

THE ROAD TO A SUSTAINABLE SELF-COMPLETION FUTURE

EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY ERIC
STRATEGIC PLAN 2024-2029



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INTRODUCTION

The European Social Survey has, unlike many others of the first wave of Landmark ERICs, never previously had an explicit strategic plan. That said, it has not been without clear direction and purpose, both of which were set out in the original Scientific and Technical Description when it became an ERIC in 2013.

This itself built upon the five founding aims which prefaced the project Blueprint - the document containing the specification and ambition for the European Social Survey when it launched in 2001. Over time these aims have been operationalised through the more detailed biennial work programmes presented to the General Assembly, the format of which - a set of thematic work packages - reflects the initial funding of ESS through the various Framework Programmes of the European Commission.

The ESS has matured a good deal during its first decade as an ERIC, having grown its membership steadily to a point close to its maximum potential, and this seems an appropriate opportunity to take stock and adopt a more strategic approach to the coming period.


This paper has been informed by multiple preliminary exercises. In Summer 2021 we held an 'ESS Futures Workshop' with major stakeholders. That workshop fell within an overlapping review of our activities by an appointed Strategic Board composed of scientific experts long associated with ESS and survey research. One outcome of this process was to recast and refresh the five aims of ESS ERIC to reflect its growing maturity.

Since presenting initial components of a strategy at a General Assembly in Madrid (October 2022), we have consulted with the major committees of the infrastructure - the General Assembly, the Methods Advisory Board, the Scientific Advisory Board and the National Coordinators' Forum. This document is informed by that consultation process, along with developments in the broader landscape of the European Research Area.

The structure of the paper is as follows: it reprises the five principal ESS aims, then under each of these it presents a series of medium-term actions to be implemented, or at least initiated, in the five-year period from June 2024 to May 2029. Some actions may serve multiple aims and thus appear more than once. It concludes by setting out key thematic priorities which summarise and will shape the transformation and consolidation of ESS ERIC over the next five years. €

AIMS OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY ERIC

The European Social Survey has five overarching aims:

- 1.** To operate a Research Infrastructure providing high quality data measuring change (and stability) over time within and between European countries in their living conditions, social structure, public opinion and attitudes;
- 2.** To practise and promote the highest scientific standards in cross-national comparative research in the social sciences;
- 3.** To continue the development of ESS infrastructure through ongoing methodological research and innovation;
- 4.** To facilitate training in the effective use of ESS data;
- 5.** To ensure the visibility, accessibility and reach of ESS data among researchers in the social sciences and beyond, policy makers and the wider public, at both the national and international level. 

Aim 1. To operate a Research Infrastructure providing high quality data measuring change (and stability) over time within and between European countries in their living conditions, social structure, public opinion and attitudes:

This is the most synoptic of the five ESS aims - it is what the ERIC exists to do. Arguably the remaining four aims all work in the service of this overarching primary purpose, and every proposed action in this plan could be related to the aim.



However, as an 'operational' aim there are some specific challenges which we identify and address. These are: a) the need for continuity of data collection; b) a high number of participating countries; and c) the maintenance of quality and topic coverage.

ACTION 1.1: In a response to challenges to the feasibility of face-to-face data collection, ESS will initiate a programme of transition to self-completion, to be fully operational from Autumn 2027 (Round 13).

ACTION 1.2: In order to maintain the high number of participating countries, ESS will undertake and support a phased transition, running 'parallel' data collection in two modes during the Autumn 2025 fieldwork (Round 12).

ACTION 1.3: In order to measure as wide as possible a range of issues and topics and to develop a longitudinal component, ESS will continue to develop its 'between-wave' online first panel and seek to make this a permanent feature of the infrastructure by 2029.

Aim 2. To practise and promote the highest scientific standards in cross-national comparative research in the social sciences:

Methodological rigour is at the core of the ESS offer. In transitioning to self-completion data collection, through necessity, it is essential to achieve this in a way which is consistent with the principles associated with the original face-to-face design, while also realising the opportunities from the new mode.

ACTION 2.1: The ESS will review the role and financing of national teams to ensure they are adequately resourced and supported to deliver high quality self-completion fieldwork.

ACTION 2.2: The ESS will develop a new fieldwork specification that retains the rigour of the original, while taking full account of the existing survey context and evidence-based experience in individual countries.

ACTION 2.3: The ESS will implement a process for refreshing and enhancing the Core Scientific Team to reflect the impending transition to self-completion data collection.



ACTION 2.4: The ESS will develop an internal training programme to equip all national teams with the expertise to implement the best national version of the self-completion approach.

Aim 3. To continue the development of ESS infrastructure through ongoing methodological research and innovation:

The ESS has always aimed not only to use the highest quality methods in comparative research but also to further develop the field through its own research programme. It has been able to build on its existing mixed mode

methodology programme to inform its current mode transition. While the EC framework programmes can provide some support, it is vital that ESS ERIC ensures it is able to take a longer term and strategic approach to its future.

ACTION 3.1: The ESS will propose the introduction of longer-term budgets (two Biennial periods) to span the transition to self-completion and encourage more strategic planning.

ACTION 3.2: The ESS will establish a stable innovation fund within its business plan ('the work programme') to ensure adequate resources are available to gather experimental evidence prior to making operational changes.

Aim 4. To facilitate training in the effective use of ESS data:

ESS has provided occasional training in the production and use of ESS data, funded almost entirely via the EC framework programmes. It is an obligation of all ESFRI RIs to consider how best to support

users of their infrastructures. ESS ERIC will take a more strategic and user centred approach in this area in the next period.

ACTION 4.1: The ESS will undertake a consultation on the demand for digital training from the ESS user-group and sub-groups.

ACTION 4.2: The ESS will develop and implement a funded plan to produce training materials as part of the 2025-29 work programme.

ACTION 4.3: The ESS will work with other RIs to identify and exploit opportunities for joint training activities.



Aim 5. To ensure the visibility, accessibility and reach of ESS data among researchers in the social sciences and beyond, policy makers and the wider public, at both the national and international level:

ESS has always sought to ensure its data and findings have impact beyond academia. Indeed, ESS has the potential to ensure that the social condition and attitudes of Europeans are visible amongst the public as well as in the academic, journalist and policy communities. Building on its existing media and communication strategy, ESS will now seek to expand its reach at both the national and supra-national level.

ACTION 5.1: The ESS will actively pursue a public affairs strand within its existing media and communications strategy.

ACTION 5.2: The ESS will better equip national teams to promote the data at national level among non-academic audiences.

ACTION 5.3: The ESS will implement measures to connect policy makers with ESS users through, inter alia, a 'substantive experts' database.

ACTION 5.4: The ESS will produce a legacy plan to ensure curation of ESS data beyond the lifetime of the RI (as recommended through the ESFRI Monitoring process).

ACTION 5.5: The ESS will work with partners in the SSH community to maximise the visibility of ESS data and its linkage with other data within and external to the SSH domain. €

CONCLUSION

This strategic plan covers the period from June 2024 to May 2029 and contains specific actions in support of ESS ERIC's aims during that period. In this respect it is not merely a position statement but a statement of intent. These actions can be summarised under five thematic headings:

1. A once-in-a-generation transformation in data collection methodology consistent with the ESS principles of input-harmonised cross-national equivalence.

2. An expansion of data collection capacity through the ongoing consolidation of a between-wave panel.

3. A strengthening of the core components of the RI, most particularly national teams.

4. The production of ESS-specific digital resources to assist the training of all data users.

5. A significant enhancement of ESS's visibility and impact in the public policy domain. €





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FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY

The European Social Survey is a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ESS ERIC) that provides cross-national data about public attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

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