Summary of 2015 revisions to the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics

The Framework for Research Ethics was introduced in 2006 and is subject to an annual review through consultation with the research community and stakeholders; to ensure ethical standards reflect changing scientific agendas and policy developments.

For the 2014-15 review we established a small review panel with ESRC Council member Professor Linda Woodhead acting as chair. The Panel was asked to consider emerging issues in social sciences, supported by responses from a small consultancy group, to agree necessary changes to the framework.

This review highlights the following key messages.

• It is important for researchers to think ethically when conducting research and consider ethical issues throughout the research lifecycle. The research lifecycle includes the planning stage, the period of funding for the project and all activities that relate to the project once funding has ended. The research lifecycle also includes knowledge exchange and impact realisation activities, the dissemination process and the archiving, future use, sharing and linking of data.

• All parties involved with research should aim to maximise the benefit of the research and minimise any harm to participants. Our principles have been revised to emphasise the need for researchers to consider the balance and proportionality of individual rights, for example respect, trust and privacy as well as the public benefits of research.

• Researchers should think robustly about potential ethical issues arising throughout the project and adequately address these when completing the ethical considerations section of their ESRC proposal submission.

• Researchers and research organisations should abide with the UUK Concordat to Support Research Integrity (http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/Theconcordattosupportresearchintegrity.aspx) and RCUK Guidelines on Governance of Good Research Conduct (http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/publications/researchers/grc/).

Changes in grants process requirements - As a result of harmonisation of policy across Research Councils ESRC no longer require written confirmation of ethics approval prior to the release of funds on funded proposals. However we still expect that appropriate ethics review will be carried out prior to research being undertaken. If an ethics review is not undertaken before the project commences and is planned for a later stage, this should be discussed with the lead ESRC officer when confirmation of funding is received by the applicant to ensure funding arrangements can be agreed.

Ethics case studies - In order to facilitate our readers thinking around ethics issues, throughout the lifecycle of the research project, we have included ethics case studies of ESRC-funded projects,
Data and legal requirements - Our Framework has been updated to reflect the establishment of the Health Research Authority (HRA) (http://www.hra.nhs.uk/). The HRA was established as a Special Health Authority by Government in response to a review by the Academy of Medical Sciences of research regulation, as announced in the Government’s Plan for Growth (2011). The Care Bill established the HRA as a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) on 1 January 2015 with responsibility for the UK-wide Research Governance Framework. Applicants can submit their proposals for ethics review to NHS RECs (http://www.hra.nhs.uk/research-community/booking-submission-changes-spring-2014/) using the Integrated Research Application System (IRAS).

Our framework confirms that applicants should contact the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) (https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service) to gain clearance when working with vulnerable people, following the merger of the Independent Safeguard Authority (ISA) and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). Our Framework has also been updated to include information on the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000.

Terminology and Glossary - We have updated the terminology within the framework as required including distinguishing between data controllers/custodians and data producers/providers.

In the glossary we have included further definitions including definitions of biobank (research tissue banks), biosocial research and broad consent which can be useful in facilitating biobank research.