

**Challenges and Opportunities for Social Science Research in  
Northern Ireland  
Northern Ireland Policy Forum  
Hosted by ARK**

**3 November 2009  
Malone House, Barnett Demesne, Belfast BT9 5PB**

**10:00 – 10:30 Registration and Coffee**

**10:30 Welcome: Professor Gillian Robinson, Director ARK**

**FORUM**

**Speakers:**

**Professor Ian Diamond**, Chief Executive ESRC

**Professor Paul Wiles**, Chief Scientific Advisor to the Home Office  
and Director of Research, Development and Statistics

**Professor Monica McWilliams**, Northern Ireland Human Rights  
Commission

**Dr Norman Caven**, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

**Ms Marie Cavanagh**, Gingerbread Northern Ireland

**Round table discussion with invited guests.**

**12:30 Launch of ARK policy publication ‘Figuring it Out: A look behind  
social statistics in Northern Ireland’ Ann Marie Gray and Goretti  
Horgan**

**12:45 Lunch and Close**

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**MEMO TO INVITED GUESTS**

ARK is pleased to invite you to participate in a Northern Ireland Policy Forum focusing on Challenges and Opportunities for Social Science Research in Northern Ireland.

Within the government, academic, and voluntary and community sectors in Northern Ireland there are particular problems and pressures facing social researchers. The UK government, and others more widely, are increasingly urging the need for evidence-based policy and are concerned with building mechanisms to ensure that this can occur. Within the academic sector, the pressures of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) result in a largely different set of agendas and targets for social science researchers. Meanwhile, the third sector, inevitably concerned with its lobbying role (and strapped for funding and under-resourced in skills), struggles to maintain a research agenda at all. Each of these sectors is also interestingly subdivided according to discipline, department or client group, making cross-disciplinary efforts all the more difficult. Each also faces its own particular difficulties with research training and recruitment. All this is, of course, well known. Meanwhile, the ESRC attempts to fulfill a strategic role overseeing the needs of UK social science research in its broadest terms, setting strategic themes and emphasizing the importance of user engagement - while still funding only the highest quality academic research.

The challenges facing each sector are obvious and the differing agendas well-rehearsed, but are there also opportunities to identify some common aims and objectives and share resources? Northern Ireland is a very small place and for decades, informal, successful, ad-hoc partnerships between researchers across the different sectors have regularly sprung up.

Within this context, ARK is convening a high level policy forum to debate the Challenges and Opportunities for Social Science Research in Northern Ireland. As a small newly-devolved entity, Northern Ireland has great potential as a case study of innovative ideas to maximize the mutual benefit of social science research and training across all the relevant sectors. Fresh from the publication of the latest RAE results, there is an opportunity to bring together colleagues from the two universities, from government and from the voluntary and community sectors to think 'outside the box' of the current research models of our various sectors.

This Northern Ireland Policy Forum will examine the evolving relationship between social research and policy and the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. The Forum will bring together an invited group of civil servants, politicians, academics, the voluntary and community sectors and provide an opportunity for all to contribute to the frank discussion on how to move forward and ensure that social research contributes to policy making.

## What is ARK?

ARK is a resource providing access to social and political material on Northern Ireland. Established in 2000 within the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast, ARK has developed a range of resource materials that inform social and political debate in the region and raise the profile of social science research on Northern Ireland. ARK currently is supported by an ESRC Large Grant from 2006 to 2011.

ARK's **mission** is to make social science knowledge on Northern Ireland easily accessible to the widest possible audience.

Within this mission, the main aims of ARK are to:

- Open up access to social and political information to a wide range of individuals, groups, organisations and agencies.
- Encourage those with relevant information on Northern Ireland to make it available to the general public and then to take practical steps through ARK to improve access to that information - by making it available on-line or disseminating it in a different format.
- Undertake research to produce primary information where there are perceived gaps. For example, ARK undertakes survey work, and compiles databases of information.
- Build capacity within Northern Ireland for social science research to be undertaken.
- Contribute to the process of recording what is occurring within the region.
- Inform, improve and raise the quality of the policy debates around social issues that confront Northern Ireland society.

ARK has four main areas of work:

- ✚ Surveys;
- ✚ Conflict, Politics and Elections;
- ✚ Policy Research and Resources;
- ✚ Outreach, Dissemination and Training.

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