UK Data Service

1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024

From strength to strength: Data, impact and future

Annual Report

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Overview

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Welcome to the UK Data Service Annual Report for 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

This is my first annual report since joining the UK Data Service as Director in August 2024. I'm proud to be able to share this report with you, showcasing the valuable work of the UK Data Service over the last year as we have supported researchers across the UK and worldwide.

One of our biggest achievements in 2023-2024 has been the significant reductions in the time it takes to enable access to the more sensitive data we hold. With user experience at the forefront of our thinking, we have redesigned application interfaces and back office operations to get data to users faster.

As part of our wider mission to holistically support researchers, we have delivered thousands of hours of training and direct user support.

The quality of our approach has been reflected in the enthusiastic response by the international research and data infrastructure community to the publication of our Data Skills Framework to guide the future development of skills and methods training approaches for the social sciences.

I'm particularly delighted that our outgoing Director, Professor Matthew Woollard, has been recognised with an OBE for his long contribution to the social science data landscape in the UK and internationally.

During 2024 and beyond we will continue to adopt new technological solutions, collaborate internationally, and pursue innovation to enhance our ability to facilitate impactful research for the public good.

STEVE McEACHERN
Director, UK Data Service

Introduction

At the UK Data Service, we are proud to be the principal repository for economic, population, and social research data in the UK. As custodians of the largest trusted digital archive of its kind, we uphold a nearly 60-year legacy of investment by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in building and maintaining the nation's research data infrastructure.

Our curated collection includes nearly 10,000 nationally and internationally significant datasets, contributed by trusted providers such as government departments, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the ESRC, and a range of funders and data owners.

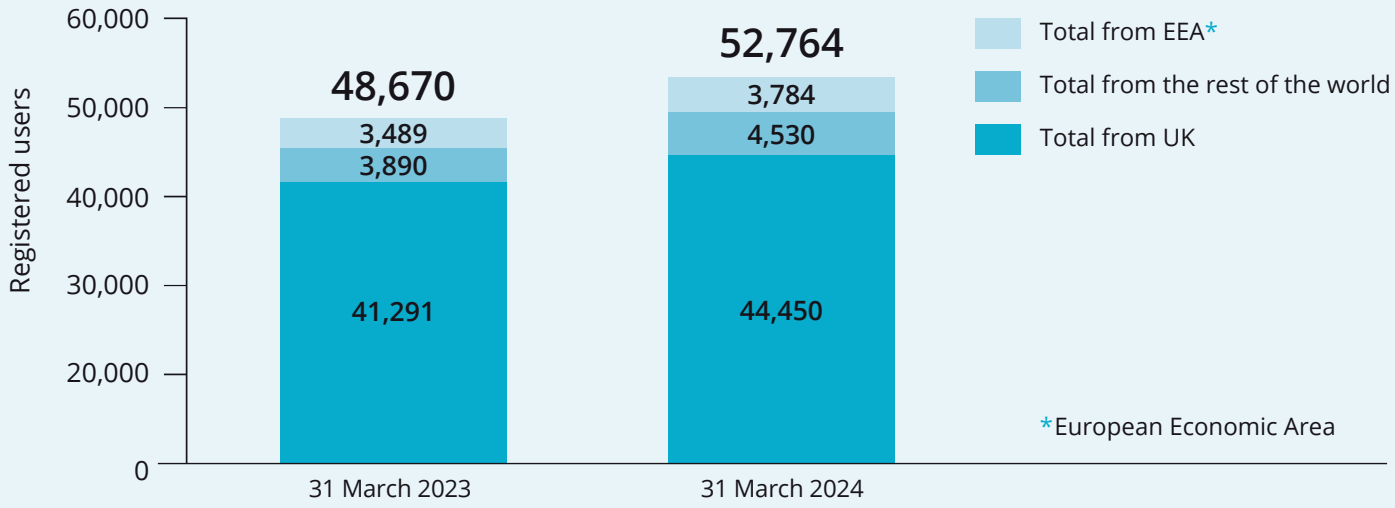
From the Census and Understanding Society to UK Cohort Studies and the Labour Force and Family Resources Surveys, our data underpins critical research that informs policy and decision-making across sectors.

As pioneers in data curation, long-term access management, and data literacy, our expertise continues to transform social science research, teaching, and learning. Each year, we provide researchers across academia, government, and policy organisations with the high-quality data and training they need to generate impactful insights. Through our active collaborations with data providers and ongoing commitment to capacity building, we ensure that research using our data contributes to real world change.

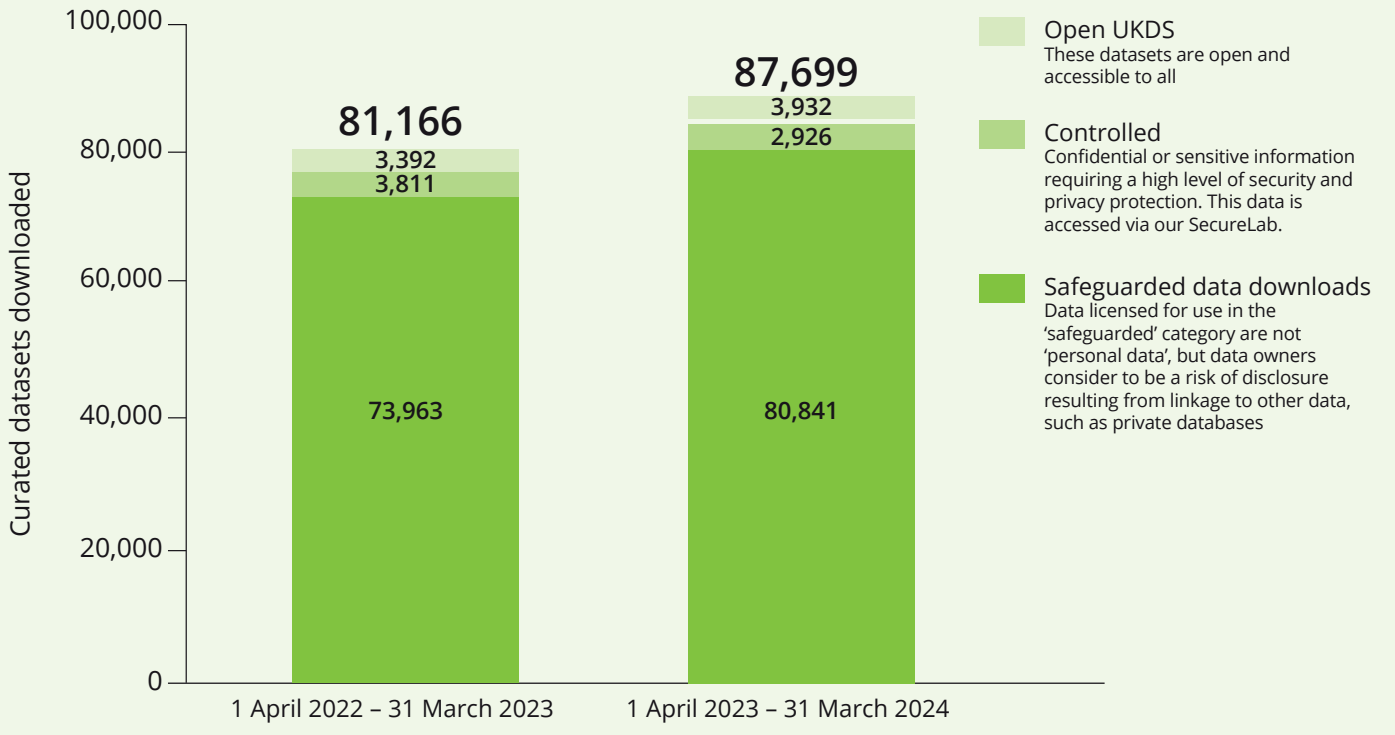
UK Data Service usage statistics

Our key statistics show a continuing increase in the overall number of users and an increase in downloads of our curated datasets.

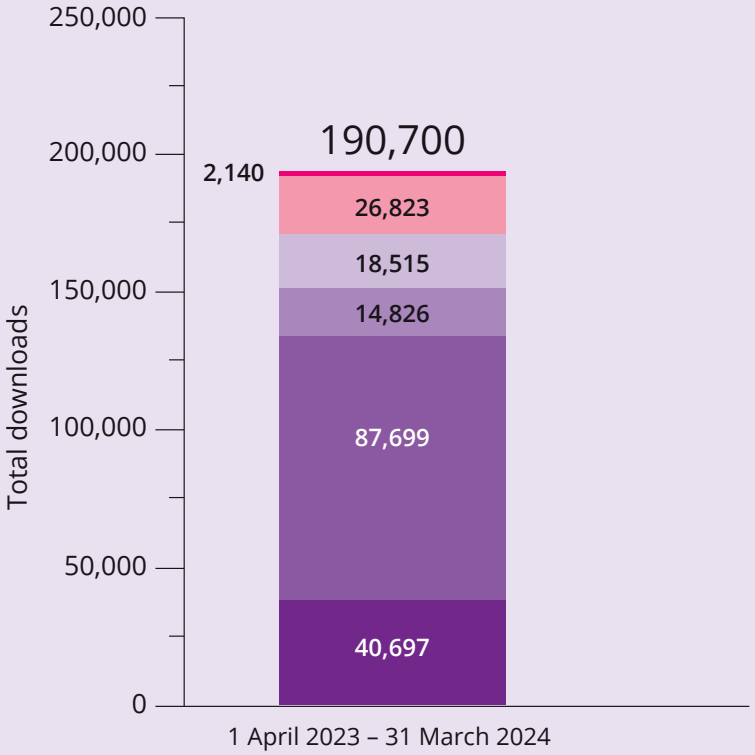
Location of registered users



Curated dataset downloads by access type



Downloads access type



I-CeM
The Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) is a collection of individual-level census data for Great Britain covering the period 1851 to 1911 – some 185 million person records in total

ReShare
These datasets consist of individual new researcher deposits

Nesstar
The Nesstar data library enables the widest data use without specialist software

International

Curated datasets
(safeguarded, controlled, open)

Census

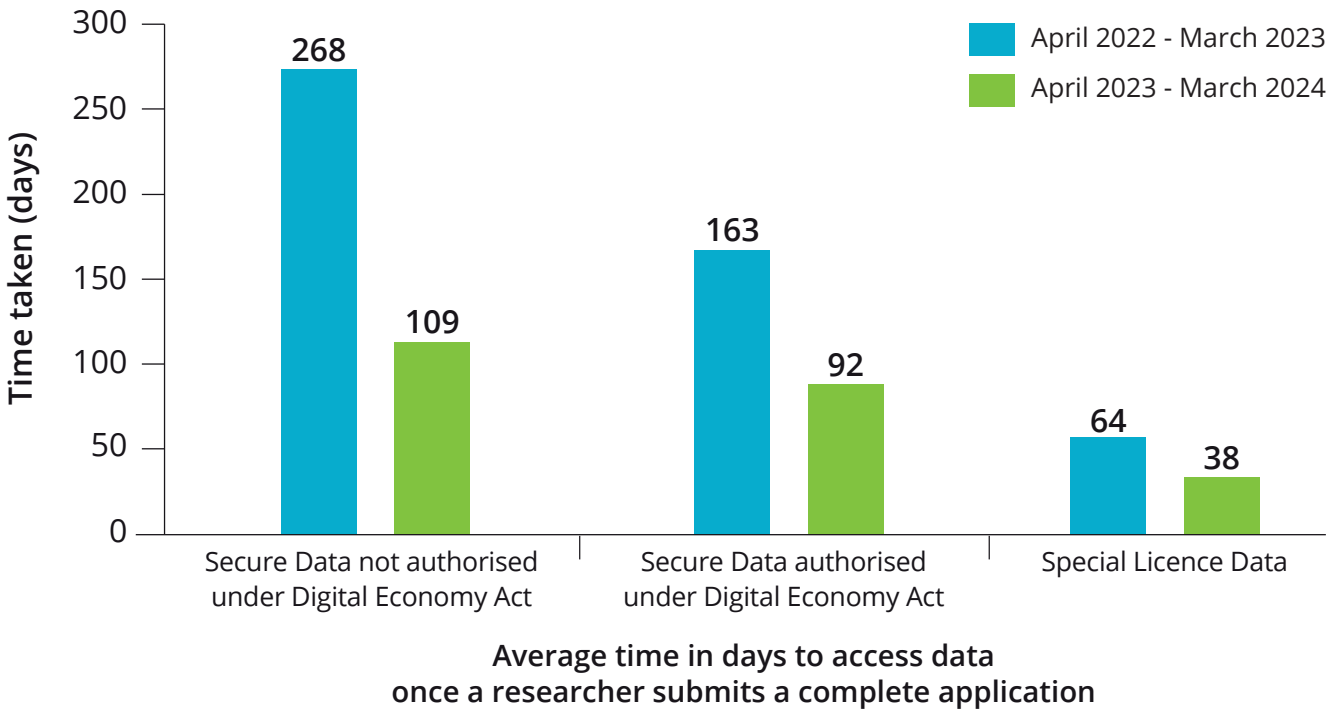
Accessing our data

2

During the last year we have focused intently on understanding our service performance. We have actively sought feedback from users to drive and target improvements.

The Access team has implemented a process improvement programme, incorporating feedback from users and depositors. This has reduced waiting time for researchers, streamlining workflows and eliminating duplications.

Application processing times



Average time in days to access data once a researcher submits a complete application

"We have significantly reduced our application turnaround times, by reviewing and improving the efficiency of our processes. Our team is passionate about providing our users with quick access to the trustworthy, high-quality data we hold."

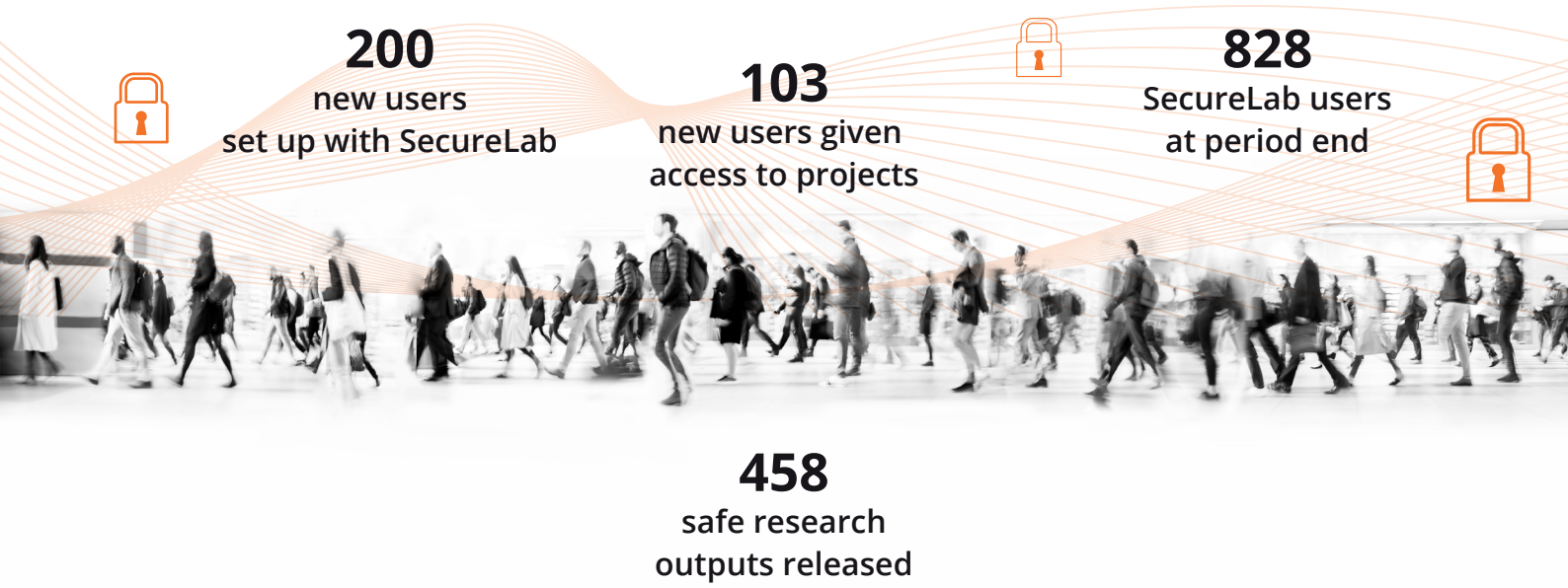
LEIGH TATE
Data Access Services Manager

Improved Special Licence application process

Special Licence data collections are anonymised but contain more detailed information than our End User Licence (EUL) data, for example, some Special Licence datasets contain lower level geographies than their EUL counterparts. All requests for Special Licence data require the completion of a set of forms so that users can provide further details about the intended use of the data. In May 2023, we introduced an enhanced Special Licence application process, which simplifies the forms for researchers, making it easier to submit high-quality applications. As a result, we have achieved a significant reduction in the time required to access data – an important milestone. Given the high demand for these collections, we remain committed to ensuring an efficient access process that meets the needs of data owners.

SecureLab

The UK Data Service SecureLab provides controlled access to data that are too detailed or sensitive to be made available under the standard End User Licence or Special Licence. This year, 121 SecureLab projects met project accreditation standards under the Digital Economy Act. Our expert staff apply statistical control techniques to ensure the delivery of safe statistical results. In order to simplify, and reduce the time it takes for researchers to access SecureLab we rolled out multifactor authentication.



200
new users
set up with SecureLab

103
new users given
access to projects

828
SecureLab users
at period end

458
safe research
outputs released

Census

3

Between April 2023 and March 2024, the Office for National Statistics and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency released a significant amount of outputs from the 2021 England, Wales and Northern Ireland Censuses.

These releases included more complex tables of aggregate data (including at different geographical levels and alternative population bases), migration data, flow data and microdata samples.

We also developed **training resources** to help researchers use microdata from the 2021 Census.

Census data

There are three main categories of census data available through the UK Data Service: aggregate data, microdata and flow data, and boundary data. Aggregate data releases have been made available through a UK Data Service CKAN instance. Census data was downloaded from the Service 35,997 times. Flow data is available through our Web Interface to Census Interaction Data (WICID) system.

We have made all currently released digital boundary data available as part of the UK Data Service through EDINA at the University of Edinburgh. Boundary data is originally published separately for England and Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. We have harmonised UK-wide versions of these data releases and published a variety of lookup tables to help researchers convert data across different areas. This is just one example of how the data processing used by the UK Data Service can add value to the underlying data we make available.

International macrodata

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International data is available from several organisations, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the United Nations.

From April 2023 to March 2024, users downloaded international data from our platform nearly 29,000 times. In June 2024, the UK Data Service will be launching Data Explorer, a brand new, easy-to-use platform for accessing international data.

International data downloaded nearly **29,000** times

Training and User Support

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The UK Data Service continues to foster data literacy and capacity for research data sharing, use and reuse through our extensive programme of training events and resources.

During the year we have developed our services in collaboration with our partners in data skills training. These include the ONS, National Centre for Social Research, government departments, Doctoral Training Partnerships, CLOSER, Understanding Society, and other members of the ESRC Data Resources Training Network. There is significant demand in the UK and internationally for data skills training and expertise and we have enabled many thousands of people to improve their data skills in finding, accessing, evaluating and using our extensive data archive for impactful analysis.

To find out more about the topics we cover go to **Learning Hub — UK Data Service** and **Training and events — UK Data Service**

In this year:

104
training events

5,204
attendees at training events

56,175
visits to Learning Hub

79,291
online YouTube training visitors

Learning Hub

Our Learning Hub and YouTube channels host our extensive collection of online learning materials, including video tutorials, guides, interactive modules and event recordings. We had 56,175 visits this year to the Learning Hub and our YouTube videos had 79,291 views. In the coming year we will improve our metrics to gain a better understanding of how our online learning materials are used and how our resources can be enhanced to meet the demands of users.

Our events are highly regarded by participants, with feedback showing that 97% of respondents would recommend the event to others, 97% find it useful for their work or studies, and 99% find the content engaging.

User conferences

This year, we delivered three user conferences focused on health studies, crime surveys, and family finance surveys. These annual events are high-impact, strategically important activities that serve as vital forums for knowledge exchange and for fostering connections between data producers, data users, and the UK Data Service.

We have been delighted to return to a combination of remote and in-person user conferences this year, with added hybrid elements including post-conference access to keynote addresses and presentations from data producers via our YouTube channel.

3
conferences:
Health
Family Finance
Crime

320
live attendees

731
views of conference recordings

Impact

6

We are proud that the data and resources provided by the UK Data Service underpin research that makes a demonstrable contribution to improving public services, health, the environment, and the quality of life across the UK.

Our Impact team works across multiple different strands to highlight and promote this impact, supporting the impact of those using UK Data Service data as well as the impact of the UK Data Service as data infrastructure.

How we evidence and promote impact

The Impact team work with researchers in academia, think tanks and charities to evidence the impact of their work in case studies. We have published **over 200 case studies**, showcasing the impact of data-enhanced research in a range of fields.

Our **Data Impact blog** is the place to visit for thought leadership in data impact and data policy theory. Working with a range of partners, both internal and external, we publish regular content covering the latest research using data from the UK Data Service, insights about data analysis, and updates from the wider data landscape.

The health case for basic income

A basic income scheme is a system of regular, secure, predictable payments to all individuals in society. Matthew Johnson and Elliott Johnson from the Health Case for Basic Income Research group used several datasets in the UK Data Service's collection to focus on potential health benefits for people who would receive money through a basic income scheme.

Their research suggests a basic income scheme could help people's health in many ways, including:

- Addressing poverty and thereby increasing people's ability to satisfy their basic needs, such as affording better food and housing.
- Reducing income inequality, giving people the option to leave abusive and damaging environments. This would reduce stress and related illnesses.
- Providing a predictable and secure future, which would increase people's awareness of their lifespan and make it worthwhile for them to invest in healthy behaviours.

Overall, the researchers found that income, financial security and perception of inequality are key drivers of health outcomes. Their work suggests a basic income scheme would be affordable, popular and impactful as a preventive and responsive public health strategy.

This work has had a significant impact on policymakers. The micropilot was discussed in the **House of Commons** and has been endorsed by the Mayor of London and the Mayor of Greater Manchester:

> "Universal Basic Income would reduce poverty to almost unheard-of levels, address the inequality both between and within regions that harms people's wellbeing, and provide a foundation for our young people to secure good lives that support good mental health."
>
> **ANDY BURNHAM**
> **Mayor of Greater Manchester**

The researchers worked with us to create a **case study** on the impact of their research. The datasets used in the research were the **Family Resources Survey, Millennium Cohort Study**, **Next Steps** and **Understanding Society.**

Many community organisations, NGOs, charities, health professionals and members of the general public have also responded positively to the micropilot:

> "Put simply, financial precarity is making people sick, something I see increasingly in my clinical work. The detailed modelling in this report suggests that basic income could significantly reduce this precarity, with consequent positive effects on health and wellbeing."
>
> **DR JONATHAN COATES**
> **GP in Newcastle upon Tyne and NIHR In-Practice Fellow, Durham University**

From the Data Impact blog

Naomi Miall, one of our Data Impact Fellows, described her research looking at child mental health in the wake of Covid-19. The data underlying her research identified a decline in mental health from 2011-2021, exacerbated by the pandemic. The study used data from the Understanding Society survey to analyse trends and highlights the need for investment in mental health services and improved living conditions for children.

Tej Nathwani introduced a new area-based measure of deprivation created by official statistics producer, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Unlike previous indices, this new measure uses census data to provide a UK-wide perspective, considering variables like education and occupation to better capture deprivation, especially in rural areas. The measure aims to support researchers and policymakers by offering more precise data to address social and economic inequalities.

Rhiannon Williams, another of our Data Impact Fellows, discussed how she seeks to build practical policy into data analysis in her work to better capture the effects of policies such as Universal Credit on housing. Rhiannon's research uses data from Understanding Society to compare experiences of Universal Credit claimants with those on legacy benefits.

Becca Lacey (St George's, University of London) explored how mental and physical health change around becoming an unpaid carer in the UK. The blog post discussed the importance of early identification of carers and the importance of remembering young adults as carers when drawing up policy.

Beate Lichtwardt (UK Data Service) and **Deborah Wiltshire** (GESIS-Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences) discussed a collaboration between our organisations to make remote access to secure data easier for international researchers. This project exemplifies how international cooperation can streamline secure data sharing, supporting broader and more efficient research efforts.

Developing data impact

Research doesn't happen in a vacuum. People build on the work of others while others build on theirs. The strands of impact become more complex as they interweave over time. For this reason, our Impact team have been developing an enhanced approach to evidencing and promoting impact, exploring bigger interconnected stories of impact using themes. The first three themes have been:

- Poverty in data
- Housing and homelessness in data (now part of the poverty theme)
- Mental health and wellbeing in data

Within each of our impact themes, we have looked both forward and backward. Backward as we pulled together a breadth of resources relating to these themes from our Data Impact blog and impact case studies to produce a broader impact narrative. Forward, as we planned and implemented how to focus on key research, researchers and organisations working in these fields.

These themes now underpin our impact work, including our Data Impact Fellows and impact events. We intend to further expand this theme-based approach over the coming years.

Data Impact Fellows

In April 2023, we welcomed our fourth intake of Data Impact Fellows. The scheme offers a bursary to fund impact-related activities and an opportunity to meet other Fellows to share and develop their ideas for pursuing pathways to impact.

For the first time, our Data Impact Fellows cohort was linked to our recently developed Impact Themes, specifically "Poverty in data" and "Housing and homelessness in data". The aim was to further develop our work in these spaces and, with the Fellows working in similar areas, to allow them to engage and connect with each other in even more meaningful ways.

2023 Data Impact Fellows

Daniel Muir joined the scheme as Research Economist (Fellow) at the Institute for Employment Studies (IES). Dan has since joined the Youth Futures Foundation as a Senior Economist. Dan's main research interests include unemployment and welfare, low pay, and skill demand and utilisation.

Naomi Miall is an affiliate researcher at the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit at the University of Glasgow. Naomi's research explores inequalities in child and maternal health using several datasets in the UK Data Service collection, including Understanding Society and the birth cohorts. Naomi now works for Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, on a programme to improve global access to HPV vaccination for adolescent girls.

Natasha Chilman was in the final year of her PhD in the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience at King's College London at the start of the scheme. Natasha is now working as a Research Associate at King's College London, where they are using large-scale linked health record data to investigate inequalities in mortality for people with severe mental illnesses.

Niels Blom was a Research Fellow at the Violence and Society Centre at City, University of London when the scheme began. Niels investigates violence and abuse and its relationship with labour market transitions, health and wellbeing. He has recently started a new role as Lecturer in Social Statistics and Criminology at the University of Manchester.

Niloofar Shoari is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Child Health, University College London, where they work on the Kids' Environment and Health Cohort. Niloofar's research focuses on understanding the impact of the built environment on the mental health of children and young people.

Rhiannon Williams – At the start of the scheme, Rhianon was doing a PhD at the University of Sheffield as part of Data Analytics and Society CDT. Their research explored housing insecurity in the UK in relation to changes in welfare policy, with a particular focus on the association between Universal Credit and housing. Rhiannon is now applying her data analysis and impact experience as an Evaluation Analyst in the NHS.

Tasos Papastylianou is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Health and Wellbeing at the University of Essex. Tasos has a background as a medical doctor, biomedical engineer and computer scientist, with expertise in biosignal and health-related data analysis. Their research is in the area of Health Informatics – the application of machine learning and artificial intelligence methods to problems in clinical medicine and public health.

Collections development and research data management

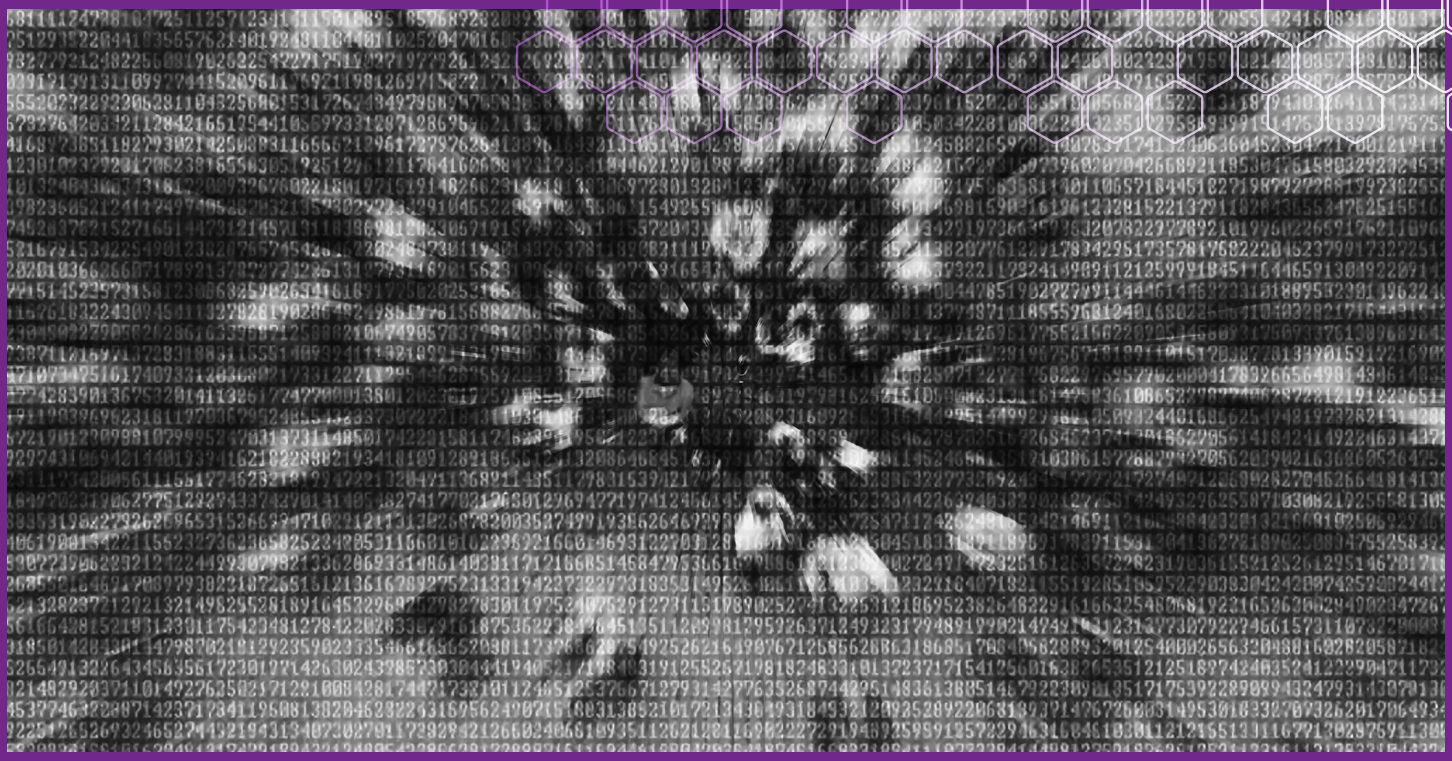
7

Collections development and research data management training and support at the UK Data Service remain at the forefront of a rapidly evolving data landscape. In this context, we continue to enhance our policies and training portfolio to meet emerging opportunities and challenges.

We collaborated closely with the independent reviewers of the ESRC Research Data Policy, who acknowledged our contributions with a strong endorsement.

We have also provided consultancy on the development of Medical Research Council's (MRC) data policy to ensure data creators and producers are supported through the data lifecycle. Our contributions are reflected in the **MRC's official guidance**, highlighting our role in shaping national data sharing practices.

In September 2023, we embarked on an 18 month **Skills Development for Managing Longitudinal Population Data for Sharing** a cross Service project, funded by the ESRC and MRC as an initial Population Research UK (PRUK) investment. This initiative aims to further advance data sharing practices within the longitudinal studies community by equipping data creators and producers with the skills needed for effective and responsible data sharing.



New acquisitions

493
new collections

Through strategic negotiations and acquisitions we have expanded our collection significantly over the last 12 months, including data from the EVENS – Evidence for Equality National Survey, COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study, Cancer Research UK Cancer Awareness Measures, HMIP Prisoner Survey, and became the exclusive provider of NHS England population health surveys e.g. Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS), Health Survey for England (HSE) and Mental Health of Children and Young People.

Additionally, we successfully made 273 collections available through the ReShare repository this year. This enabled not only compliance with the ESRC Research Data Policy, which requires ESRC-funded researchers to make their data available for reuse but also enhanced access to valuable research data and supported the principles of open and ethical data sharing. Our rigorous ethical and legal review processes, combined with tailored training and ongoing support for researchers, have established us as a trustworthy and responsible repository within the social sciences. As a result, ReShare continues to attract collections from a diverse range of research projects, including those funded by ESRC and other major data funders such as MRC, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), the European Commission, Leverhulme Trust, and others.

European Language Social Science Thesaurus

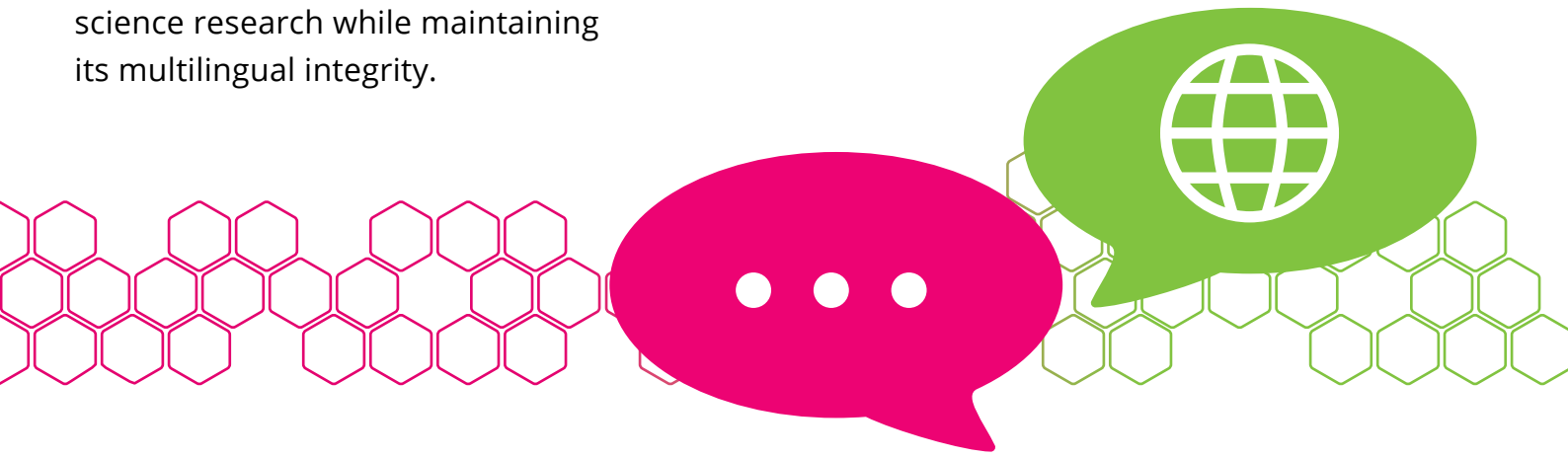
The UK Data Service proudly serves as the Service Owner for the European Language Social Science Thesaurus (ELSST), on behalf of CESSDA. Currently available in 15 languages, ELSST is a comprehensive multilingual thesaurus tailored for the social sciences, utilising a structured vocabulary of concepts to facilitate data discovery across Europe.

This innovative resource ensures that social science data is accessible to researchers, regardless of language or domain. As Service Owner, we are tasked with hosting the thesaurus management system, delivering updated content to the CESSDA web platform, and promoting ELSST as a vital vocabulary tool on a global scale. Our dedicated team collaborates closely with translators from CESSDA Service Provider organisations, holding regular meetings to discuss, refine, and enhance ELSST content.

This ongoing collaboration ensures that the thesaurus remains relevant and reflects the evolving landscape of international social science research while maintaining its multilingual integrity.

During this reporting period, we concentrated on enhancing the diversity and inclusivity of ELSST concepts, aligning them with contemporary social science research and societal trends. We released an Inclusivity Statement to articulate our commitment and also presented at the International Association for Social Science Information Service and Technology (IASSIST) conference in May 2023.

The Service Ownership of ELSST bolsters the international reputation of the UK Data Service as a key leader and collaborator in ontological development and interoperability for multilingual metadata tools. ELSST is seamlessly linked to both the UK Data Service catalogue and the CESSDA Data Catalogue (CDC), and our continuous efforts to ensure its currency - both in content and technology - empower researchers to discover relevant data resources across Europe and beyond more effectively.



Data Curation and Metadata Discovery

8

The Data Curation and Metadata Discovery teams have played a key role in delivering the UK Data Service over the last year, curating and releasing over 400 new and updated studies.

In addition, our research, development and networking activities ensure that we remain agile and adaptable to shape and guide curation and to take on board new technologies and tools in a changing data landscape.

Data Curation Network

We have joined the US-based **Data Curation Network** (DCN) as an affiliate member. This will enable us to build collaborations and highlight international best practice in curation. Over the coming years, we will add open-source UK Data Service tools to the available DCN resources and use those developed by fellow archives and repositories to strengthen data and metadata curation for the future.

User experience

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We continue to be highly responsive to feedback and user experience. We engage in continuous dialogue across many platforms leading to ongoing modification and extension of our Training and User Support offer.

We have separately launched a monthly SecureLab **drop-in session** to give SecureLab users an opportunity to raise issues and receive individual support.

Between August and October 2023, we conducted a **survey of UK Data Service SecureLab** users to understand their current experiences and needs. This helped us to identify several potential improvements to the service.

We have also conducted a thematic analysis of interviews with students who attended our wider online events programme. The results show that UK Data Service training events support the development of data skills in students, providing them with practical applied data skills, as well as critical skills to plan/design their research and assess data sources. Other benefits include increasing the confidence of students to get started with data, identifying further learning opportunities and providing access to research communities.

We found that the participating students lacked clarity in terms of the skills that they needed to use data, and this has fed into future plans for our training programme.

Improving SecureLab user experience

The UK Data Service User Support team shared a UKDS SecureLab user experience survey with all SecureLab researchers from August-October 2023. The aim of this survey was to better understand the types of analyses and analytical tools SecureLab researchers used in their research, and to identify aspects of the SecureLab service for which improvements could be made.

From the 100 responses received, the User Support team determined that the most used statistical software programs were StataMP, R, and Python. Respondents also identified the associated software packages they most used for each of those programs. The most frequently reported analysis methods were regression models, descriptive statistics, econometrics, and longitudinal data analysis.

In addition to these researcher behaviours, the survey responses also identified areas where researchers thought the SecureLab could improve.

We gathered valuable feedback on software improvements and have taken steps to enhance performance, compatibility, and accessibility for researchers.

These reports have aided the User Support team in providing more targeted support to meet the needs of the UKDS SecureLab users. In response to the feedback the User Support team received, we have implemented the following: a new catalogue of reference materials available to all UKDS SecureLab users within the secure environment; new local repositories for R and Python packages, as well as a potential solution to support Stata ADO packages; a more streamlined Import Request form; and, begun collaborations with the UK Data Service IT team to determine how to increase SecureLab performance.

New projects

The Training and User Support Directorate delivered two new projects this year. We developed and published a Data Skills Framework for contemporary skills development in data management and curation, data discovery and access, and data handling and secondary data analysis in the social sciences, also detailing how these initiatives integrate into the broader training ecosystem.

This has generated a great deal of interest and impact with 3,000 views and 2,000 downloads since publication, and outstanding feedback from many stakeholders in the data skills training community and international statistics community. We are in dialogue with a number of non-academic organisations about their use of the Framework in Continuing Professional Development for their staff or members.

Drawing on two recent ESRC reviews (Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences, 2021; Scoping the Skills Needs in the Social Sciences to Support Data-Driven Research, 2022), and building on our existing alliances with universities, we launched a collaboration with three ESRC Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs), which has been developed and piloted during the 2023-2024 academic year. This has involved close, iterative collaboration with universities and students to deliver online modules that can be integrated into different DTPs according to their programmes and needs. Evaluation and development of the model will be undertaken next year.

Looking ahead

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The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has sealed its commitment to the collection of and provision of access to social science data, by awarding the UK Data Service £37.5 million, funding its work for the next six years.

The UK Data Service continues to underpin the research and innovation ecosystem, enabling evidence-led research with data and computation.

> "The UK Data Service is an international leader in the technical development of digital standards, data curation, research data management, data skills training and impact. It is a vital part of the UK's research infrastructure, and supports users from 146 countries."

STIAN WESTLAKE
ESRC Executive Chair

Host organisations and expertise

11

UK Data Archive – University of Essex: Lead partner of the UK Data Service. The UK Data Archive is curator of the largest collection of digital social science data in the United Kingdom. Founded in 1967, the Archive is an acknowledged centre of expertise in the areas of acquiring, curating, preserving and providing access to data. In 2010 it became the first academic department in a UK university to earn ISO27001 certification, an international standard of information security. In 2020 it was accredited to continue providing controlled access to secure research data under the Digital Economy Act 2017, and gained international certification from CoreTrustSeal as a trusted digital repository.

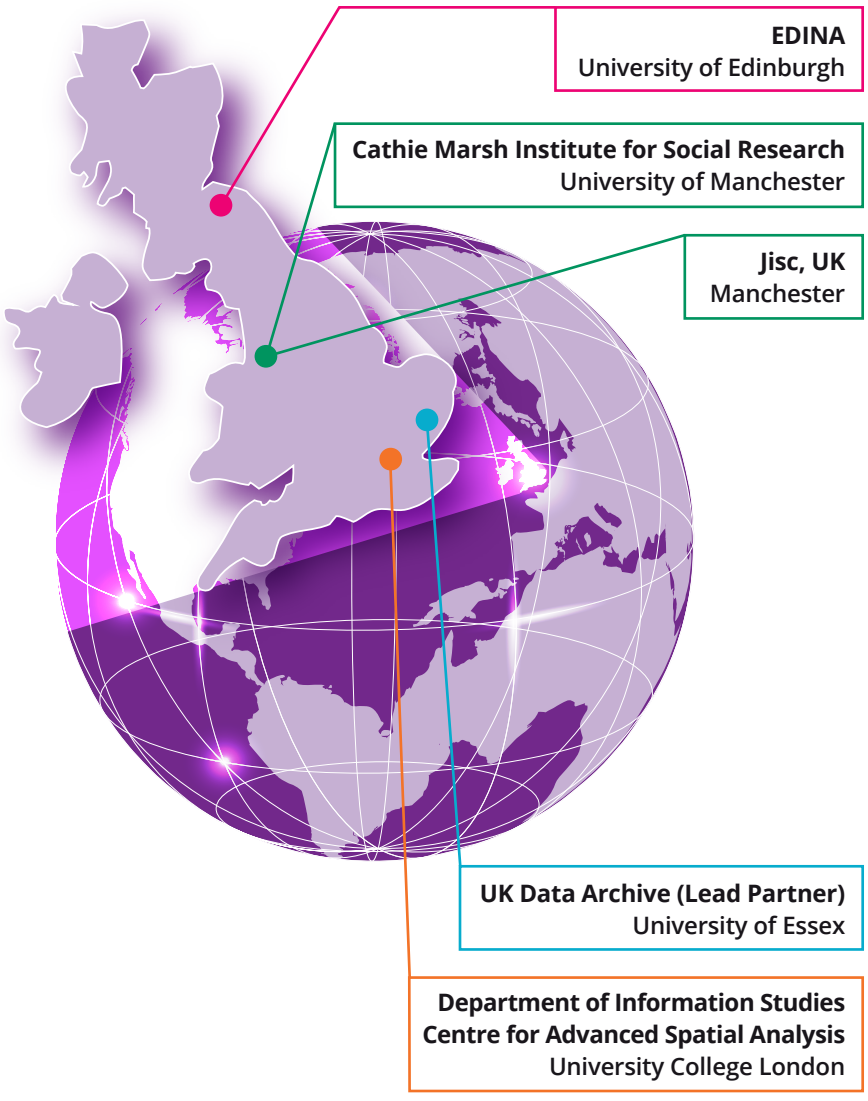
Cathie Marsh Institute for Social Research - University of Manchester: The Cathie Marsh Institute for Social Research (CMI) is a centre of research excellence, specialising in the application of advanced quantitative methods in an interdisciplinary social science context. CMI is named after Cathie Marsh who founded the Census Microdata Unit in 1993.

Jisc: Jisc is a registered charity and champions the use of digital technologies in UK education and research. UK Data Service staff at Jisc provide access to aggregate statistics from the 1971 to 2021-2022 UK censuses, as well as international data from intergovernmental organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and OECD. The UK Data Service Impact team is also based at Jisc.

Department of Information Studies - University College London: The UCL Department of Information Studies is an international centre for knowledge creation and transfer in the fields of librarianship, archives and records management, publishing, information science and digital humanities. The department brings together academics and practitioners in these fields, with research aiming to develop the understanding and insights needed to shape the emerging information environment, while elucidating and building on the historical developments that have created this environment.

Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis - University College London: The UCL Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA) is one of the leading forces in the science of cities, generating new knowledge and insights for use in city planning, policy and design, and drawing on the latest geospatial methods and ideas in computer-based visualisation and modelling. CASA is part of The Bartlett, UCL's global faculty of the built environment.

EDINA - University of Edinburgh: EDINA is a national academic data centre operating since 1995. It is designed by Jisc to support the activities of universities, colleges and research institutes across the UK. Its mission is to develop and deliver cost effective shared services and infrastructure for research and education, founded on innovation, research and evidence-based knowledge. EDINA also continues to act as the ESRC specialist geography unit for the census, supporting UK Data Service users in accessing and using the geography outputs of the 2021-2022 and previous censuses.



UK Data Service

Economic and Social Research Council

help@ukdataservice.ac.uk

+44 (0) 1206 872143

We are supported by the University of Essex, University of Manchester, Jisc, UCL and University of Edinburgh. We are funded by UKRI through the Economic and Social Research Council.

UK Data Archive
University of Essex
Wivenhoe Park
Colchester
Essex
CO4 3SQ

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