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SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

research matters

Introducing the Research Capability Hub

By Carina Bossu, Bart Rienties, Dewi Knight and Paul Walley, Open University

The Research Capability Hub (RCH) is a new programme, funded by the ESRC, to deliver training and create a community of practice that will build the capacity of social science researchers in the UK. RCH aims to support these researchers by bring together a diverse range of stakeholders, including across different disciplines, career stages and sectors, to meet the training and developmental needs of the UK's social science researchers. We will do this by using Open University's (OU) existing and innovative online platforms and infrastructures.

Working across the UK's four nations, through the OU's PolicyWISE initiative, partners include UCL, Swansea University, Queen's University Belfast, Edinburgh University and the University of Gothenburg. SoLAR and Social Partnership Networks will bring other capability and expertise. The hub is funded for five years and represents a major investment in the UK's social science research infrastructure.

Figure 1: First away day with most of the RCH team in person and online (24.09.2025)

RCH approach

Using the OU innovative OpenLearn Create platform, co-created resources will offer flexibility and cost-effectiveness at scale. This approach will improve accessibility, sustainability and adaptability to different disciplines and social scientists' needs. The RCH concept is one that supports personalised learning journeys, fosters community-driven research skills development and connects research with policy engagement.

This new way of developing research skills training and capacity building seeks to strategically coordinate provision and will include innovative approaches to enable effective learning and a culture of continuing professional development.

Opportunities for social science researchers and the community

RCH will develop a flexible approach to capacity building aligned with individual researcher needs by co-creating research methods courses jointly prioritised with stakeholders. Training courses will promote accessibility and inclusion through open-access, high-quality learning experiences using the established OpenLearn Create platform. This allows researchers to engage with training at their own pace, co-create new resources and receive recognition.

RCH will also foster community engagement by establishing a policy-linked federated, researcher-led structure where stakeholders collaborate in identifying training needs and co-creating learning pathways. Our approach will ensure sustainability and impact by leveraging the RCH digital learning expertise and existing partnerships to ensure long-term impact.

How we will support and engage social science researchers

To engage with and support social science researchers, we will identify and develop a taxonomy of capabilities and needs grounded in researcher-centred design, collaboratively mapping competencies across methodologies. We will also develop personalised learning approaches that adapt to different needs, backgrounds and career stages through modular, bite-sized content. This will be enabled by co-creation principles that will be developed in collaboration with a range of stakeholders, including social science researchers.

They will be able to engage with our mentoring programmes, which will ensure that researchers from different career stages have the opportunity to continue developing. Social science researchers will have the opportunity to participate and join in community engagement through communities of practice, regular convenings, peer-learning circles and open collaboration channels that RCH will create.

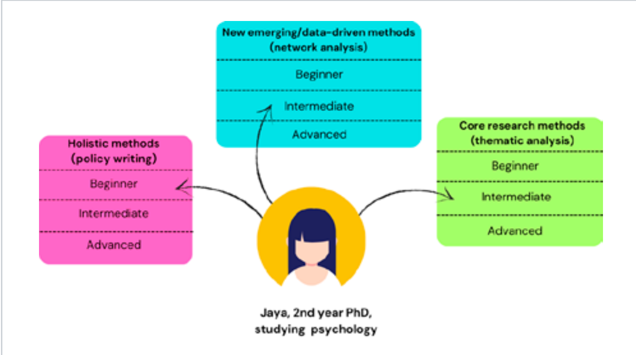

Figure 2: Providing personalised support (from PhD student to senior professor)

Our next steps

The work to establish the hub started in October, and the first months will see platforms being made fully operational, the curation of existing best practice and resources and the transfer of some existing resources on to the platform. Beyond building new courses based upon social scientists' needs, RCH will provide the opportunity for any university and training provider to host their training events relevant to social scientists on the platform.

We are also planning our first stakeholder activity, which will include social scientists and training partners across the UK to identify the most urgent training needs at a hybrid event at the end of January 2026.

How to get involved

You can find out more on our website at: rch.ac.uk. Please get in touch with us for more information at rch-enquiries@open.ac.uk and if you would like to join our hybrid event in January.

What do you think of Research Matters?

Research Matters **is for anyone interested in social research, whether working as a social researcher, using social research or just wanting to learn more about it.**

The editorial team is keen to hear from readers what you think about the magazine. Are there any industry sectors, methods, or disciplines you would like to see included more often? Or other features or series you would like to suggest? Or would you like to write a regular column on an industry hot topic? Please email admin@the-sra.org.uk with any ideas. You do not necessarily need to contribute to any future features but are more than welcome to do so if you would like!

Looking forward together

SRA chair, Ed Dunn, reflects on the year past and future plans, and looks forward to working together as the SRA embarks on another exciting chapter.

As 2025 draws to a close, I'm delighted to introduce the winter edition of *Research Matters*. It arrives at a time of exciting change and renewed ambition for us, and I'm proud to share highlights from across the SRA, as well as news of major developments that will help shape our future.

Celebrating community and connection

The most significant development is the imminent launch of the SRA member hub, our new online community platform. Designed exclusively for members, the hub will be a space to connect, share knowledge and access resources tailored to the needs of social researchers. Whether you're seeking peer support, professional development or simply a place to exchange ideas, the member hub aims to foster deeper engagement and collaboration across our diverse network. We're inviting members to help shape and test the platform ahead of its launch, ensuring it truly reflects the interests and aspirations of our community. If you'd like to be involved as a tester, contributor or champion, please do register your interest – together, we can make this a vibrant and valuable space for all.

Trustee awayday: strategy in action

This autumn saw both our trustees and the SRA's staff gather for a highly successful awayday focused on refining our strategic direction and strengthening governance. The energy and commitment in the room were palpable, as trustees and staff worked collaboratively to review our progress and set priorities for the years ahead. The awayday underscored the SRA's dedication to transparency, inclusivity and member-led decision-making. I want to thank everyone who contributed their insights and expertise, helping to ensure our association remains responsive to the evolving needs of social researchers. I left the day feeling energised by the passion in the room – hearing colleagues share their hopes for the SRA's future reminded me why our work matters.

Strategic objectives: 2025 to 2028

Looking ahead, we'll soon be sharing our refreshed strategic objectives, which will guide the SRA through to our 50th anniversary in 2028. Our strategy reaffirms our commitment to promoting excellence in social research, supporting professional development and nurturing an inclusive and diverse community. Key aims include expanding pathways into the profession, advancing knowledge and practice and growing our regional engagement. We're proud of the progress made in recent years – from innovations in training and events to our expanding digital presence – and we're excited to build on these foundations as we move forward.

Highlights from this Issue

This edition of *Research Matters* continues our tradition of showcasing methodological innovation, reflections on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and updates from across the sector. You'll find articles on career pathways, peer research and new approaches to social research methods, as well as interviews with sector leaders. Our regular features include updates on SRA training, news from our regional branches and highlights from the SRA blog and newsletter, which remain key channels for sharing developments and opportunities with members. Special thanks go to our editorial team and volunteers for their dedication in bringing this publication to life.

AGM: date for your diary

Finally, I encourage all members to join us for the SRA AGM, which will be held online on Wednesday 25 February at 12pm. The AGM is a vital opportunity to engage with the governance of our association, participate in key votes and help shape our direction for the coming year. Please check the members' section of our website for the agenda and supporting documents, and make a note to join us for this important event.

As chair, I'm continually inspired by the passion and professionalism of our members, especially all those who volunteer their time to support our aims. So, as we look ahead to the new year, I want to thank all our volunteers, contributors and readers for their continued engagement and support. Wishing everyone a restful holiday season and a successful start to 2026. I look forward to working together as we embark on another exciting chapter for the SRA.

Journal of Creative Research Methods

By Helen Kara, independent researcher

Creating a new academic journal is a long, long journey. If I had realised quite how long a journey it was, I probably wouldn't have set out – but now I'm glad I did.

I started working on creative research methods in 2014. In 2017 it occurred to me that the field could do with a journal, so I had a chat with the journals' editor at Policy Press, who turned me down like a bedspread. But the idea didn't go away. I considered trying other publishers, but most of my creative methods work is with Policy Press (now an imprint of Bristol University Press), and I like working with them. So, in 2022 I had another go, and this time the reception was warmer. I have always found Policy Press to be very supportive, and their help in guiding me through the process was invaluable.

The first job was to recruit editors-in-chief. I was fortunate to find Su-ming Khoo from the National University of Ireland, Harriet Shortt from Bath Spa University and Sophie Woodward from the University of Manchester; a terrific trio who are great ambassadors for the journal.

Then we had to populate the first two issues; not an easy task for a journal that doesn't exist. The International Creative Research Methods Conference (ICRMC), which I host in Manchester every September (and which Tina Haux (CEO of the SRA) ably chaired this year), proved a fertile hunting ground for potential articles.

We also needed to recruit an editorial board. We did an open call, aiming for diversity across as many dimensions as possible, and shared it through our networks and more widely via social media; Policy Press did this too. We received only one application from an African country, and one from a South American country, and neither quite fitted the bill. That was disappointing, but we did achieve a good geographical spread across much of the rest of the planet. Also, where people are based is not the sole indicator of diversity, particularly in such a mobile profession as research. We were pleased by the general level of diversity of applicants across age, gender, career stage, discipline/profession and sector.

The journal was launched at ICRMC 2025 with celebratory cupcakes

Then we had to write a proposal for the journal, including the abstracts for the articles in the first two issues and details of the editorial board. This went for peer review: an anxious time after so much work. Nails were bitten and anxiety dreams endured. We eventually received eight reviews, which was daunting at first, but they were gratifyingly thorough with a huge amount of positive feedback. There was also some helpful constructive criticism which the leadership team responded to at the publisher's request. Then in mid-2024 Policy Press gave us the go-ahead.

It is really very difficult to attract and retain writers for a potential rather than an actual journal, and we ended up with one initial issue rather than two. The journal was launched at ICRMC 2025 with celebratory cupcakes. The first issue is fully open access until December 31 – the publisher is trying to find funding for the whole journal to be open access, but that is very difficult in the current climate. Now we are receiving more submissions, but there is room for even more, as we need to publish two issues in 2026 and three in 2027. So, there are three things you can do for this journal:

1. Read volume one, issue one of the Journal of Creative Research Methods at Bristol University Press Digital.
2. Write an article using the author instructions.
3. Tell all your friends!

The journey is not finished. The editorial board is still learning how to operate most effectively. No doubt there will be changes of editors-in-chief and editorial board members at some point. We need an impact factor so that scholars from countries such as South Africa can submit their work, and that will take at least three years. But the journal is here, and that is a big milestone reached.

METHODS

Beyond the snapshot: real-time research

By Karen Tuzylak, senior lecturer in primary education, Manchester Metropolitan University

I spent over 15 years in primary education, stepping into an assistant head role early in my teaching career. Those years were full of learning, not just for the children I taught, but for me as well. I saw the joy, exhaustion and emotional intensity that comes with teaching. And I watched early career teachers arrive full of hope, only to be overwhelmed by the realities of the role.

Now, as a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, I work with trainee teachers every day. That experience led to my doctoral research, an inquiry not into policy or statistics, but into people. I wanted to understand what it feels like to become a teacher.

Why mobile ethnography?

Traditional research methods often capture teachers in reflective interviews long after events have passed. But what about the emotions that emerge in the moment? The confidence after a lesson that finally clicks. The quiet moment of doubt whispered alone in a parked car after a difficult day. I did not want the tidy summary. I wanted the live feed.

I used mobile ethnography, working with Indeemo, a platform that allowed five early career teachers to document their first year using short videos, voice notes, photos, emojis and text reflections. They could contribute whenever it suited them: during a lunch break, sitting in their car or late at night in their pyjamas. The platform gave me access to rich, unfolding narratives that a one-off interview could never replicate, and I could see them as soon as they were uploaded. It also gave participants a space to reflect honestly. One told me it felt like 'talking to someone who understood'.

Building trust and collecting rich data

Setting up the platform reminded me of preparing a classroom. It was exciting, slightly chaotic and full of laminated ambition. I created welcome videos so participants could see me as a person, not just a researcher. Building trust was essential. What emerged was not a one-way process of data collection but a collaborative endeavour. They were not just participants. They were co-authors in telling their own stories.

Using thematic analysis, both inductive and deductive, I was able to trace patterns and identity shifts. The platform tools helped me search keywords, clip meaningful moments and visually map emotional journeys. It felt like having a research assistant who never needed rest, but it was still up to me to interpret the insights with care.

Being present, even from afar

What surprised me most was how close I felt to the data. Because I was seeing them live, I was not just learning about participants' experiences. I was walking the journey with them, even from afar. One participant, in her second week, said, 'I do not know if I can do this'. Months later, she smiled into the camera and said, 'I think I have actually got something to offer'. That shift in language revealed real changes in confidence and professional identity.

This was more than collecting data. It was about being present, about noticing the emotional labour of becoming a teacher. The highs and lows were captured not in hindsight but in the moment. It changed how I thought about research itself.

What I learned along the way

One of the biggest lessons was the emotional weight of this kind of research, not just for participants but for me too. There were moments that made me cry, moments I felt helpless and moments I felt proud. This work taught me the value of reflexivity and of caring for myself while holding space for others.

When it came time to present my findings, I wanted my examiners to feel them, not just read them. I used augmented reality (AR) in my thesis to bring the data to life through embedded avatars, videos and images. Using an AR platform, I linked physical pages of my thesis with digital layers such as videos, avatars and sound clips so that when readers scanned certain images, interactive content appeared as if emerging from the paper itself. One examiner said, 'I wish I had done research like this'. I left with only two hours of amendments and a sense that the method had truly resonated.

Looking forward

What I have learned is that we do not always need to gather more data. Often, we need to listen more closely to the stories we already have. Research should not only measure. It should feel. It should make space for people to be seen and heard. This project reminded me that emotion is not separate from evidence. It is part of it.

This was not research that stood at a distance. It stood alongside. And that made all the difference.

Letting go of power in participatory research

By Christina Herold, user research lead, Citizens Advice

'I feel happy that I can express myself to someone. This research group could be the root to a solution'. These are the words of a Citizens Advice client who was part of a participatory research project last year.

Citizens Advice is a charity that gives free, confidential advice to millions of people over the phone, online and in person. From our data, we knew that clients of colour had a poorer experience of our services but we did not understand the causes or how we could change it. We needed research to get behind the numbers.

We wanted to approach it in an equitable way using a participatory approach to actively involve those most affected. We did not have the expertise internally to do this, and we wanted to build organisational experience working in this way. We were lucky to work with Hello Brave which led the research.

Hello Brave established a research group made up of Citizens Advice colleagues and representatives from external organisations working with Black, Chinese and Southern Asian communities. The group was given a clear brief and scope to understand the constraints of the work, and then given full autonomy to decide on research questions and methods.

Instead of Citizens Advice deciding the research focus and approach, it was in the hands of experienced experts. Letting go of control of the research like this was new to us – here is what we did to be able to let go of power.

Sharing accountability

The main reason for doing participatory research is to shift power and avoid extractive research that does not effect change.

To improve the likelihood of change being delivered, we broadened the organisational accountability by:

- involving senior stakeholders in agreeing on the scope
- collaborating with people able to deliver change
- hosting regular sessions with colleagues to raise awareness and secure buy-in

Bringing colleagues along in the process has built a shared ownership between the organisation and the research group, making it easier for the project group to let go of power.

Sharing ownership

The collaboration involved sharing otherwise confidential information, such as data insights and organisational knowledge, with external members of the research group. Setting this up well was the most time-consuming challenge for Citizens Advice to overcome as we had to update our contracts, terms and conditions for use of intellectual property, and information governance. Hello Brave played an instrumental role in doing this to protect the project's integrity.

Sharing knowledge was key to the success of the work as it balanced power and established trust between all parties as well as moving beyond a transactional way of working. We shared the findings with participants, and we are sharing highlights from the research publicly as part of our Data Insights events.

This has helped to foster shared ownership beyond Citizens Advice which has enabled us to let go of power as the insights from the work have the potential to help advice-users across society.

Being mindful of 'shadow power'

Lastly, we made sure to hold each other accountable for what we called 'shadow power' that could unintentionally be exerted to influence the work. This could show up through feedback and in discussions with research group members where we, employees of Citizens Advice, could put pressure on the group to change their minds. We wanted to avoid disempowering the research group.

Being part of a participatory process can feel unsettling as doing the work well requires trust in the process due to the shift in power. We found that we could lean into the trust that had been established with Hello Brave, the research group and the process itself as it centres on the people most affected. By doing so we have had clients of colour holding a much-needed mirror up to our service.

But our work is far from done. Hello Brave and the research group made 12 recommendations for change which we're working on. These include creating:

- easily accessible support in communities where there's less time, money and trust
- welcoming, inclusive and holistic services that reassure that we're here to help everyone

We are sharing more about what we have been told and what we are doing through a series of blogs.

Due to the dedication and generosity of the research group, participants and Hello Brave we are now suitably equipped to embark on making changes to deliver equitable support in the future.

Funding programme evaluation: eight things to remember

By Rachel Grafham, research officer at the Health Foundation and Diane Redfern-Tofts, head of research at Tommys, formerly research manager at the Health Foundation

The Health Foundation is an independent charitable organisation providing research, analysis and grant funding to improve health and health care. We are privileged to be able to commission evaluations to maximise learning and improvement of our major funded programmes. With a range of colleagues, we've been looking back at the evaluations we've funded over recent years with a view to informing our future approach.

Reflecting on our learning from these evaluations, we've come up with eight top tips for evaluating programmes. For the purpose of this article, we're using a broad definition of 'evaluation'. We're referring to the commissioning of independent evaluative activities that aim to reflect on the value, quality and learning from a programme, rather than limiting ourselves to traditional evaluation methodology. We'll touch on learning partners, support partners and more traditional evaluation approaches…but more on those terms later! First, we'll look at when to start planning your evaluation.

1. Start 'evaluation' thinking early

Evaluation needs must be considered from the earliest stages of programme scoping to ensure that programme and evaluation structures complement each other and that the right people and skills are in place. Scoping the evaluation at the same time as scoping the programme helps ensure this synergy. In addition, if evaluation thinking only begins once a programme is well underway, it's not always possible to retrospectively get the data or information you need. Talking to internal and external stakeholders about evaluation early also helps to establish the most effective evaluation approach and to set expectations and ensure consensus on what the evaluation is setting out to achieve. It also ensures that there is clarity on who needs to be involved in the evaluation, so that those voices can be embedded from the outset. For example, the impact of involving patients and the public in evaluation is vastly increased if their role is embedded from the outset.

2. Decide what you'd like to know and what's possible to find out

'Evaluation' decisions should be grounded in what information you need or would like to have by the end of the programme. It's easy to be led by standard practice, or by what approach worked well on a similar programme in the past. However, the best way to make the right choices about your evaluation is by going back to basics to think through what you need to know and what you will do with that information. This should be considered alongside a realistic assessment of what you can find out by the end of the evaluation period. As an example, it may not be possible to see changes in your outcome measures by the end of a three-year programme. If impact is what needs to be measured, factor in more long-term follow-up with project teams beyond the length of the programme. If that's not possible, what other measures might help? Gaining clarity on what you'd like to know by the end of the programme should lead you to the best approach to your 'evaluation'. You may find that programme monitoring (systematically collecting specific data to track the impact of the programme) can meet your needs. You may decide a learning partner (an independent contact or supplier, supporting the programme to generate and share learning from its work) is more appropriate. Or perhaps some evaluation methods alongside either of the above will be best. Don't be afraid to tailor your approach – this will maximise the impact and efficiency of your work.

3. Work out how much money matters

Be realistic upfront about whether some assessment of cost or value for money needs to be factored into the evaluation. This is particularly important if the programme is looking at system change, with interventions likely to cost rather than save money in the first instance. We've noticed that, towards the end of a successful programme or intervention, questions emerge about the costs and benefits and often it's too late for that data to be meaningfully collected. If a project or programme is intended to influence direct action from system leaders and decision-makers, it may not be possible for that to happen without some understanding of the costs. Consider this carefully at the evaluation scoping stage and plan accordingly.

4. Note that language matters (and doesn't matter at all)

Once you're clear about what information you're hoping to obtain from the evaluation, you need to develop a clear and accessible summary of your evaluation expectations and aims. Creating this and revisiting it regularly can alleviate misunderstandings or scope creep. Often words like evaluation, learning partner or support partner have very particular meanings to specific individuals or organisations, and we've offered up some definitions above. But these terms are often used interchangeably. Avoid getting bogged down with labels. Instead, focus on your goals and the audience and tone of any outputs you're envisaging, as this can be a helpful way to explore where in the context of learning and evaluation you need to be. Language related to monitoring and evaluation can feel loaded and, depending on the power dynamics within a project or programme, can sometimes leave teams feeling like they are being tested or judged. If the terminology being used isn't working, work together with all your stakeholders to find something that better fits the relationship.

5. Consider what skills and capacity are needed for a successful evaluation

Check whether there are sufficient skills within the sector to undertake local evaluation or even data collection, as this can and should have implications for programme and evaluation design. If the skills aren't widespread within the sector, is it possible to offer support or training as part of the programme design? If that's not possible, can a greater burden of that responsibility be held by an evaluator or other supplier? We must also be pragmatic about the time people can reasonably commit to evaluation activities, particularly when working in sectors in which people are already overworked and stretched to full capacity (such as health and social care). It may be sensible to build in time and space for evaluation as part of the main programme design. Once the scope of the programme and evaluation is set, consider how the skills of potential teams can be assessed at application and interview stage. Your application process and interview should be framed to test those skills. For example, if the evaluation fieldwork involves workshops, asking potential suppliers to facilitate a workshop as an interview task makes sense, particularly if you are able to include key stakeholders as workshop participants. If public participation is a priority, ask public participation advisers to shape and take part in assessment processes including interviews and selection criteria.

6. Be honest about how adaptable you need your evaluator to be

A key skill that's easy to overlook is how adaptable you need your evaluator to be. Multi-year programmes can and do change from scoping through to completion. This could be due to changes in the external environment, such as a general election, or the internal environment, such as a strategy refresh. There may also be inherent uncertainty in the programme design due to using phased or co-production approaches. Evaluators need to be well-prepared for this, and funding documentation should be explicit about the expected amount of change the evaluator is likely to experience so that their approach can take this into account.

7. Plan your ways of working

Programmes and evaluations can get messy. It is essential to map out the stakeholders and relationships involved in the evaluation and to think carefully about how relationships will be built, governed and supported throughout. For example, if an independent evaluator is relying on local evaluation data for their work, how can you ensure that information flows effectively? If you're working with a support partner and evaluator, how can you avoid duplication of effort and limit the demands on project teams? How important is independence to your evaluation activity and what does that mean for ways of working? In some cases, this requires pragmatism, for example when using developmental evaluation approaches whereby the evaluator, for all intents and purposes, is part of the programme team but needs to retain some independence to provide constructive insights and challenge. Ways of working and key information flows should be backed up by contracts and governance. It's also worth investing time and resources in relationship building and facilitation.

8. Make the evaluation contract work for you

Ensuring that milestones for sharing evaluation protocols, preliminary findings and interim deliverables are part of the contractual deliverables can be an effective way to ensure that evaluation is on track. These interim deliverables also provide a natural opportunity to return to the evaluation aims and to consider whether they are still valid, appropriate and relevant. They are also valuable for ensuring that projects/programmes provide learning or get feedback while work is ongoing. You can also be explicit in your contract about your expectations for information flow, helping you to get what you need from people at the right time.

On the back of this learning, we have been thinking internally about how we approach evaluation. Sometimes evaluation can fall into the trap of rigidly adhering to overly academic constraints; the most useful evaluations use evaluation theory as an initial framework and take a more pragmatic approach in practice. While evaluation approaches and the evaluation sector are constantly evolving, meaning we will need to also, these eight tips should hold true.

We would like to thank Hardeep Aiden, Chamut Kifetew, Stephanie Guest, Hannah Knight and Amanda Watt for their contributions to this article.

DATA

Supporting employment support: the Data Lab

By Aujla Kavandeep, government analyst and head of the Data Lab, Department for Work and Pensions

This is the story of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Employment Data Lab: how it began, some of the challenges we faced, reflections on the first three years and what the future holds.

The problem

There are many organisations that provide employment support programmes such as charities, third sector organisations and local authorities. But how do they know if these programmes are working or good value for money? The answer is: it's usually very difficult to work out for two main reasons:

- People move around, so ascertaining longer-term outcomes is difficult to obtain or measure as well as resource intensive.
- Many of the participants could well have gone into employment without this support anyway.

These two issues are fundamental problems for any evaluation, in any field. The solution in medicine and more recently in government is to use randomised control trials (RCTs). However, RCTs are expensive, time-consuming and beyond the scope of most small organisations.

Our solution

DWP developed the Employment Data Lab to carry out evaluations of external employment support provision and to share the findings publicly.

The idea was based on the Ministry of Justice Data Lab which was set up in 2013 to assess reoffending rates across different initiatives. Following its success, an Employment Data Lab was championed by New Philanthropy Capital to enable external providers to understand the impact of their employment programmes. It was widely recognised across government and the voluntary sector that this was a good idea. It would help meet DWP labour market objectives and improve the evidence base on 'what works'. This in turn could lead to better employment programmes, helping more people into work. After a period of lobbying DWP ministers and conducting feasibility studies, the DWP Employment Data Lab service officially launched in 2022.

Implementation

The department realised we already had the three key building blocks to form an Employment Data Lab, but the component parts just needed connecting.

- We had the administrative datasets on benefits, earnings and employment that provided the long-term outcomes of anyone receiving employment support.
- We had a means of linking participants to DWP data through personal identifiers using 'fuzzy matching' techniques which we'd already developed.
- The third aspect was that a statistical technique called 'propensity score matching' had been used by departmental analysts to construct comparison groups for national employment programmes.

Along with these, the UK general data protection regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018 provided the means of securely transferring and managing the data.

The service has been developed with the support of several stakeholder organisations that continue to participate on our advisory board. The board provides strategic direction and support to organisations to engage with the data lab.

Lessons learned

So far, we have evaluated employment programmes involving young people, veterans and people at risk of homelessness. We also have potential projects on health, transport and ex-offenders in the pipeline. This variety of interventions has made life interesting and possibly slowed things down as it is far less of a 'handle-turning' process for the initial projects than we originally envisaged. This is because each policy area requires a bespoke methodology that can take months to develop but once developed, we should be able to re-use the approach.

Our initial conclusion is that the process is working, and we have produced and published a series of reports with many more planned. However, each report takes several months from the initial discussions to organising the data transfer, identifying appropriate data sources and devising the methodology.

The future

Given the large number of local and regional employment programmes, demand is certainly outstripping supply. So, we are working with our advisory board on how to prioritise future projects. And the trend for an increasingly devolved landscape is likely to continue with the recent 'Get Britain Working' White Paper.

A final observation is that the data lab can tell you about *what* happened, but it can't tell you *how* or *why* it happened. To support the wider synthesis and dissemination of the evidence base on labour market outcomes, particularly for local practitioners, the department is planning to set up a 'What Works Centre'.

You can find more information online about the Employment Data Lab.

Five top tips for implementing an effective peer research model


By Holly Captainino associate director, Verian Group evaluation practice; Mary Suffield, director, Verian Group policy practice; Lauren Bennett, head of evidence and impact, Revolving Doors

What is a peer research model?

A peer research model explicitly involves co-design and co-implementation of a research piece with people who have had relevant personal or lived experiences. It is an approach that is often applied when research is being undertaken on sensitive subjects.

Verian and Revolving Doors have a long and established history of working together to implement peer research models, particularly in seeking to understand experiences of drug and alcohol dependency and multiple disadvantage. In this partnership, Revolving Doors brings expertise on the application of peer research, and close, supportive and meaningful relationships with individuals with lived experience. Verian, in turn, brings experience of robust and rigorous research practices, stringent ethics and safeguarding, and knowledge of clients' needs and key questions.

This article outlines learning from this tried-and-tested partnership for effectively delivering peer research.

TIP 1: Provide opportunities for peer input at every stage of the project

Where possible and appropriate, peer researchers should be involved throughout a project – from design to delivery and dissemination.

- Design phase: peer researchers can draw on their experiences to ensure accessible language is used throughout research materials. Their experience can also help to shape the structure of discussions or questionnaires to ensure the flow feels natural and topics are introduced to participants in a trauma-informed way.
- Conducting fieldwork: peer researchers make respondents feel more comfortable and understood due to shared experiences which allows for rich data collection.
- Analysis sessions: having a multi-disciplinary approach enables the team to look at the same evidence from a different perspective, making insight more well-rounded.
- Reporting and dissemination: peer input can ensure that the use of language and interpretation is not stigmatising.

TIP 2: Do not assume that all peers will want to be involved in all stages and in the same way

- Having a team of peer researchers reduces the risk of overburdening individuals.
- Each peer will have differing resources, capacity, background and experience, as well as safeguarding requirements that affect how they might want to be involved.
- It's important to have a good relationship with each member of the peer research team so that you are aware of their needs and interests.
- It is also necessary to consult with them at each stage about how they want to be involved and consider the best ways to use their time, as circumstances change.
- Give choice about naming and crediting peers. Some people may not want to be identified as having particular lived experience.

TIP 3: Facilitate joint relationship building and learning between researchers and peers

A strong relationship between peers and researchers increases openness, transparency and learning on both sides.

- Hold specialist training for peer researchers on research methods and processes so they feel prepared going into a new project.
- Hold specialist training for researchers on working with peers and project target groups.
- Conduct joint briefings to allow for all parties to learn from the questions raised by each other and to build relationships across the team.
- Co-facilitation of fieldwork can facilitate learning across the team. This could include learning about how to effectively engage your target audience, different interviewing techniques or the broader context of the topic.
- It is important to support the ongoing learning and development of peer research skills. This can be tailored to existing skills and experience.
- Consider reviewing the project structure to pair researchers and peers on fieldwork and trips to support relationship building and joint learning.

TIP 4: Ring-fence time and resources

Successful peer research projects account for additional time and resource required from the outset.

- Hold budget to reimburse peers for the relevant level of involvement.
- Peers have busy lives. They need advance notice of activities and reminders closer to the time.
- Have one person or people who are directly responsible for owning the relationships with the peer researchers allowing for clear lines of communication.

TIP 5: Consider broader sector advisory groups that bring together academic, policy and lived experience backgrounds

- This enables the consideration of the wider evidence base and literature on the research topic.
- Multi-disciplinary perspectives on policy contexts and implementation further enhance the insight provided.
- It provides additional project quality assurance.

The Verian and Revolving Doors partnership and the application of this approach have been instrumental in ensuring that lived experience is central to every stage of evidence generation. In turn, this significantly improves the quality of evidence, empowers participants and ensures that results are applied in a realistic and impactful way within complex contexts and environments.

Career journeys: what's changed and what I've learned

By Charles Tallack, senior fellow, the Health Foundation

After a long career in analysis, I've recently stepped back as director of analysis at the Health Foundation, and am now working part-time as a senior fellow. Although I've relinquished my formal leadership position, this new role gives me more time to focus on the things I most enjoy. Many of those are things that originally attracted me to my career: analysing problems, evaluating potential solutions and communicating analysis so it has influence. For this article I've been reflecting on what's changed during the course of my career, and what I've learned.

First, a career synopsis. After a few false starts as an analyst in the private sector, I joined the Department of Health as an operational researcher. Here, I found a rewarding workplace. The problems I worked on – for example, how many beds does the NHS need? – had multiple, sometimes conflicting objectives, so needed multiple analytical perspectives, and existed in a political environment. And I was working with curious people who were genuinely interested in what they did and had a passion for 'the truth'. In a nutshell, the hallmarks of high-quality social research for complex problems.

From the Department of Health, my career took me to Blair's Strategy Unit, and a spell in HM Treasury. From there, a geographical detour to the New Zealand Treasury. After four years in New Zealand, I was back in the Department of Health. Then to the newly established NHS England where I led a team evaluating major service changes. And finally to the Health Foundation – an independent, evidence-informed health think-tank.

Across these three plus decades, much has changed. Not so much the issues – many of which are surprisingly enduring – but the way in which we tackle them.

The explosion of data and computing power has turbocharged our ability to design, implement and evaluate policy. At the same time, the internet has democratised and sped up access to knowledge. Now anyone can 'do their own research'.

The advent of email and shared documents has revolutionised the way we communicate and how documents are written and decisions made. The end-to-end process is not necessarily quicker than it used to be but there are far more iterations and it certainly feels more frantic. PowerPoint slide decks are ubiquitous: they can be used engagingly but written documents have a greater ability to communicate nuance and narrative.

Changes have opened up new opportunities for researchers. But it's far from clear that significantly better policymaking has followed.

Why not? Data have given us dashboards and performance reporting. But data alone do not diagnose and solve problems. We first need to ask the right questions and use data to test hypotheses and evaluate potential solutions. And data are too often taken at face value – not questioning their quality and representativeness. We should often consider qualitative research to add meaning and understanding to the data, as well as asking whether the data really tell us what we think they do.

As the internet has spread access to knowledge, cherry-picking the evidence to support a favoured policy position has also become more common. Policymakers, strategists and even ministers, who may not be trained in analytical skills, may decide to bypass analysts if they aren't getting the answers they want from them.

So, what advice would I give to the next generation of researchers and analysts?

Be curious and use your skills to challenge prevailing thinking. When you have the opportunity, tackle big, enduring questions. These are often neglected because the answer is required before the research is finished. But the next generation will ask the same questions.

Be confident about the importance of your skills but don't focus on only technical research skills. Social researchers' abilities – to distinguish high-quality evidence from low quality and to combine quantitative and qualitative research evidence to thoughtfully explore problems – will be more important than ever. Excellent influencing and communication skills are needed to push back against the tendency to look for evidence that supports a favoured policy position or even to bypass qualified analysts.

Regional events and networking in the SRA

By Georgina Culliford, chair of SRA North

The SRA has had regional branches for many years, and there is immense value in events that are situated in, and champion the work of, different regions in the UK.

In our post-Covid world, many social researchers find ourselves remote or hybrid working; optimising our time with online calls and lunchtime webinars. While there is value from this shift to more digital collaboration, there is also an opportunity and appetite for more regional, face-to-face knowledge exchange and networking that leave space for unexpected conversations and new, genuine connections. SRA North has put on two events in the past year, and the take-up has given us impetus to do more with the branches.

Relaxed, open networking

The first event was a casual networking event in Leeds, where social researchers could drop in and meet other like-minded individuals. Around 25 people joined and several commented on how refreshing it was to network in an unstructured, friendly way. Social researchers, after all, are often social creatures. We always book events near transport hubs and near major government, academic or agency hubs, meaning easy access for as many people as possible. Look out for our next networking event in 2026.

Behavioural science event

We also put on a face-to-face event in May 2025, all about using behavioural science in social research. We were fortunate to have four fantastic speakers representing different sectors of social research and different perspectives on behavioural science. Our speakers reflected on different tools, approaches and applications to social research, and gave examples ranging from healthcare to net zero.

Beverley Bishop, head of behavioural science at the Department for Transport, reflected on her experience of using behavioural science in government. Govundeep Sidhu is a trainee health psychologist at NHS Hull Teaching Hospitals University Trust and gave an applied example of using behavioural science to understand why intensive care unit staff were not using a particular tool designed to support them through traumatic interactions. Lauren Leak-Smith, senior adviser at the behavioural insights team, and specialising in energy, environment and sustainability, spoke about some new research about decarbonising roads. Max Taylor McEwan, senior research director at Madano, discussed its award-nominated approach using behavioural science principles and applying AI to humanise patient experience data.

Not only did attendees benefit from the presentations, Q&A and overall knowledge exchange, but an informal networking session afterwards allowed researchers to make new connections and ideas, getting out of the office or out from behind a screen for an afternoon. The event recording is on YouTube at this link.

SRA regional branches (North, Scotland and Cymru) are always looking for event ideas and enthusiastic regional researchers. Email admin@the-sra.org.uk if you would like to get involved.

Titles for review

We are always looking for reviewers (SRA members only) to write a short review for us. All books up for review are listed below. If you are interested, please email admin@the-sra.org.uk and we'll send you guidelines. Please note that publications are available as eBooks only. Book reviews need to be submitted within 10 weeks of you receiving the book. Here are the titles on offer:

A 101 action research guide for beginners: demystifying research terminology using a concrete STEM action research project
Saba Ahmed
Peter Lang, 2024

Doing visual ethnography – fourth edition
Sarah Pink
SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021

Dyadic interviews in qualitative research: your practical guide
Joanna Szulc and Nigel King
SAGE Publications Ltd, January 2025

Ethics, integrity, and policymaking: the value of the case study, Research Ethics Forum Series: Volume 9
(Ed. with Dónal O'Mathúna, Ron Iphofen)
Springer, 2022

SRA training

Unless otherwise stated, all courses are run online using Zoom. In-person courses are held in London or Edinburgh. Online courses run over one day or two half days, and extended courses over two full days or three part-days.

New dates and courses are being added all the time (and only courses with space are shown below), so for latest info please visit www.the-sra.org.uk/training or contact Patricia: training@the-sra.org.uk

Costs: **online**: SRA members: half day: £90; one day or two part-days: £180; two days or three part-days: £360. Non-members: half day: £117.50; one day or two part-days: £235; two days or three part-days: £470; **in person**: SRA members: £220; non-members: £290.

If you have any queries, please contact Patricia: training@the-sra.org.uk

Full details of all courses are at www.the-sra.org.uk/training

Evaluation

28 January: Impact evaluation (advanced), with Professor David Parsons

19 February: Foundations of evaluation, with Professor David Parsons

2 & 3 March: Theory-based evaluation: options and choices, with Professor David Parsons

5 & 6 March: Building and using a theory of change, with Professor David Parsons

9 March: Research and evaluation project management for project leaders, with Professor David Parsons

12 March: Management for commissioned research and evaluation, with Professor David Parsons

Qualitative

13 January: Introduction to focus groups, with Dr Karen Lumsden

14 January: Introduction to participatory action research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

16 January: Qualitative data analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

29 & 30 January (2 afternoons): Creative methods in qualitative data collection, with Dr Nicole Brown

30 January: AI-assisted qualitative data analysis, with Dr Christina Silver

3 February: Conducting online focus groups, with Dr Karen Lumsden

4 February: Foundations of qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

10 February: Introduction to qualitative interviewing, with Dr Karen Lumsden

11 February: Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

17 February: Qualitative data analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

18 February: Narrative analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

26 & 27 February: Creative data analysis, with Dr Nicole Brown

10 & 11 March: Focus group design and moderation, with Dr Karen Lumsden

13 March: AI-assisted qualitative data analysis, with Dr Christina Silver

17 March: Writing up qualitative data, with Dr Karen Lumsden

Quantitative

27 & 28 January (2 afternoons): Web survey design, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

3-5 February: Cognitive interviewing for testing survey questions, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

6 February: Introduction to R for social researchers, with Alexandru Cernat

24-26 February (3 afternoons): Questionnaire design, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

10 March: Understanding statistical concepts and essential tests, with Valerija Kolbas

17 & 18 March: The 3 stages of weighting probability samples, Dr Pamela Campanelli

20 March: Introduction to sampling for social surveys, with Alexandru Cernat

Other research skills

14 January: Inclusive social research practice, with Dr Nena Foster and Hannah Marcus

22 January: An introduction to behavioural science, with Dr Bev Bishop

11 & 12 February: Research with children and young people, with Berni Graham

24 February: Writing effective research reports, with Professor Simon Haslam

Spotlight on SRA activity

Training
www.the-sra.org.uk/training

Many qual, quant and evaluation courses are online.

Events
www.the-sra.org.uk/events

Blog
www.the-sra.org.uk/blog

Topical posts on researching.

Journal
Read back issues and find out how to write an article for our free journal.

Resources
www.the-sra.org.uk/resources

Good practice guides and more.

Ethics
www.the-sra.org.uk/ethics

An expert forum for members' queries, good practice guides and more.

Member resources
Log in, go to www.the-sra.org.uk then see 'members' section.

Free access to 5,500+ social science journals, data science training at a third off, and more.

Edited by Shirley Henderson www.shirleyhenderson.co.uk Designed by www.graphics.coop

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research matters

Views expressed by individual contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the SRA.

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