Research Project Accreditation Application Guidance

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# **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 The Statistics and Registration Service Act (SRSA) 2007 at s.39(4)(i) allows access to unpublished data held by the Office of National Statistics by approved researchers for the purpose of statistical research.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 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 application process is as follows:

* The Researcher works with CeLSIUS to complete their project application (including the Longitudinal Study Supplementary form and Ethics Self-Assessment form).
* CeLSIUS submits the application on behalf of the researcher.
* The application is subject to initial feasibility and public good checks by accredited processing environments. Accredited processing environments may contact CeLSIUS 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 UK Statistics Authority Ethics Self-assessment form is assessed by [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/) .
* 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, ONS will inform the applicant. If the project is approved, ONS will notify the researcher of any conditions of access specified by the data owner(s), UKSA or RAP.



# **Serving the public good**

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

* To provide an evidence base for public policy decision-making
* To provide an evidence base for public service delivery
* 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
* To replicate, validate or challenge Official Statistics
* To replicate, validate or challenge existing research
* To significantly extend understanding of social or economic trends or events by improving knowledge or challenging widely accepted analyses
* To improve the quality, coverage or presentation of existing statistical information

# **Completing the application form**

NB: to place an ‘x’ into the available check boxes, please click on the correct box and an ‘x’ should appear.

## 1) ABOUT THE PROJECT

### 1a) Application type

There are two types of project applications you can choose from.

Apply for full project if you have an agreed hypothesis and/or defined research questions. If approved, you will be able to access and remove any cleared research outputs needed for your project. You will also be expected to publish any work derived from the data and must inform the SRS Customer Support team (previously Research Support) once it is published.

Apply for exploratory analysis if you are unsure of where your research project will lead or what questions you will answer. Alternatively, it could be granted if your project centres on an underdeveloped field or has limited descriptive data available.

Note that if your exploratory analysis application is approved, you will not be able to take any findings out of the Accredited Processor safe setting or publish your research.

### 1b) Project title and duration

#### **Project title**

Your project title will be published on the ONS website as part of the UK Statistics Authority’s public record, and on the CeLSIUS website to inform potential LS users.

#### **Estimated start and end date**

The end date is an estimate of the date that you anticipate finish writing up your final, cleared research results. Try to be as accurate as possible.

### 1c) Research theme

Select the theme that most closely matches the subject of your research project. If your project theme is not included below, select ‘Other theme’ and specify it in the second box.

### 1d) Abstract

This should be a short description (max 100 words) of your research project and the public good it will provide (i.e. a summary of the purpose, methodology, public good and predicted population).

It will be published on the UK Statistics Authority website and the CeLSIUS website and will help other researchers quickly identify your project.

### 1e) Purpose

This section should provide a more detailed description of your project’s aim and objectives and whether it is part of the larger body or programme of work. You have a maximum of 500 words, for this section. The information will help ONS to assess whether your proposal will be feasible, appropriate and clearly beneficial to the public.

### 1f) Research methodology

In this section, provide full details of your research methodology. This information will be key to assessing whether your proposal will be feasible, deliver clear public good and be an appropriate use of data.

The level of detail 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.

1. ***Please select the method(s) you intend to use in the 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-1). 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 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. ***Explain how the methods selected will lead to valid conclusions and the extent to which this method will realise the public benefit of the project (500 words max).***

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. ***Potential biases or limitations within the methodology (500 words max)***

Researchers must give assurance that they have thought about the limitation of the 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.
* the outcomes of your research and how your research is presented.

You should also 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.

*NB: Previous Longitudinal Study users should mention here if they intend to use syntax files from their previous project and provide a justification for this use. The requested file/s will then be transferred from the previous project area on the SRS platform, to the new project area.*

### 1g) Research sponsor

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.

If you answer ‘yes’ to this question, then you need to give the details of the organisation (i.e. name and address), and your contact there (i.e. name, phone number and email). 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.

## 2) PROJECT TEAM

Add all the accredited researchers and peer reviewers who will be working on the project with you (don’t forget to include yourself).

The first and last name and organisation of all accredited researchers named on the project will be published in a public record of accredited researchers on the UK Statistics Authority website.

### *What are the different project roles?*

Choose **Accredited Researcher** if you have permission to access, analyse and interrogate unpublished data in a safe researcher setting, provided by a Digital Economy Act (DEA) Accredited Processor. If you are not an accredited researcher and need to be one, you will need to apply to be one via the [Research Accreditation Service](https://researchaccreditationservice.ons.gov.uk/ons/ONS_registration.ofml).

**Peer Reviewers** may perform two different roles on a project. Either having access to secure data to validate or replicate research findings, or only having access to cleared outputs:

* Choose **Peer Reviewer - Access to secure data** for a reviewer who will access secure data to validate or replicate previous research. They will access secure data in a safe setting provided by a DEA Accredited Processor to do these tasks. It is necessary to be an Accredited Researcher to perform this role.
* Choose **Peer Reviewer - View cleared outputs only** for a reviewer who will view cleared research outputs only. They will have no access to the secure data in a safe setting provided by an Accredited DEA Processor. It is not necessary to be an Accredited Researcher to perform this role.

If you or a member of your project team is not already an ONS Accredited Researcher, it is possible to apply for researcher accreditation at the same time as, or before, your application for research project accreditation. If you are applying for accreditation for yourself and the project together, please give your full contact details here and complete and apply to be an accredited researcher through the Research Accreditation Service.

Your project application and researcher accreditation application will be considered in parallel, but the Lead Researcher must be accredited at the time that the project application is reviewed by the RAP. Access to the project data however, can only be granted once both applications (i.e. researcher accreditation and project accreditation) have been approved.

You should use section 2c) Additional team members to list the names and details of the other members of the research team. If there is more than one additional team member just add more tables as required.

## 3) DATA REQUIREMENTS

### 3a) Data Required

This will be the ONS Longitudinal Study.

NB: If you want access to other datasets that are available through the SRS (e.g. Understanding Society (UKHLS)) you will need to submit a separate Research Project Accreditation application for those datasets.

### 3b) External data

If you intend to bring in any data for your project, which you will link to the ONS Longitudinal Study, you will need to:

* Describe the data and its source
* Name the owner
* Provide evidence (e.g. an email or Data Access Agreement) that you have permission from the data owner to use their data for this research. You will also need to provide information on any conditions of use have been imposed on you

Please send us this evidence as we will need to submit it with your application.

### 3c) Use of unpublished data

Access to unpublished data is only permitted for research which cannot be completed using aggregate or published data.

In a maximum of 500 words, please name the other data sources you have considered and explain why these would not be sufficient for your project.

### 3d) Data linking source

Data linking is the process of trying to establish if two records from two different databases relate to the same entity (e.g. person, geographic area). The pairs of records that you think are matches are called links. If the pair truthfully relate to the same entity, the pair are a match.

If you do intend to link to other data sources you need to provide the following:

* 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
* A justification for the linking

This will help ONS to understand the confidentiality risks involved.

### 3e) Access to data sources

For the purposes of this application the Accredited Processor service will be the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service.

### 3f) Data access duration: End of data access

Provide a realistic estimate of the last time that you will need access to your data in the safe setting.

NB**:** This is not the same date as that specified in section 1 because that was about the duration of the whole project, not just the period of data access. The date therefore needs to be before the End of project date that you gave in 1b).

You will be able to request an extension at a later date if needed, but the extension request will be subject to approval by the RAP.

### 3g) Software required

Select all software that you would like to 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, ONS 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 tests the software in the processing environment.

## 4) 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 gaining, 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 should use the form and guidance available from the UK Statistics Authority (please ask a CeLSIUS USO for a copy of form. The form will have some fields pre-filled, please complete the remaining fields and do not change the content of the any of the pre-filled cells. Please ensure that the information that you provide in the Self-assessment form corresponds with the information given in your project application form.

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.

## 5) PUBLIC BENEFITS

### 5a) Public benefits

To be accredited, all full research projects must demonstrate that they will deliver clear public benefit to the UK. Your project should deliver one or more of the public benefits in the table provided. Provide as much detail as possible about how your research will provide each of public goods that the project will deliver, 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.

### 5b) Risks to public benefits

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

## 6) PUBLICATIONS

ONS is 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.

You will need to:

* Describe how you will make your research available to the public e.g. publishing in a journal, on a website, in a press release (section 6b)
* Name the specific journals, websites or report you intend to use to publicise the research (section 6c)
* Provide your best estimate of when you expect to publish your results (ONS will use this data to decidewhen to contact you about putting the publication information on its website (section 6d)

If you are not willing to publish your findings you will need to specify this and complete section 6e.

* Projects that will not publish their findings will only be approved if there are exceptional circumstances, e.g. a need for confidentiality of sensitive policy development within government
* Exemptions may not be permanent e.g. if research results cannot 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 6e)

Section 6f) enables you to say if you would be willing to work with ONS 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’, ONS may contact you during your research to discuss how any joint publicity might work.

**Submitting your application**

Once you have completed the research accreditation application form you should send it along with the ONS Longitudinal Study Supplementary Form and the UK Statistics Authority Data Ethics self-assessment form (if needed) to: celsius@ucl.ac.uk.

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