Research Project Accreditation Application Guidance

# Background

The following legal gateways allow accredited and approved researchers to access data for research and statistical purposes. The Digital Economy Act 2017 (DEA) (Part 5, Chapter 5) includes an important statutory framework to support the UK research community, both within government and beyond, that permits public authorities to share de-identified information with accredited researchers for the purposes of public good research. The Statistics and Registration Service Act (SRSA) 2007 at s.39(4)(i) allows access to unpublished data held by the Office of National Statistics by approved researchers for the purpose of statistical research.

Both gateways 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. All projects involving access to data for research purposes using the SRSA Approved Researcher gateway and the DEA Research power will be consistently accredited using the [Research Code of Practice and Accreditation Criteria](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-economy-act-2017-part-5-codes-of-practice/research-code-of-practice-and-accreditation-criteria).

The Code also sets out the criteria for the accreditation of processors, research projects and researchers and the Authority has established the [Research Accreditation Panel](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/digitaleconomyact-research-statistics/research-accreditation-panel/#:~:text=The%20role%20of%20the%20Research%20Accreditation%20Panel%20is,RAP%20assess%20each%20project%20against%20the%20following%20criteria%3A) (RAP) to independently oversee the accreditation of each of these.

# Research project Accreditation and Process

To access secure research data in a safe setting provided by an [Accredited Processor](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/digitaleconomyact-research-statistics/better-access-to-data-for-research-information-for-processors/list-of-digital-economy-act-accredited-processing-environments/#:~:text=Digital%20Economy%20Act%20Accredited%20Processing%20Environments%20are%20accredited,and%20provision%20of%20secure%20access%20to%20de-identified%20data.), 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](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/digitaleconomyact-research-statistics/better-useofdata-for-research-information-for-researchers/list-of-accredited-researchers-and-research-projects-under-the-research-strand-of-the-digital-economy-act/) is published on the UK Statistics Authority website to ensure transparency of access to data for the purpose of research. A list of Accredited Researchers is also published.

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 accredited processing environments. Accredited processing environments 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 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](https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/committees/nsdec/)

[Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NSDEC)](https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/committees/nsdec/) for ethics advice.

* The accredited processor will then apply an accreditation framework overseen by the [Research Accreditation](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/digitaleconomyact-research-statistics/research-accreditation-panel/) [Panel (RAP)](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/digitaleconomyact-research-statistics/research-accreditation-panel/), to assess the extent of the project’s compliance with the [DEA Research Code of Practice and Accreditation Criteria](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-economy-act-2017-part-5-codes-of-practice/research-code-of-practice-and-accreditation-criteria). Where possible, clearly compliant projects are accredited by UKSA, while projects with potential risks identified are submitted to the RAP for an accreditation decision.
* Once a decision has been made on the research project application, the accredited processor will inform the applicant. If the project is approved, the accredited processor will notify the researcher of any conditions of access specified by the data owner(s), UKSA 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.

# 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’.

# 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.

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 an 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 Accredited Processor with the aim of validating or replicating previous analysis. As they will access personal information, they will need to be a 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 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.

# Researcher Team

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

It would help administration of the project within your Accredited Processor 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.

# Research Sponsor

* + 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.
		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. If applicable, please give enter the grant/award reference number. This will enable us to track the project outputs and outcomes.

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

# 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 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.

If applicable, please provide your existing local project number. This is the number the accredited processing environment has assigned to your project.

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.

# 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.

# 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 may be published on the UK Statistics Authority website as part of the public record of Accredited Projects.

# 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.

# Research Methodology

* + 1. Please select the method(s) you intend to use in your research project.

According to the [Code of Practice for Statistics,](https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-code/quality/q2-sound-methods/) methods should be based on national or international good practice, scientific principles, or established professional consensus. The list of methods is provided by the National Centre for Research Methods[[1]](#footnote-2). If the method(s) you intend to use is not included in the list provided, please provide methodological references in the text box.

For the research project to be legally accredited under the Digital Economy Act 2017 or the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, the UK Statistics Authority requires assurance that method(s) used to analyse data will lead to valid conclusions that align to the research project aims, which ensures that the research project has potential to achieve the public benefit that is specified in the application.

The Centre for Applied Data Ethics have published practical user guidance on a range of applied data ethics topics, including the application of particular research methods, which can be found via the link [here](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/what-we-do/data-ethics/centre-for-applied-data-ethics/guidance-and-support/ethics-guidance-documents/).

* + 1. For the research project to be legally accredited under the Digital Economy Act 2017 or the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, the primary purpose of a research project must be to serve the public interest.

It is not enough to solely state the public benefit of your research project; you also need to make sure that the method(s) used, and the outcomes derived, can be used to realise the public benefit. Complex statistical outputs, increased number of assumptions, or the level of granularity and geography might not properly inform the public or decision-makers.

The UK Statistics Authority is seeking assurance that the choice of the methodology is appropriate to achieve the research aims and proposed public good of the research project. Please include the following in your explanation:

* Include an explanation of how your methodological approach will answer the research aims/questions set out in the project application.
* Explain how the methods used will lead to valid conclusions and enable the public good of your research to be achieved.
	+ 1. Researchers must give assurance they have thought about the limitations of their methods, identified bias and how this might impact the research, and have put plans in place to mitigate against any risks identified.

According to the Code of Practice for Statistics, limitations include an inherent weakness in the quality of statistics, data or statistical methods that should be understood in order to ensure their appropriate use and interpretation.

Identifying and managing bias and limitations is essential in research and, to ensure its integrity, it is important that you consider:

* the data sources used and most importantly how these are produced;
* the effect of researcher or observation bias throughout the lifecycle of the project;
* the methods and algorithms employed, their assumptions and constraints; and
* the outcomes of your research and how your research is presented.

It is equally vital that you provide mitigations for any identified bias. As bias could also be identified later in the research process, it is important to stay aware of this, provide mitigations when appropriate and communicate these clearly alongside outputs.

# Data Required

* + 1. You must provide enough details about the various data you wish to access to allow them to be unambiguously identified. Please get in touch with your processing environment to get access to their data catalogue.

If your research would require data that is not currently included in the catalogue, it may still be possible for you to still access them. Please contact your accredited processing environment to discuss any such requests before submitting your application.

* + 1. If you intend to bring other data into a secure environment provided by an 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.

* + 1. 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.
		2. 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.**

# 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 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 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.

# 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 already have ethics scrutiny, please provide your processing environment with your ethics application and proof of approval, alongside your project application paperwork.

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](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-authority-board/committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees-and-panels/national-statisticians-data-ethics-advisory-committee/ethics-self-assessment-tool/). Guidance on how to complete the self-assessment is provided with the form, [is also published on the UK Statistics Authority website.](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/guidelines-on-using-the-ethics-self-assessment-process/)

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.

# Public Good

* + 1. To be accredited, all 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](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-economy-act-2017-part-5-codes-of-practice/research-code-of-practice-and-accreditation-criteria) [Criteria](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-economy-act-2017-part-5-codes-of-practice/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.

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.

* + 1. 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.

# 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 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.

# Location of Data Access

Subject to restrictions, such as data owner’s permission, you can choose which 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.

# 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 the accredited processing environment with details of where they can be found so the results can be publicised. Please select the relevant option from the list provided.

* 1. Please provide the accredited processing environment with your best estimate of when you expect to publish your results. This date will be used will use this date to guide us when to contact you about putting the publication information on our website.
	2. 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.
	3. We would like to know if you would be willing to work with the accredited processing environment 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, the accredited processing environment 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 your selected accredited processor.

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1. National Centre for Research Methods: Review of the Typology of Research Methods within the Social Sciences Report (January 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)