Research Project Accreditation Application Guidance

Background

Chapter 5 of Part 5 of the Digital Economy Act (DEA) 2017 facilitates the linking and sharing of datasets held by public authorities (as defined in the Act) for research purposes, across the UK. The provisions aim to broaden the capacity of research to deliver direct and indirect public benefits, including the production of valuable new research insights about UK society and the economy. To provide clarity and transparency about how the research power will operate, the UK Statistics Authority has issued a [Research Code of Practice and Accreditation Criteria](#) concerning the disclosure, processing, holding or use of personal information under the DEA.

The Research Code sets out the criteria for the accreditation of Processors, Research projects and Researchers and the Authority has established the [Research Accreditation Panel](#) (RAP) to independently accredit each of these.

Research project Accreditation and Process

To access secure research data in a safe setting provided by a DEA Accredited Processor (a list of these are published on the UK Statistics Authority website), researchers must submit a research project or exploratory analysis accreditation application. This can be done in parallel with the Accredited Researcher application process. A complete list of Accredited Research projects will be published in a record of Accredited Researchers on the UK Statistics Authority website to ensure transparency of access to data for the purpose of research.

The Accredited Research project or exploratory analysis application process is as follows:
- The Researcher completes and submits an application form.
- The application is subject to initial feasibility and public good checks by the ONS Statistical Support team, and data owner approval is sought. ONS may contact applicants if they need further information on the project, e.g. clarity on research methodology or public good.
- The application is shared with the DEA Accredited Processor(s) selected for that project.
- The evidence provided for ethical consideration of the research project is assessed. If required, the researcher may use the UK Statistics Authority Ethics Self-assessment form to submit this evidence. An application may be referred to [the National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NSDEC)](#) for ethics advice.
- The final checked application is submitted to the [Research Accreditation Panel (RAP)](#), set up the UK Statistics Authority to carry out the independent accreditation of research projects.
- Once RAP has decided on the research project application, the ONS Research Support team will inform the applicant and Accredited Processor(s) selected in the application, of the decision. If the project is approved, we will notify the researcher of any conditions of access specified by the data owner(s) and/or RAP.

The primary purpose of all Accredited Research projects must be to serve the public good in one or more of the following ways:

1. To provide an evidence base for public policy decision-making;

2. To provide an evidence base for public service delivery;

3. To provide an evidence base for decisions which are likely to significantly benefit the UK economy, society or quality of life of people in the UK;

4. To replicate, validate or challenge Official Statistics;

5. To replicate, validate or challenge existing research;

6. To significantly extend understanding of social or economic trends or events by improving knowledge or challenging widely accepted analyses;

7. To improve the quality, coverage or presentation of existing statistical information.

Completing the application form

This guidance may be used when you complete the Research Project Accreditation Application and intend to undertake either a research project or exploratory analysis.

1 Application Type

Select the type of project application you are applying for; research project or exploratory analysis.

An accredited research project will result in published findings that serve the public good. A researcher may apply for exploratory analysis to enable them to understand the strengths and limitations of data and inform the development of more detailed research proposals, where the results of subsequent research are considered to deliver a public good.

Researchers are not permitted to take any exploratory analysis results out of the Accredited Processor secure access environment or publish any results.

NB: to place an 'x' into the available check boxes, please double click on the box and select 'checked' under the Default Values heading in the menu that appears. To save your changes and close the menu, click 'OK'.

2 Project Lead

The Project Lead will be responsible for the overall project and will be our main contact for any requested project changes throughout the process, including any discussions about the project. Requests to change the project timescales or for additional researchers to be included, must be submitted by the Project Lead or the Deputy Project Lead. Requests for output clearances or data ingests can be made by anyone named on the project.

There are different roles on an Accredited Research project.

- An Accredited Researcher is permitted to access personal information data in a safe environment provided by a DEA Accredited Processor, as listed on the UK Statistics Authority website. The researcher may be fully or provisionally accredited.
- A Peer Reviewer - there are two types of roles performed by Peer Reviewer:
    - A Peer Reviewer may carry out analysis and produce outputs in a safe setting provided by a DEA Accredited Processor with the aim of validating or replicating previous analysis. As they will access personal information, they will need to be a DEA Accredited Researcher. They will also have access to cleared outputs that have been statistically disclosure control checked to protect data confidentiality;
    - A Peer Reviewer may be on a project to view cleared outputs only, with no access to the secure data in a safe setting provided by an Accredited DEA Processor. This role does not require researcher accreditation, but it may be performed by an Accredited Researcher.

If you are already an Accredited Researcher, you only need to give your first and last name and Accredited Researcher (AR) number in this section, as we already hold your details.

If you are not accredited already, it is possible to apply for accreditation as a Researcher at the same time as, or before, your application for research project accreditation. If you are applying for accreditation of yourself and the project together, please give your full contact details here and complete and submit the separate application for researcher accreditation at the same time. Both applications will be considered in parallel, but your access to data can only be granted once both applications have been approved.

If a researcher lacks the experience and qualifications necessary to be a Full Accredited Researcher, they can apply to be a Provisional Accredited Researcher so that they may work on an Accredited Research project under the supervision of a Full Accredited Researcher.

3 Researcher Team

If there is a team of people working on the project, we will require each person's details.

It would help our administration of the project if a Deputy Project Lead is identified, in case the Project Lead is unavailable at any time. We would normally only expect there to be one deputy.

If the research team changes after the project has been accredited, the Project Lead (or their deputy) must inform us immediately of the intended change so that we can ensure that there is no unlawful access to the data.

4 Research Sponsor

4.1 This question should be answered 'yes' if you are carrying out the research project for an organisation that is not your employer, for example as a consultant under contract to another organisation.

4.2 If you have answered 'yes' to question 4.1, you should enter details of the sponsoring organisation and of the contact within that organisation. This will enable us to get a clearer understanding of the risks and benefits associated with the project.

The sponsoring organisation name may be published with the Accredited Research project details, in the published record of DEA Accredited Researchers on the UK Statistics Authority website, to maintain transparency about who is using the data.

5   Title of the Research Project

The titles of all Accredited Research projects are published on the UK Statistics Authority website as part of the public record of DEA Accredited Researchers. The title should identify the main area of your research so that another researcher could understand if it might be relevant to their area of study.

Please also provide the anticipated start date of your research project and your estimated end date. This will be the date when you expect to have finished writing up your final cleared research results.

6   Research Theme

Select the theme (from the drop-down menu) which most closely matches the subject of your research project. If you select one of the options which asks for more detail, add that in the box at 6.2.

If none of the themes offered are suitable, select 'other' and specify your own theme description in the box provided.

7   Abstract of the Research Proposal

This should be a short description (100 words maximum) of the proposed research project and the public good it will provide, which will be published on the UK Statistics Authority website as part of the public record of DEA Accredited Researchers.

8   Purpose of Research Proposal

Provide a detailed description of your research proposal. This information will help assess whether your proposal will be feasible, deliver clear public good and be an appropriate use of unpublished data. This should not exceed 500 words.

9   Research Methodology

Provide full details of your research methodology. This must include any statistical methods, collaborative work and additional data sources to be used (linked data, web scraping, survey results etc). This information will be key to assessing whether your proposal will be feasible, deliver clear public good and be an appropriate use of data. This should not exceed 1000 words.

If you are applying for an Accredited Research project, then as this research is targeted at addressing specific aims, greater detail regarding the methods of analysis and the data to be used are expected. Ensure you:

- Specify your research aim(s), including a clearly defined hypothesis (or hypotheses) to test and/or research question(s) to be answered;
- Specify the method(s) of analysis you plan to use (such as regression);
- As far as possible, try to articulate the outcome or dependent variable(s). Types of outcome may be binary, categorical (with levels), time to event, continuous, multiple events/counts, change over time etc.
- Indicate the starting point for the modelling process - acknowledging that the model may evolve. For example, what independent or explanatory variables comprise at least the initial set to be considered. Include statistical test(s) that are likely to be used and the type of model(s) to be employed (such as regression, logistic, proportional odds, cluster etc.);
- Explain (where relevant) how any potential selection/causal bias will be addressed (e.g. by including a control group with information on how this control group will be created);
- Provide methodology references, if a non-standard methodology is proposed;
- Include information about any contribution to the field of research methodology that you believe may result from your research; and,
- Include an explanation of how your methodological approach will answer the research question(s) set out in the project when employing methods not covered by any of the above (e.g. correlation or basic descriptive analysis will only be used, noting that such analysis might be more applicable for exploratory research).

The level of detail for the research methodology should enable an experienced researcher to understand what type of model is going to be constructed, how bias is being addressed and what is likely to constitute an important effect.

10 Data Required

10.1 You must provide enough details about the various data you wish to access to allow them to be unambiguously identified.

A catalogue of data available can be viewed on the ONS website as a download. If you are applying to access data through another processor, you should find details of the data they hold on their website or by contacting them directly.

If your research would require data that is not currently included in the catalogue, it may still be possible for you to access them. Please contact the Research Support team (Research.Support@ons.gov.uk) to discuss any such requests before submitting your application.

If you require access to data from the ONS Longitudinal Study, please also complete the appropriate supplementary form available as a download from the ONS website.

10.2 If you intend to bring other data into a secure environment provided by a DEA Accredited Processor, you should describe the data, its source and who the owner

is. You must also provide evidence, such as an email or Data Access Agreement, that the owner has given you permission for their data to be used by you for this research. If any conditions have been imposed upon you, these should also be disclosed to us.

10.3 Access to unpublished data is only permitted for research which cannot be completed using aggregate or published data. Please explain which other data sources you have considered and explain why these would not be sufficient for your project.

10.4 If your research project will require any linking of data from another source, this section must include; a description of the data source(s) to be linked; a summary of key variables that will be used; a summary of the linking methodology; and, a justification for the linking. This will help us to understand the confidentiality risks involved.

Note: Data linkage is the process of trying to establish whether two records from two different databases relate to the same entity, (e.g. person, address, household, business). The pairs of records that you think are matches are called links. If the pair do truthfully relate to the same entity, the pair are a match

11 Software Required

Select all software that you would like use for the project. This will help to ensure that, if accredited, your research project will be able to proceed at your selected DEA Accredited Processor. If any of the software you would like is not easily available, we will contact you to discuss what might be possible.

Your software requirements may affect which DEA Accredited Processor you can choose to provide your secure access to the data.

If you need to use other software not listed, there may be a licensing charge and a delay to having it available to you while an Accredited Processor test the software in the processing environment.

12 Ethics

All DEA Accredited Research project applications must include appropriate ethics scrutiny before they can be accredited. Please state whether you already have, or anticipate, approval from an ethics approval body (this might be your own organisation) and provide details, including the name of the body that considered your project.

If you have not sought or plan to seek ethics approval, you may choose to use and submit the UK Statistics Authority data ethics self-assessment form available on the Authority's website. Guidance on how to complete the self-assessment is provided with the form, is also published on the UK Statistics Authority website.

All information you provide will be considered as part of the accreditation process and if we require more information we will contact you. The Research Accreditation Panel will

consider the ethics information provided and may refer an application to the National Statisticians Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NSDEC) for their ethics advice.

13 Public Good

13.1. To be accredited, all full research projects must demonstrate that they will deliver clear public benefit to the UK, using the definition set out in paragraph 33.1 of the [Research Code of Practice and Accreditation Criteria](). Provide as much detail as possible about how your analysis will provide a public good, e.g. specific policies or decisions that you anticipate the research will provide an evidence base for and how the results will be publicised and disseminated.

If you are based overseas, any research must be undertaken within a UK based secure environment accredited under the Digital Economy Act.

You should provide details about how your research project will achieve a public good within the table provided. Fill provide explanations for all the public good criteria that apply.

13.2. If you have identified any risks to achieving public good, or other adverse effects, give details here together with what you have done, or will do, to reduce or eliminate the potential effects.

14 Duration of Access

You should provide an estimate of how long you are likely to require access to the data by selecting an end date from the drop-down calendar. This should be a realistic estimate to allow DEA Accredited Processors to manage secure environment capacity requirements. Please note that this is not the same date that was asked for in section 5 of this guidance as that was about the duration of the whole project, not just the period of data access.

You will be able to request an extension to the project if it later becomes clear that you do not expect to finish by this date.

Where access is granted for exploratory access you will be limited to a maximum of 12 months.

15 Location of Data Access

Subject to restrictions, such as data owner's permission, you can choose which DEA Accredited Processor you would like to use to do any linking/matching of data (data preparation), and where you would like to access the data (data provision). The processor(s) you choose must have been accredited for the function(s) you wish them to perform by the Research Accreditation Panel. Information about which processors have been accredited and for what functions can be found on the UK Statistics Authority website.

16 Publications

16.1 We are unlikely to decide that your project will deliver public good if the findings are not made public. This might be achieved by publishing research findings on a website, in press releases or in announcements about new policy decisions.

16.2/16.3 Once results have been published we expect you to provide us with details of where they can be found so that we can publicise those results on our website. This could be a sponsor's website if there is a research project sponsor.

16.4 Please provide us with your best estimate of when you expect to publish your results. We will use this date to guide us when to contact you about putting the publication information on our website.

16.5 An exemption from the requirement to publish will only be granted in exceptional circumstances (e.g. a need for confidentiality of sensitive policy development within government, e.g. national defence policy) and may not be permanent. We understand that research results can sometimes not be published until after policy decisions have been made and published. If this applies to your project, you should attempt to give an estimate of when that may be in section 16.4.

16.6 We would like to know if you would be willing to work with us to showcase your research and its impact, e.g. as a case study. The answer you give to this question will not affect whether your project is accredited. If you answer Yes, we may contact you during your research to discuss how any joint publicity might work.

Submitting your application

Once completed, please return an electronic copy of your completed form together with any additional evidence and a completed UK Statistics Authority ethics self-assessment form (if required) to ONS via the Research Support team; Research.Support@ons.gov.uk

UK Statistics Authority

Accredited Research Project Application Process

Application & Initial Assessment — Statistical Support Team

Project application submitted

ONS Research Support team

Is there a legal access to the data under the DEA?
— No → Statistical Support provide guidance
— Yes ↓

Data Owner approval and Feasibility

Does the research provide a public benefit?
— Yes → Application sent to data owner
— No → Application sent back to Research Support Team

Statistical Support provide guidance

Is the research feasibile and the data required appropriate?
— No → (Application sent back to Research Support Team)

RAP Panel

Application submitted to Research Accreditation Panel (RAP)

Is proposed use of the data ethical?
— Yes → Application submitted to Research Accreditation Panel (RAP)
— No →

Application approved by RAP?
— No → Statistical Support provide guidance
— Yes → Chosen data processor informed if applicable

Approval Outcome

Data Access Agreement sent to applicant for signature

User accounts created on return of signed Data Access Agreement

Access to data granted once project researchers are Accredited