposal Form**, which is available at <https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk/eforms/secure/Login.asp>.

Je-S is the electronic submission system which is used by all Research Councils to provide a common electronic system that supports research administration. More detailed information can be found at <https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk/>. **In particular applicants should note the registration requirements to make a Je-S submission.**

Only those full proposals submitted through the Je-S system will be accepted for processing. The proposal submitted through Je-S will be taken to be the final version, and will be the version used for external peer assessment.

The specific **notes for guidance for the full stage of the call will** provide details on the information that you will be required to submit as part of your full proposal. All applicants are strongly advised to consult ESRCs **Research Funding Guide** (www.esrc.ac.uk/RFG), which sets out the rules and regulations governing its funding.

Contact

If you have any questions or would like further information about the scheme, contact:

- Teresa Tucker or Charlotte Dormer
Email: esrcnexusnetworkplus@esrc.ac.uk
Telephone: 01793 442858