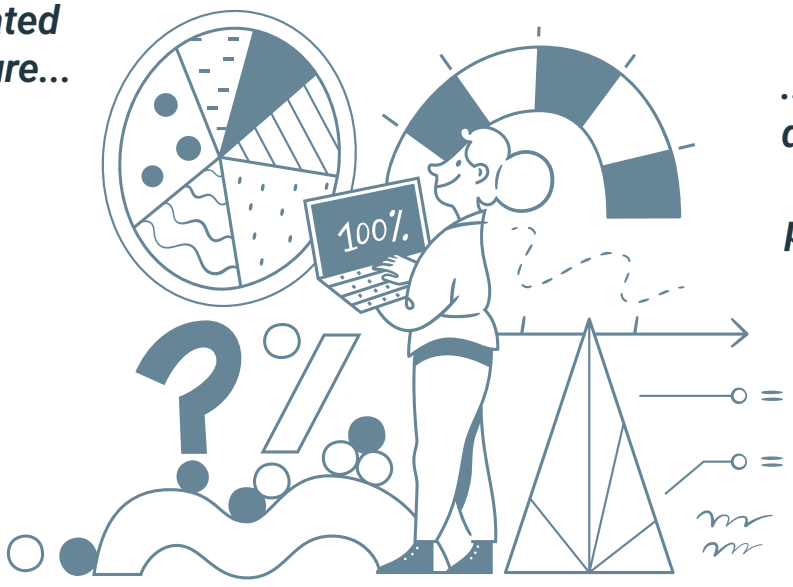
Making data work harder for Scotland

Our cross-party statement for the 2026 Holyrood election

Research Data Scotland (RDS) was established by the Scottish Government in 2021 to make it faster and simpler for researchers to access sensitive public sector data for research. This research takes place in Trusted Research Environments (TREs), where data can only be accessed by approved researchers under strict security and ethical controls. This allows the safe generations of insights to transform:

- **Our health**, by uncovering the causes and early signs of disease and ill health, and using these insights to power innovation in the NHS that supports staff to deliver faster diagnosis and better prevention and treatment
- **Our economy**, through attracting both public and private investment into our universities and life science companies
- **Our public services**, by providing the cross sectoral evidence base needed to maximise the benefit of public sector spending

Research access to public sector data, through a secure, integrated data infrastructure...



...enables data-driven research innovation and policymaking...

...that benefits our health, economy and public services.

What's the opportunity?

Existing data, systems and expertise make Scotland well-placed to reclaim its role as an international leader in data-driven innovation and adjacent fields such as machine learning and AI, and to become the international partner of choice for the assembly of trustworthy data ecosystems. Supporting Scotland as a leading centre of data research would also bring significant economic and social benefits.

Together with our partners in research, government, Public Health Scotland, National Records of Scotland, the private sector, and with UK-wide partners including HDR UK, ADR UK and the Office for National Statistics, RDS has made real progress in aligning and simplifying the data for research system. But there's more to be done and our health, economy and public services can't afford for us to wait.

- An external evaluation of the Administrative Data Research (ADR) UK programme found that for every £1 invested, there is just over £5 of value returned. Scotland has historically been a leader in data research within the UK. However, the ADR evaluation now identifies Scotland as a negative outlier within the UK regarding efficient data access, as processes for linking data across different public sector sources are too complex compared to the other UK nations.
- The UK data economy (its data market plus the value data adds to other sectors of the economy) represents an estimated 6.9% of GDP (as of 2022). In 2021, data-enabled UK service exports accounted for 85% of total service exports, estimated to be worth £259 billion.
- A 2019 report by EY estimated that making better use of NHS data has the potential to bring benefits worth £5 billion per year to the NHS itself (in terms of operational savings, enhanced patient outcomes and generation of wider economic benefits to the UK) and deliver £4.6 billion per year in benefits to patients.

What's possible with data research?

These are examples of work by RDS and our partners that illustrate the power of using data for research, and what must be built upon to make Scotland a powerhouse for data-driven research and innovation.

Case study: Informing policy to reduce alcohol harms in Scotland

ADR UK enabled research that linked data from different public sector sources to assess the effectiveness of minimum unit pricing as a policy intervention for reducing alcohol-related harm in Scotland. Using Scottish and English data, they found that deaths directly linked to alcohol consumption declined by 13.4%, and hospital admissions for alcohol-related conditions fell by 4.1%, translating to approximately 156 fewer deaths and 411 fewer admissions each year. These findings informed the Scottish Government's decision to extend the policy in 2024. ADR UK has estimated the annual gross benefit from lives saved by minimum unit pricing to amount to around £170 million.

Case study: Understanding antidepressant treatment patterns in severe mental illness

This University of Edinburgh led research project uses electronic prescribing records to examine patterns of antidepressant use within patients living with severe mental illness and the consequences of these patterns, in terms of healthcare utilisation and mortality risk. This project used the Researcher Access Service, developed by RDS, which provides a digitised end-to-end process for accredited researchers to access public sector data for research which serves the public good.

Case study: One million brain scans used to assess dementia risk

Researchers from the Universities of Edinburgh and Dundee received access to over 1.6 million brain scans collected from patients across Scotland over a decade. They will use AI to analyse the scans to search for patterns or signs of dementia, which can in turn form the basis of tools that help radiologists with early detection.

Case study: Making clinical free text and imaging data ready for AI model development

Researchers in Glasgow and Aberdeen, together with Canon Medical Research Europe, have developed the SHAIP platform, which anonymises identifying information in imaging and free text data at scale. This means that the data can be used to train AI tools to look for signs of disease without replicating personal information contained in the training data. SHAIP has already been used to support breast screening as well as fracture diagnosis.

What has RDS done?

- Launched and continues to develop the Researcher Access Service, which provides for the first time an end-to-end digital process for secure access to sensitive, anonymised public sector data
- Delivered research elements of the Scottish Government's Health and Social Care Data Strategy
- Championed alignment of, and investment in, Scotland's Safe Haven Network
- Secured public input through running the Scotland Talks Data public panel with the Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research (SCADR) and embedded public involvement and engagement throughout all we do, ensuring we maintain transparency and trust
- Worked with partners to transform the approvals processes in Scotland for accessing data
- Helped to deliver the ADR Scotland programme
- Convened thinking to establish best practice on areas including synthetic data, public engagement and communications

How can government and others support this capability which benefits our health, economy and public services?

To realise the potential return on investment behind both the UK and Scottish Government's investments in data research, and the benefits this capability brings to our health, economy and public services, we're calling on the next Parliament to:

- **Recognise the essential role of linked data** in providing an evidence base for public sector reform and addressing complex societal problems such as child poverty and economic growth
- **Set the expectation within government departments and public bodies to reuse and share their data** for research in the public benefit
- **Commit to invest in the safe computing infrastructure and expertise in the Scottish Safe Haven Network** rather than spending to develop new secure data services, and support Research Data Scotland's efforts to encourage wider investment from elsewhere
- **Ensure public sector data and data infrastructure are appreciated in policy and investment terms** as essential enablers for the adoption of AI in public service delivery

- **Align where appropriate with relevant UK-wide health data initiatives** like the Health Data Research Service, and thereby enable interoperability and cross-nation collaboration on data research
- **Reaffirm the commitment made in both the Health and Social Care Data Strategy and Pandemic Preparedness Review** to a service that provides quick access to linked research data for government, academia and industry
- **Implement the recommendations co-produced with the Scottish Government** to improve how data for research is stored in Scotland's National Safe Haven

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