UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

RESEARCH ACCREDITATION PANEL

Minute

Thursday 25 April 2019

Present

Committee Members
Professor Paul Boyle (Chair)
Chris Dibben (Independent member)
Tricia Dodd (Independent member)
Kevin Fletcher (HMRC)
Andrew Garrett (Independent member)
Sarah Henry (ONS)
Glyn Jones (Welsh Government)
Sarah Mathieson (Independent member)
Neil McIvor (Department for Education)

Advisors
Jason Riches for Nikki Shearman (ONS)
Peter Stokes (ONS)
Andy Wall (ONS)

UK Statistics Authority
Simon Whitworth (UK Statistics Authority)
Ross Young (UK Statistics Authority)

Apologies
Rebecca Endean (UK Research and Innovation)
Roger Halliday (Scottish Government)

1.   Introductions
1.1   The Chair welcomed members to the fifth meeting of the Research Accreditation Panel.

1.2   Members approved the minutes from the fourth meeting of the Research Accreditation Panel.

1.3.   Simon Whitworth updated the meeting with progress on actions from previous meetings. Most actions were either complete, or in progress and would soon be complete.

2.   Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency Accreditation
2.1   Andy Wall briefed the Research Accreditation Panel that the UK Statistics Authority had completed an assessment of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NIRSA) Research Support Unit (RSU) processor environment under the Digital Economy Act (DEA). The UK Statistics Authority accreditation team recommended that the Research Accreditation Panel approve the accreditation of the NISRA RSU for five years.

2.2   The Panel felt that the level of detail in the assessment report was appropriate to enable them to make an accreditation decision and they approved the recommendation to

accredit the NISRA RSU for a five-year period subject to the following changes to the report being made.

    i.   Include a summary of the steps NISRA need to take to improve some of their assessment ratings.

    ii.   Change the overall RAG status for the capability assessment to Good to reflect the more detailed capability assessment findings.

    iii.   Change the graphical presentation of the assessment scores to accurately reflect the assessment scores.

2.3   It was confirmed that the annual review of the processor would be a one-day review. The Panel were also informed that there is an expectation that the processor will improve their standards each year. Therefore, if they have been rated as good in a previous year the processor will be expected to work towards a mature rating the following year.

ACTION: Andy Wall and Pete Stokes to make the above changes to the accreditation document.

3   Update on the Office for National Statistics and the Secure Research Service Accreditation

3.1   Andy Wall provided the Research Accreditation Panel with an update on the progress of presenting an accreditation assessment report to the Research Accreditation Panel for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the ONS Secure Research Service (SRS).

3.2   It was reported that significant progress had been made in preparing ONS's evidence. However, progress slowed during March as UKSA assessor staff performed the assessment of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) Research Support Unit (RSU) and their Census environment. The Panel were informed that the NISRA assessment was a valuable exercise to better understand the required depth of assessment and the evidence required to gain accreditation. This is now being taken into account in finalising the evidence ONS will present to the Panel in May.

3.3   The Panel was informed that ONS had shared their accreditation evidence with Professor Felix Ritchie, from the University of the West of England, who advises organisations around the world on safely making data available for research and statistical purposes. Professor Ritchie had provided independent assurance on the processes ONS have in place and had suggested some improvements to ensure ONS was consistent with global best practice in the field.

3.4   It was reported that ONS are meeting with DWP and HMRC to go through ONS's security evidence on the 7 May. The Panel stressed the importance of these key data owners trusting the accreditation process to help facilitate the sharing of data with accredited processor environments.

3.5   Andy Wall and Peter Stokes assured the Panel that the evidence to enable the Research Accreditation Panel to make an accreditation decision on the suitability of the ONS as an accredited processor will be presented to the Panel in the meeting on the 24 May 2019. The Panel stressed the importance of making sure this evidence was presented at the next meeting given the key role ONS is due to play in making data available through the Administrative Data Research Data Partnership.

ACTION: Pete Stokes and Andy Wall to present ONS' accreditation evidence at the next Research Accreditation Panel meeting on the 24 May.

4.   Digital Economy Act Processor Accreditation Status Update

4.1 Andy Wall provided the Research Accreditation Panel with an update on the status of applications for accreditation under the Research Strand of the Digital Economy Act. It was reported that the accreditation team aimed to provide accreditation evidence to the Panel for all those potential processors who have so far expressed an interest in being accredited by June 2019.

4.2 The Panel stressed the importance of keeping to this timetable to ensure that the operationalisation of the Research Strand of the DEA moved forwards with appropriate pace.

5. Project Accreditation

5.1 The Panel considered two potential project applications that had recently been received for access to ONS data. This provided the Panel with a chance to comment on the information they would receive in applications when they are considering whether to approve a project application.

5.2 The following points were made in the discussion that followed:

   i. Researchers need to include more evidence of the public benefit of their research in their applications.
   ii. Any potential risks of the research should be included in the application.
   iii. Researchers need to include more information on their proposed methodology. This should include what variables researchers are interested in using from particular datasets.
   iv. It was reported that Andy Garrett produced guidance for researchers who applied to the Administrative Data Research Network's Approvals Panel that could be useful to help researchers provide better information on their proposed methodology.
   v. The application form should make it clear to the researchers that they will only be able to access deidentified data through the Research Strand of the Digital Economy Act.
   vi. The application form should make it clear about what is meant by a public facing summary.
   vii. A description of the nature of the organisations doing the research and sponsoring the research should be included in the form.

ACTION: Pete Stokes to make the above changes to the project application and supporting guidance.

6. Reporting Metrics

6.1 Simon Whitworth provided the Research Accreditation Panel with some initial thoughts on the metrics about the operationalisation of the Research Strand of the Digital Economy Act which will be regularly reported to the Panel to enable them to provide the governance of the Research Strand of the Digital Economy Act.

6.2 It was suggested that the metrics could be usefully grouped into categories such as the cycle time of projects, the quality of the infrastructure, the outputs produced and the impacts of the research.

ACTION: Simon Whitworth to reconsider the metrics in light of the groupings identified and present these at a future meeting of the Panel.

7. Any other business

7.1 Professor Chris Dibben reported that he had been leading work to develop small prefabricated safe settings, called SafePods, that could provide remote access to sensitive or confidential datasets for research purposes. It was reported that the

Economic and Social Research Council had recently advertised for eligible organisations to apply for a SafePod and to be part of The SafePod Network.

8.   Date of Next Meeting
8.1   The Research Accreditation Panel will next meet on 24 May.