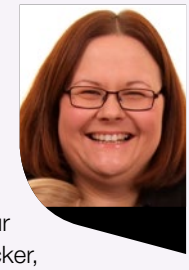
MARCH:2026

SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

research matters

Delivering better evaluation across government

By Helen Wood, interim head, Evaluation Services Unit



Robust evaluation is essential to effective policymaking. As demand grows for evidence on what works and what doesn't, government needs timely, high-quality insight to support better decisions.

The Evaluation Services Unit (ESU) was established in 2024 to meet this challenge. Our mission is to make high-quality evaluation quicker, easier and more affordable across government. Operating as an in-house consultancy, we deliver services ranging from initial scoping to final reporting for government departments and arm's-length bodies (ALBs).

Aligned with the Government Social Research Strategy for 2025, we help clients from across the civil service including ALBs to assess value for money and shape policy thinking, providing vital insights into how policies affect people on the ground. We work with a broad range of analytical, policy and delivery professionals, delivering their evaluations so that high-quality evidence can feed into policy decisions.

We are a growing unit of researchers and analysts, combining permanent staff from central government, academia, and consultancies with PhD interns and specialist contractors. Together, we bring decades of experience and a wide range of perspectives to the design and delivery of robust, policy-relevant evaluation.

We work in partnership with the Cabinet Office's Evaluation Task Force (ETF) to ensure robust evidence underpins government spending decisions. ESU staff sit on the Evaluation Trials Advice Panel, and the ETF regularly signposts departments to us for guidance and delivery support.

We also work alongside policy teams across government to help civil servants tackle complex policy challenges, drawing on a wide network of academic and external expertise.

To put this work into perspective, here are some case studies of the type of work we do:

CASE STUDY: Improving support for survivors of domestic abuse

Sanctuary schemes are a form of safe accommodation enabling domestic abuse survivors to remain in their own home if safe to do so. Delivery varies considerably across England and there is limited insight into how consistently survivors are supported in these schemes. ESU is working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to scope and deliver an evaluation to provide clarity and deepen understanding of this variation and how to improve consistency, including how support to survivors could be strengthened. We're also delivering a toolkit that local authorities can use to improve their own sanctuary scheme provision.

CASE STUDY: Modernising policing with video technology

Working with the College of Policing, we evaluated the trial of enhanced video response (EVR) by Avon and Somerset Police following a successful pilot with Dorset Police. This system allows officers to handle appropriate non-emergency calls via two-way video rather than attending in person. It's led to a reduction in response times by over three days for non-emergency calls.

Our analysis confirmed that video response significantly reduced demand on police time while improving outcomes. Key benefits included:

- **Efficiency**: reduced travel times, quicker responses for victims and higher quality evidence provided shorter case durations, freeing up vital resources for fighting crime across the force.
- **Quality**: video investigations were more likely to comply with the Victims Code of Practice.
- **Wellbeing**: officers reported lower stress and higher job satisfaction.
- **Privacy**: victims valued the flexibility and privacy of a video call over a physical police visit.

We identified critical success factors, including robust training and internal communications, senior leadership support, and optimum team composition of mixing experienced and junior officers.

The College of Policing's Centre for Police Productivity is now supporting more police forces to use the practice.

How to get in touch

You can keep up to date with the ESU by finding us at the 'Open Innovation Team' page on LinkedIn or visiting our GOV.UK page.

We also work with policy professionals and analysts across government departments and ALBs. If you work in one of these areas and have an evaluation need, please email us at enquiries@evaluationservices.gov.uk

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!

Credited, connected and influential

SRA chair, Ed Dunn, highlights some of the ideas and questions discussed in this issue.

Welcome to this quarter's Research Matters. It covers practical evaluation plus AI, learning cultures and how we organise our work. What links the articles is a focus on ensuring social research is well used, not just well produced.

This is clear in our opening feature on the Evaluation Services Unit (ESU), set up in 2024 to help departments and arm's length bodies provide high-quality evaluation more quickly and consistently. The case studies show that 'what works' is rarely only technical. From strengthening sanctuary schemes for survivors of domestic abuse to exploring what enhanced video response could mean for policing, impact depends on practical choices: bringing evaluation in early, designing it with the right people, and making sure learning reaches decision-makers.

Another thread is trust, especially as AI tools accelerate and pressure for speed grows. With colleagues from Germany and the US, I've contributed to this edition in the Verian piece on safeguarding real voices in social research. We examine the growing interest in 'synthetic samples' and the temptation to treat modelled outputs as a substitute for speaking to people. AI-assisted approaches may have legitimate uses, but simulated responses cannot replace the methodological and democratic value of lived experience, particularly when research informs public policy. The task is to focus on sensible boundaries so that innovation strengthens credibility rather than undermining it.

That focus connects with Léa Brinon's reflection on participatory research, and her emphasis on learning through practice. She describes adapting language, activities and power dynamics with participants, rather than treating the method as fixed once the proposal is written. It's a timely reminder that reflexivity is not an optional extra but central to respectful, accessible and better research.

This edition also considers the conditions that help research quality thrive and those that quietly make it harder. Julian Molina and John Connolly's article on learning cultures will resonate across many organisations beyond government. As a former deputy head of Government Social Research (GSR), I recognise some of the pressures they describe: learning and development squeezed into gaps; uneven research literacy among commissioners and users of evidence; and the difficulty of sustaining standards across complex organisations with churn, tight timelines and competing priorities. I know from experience GSR works hard to enforce and support standards through networks and development, but the wider point holds: learning and development is more than courses or materials. It's the surrounding system, including time, incentives, governance and expectations, that makes good practice easier to sustain.

A similar lens, looking at the system and not just the method, is evident in the articles on organisational models and ways of working. Jonathan Sobczyk Boddington reflects on employee ownership in social research and what it can change about stewardship and decision-making. Matt Stedman shares early learning from IFF Research's four-day-week experiment, an attempt to protect deep thinking, wellbeing and learning while still achieving high-quality work. Together, they pose a question worth considering: what structures best support good research, ethically and sustainably, over the long term?

It wouldn't feel like spring without an eye on the political context. Robert Ford's preview of the May local and devolved elections is a helpful guide to the shifting terrain in which social research is commissioned, interpreted and sometimes contested. Our interview with the new chief social research officers in the Welsh Government offers a grounded view of leadership, including preparing for a new administration, building evaluation in from the start, and navigating the opportunities and risks of AI in day-to-day practice.

Closer to home, it's been brilliant to see the SRA member hub take off so quickly. My thanks to everyone who has been involved with this opportunity for connection, peer support and discussion across methods, ethics, accessibility and more. If you haven't had a look yet, do drop in.

I don't want you to miss the SRA annual conference – a highlight of our year for ideas, sharing practice and bringing our community together. Booking is now live, with early bird rates until 31 March. I hope you'll be able to join us in July.

My thanks to everyone who has contributed to this edition and to the editorial team for shaping it. I hope you enjoy reading it, and that it leaves you with practical ideas to try, alongside bigger questions about how we keep evidence credible, connected to lived experience and influential where it matters most.

How can I help you?

Safeguarding real voices in social research



By Ed Dunn, senior director, Verian and chair of the SRA; Sophia McDonnell, associate director and Kathryn Cooper, global head of behavioural and communications advisory, Verian

Synthetic samples in social research: safeguarding the role of real voices

Interest in 'synthetic samples', AI-generated responses designed to approximate survey data, has grown rapidly and prompted debate across the research community. These tools can support quicker, lighter touch forms of data generation, but they also raise important methodological, ethical and democratic questions. For research that informs public policy, understanding these implications is essential for maintaining credibility and public trust.

What synthetic samples can and cannot do

Synthetic samples are sometimes presented as a more sophisticated alternative to prompting a general-purpose AI model to answer a questionnaire. Both approaches generate statistically likely responses from existing data. Traditional methods such as imputation and weighting also draw on past information, but the key concern with AI modelled outputs is the opacity of their processes and the lag inherent in the data they rely on.

Social research seeks to capture lived experience, including complexity and change. Real participants reveal emerging attitudes and subtle shifts, while synthetic responses tend to mirror historical patterns and may miss new dynamics. Independent tests also show inconsistent and sometimes unpredictable error profiles.

Transparency, replicability and the integrity of evidence

Robust research depends on transparent data sources, analytical decisions and methodological choices. Synthetic sampling generally provides limited visibility across these areas. Information about training data and model settings is often incomplete or unavailable, and small prompt or configuration changes can produce noticeably different results. Frequent model updates add further difficulty for replication.

Even when shaped by domain specific datasets, core issues remain. Training data and model settings are often unclear, small configuration changes can alter outputs, and frequent model updates limit replication. This opacity makes it difficult to assess uncertainty, bias or error.

Bias and misrepresentation

AI models reflect the characteristics and limitations of the data they are trained on. If training datasets contain demographic or socio-economic biases, these may carry into synthetic outputs. This is particularly concerning for public policy research, where fairness and representativeness are essential.

Traditional data collection includes quality controls such as interviewer validation or engagement checks that help identify inconsistencies. With most surveys now online and requiring different safeguards, such checks remain possible. Synthetic approaches cannot offer comparable protections since outputs are generated algorithmically rather than reported by people. They risk diluting diversity, missing seldom-heard groups, or presenting a misleading sense of precision unsupported by transparent processes.

Democratic implications and Verian's position

Social research helps support democratic decision making by ensuring that people's experiences and views are heard. Replacing direct engagement with modelled responses has implications for that role. Synthetic data risk weakening input, output and throughput legitimacy, because insights stem from simulated rather than lived experience, may reflect underlying bias, and rely on opaque processes that reduce confidence in the decisions based on them.

Verian's recent position statement reflects these considerations. It recognises that AI can play a constructive role, particularly in testing, piloting and process assurance, but cannot replicate the authenticity or legitimacy of genuine public input. These themes were echoed at the recent Market Research Society (MRS) and Debating Group event at Portcullis House [London offices for MPs and their staff], at which contributors emphasised the importance of balancing innovation with the integrity of public evidence.

Appropriate uses: supplementary, not substitutive

Synthetic methods can add value when used carefully. They suit tasks such as testing questionnaires, supporting cognitive testing or contributing to controlled methodological experiments, applications that complement rather than replace real respondents. AI can also help generate probes or code data when guided clearly but cannot replace methodological learning dependent on human participants.

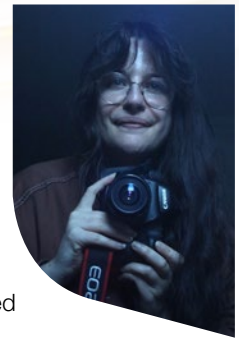
Conclusion and an invitation

AI can undoubtedly enhance aspects of research practice, but clear boundaries remain. Synthetic samples are not a substitute for genuine public participation, particularly when evidence informs public policy or democratic accountability. Real voices remain central to credible social research.

Please continue the conversation on the SRA member hub, where Verian senior director and SRA chair, Ed Dunn, has begun an active discussion about the future role of synthetic data in our field.

Being a responsive researcher in participatory research

By Léa Brinon, postgraduate researcher in social work, University of Strathclyde



Starting my PhD

Like most PhD students I was advised to start thinking about the best methodological fit to my research questions early on in my project. Although identifying the most appropriate research method was still a work in progress, I had developed a strong interest in the barriers parents with learning disabilities faced keeping their children within their care, and knew that I wanted to ask this group for their permission to take part in my project.

As a photographer I was already familiar with the potency of images to convey a range of emotions that words alone cannot carry. My previous involvement with community photography projects led me to select the participatory and art-based method 'photovoice' to work with parents. Participatory research includes participants in the different steps of the research process, moving from doing research **on** them to doing research **with** them. Photovoice invites participants to contribute to knowledge-making through taking images of their communities and surroundings.

The limits of theory

Neither wishing to undermine the importance of theory, nor calling on other researchers to cut corners when preparing to start work alongside participants, the literature that I read on participatory methods did not perfectly match what I experienced doing participatory research hands-on.

Moments of research

The habit of keeping a reflective journal to document key moments of research is a practice associated with, and recommended in, participatory research. I can think of many examples that would be worth including here from my experience with this project. Here are two illustrative examples exploring the experiential knowledge I developed working side-by-side with participants and how that interacted with theory.

The first occurred during the preliminary workshop on photovoice. I launched the workshop by introducing the benefits of group agreements to foster trust between participants. Although the parents who attended the session agreed with the concept, they also explained that trust should not be mentioned lightly. I refrained from using the word 'trust' when describing the project after that point, leaving it to the parents to decide on whether the term was appropriate.

The importance of language and representation is a key component of the theory of participatory research. In this instance, allowing participants to exert control over the way they are represented extended to how they envisaged the nature of the project itself.

The second referred to one of the activities I created to support parents with curating their images into a photographic exhibition. I instantly felt that parents were unsure about the purpose of the activity that I had designed.

I could have easily read their lack of engagement as an accessibility issue due to them being diagnosed as having a learning disability. However, allowing parents to express their frustration and take the initiative in letting one of the parents co-run the activity instead, turned the task into a meaningful experience that they all connected with as a group.

This example relates to the notion of positionality rooted in a participatory approach to knowledge-making. Acknowledging the privileges I benefited from as a researcher with no learning disabilities helped to avoid making assumptions about participants' abilities in practice.

Being a responsive researcher

These two examples illustrate the interdependence between the parents and myself as we began working on the project together.

Paying attention to ever-changing dynamics and emotions when conducting the research did not come as a choice but as necessary to ensure that the project came to fruition. I am very proud of the work we achieved together. The project culminated in a photographic exhibition and talk at my university campus led by the parents. Over 60 undergraduate students in social work attended the opening day of the exhibition.

Acknowledging the inter-relational nature of participatory research is not romanticising practice: levelling power dynamics in participatory research is tricky when the aim of research is to extract something from participants. This experience has sharpened my skills in being a responsive and responsible researcher, and means that I am continuing to work with the same parents beyond the initial project with a planned re-run of the exhibition in March.

Elections 2026

By Robert Ford, professor of political science, University of Manchester

On 7 May voters go to the polls in the largest set of elections to date in this UK parliamentary term, providing a crucial test for the struggling Labour government and an opportunity for opposition parties looking to turn polling popularity into strength in local and devolved government.

This bumper wave of elections includes devolved elections in Scotland and Wales, the latter with a brand-new electoral system, and local elections across much of England, with seats up in most of England's largest cities, including all seats on London's 32 borough councils and all 101 seats on Birmingham's city council, the largest local government district in England. The overarching story of these elections is the same everywhere – an unpopular Westminster government faces pain at the polls – but there are fascinating local sub-plots in each region and nation. The outcome of each and all of these elections could have implications for social researchers, as new parties with distinct agendas and priorities for social research gain ground and potentially form new administrations.

The Welsh Senedd elections look set to make headlines. Labour has dominated Welsh politics for over a century and has led every Welsh government since devolution began in 1999. But current opinion polls suggest the party could slump to third place or lower in elections to the new Senedd, which are being conducted for the first time using a new electoral system. Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party, is locked in a close race for first place with Reform UK. But even if Reform wins the most seats overall, it is unlikely to secure a majority and has fewer potential coalition partners than Plaid Cymru. The Welsh nationalists currently look very likely to lead their first ever government, either alone or in coalition with other parties of the left.

We are less likely to see dramatic changes in Scotland, where the Scottish National Party (SNP) has led every government since 2007. The SNP remains well ahead of all competitors in polling, and will likely form the next government, though it may fall short of a majority in the Scottish Parliament. The main story in Scotland is the race for second place – support for Scottish Labour, which surged in 2023-24, has slumped since the Starmer government took office in Westminster, while Reform UK is on the rise in Scottish polls. Neither of Nigel Farage's previous radical right parties – UKIP and the Brexit Party – ever gained traction in Scotland but Reform UK may become the largest unionist party and the official opposition to the SNP, displacing both Labour and the Conservatives.

English local elections will take place across a patchwork of local council areas and will be watched closely to see if the big trends in polling – the collapse of both traditional governing parties and the rise of radical alternatives on the right and the left – are reflected at the ballot box. Last May's contests were most painful for the Conservatives, as most of the seats up were in traditionally Tory areas and had last been contested in 2021, when the Conservatives were riding high in the polls. But this time it is Labour that has the most to lose, with contests in many of the big English cities which have hitherto been electoral strongholds for the party, while several parties are hoping to make gains.

The Greens will be hoping to make breakthroughs in inner London, and in parts of other large cities where their core electorate of younger graduates and ethnic minorities are constituents, while the Liberal Democrats will look to consolidate their hold on rural and suburban parts of southern England. But most attention will focus on Reform UK, which is aiming to top the poll in English local elections for a second year in a row.

With over 4,000 council seats in England up for election, and current polling suggesting that both Labour and the Conservatives will lose more than half of the seats they are defending, we could once again see dramatic shifts in the landscape of local government. And if the results for Labour prove dire in all three nations above, these elections could destabilise the already floundering premiership of Sir Keir Starmer and kick off yet another round of political upheaval at Westminster.

The SRA member hub: off to a flying start

Launched in January, our member hub is already proving to be a vibrant and thriving space for our community of social researchers, with more than 400 members joining in its first weeks.

The hub is an exclusive online space for SRA members, where researchers at every stage of their careers can connect, exchange knowledge, explore best practice and strengthen our collective identity as a trusted community of social research professionals.

Within the hub, members can access their benefits and engage directly with fellow researchers, creating opportunities to collaborate, share expertise and learn together.

Why join the hub

The hub has been shaped by what members consistently tell us they value most: meaningful connection, practical support and opportunities to learn from peers who understand the realities of social research.

Inside the hub you can:

- Access your SRA membership benefits in one place
- Join thoughtful discussions on ethics, methods, research practice, AI, evaluation and more
- Share and discover practical tools, guidance and resources through our library feature
- Connect with peers through member exclusive events our question-and-answer discussions
- Support your professional development through expert contributions
- Shape the future of the SRA by contributing to polls, feedback activities and co-created content

Whether you prefer to actively post or simply follow discussions and attend events that matter to you, there is a space to engage in a way that suits your time and interests.

What's happening in the hub

Since launch, the community has sparked lively and valuable conversations. Highlights include:

- Members of our Welsh contingent organising an in-person meet-up
- Researchers sharing advice on staying up to date with AI developments including some key takeaways from our recent event in January on 'Applications of AI in the Public Sector'
- What the biggest challenges are facing research professionals and teams including fundraising, outputs and ethics
- Peer support on approaches to value-for-money and cost-effectiveness analysis in programme evaluation

Alongside ongoing discussions, we've hosted several exclusive member events including:

- Applications of AI in the public sector
- Accessibility in research
- Quality in qualitative research
- Job hunting in social research

Be part of the conversation

The hub is more than a 'platform', it's a growing professional community. Member contributions will help shape the future direction of the SRA, ensuring it continues to reflect the expertise, priorities and ambitions of social researchers.

We're excited to see the community continue to grow and to learn from the ideas, experiences and insight our members bring.

LOG IN, JOIN THE CONVERSATION, AND HELP SHAPE THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL RESEARCH WITH THE SRA.

Beyond 'training materials': reflections on GSR learning cultures

By Julian Molina, senior lecturer in public policy, University of Bristol, and John Connolly interim pro vice chancellor (research) and vice dean of the Glasgow School for Business and Society, Glasgow Caledonian University

'Training materials are useful, but they do not, on their own, create the conditions for a sustainable or impactful learning culture. Government Social Research (GSR) needs a clearer framework for its ambitions to develop the social research profession. This would look like protected, funded time for development; influencing, consultancy and communication recognised as professional craft; policy colleagues equipped to commission and interpret research well; evaluation and theory of change designed from the outset; and a "publish by default" approach so evidence can be scrutinised and reused. The aim is not to ask individuals to do more on top of their existing workload. It is to make high standards easier to sustain.'

We reached this view by listening to GSR members reflect on their experiences and what they saw as the impact of social research within government. Our recently published research report – The future of the profession: the experience and impact of government social researchers – drew on discussions with 43 current and former GSR members. We sought to understand how GSR is experienced and governed, and what a sustainable future for the profession might require. Our interviews focused on GSR members' experience of working with policy teams, commissioning and managing projects, designing evaluations and working with evidence in politicised environments. A clear mood emerged: people were committed to work that delivers public value, and many took pride in producing careful and robust evidence under pressure. Yet learning was often described as something squeezed into gaps: important but treated as discretionary rather than designed into the system.

As we have written in Leadership without power: why the new government social research strategy won't deliver, we are concerned that the GSR 2025-2029 strategy will not realise its goals unless GSR leadership has clearer authority within the senior civil service. Additionally, in order for GSR to maximise its impact, developing a sustainable and well-resourced learning culture is crucially important.

A recurring theme was uneven research literacy on the policy side. Participants described unrealistic expectations, uncertainty about what good social research entails, and evaluation findings being used selectively or not at all. They also described 'DIY research': rapid surveys or interviews undertaken without quality assurance or research ethics, then handed to GSR colleagues to analyse quickly and make defensible. This does more than waste time. It normalises weaker standards, shifts risk on to researchers, and quietly reshapes what 'good evidence' comes to mean in a busy organisation.

Timing is another pressure point. Many researchers told us they were brought in late, after key choices had already narrowed what could be asked, which makes evaluation a retrofit rather than a tool for learning during delivery. With weak knowledge management and constant churn, lessons can be lost between projects and teams, and familiar problems reappear with surprising regularity. In those conditions, professional development becomes precarious: learning competes with delivery, and reflective practice is crowded out by constant reprioritisation. Role design compounds the challenge. Several participants described jobs drifting away from doing social research towards overseeing contracts, reducing opportunities to learn through hands-on work.

These are some reasons why we think the GSR 2025–2029 strategy needs to be firmer about how to achieve its goal of having GSR 'recognised as a community of expert researchers'. The strategy's language on learning is well intentioned yet modest. It stresses personal responsibility supported by training materials, and support for partners to understand the value of GSR. But our findings suggest this places too much weight on individual intent and too little on the environment that could make this possible: protected time, incentives that reward quality (not just speed), clear expectations for commissioning and evaluation, and governance that makes publication the default rather than the exception. Without those conditions, 'learning' risks becoming merely aspirational.

The strategy highlights ethical and practical uses of AI across the research pipeline, and government is developing a National School of Government and Public Services. Both signal that civil service capability and reskilling are on the agenda. In a faster, AI-informed environment, social researchers' judgements about evidence and evaluation design become all the more valuable. Social researchers are well placed to ask better questions, set workable timelines, design effective evaluations, and communicate findings so the public can scrutinise and build on them. A more ambitious and embedded learning culture would better support social researchers to achieve these goals.

Owning the mission: employee ownership in social research

By Jonathan Sobczyk Boddington, founder and group director, ImpactEd Group

Last year ImpactEd Group became employee owned. It is early days, but in this two-part article I want to suggest that employee ownership is worth considering for parts of the social research sector, and to explain why we believe it can connect purpose, people and commercial reality better. I will return in a year or so to share what we have learned in practice.

ImpactEd is an education-focused social research and evaluation consultancy. We work with schools, trusts and non-profits to understand what is happening, what is driving it, and what to do next to improve impact and sustainability.

The move into employee ownership took us into a question I had not previously examined closely: in a mission-led organisation, is there a better way to connect our purpose, our employees and our shareholders?

In commercial social research we spend a lot of time talking about values, culture and impact, and far less about ownership. Yet ownership quietly shapes what gets funded, what gets protected when budgets tighten, and how decisions get made when priorities collide.

Over time I have come to think there is a real (and often politely avoided) tension between three legitimate interests: employees who want security, voice and fair reward; a mission that needs long-term investment and integrity; and shareholders who reasonably expect stewardship of capital and a return.

Considering that tension feels especially timely in a world in which capital and ownership are increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Against that backdrop, employee ownership offers a credible alternative: spreading not only financial upside, but also voice and stewardship, across the people who build and run an organisation.

Our work depends on trust, relationships and the craft of good research and consultancy projects. Partners work with us because they believe we will tell them the truth, not just what is convenient. But there are always pressures: to prioritise delivery over methodological development; to invest in our bespoke data-collection tools and the software that underpins our work; to take on projects that pay well but can pull you off-mission; and to support projects that matter but are harder to fund.

> Becoming employee owned did not remove those trade-offs. It did change who the organisation is ultimately for

Becoming employee owned did not remove those trade-offs. It did change who the organisation is ultimately for. By placing a controlling shareholding in an Employee Ownership Trust (EOT), a structure used by well-known UK businesses such as the John Lewis Partnership and Go Ape, decisions are tested not just against this quarter's numbers, but against what keeps the organisation healthy and fair for the employee community over time.

Getting there required technical work on structure, valuation, tax and transaction mechanics. But the people steps mattered just as much. We convened an employee voice group in parallel to our commercial board so that employee perspectives were surfaced early and routinely, invited employees into board meetings, and shared board papers more widely.

What has changed most is how colleagues relate to the work itself. When researchers and evaluators are also owners, they engage differently with the tensions that define mission-led research. Questions about methodological rigour, about whether to invest in a slower but more robust approach, or about how to protect the integrity of findings under commercial pressure – these become shared responsibilities, not just management decisions. People are not simply delivering projects; they are stewarding the quality and credibility of the organisation's work on behalf of partners, the wider sector and each other.

That shift has been much more about maturity than perks. That said, practical benefits matter too: the model can enable an income tax-free bonus of up to £3,600 per employee each year, and it allows exiting shareholders to sell at an independently supported valuation, typically funded from future profits.

In the follow-up piece, I will look at lived experience: what changed day-to-day, what surprised us, and whether the promise holds up once the novelty wears off.

In the meantime, if employee ownership might be of interest to you and your business, I would be happy to share what we have learned so far.

Introducing the new chief social research officers in the Welsh Government

Rebecca (Becca) Sarasin and Catrin Awoyemi took up the post of chief social research officer for Wales in September. We spoke to Becca and Catrin to find out how they have been settling into their new role and their hopes and aspirations for the future of social research in the Welsh Government.

What led you both to this role?

Becca: I am a career social researcher driven by the impact that evidence can have on positive outcomes for people. I started as a trainee researcher in a research company mainly working on social research projects for public sector organisations across Wales. I joined the Welsh Government in 2004 and have led and developed a variety of research and analysis teams since then, providing research evidence to support different policy areas including health, housing and regeneration, environment, equalities and social justice, culture and sport.

Catrin: I started my career as a statistician in local government, then the Office for National Statistics and the Welsh Government. During a career break I worked as a freelance analyst and childminder. I returned to policy roles in the Welsh Government which gave me an insight into the application of evidence and the importance of social research in policymaking. Through managing research projects and additional personal learning, I became a badged member of the Government Social Research (GSR) profession.

How have your first six months as chief social research officers been?

Very busy! We have members of the GSR profession across all policy areas of the Welsh Government and we've been inspired by their dedication to impactful research. As well as working internally, we've been building relationships with the UK GSR heads of profession and research centres and academics so that we can learn from others to maximise the amount and quality of evidence available in Wales for policymaking.

What are your key priorities?

It became obvious very quickly that the biggest challenges facing us are Senedd reform and a new government in May 2026, and the opportunities and challenges posed by AI.

We want to be ready to support the incoming government with evidence for policymaking from day one and to help it build monitoring and evaluation into the new programme for government.

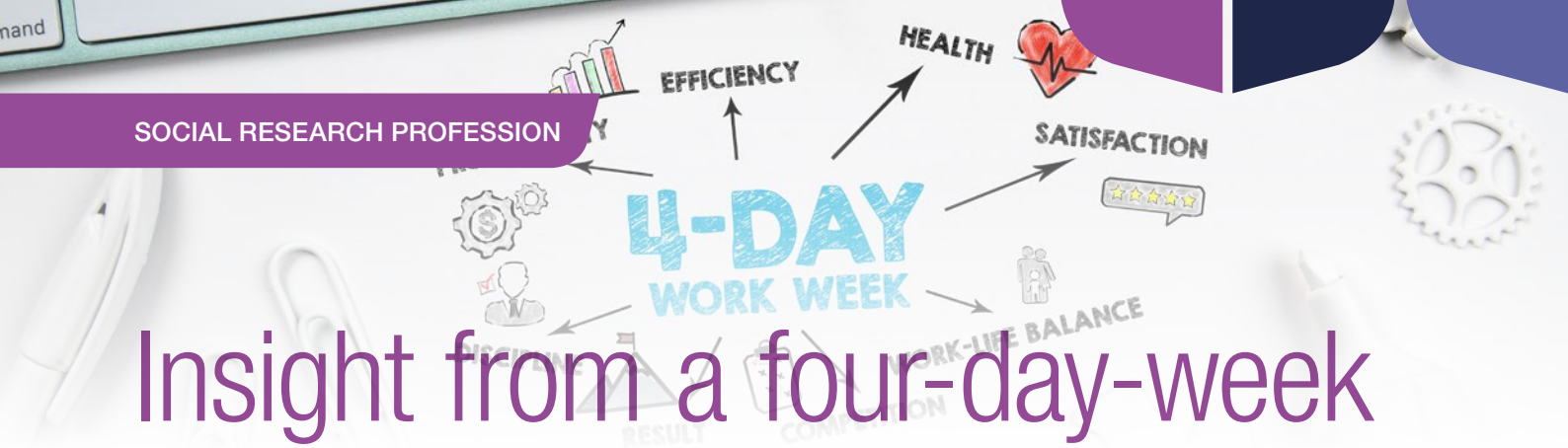
AI surrounds us now, in our work and daily lives. There are huge opportunities for research with AI, but only if we can make sure that we maintain the standards set out in the GSR code. We are learning and working with others to understand how and when we can use AI in research as well as how we advise others about using AI for research. Over time, we foresee that using AI will mean we can do more research with the resources that we have, making more impact.

How are you approaching the joint nature of the role?

This is our third role in a job-share together and we see the joint role as a strength – it brings two perspectives, two sets of experience, and a built-in sounding board for decision-making. Neither of us would have considered a role like this on our own as it would be difficult to balance (juggle!) our work and family lives. We get personal benefits from the job-share but the organisation benefits too.

What are your hopes and aspirations for the future of GSR in Wales?

We want to ensure the profession continues to be at the heart of policymaking in Wales and influences decisions to improve outcomes for people. We want to further develop the way we work with other analysts, especially economists, to strengthen evaluation in line with the UK Government Social Research Strategy 2025-2029. We can add most value by working with the wider research community. So we want to develop our relationships, including expanding our use of areas of research interest (ARI) publications, so that others can also contribute to policymaking in Wales.



Insight from a four-day-week experiment

By Matt Stedman, communications manager, IFF Research

Organisations are continually reviewing how their environments and practices can best support their impact, performance and people, with conversations about balance, choice and sustainability increasingly front of mind.

It's no surprise that, in this context, interest in the four-day-week has started to grow, underpinned by an exciting hypothesis: working a shorter week focused on what's produced, rather than the hours spent, can lead to improved productivity, wellbeing and job satisfaction.

With these considerations in mind, we decided to trial a four-day week at IFF Research, adopting a 100–80–100 model (100% of the pay, 80% of time, but still meeting 100% of our outputs). We wanted to see if it could support the kind of thoughtful, high-quality research our clients rely on, improve our working lives and team retention, all while maintaining or improving business performance.

Evolving ways of working

The social research sector has evolved. Projects often span multiple strands, audiences and methodologies to generate more comprehensive insight on complex issues. This arguably places a greater cognitive demand on researchers, increasing the intensity of the work.

At the same time, advances in technology (and most recently the evolution of widely accessible AI) have the potential to free up more time for this type of deeper thinking by easing the burden on repetitive tasks. What people spend most of their time doing on a daily basis is in the process of fundamentally changing.

These shifts provide an exciting opportunity to organise our work and time differently.

Recognising this, we were clear from the start that the trial needed to be driven by a collective sense of agency, as Jan Shury, CEO at IFF explains:

> *'It was crucial for us that we all approach the trial in a spirit of collaboration; this is less about organisations directing their team to work in a certain way and more about people choosing to work and collaborate differently.'*

Measuring performance

While obvious, for the model to work the business needs to continue to thrive in the quality of our research and financial performance. If either starts to suffer, then the trial is failing to meet the needs of the organisation and isn't sustainable.

Alongside this, we're tracking employee wellbeing closely too, using measures from our regular pulse surveys and indicators such as the average levels of sick leave. If the model requires people to burnout just to keep pace, then that means it isn't working either. Eventually, the quality of the work will suffer too.

Key lessons we've learned

Changing how we work has meant we've had to consider how we approach typical activities. Reworking the nature and purpose of meetings is a prime example. We started by evaluating each meeting's necessity, membership, frequency and duration. Due to the new working patterns, Monday and Friday have become meeting-free days, allowing more time for deeper work and focus.

We've had to be particularly mindful of equity across roles and teams. Not all research tasks compress in the same way, and a four-day week risks uneven pressure. Our guiding principle of autonomy means we've encouraged teams to shape their own structures to fit differing requirements.

Tighter weeks could mean that learning and development time is constrained. We've made a concerted effort to prevent this, such as establishing peer-to-peer troubleshooting groups and multiple learning channels to reduce contact time.

All these challenges can be heightened further with pressure points arising at particular times of the year for different teams. This is one of the reasons why we've extended the trial, which will have run for nine months by the end of March. Doing so allows us to assess how the model holds up during the various peaks and troughs for each department.

Encouragingly, so far, many colleagues have reported that shorter weeks have sharpened their focus. They leave less room for drift, help clarify what really matters, and prompt decisions on where energy is best spent. Due to a better sense of balance, people are also feeling healthier and happier too.

What comes next?

We don't yet know whether we'll adopt this model permanently, but it's been an insightful process. It's been interesting to apply the same curiosity that we bring to our research to ourselves. The experiment has forced us to confront questions about how we value work, measure contribution, and support people to do their best thinking. Whatever the eventual outcome, those lessons will endure.

Working, studying and work-life balance

By Rebecca Williams, researcher, National Centre for Social Research

The choice between work and studying is often seen as an either-or situation, but what if you choose to do both at the same time? Embarking on an additional two years of studying while working was not the path I envisioned for myself after finishing my undergraduate degree. However, as I benefit daily from the skills learned during this time, I realise it was the best choice I could have made.

The postgraduate world

After completing my undergraduate degree in sociology in 2021, it was time to enter a difficult job market that was affected by the ongoing consequences of the pandemic. I knew that I wanted to start a career in social research but finding a graduate job was difficult and it was an isolating time. Therefore, I decided to start a part-time MSc in data science. Studying part time gave me the flexibility to enter the workplace while continuing to enhance my technical and research skills.

I decided to pursue an MSc in data science because I had enjoyed the quantitative modules during my undergraduate degree and I thought that increasing my knowledge of different programming languages and data analysis techniques would be beneficial for the career I wanted.

Entering the workforce

A few months into my degree, I started working full time as a research assistant at the National Centre for Social Research. The steep learning curve of starting my first graduate job was intense on its own, but I was also balancing this with the demands of an MSc that was drastically different from my previous degree. However, the skills I learned were increasingly valuable in the field of social research. For example, I have been able to use the programming language R for handling complex data sets and conducting advanced data analysis, skills that I would not have had without doing a postgraduate degree.

Balancing work and study

With evenings and weekends dedicated to studying, time management became especially important. Typically, I would finish work and then dedicate a few hours to watching lectures or getting started on assignments. Being able to access all my lectures remotely was fantastic and I could plan catch-ups with lecturers during lunchtime to avoid conflict with work. I became frugal with my annual leave, saving it to be used before a deadline and there were occasions when assignments were finished late at night before commuting to work the next morning.

Learning and tips

While it was a busy and sometimes stressful period, it helped me become better at my job. Not only did I acquire new technical skills that I now use daily at work, but I also learned the importance of time management and prioritisation.

Here are some tips I learned along the way:

- Plan ahead – as soon as you know your deadlines, add these to the calendar and check for any conflict with work commitments
- Set small goals – break down your workload into manageable daily tasks so you don't feel overwhelmed
- Communicate – let your colleagues know about any busy periods so they understand if you need to take time off around these times
- Take care of yourself – make time for fun activities, work and studying are important but so is your wellbeing
- Use your support system – lean on family, friends or colleagues for motivation and help

Should you do it?

Deciding to do a postgraduate degree while working is a significant commitment and it is important to consider whether it is something that will fit your lifestyle. However, I found it incredibly rewarding and it contributed significantly to my personal growth. It helped me develop resilience and confidence in my ability to handle multiple responsibilities, which was particularly beneficial during the early stages of my career.

Making the choice to work and study will not only enhance your career prospects but will also benefit you personally. So if there is something you are passionate about, it is definitely worth considering.

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23 April: AI-assisted qualitative data analysis, with Dr Christina Silver

30 April & 1 May (2 afternoons): Creative methods in qualitative data collection, with Dr Nicole Brown

6 May: AI-assisted qualitative data analysis, with Dr Christina Silver

8 May: Introduction to qualitative interviewing, with Dr Karen Lumsden

12 May: Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

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26 & 27 May: Focus group design and moderation, with Dr Karen Lumsden

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5 June: AI-assisted qualitative data analysis, with Dr Christina Silver

24 June: Qualitative data analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

30 June: Foundations of qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

Quantitative

13 & 14 May: Questionnaire design, Dr Pamela Campanelli

15 May: Data management and visualisation with R, with Alexandru Cernat

11 June: Understanding statistical concepts and essential tests, with Valerija Kolbas

Other research skills

8 April: An introduction to behavioural science, with Dr Bev Bishop

8 April: Introduction to equity-based trauma informed research practice – day 1 (formerly how to design trauma-based and inclusive research), with Holly Taylor-Dunn and Skye Curtis-Guilhen

14 April: Ripple effect mapping (in person, in Birmingham), with Dr Holly Taylor-Dunn and Skye Curtis-Guilhen

15 April: Introduction to equity-based trauma informed research practice – day 2, with Holly Taylor-Dunn and Skye Curtis-Guilhen

21 April: Inclusive social research practice, with Dr Nena Foster and Hannah Marcus

22 & 23 April: Research with children and young people, with Berni Graham

27 April: Introduction to mixed methods research, with Dr Sarah Jasim and Dr Ruth Plackett

30 April & 1 May: Introduction to deliberative methods, with Sophie Reid

17 June: Research with children and young people (in person, in London), with Berni Graham.

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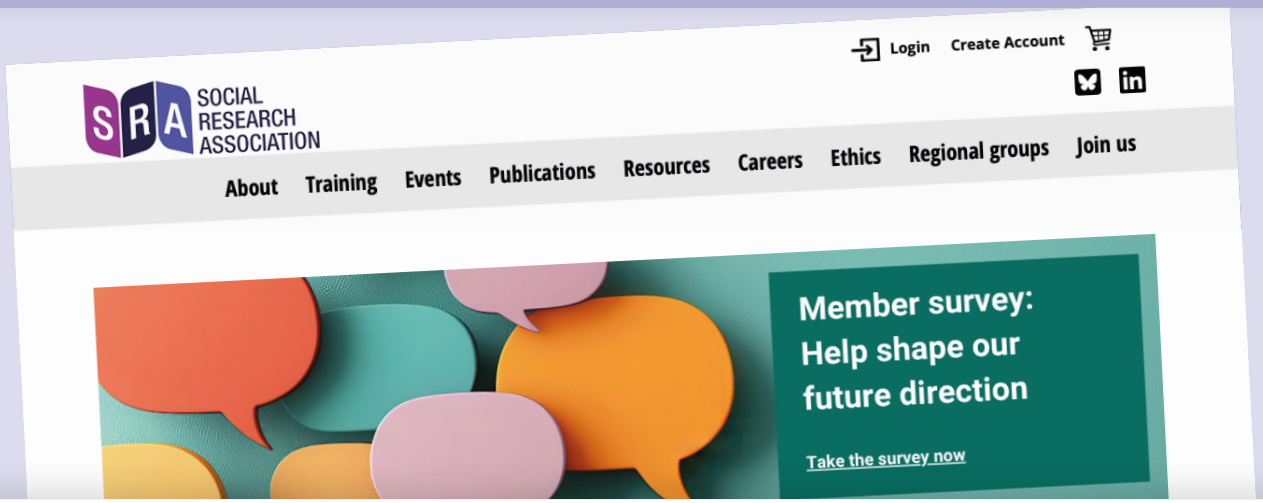

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