

Scaling up faster and simpler data access through a sustainable business model

Research Data Scotland 2025-26 business plan

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Purpose

This document shows Research Data Scotland's (RDS) objectives for 2025-26, describing how we will measure success in achieving those tasks, allocate budgets, and how our work will underpin the goals laid out in our longer-term strategy.

RDS vision

Our vision is to promote and advance health and social wellbeing in Scotland by enabling timely and cost-effective access to public sector data about people, places and businesses. Using this data, we facilitate collaborative data-driven research and innovation in the public good.

RDS mission

To achieve this vision, Research Data Scotland (RDS) will:

- coordinate access to the excellent data already collected about people, places, and businesses in Scotland
- facilitate working across boundaries to collaborate on common datasets
- enable access to the analytical tools researchers need to bring cutting edge insights that inform great decisions.
- We will facilitate research on different scales, from large international studies to simple and quick analyses of individual datasets, and support accredited researchers to use the latest data science and geospatial approaches.

RDS will work with data linkage partners and other data services in Scotland and help further develop Scotland's data infrastructure through the creation of a portfolio of research data assets – held securely with public support – and enable these datasets to be updated and accessed at pace. We will also introduce new services that help organisations access and use data so they can better understand the impact of their decisions with the aim of improving wellbeing and equality in Scotland.

Developments and achievements in 2024-25

In its [Programme for Government](#), the Scottish Government reinforced its four key priorities: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency, and ensuring high quality and sustainable public services. All of these are cross cutting and need collaboration of people and evidence, and linked data. The Programme for Government included the commitment to “optimise access to data by establishing rapid, high quality, federated access to health data for research and innovation”. Our role is to create the research data infrastructure where new insights from research and analysis using linked data can help to understand causes of challenge in these areas, and to be able to better measure and evaluate progress.

The Scottish Government – through the 2021-26 ADR Scotland programme – has funded RDS to work with Scottish Government and other public sector organisations in making a much wider range of Scottish data available for research, particularly to support new research on children and families. The programme also has supported RDS (leading the Alliance Technical Group) to transform how data is extracted from data controllers, deidentified and made connectable, and stored for reuse in the National Safe Haven. This work is still in development, and when ready for implementation, this approach will set the basis for us scaling up the number of datasets we can make available on the basis of robust public engagement and support from data controllers.

The Scottish Government funding through ADR Scotland has also enabled the publication of [synthetic datasets](#) that help researchers formulate their projects and build researcher skills and awareness in using population scale datasets. It was great to win the [ADR UK award](#) for outstanding teamwork with Scottish Government.

Reducing complexity requires standards. The RDS-led [renewal of the Safe Haven Charter](#) sets standards, which delivered on a commitment in the Scottish Government [Health and Care Data Strategy](#). As does the delivery of the [Researcher Access Service](#). Our [Systems Development Fund](#) has supported Scottish Safe Havens to assess their compliance with those standards, including the [SATRE standards](#) developed through the DARE UK Driver Projects programme. Our work to develop a draft framework for access to data by private sector organisations gives a basis, grounded in views from the public, for addressing a way through this important and sensitive use of data.

Two major reviews reinforced the importance of getting the full value from investment in collecting data. The [Sudlow review](#) and the Scottish Government [Standing Committee on Pandemic Preparedness](#) recommended moving to a single standardised data access and approvals process that would be part of a national research data service. This is both an endorsement of our direction of travel and a North Star for keeping us focussed on that mission.

The launch of our [Researcher Access Service](#) in April established an approach to work towards these goals. The service is a streamlined, end-to-end digital platform for researchers accessing secure data, and it has delivered an average time to research data access of 156 days compared to 643 days for the traditional pathways. A [data use register](#) was launched in November, as was a significantly improved [metadata catalogue](#). We have used structured feedback and data on the service to plan

significant change for version 2 of the Researcher Access Service, that we're expecting to launch in the first half of 2025.

Substantial UK Government investment in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Integrated Data Service and the NHS England Secure Data Environment network means we need to both keep up with and collaborate on best practice. We also need to identify and win funding to fill areas where the Scottish data offer is unique, as well as connecting data with ONS to deliver new insights. The [Connect 4](#) programme with ONS and the DARE UK programme has established a road map for this integration. We now need to work with ONS and other data services to make this a reality.

Indeed, RDS can't and won't act alone – we have a leadership role to bring data-led organisations across Scotland together for the shared outcome of making the most of our research data assets. Our Memorandums of Understanding with [Smart Data Foundry](#) and with the [Digital Health Institute](#) will lead to new insights from connecting financial data for the public good, and bringing data to bear on the biggest challenges facing health services.

Despite this UK Government investment, public finances are (and are expected to remain) extremely tight, and so we will be expected to take further costs out of the system and clearly demonstrate the value that we are bringing to our funders. An important part of this was establishing costs across our partners to help identify opportunities to reduce costs, ensure income covers our spending, and measure success.

The last year was much more stable staffing-wise, with seven people joining RDS and five who left. We ran a four-day week pilot, with most RDS staff reducing working hours from 35 to 32. This meant reviewing ways of working. Our Board helped us to do this, particularly when our funding was reduced during the year. We welcomed two new Board members, Sapna Marwaha and Alison Byrne.

There are a number of emerging areas that we will need to work through in 2025-26, such as the commitment of Scottish Government to further investment in RDS, the future scale of the ADR UK programme, use of GP or medical imaging data, moving to more efficient ways of curating data, ambitions of the UK Government to develop a National Data Library, scaling up arrangements to harness Artificial Intelligence and enacting further data protection legislation.

Short- and medium-term priorities

Back in 2021, the business case for RDS set out a vision of a single point of entry to Scottish data for research, and a service behind this that was quicker and more efficient than what was in place. While Covid held back RDS from getting started, and reductions in anticipated budget have delayed some of the expected progress, we have done a lot of the difficult work to develop the Researcher Access Service based upon achieving those aims. Our challenge now is to take this service to scale, to connect it with other services hosting secure data about Scottish people, places and businesses, and build on the expertise that exists around Scotland.

A connected service operating at scale and working in **collaboration** can attract investment from researchers from industry, universities and the public sector, bringing new jobs to Scotland and supporting economic growth. As well as making this service a reality, an ambition for the coming year is to speak as one system in ways that resonates with service users and funders alike, reducing the complexity of our message and our collective offer: to become one Scottish system, aligned with and a leader in the UK.

Our work is underpinned by five values which steer our decision making and clarify what we expect from one another every day: integrity, transparency, courage, collaboration and humility.

We are still building towards an optimum service, so we will need to display **humility** by listening to people's experiences, identifying emerging best practice, and using data to decide how we drive improvement. We will need to display **courage** to challenge the status quo building on the strong **collaborative** relationships we have built with data controllers, partners and service users by promoting inclusion and demonstrating **integrity** and **transparency**.

We need to take steps to ensure that this system remains financially sustainable by taking further costs out of research data processes. To support increasing research funding, we will need to continue to complement work by Scottish Government and partner organisations to position Scotland as a place with excellent expertise and the ability to test out approaches that develop new best practice, and a place with unique data resources that need support to continue to be curated.

Business plan 2025-26

RDS's key priorities for 2025-26 can be categorised into four core areas of work:

- Aligning approaches, building and demonstrating trustworthiness
- Shaping and delivering researcher services
- Unlocking Scotland's data
- A sustainable system

Aligning approaches, building and demonstrating trustworthiness

Our ambition remains to take complexity out of arrangements for reuse of data for research and analysis. We will do this by developing a single approvals panel for accessing data for scientific research in Scotland, supported by a set of aligned and transparent standards, policies and approaches. More high-quality research on public priorities will mean it is easier to demonstrate the impact that research has on improving the lives of people in Scotland.

The next year is about building on the positive relationships RDS has fostered with national and regional partners to make it easier for service users and funders to understand the Scottish system, and further move towards more aligned and integrated infrastructure and service delivery. This will take cost out of the system whilst helping service users to get the data they are looking for in quicker and more straightforward ways.

Priority objectives for 2025-26 are:

- Increase and diversify the Information Asset Owners using the Researcher Access Service panel to approve use of their data for research projects.
- For the Researcher Access Service, have at least 20 projects where data is delivered.

Key enabling objectives for 2025-26 are:

- Establish greater organisational alignment with delivery partners to simplify how RDS and partners are branded and collectively talk about our offer to researchers, as part of a unified Scottish research infrastructure.
- Integrate the national and regional safe havens into a unified system, linking national and regional models to support more efficient working, grant funding, and the RDS business case.
- Reduce the burden on the Public Benefit and Privacy Panels for scrutiny of scientific research requests by increasing the proportion of projects coming through the Researcher Access Service.
- Develop a model to simplify private sector use of health data for research.

- Publish a set of policies and standards that underpin the Researcher Access Service on our website, once agreed with partners.

Objectives for 2025-26 dependent on capacity are:

- Embed good practice in public engagement and involvement to build confidence in data research for public benefit by increasing transparency and addressing public views.

Priorities / Primary Key Performance Indicators:

Indicator	Baseline	Aim for 2025-26
Number of Researcher Access Service projects with data delivered	4	20
Number of Information Asset Owners with signed agreements to use data in the Researcher Access Service	1	6

Shaping and delivering researcher services

The focus for RDS remains to speed up and simplify arrangements for access to data. We are planning to do this by widening the range of activity coming through the Researcher Access Service and by continually improving the way this operates. Scaling up the number of datasets available through the Researcher Access Service and increasing the range of projects coming through a single point of entry for scientific research in Scotland are key elements of this ambition.

We also need to continue to learn where things could be done even better: by being connected to best practice elsewhere and using the data and intelligence from those using our services and those supporting researchers. This includes considering the introduction of new services where they have significant public value.

Priority objectives for 2025-26 are:

- Speed up each part of the time researchers spend to getting data: the time researchers spend completing an application for data access, the time it takes to get approvals for projects, and the time researchers wait for access to data in the National Safe Haven once their project has been approved.
- Increase the number of projects delivered through the Researcher Access Service, and be able to start to measure its impact, both in terms of academic publications and into Government policy, strategy or public service delivery.
- Establish a way of systematically capturing and using data on user satisfaction, experience and complaints to improve services.

Key enabling objectives for 2025-26 are:

- Increase the number of Scottish datasets included in the RDS metadata catalogue.

Objectives for 2025-26 dependent on capacity are:

- Increase availability and use of synthetic datasets by researchers.

Objectives for 2026-27 are:

- Develop and test a single enquiry form for all Scottish safe havens.
- Develop scope of what additional services would be valuable, including both monetary and societal benefits.

Primary Key Performance Indicators:

Indicator	Baseline	Aim for 2025-26
Median working days between a complete and feasible Researcher Access Service submission and approval of access	45	10
Median working days from Researcher Access Service panel approval to researcher access	39	29

Unlocking Scotland's data

In order to get a wider range of new and impactful insights from research, we need to scale up the number of datasets that are available and connectable through the National Safe Haven. The work done over the last year gives a firm basis for doing this in a way that is more efficient and commands support from the public and data controllers. Over the next year, we will set out our offer to new data controllers, working with them to unlock their data for research.

As more datasets are made available for research, the cost of maintaining and updating them increase. As such, we will use the investment we've made in establishing Reproducible Analytical Pipelines and explore how we reduce the steps to ingest new data to achieve further efficiencies for RDS, its partners and data controllers.

Unless researchers are aware of what data is available, its potential goes unrealised. As such, we need to build greater awareness of the Researcher Access Service and data available through the service, and promote data discovery tools such as the RDS metadata catalogue.

Having data as close to present day as possible is important as researchers try and understand the present and predict the future. Another goal for us is therefore to work with Information Asset Owners to reduce the time taken to update datasets.

Priority objectives for 2025-26 are:

- Put all data in the National Safe Haven on to a common basis, reducing the cost & effort taken to ingest datasets.
- Increase the range and quality of datasets available for research in the National Safe Haven.

- Increase engagement with the private sector, universities and research funding bodies by undertaking a marketing programme.

Key enabling objectives for 2025-26 are:

- Ensure relevant datasets are updated in the National Safe Haven within a year of being used in a statistical publication.
- Identify new data sourcing opportunities from research demand.

Objectives for 2026-27 are:

- Build on the work of the Connect 4 project to improve accessibility for researchers to data about Scottish people, places and businesses held by the Office for National Statistics.

Primary Key Performance Indicator:

Indicator	Baseline	Aim for 2025-26
Additional 10 datasets available via National Safe Haven	0	10

A sustainable system

To deliver the impact from data driven research, we need a financially sustainable system of curation and secure provision of that data. The majority of income for RDS and national partners in 2024-25 came from Scottish Government, with increasing amounts from UK Research Councils. The RDS Board set the ambition to bring in a third of income from longer term research programmes and a third from Researcher Access Service users.

As such, we need to increase the number of research projects our services support and contribute to, or lead a wider range of research programmes. We also need to continue to take cost out of the system. In doing so, we must build on our understanding of where costs fall across partners, to introduce a financial framework that ensures money gets to the places it is needed.

The development and scaling of our services should move us towards being seen as an international exemplar of a secure research data service.

Priority objectives for 2025-26 are:

- Scale up the number of projects coming through the Researcher Access Service to achieve £300k through the service.
- Secure income for partners from research grants (£500k for RDS), building even stronger and wider relationships with collaborators and ensuring we have Independent Research Organisation (IRO) status with the UKRI.
- Agree a business case for further multi-year investment by Scottish Government into infrastructure to support reuse of data for research and analysis.

Key enabling objectives for 2025-26 are:

- Introduce a financial framework for RDS, EPCC, Public Health Scotland and National Records of Scotland that governs the flow of money to support service delivery and infrastructure maintenance.
- Capacity management (people) to ensure delivery efficiency.

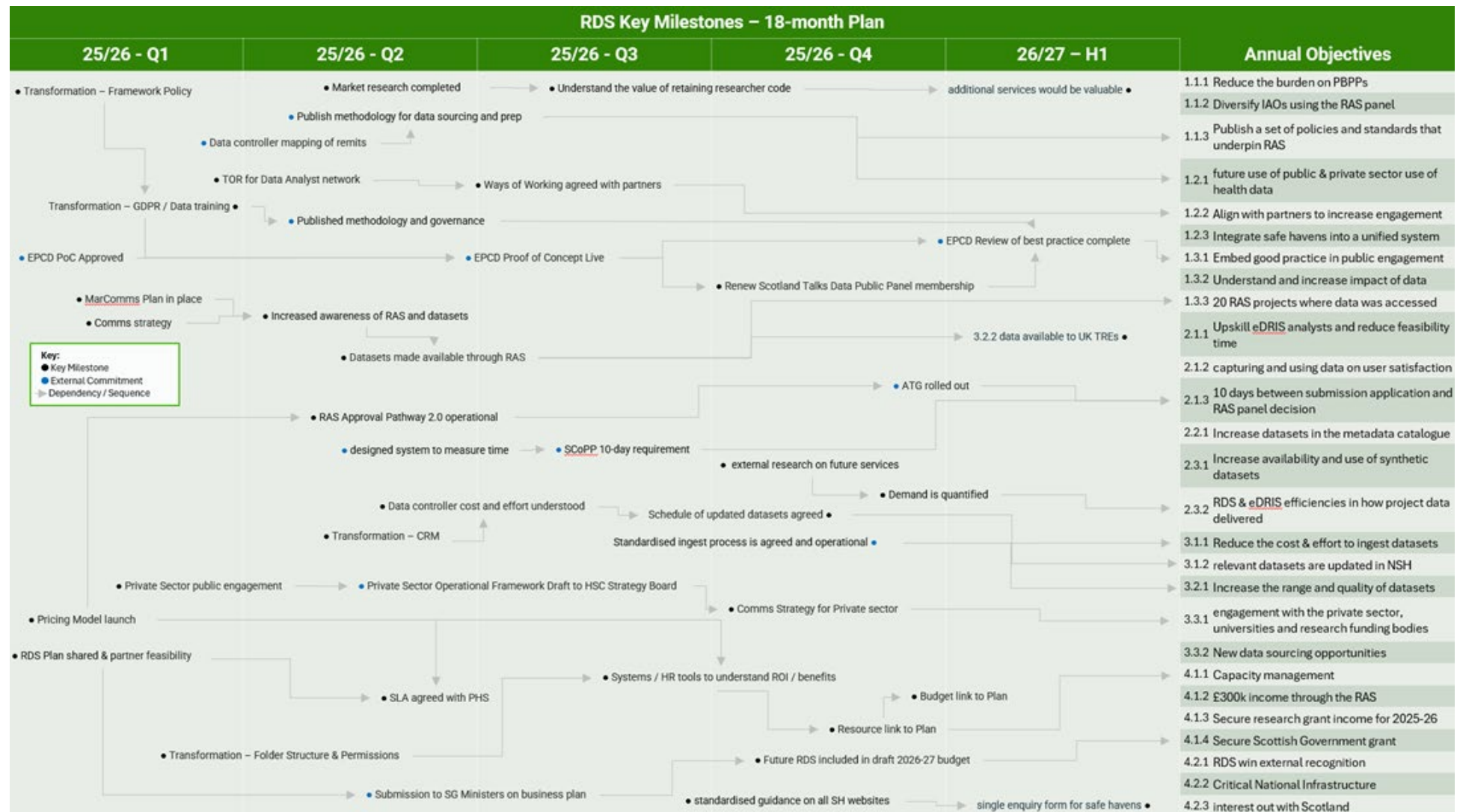
Objectives for 2025-26 dependent on capacity are:

- RDS wins external recognition for the contribution it is making to improving data for research.
- Keeping a watching brief on developments stemming from the Sudlow Review and considering how these may impact/influence development of RDS. In particular, explore the costs and benefits of the Researcher Access Service becoming critical national infrastructure, decide whether to pursue and if so get agreement.
- Increase the interest in doing data driven research from outwith Scotland.

Primary Key Performance Indicator:

Indicator	Baseline	Aim for 2025-26
Total 25/26 income target from all income streams – Business Case, Grants, and Researcher Access Service	£0m	£3.8m

Research Data Scotland 2025-26 business plan timeline



Budgets

Income

The long-term aim for RDS is to diversify its income into three reliable sources: Scottish Government core funding, Grant Income from research bodies, and commercially from service delivery (for example from our Research Access Service). RDS expects to receive income from the following various sources in this financial year:

- £3.1m in core grant support from Scottish Government
- £640k funding for the ADR Scotland programme
- £225k income from research and collaboration projects
- £220k commercial income from our Research Access Service
- Total of £4.185m for the year 25/26

Expenditure

The income expected allows RDS to budget expenditure of £4.2m and will be spent as follows:

- Staffing £2.5m
- Project spend of £1.5m (down from £2.8m in 24/25)
- Operations/Governance £192k

Payroll figure assumes continued staffing of 35 posts (36 24/25) and includes £42k increase in employers National Insurance from 6 April 2025.

Project spending across our three main departments:

- Digital £1.3m,
- Partnerships £205k
- Data £22k,

A more detailed budget is shown on the next page

Reserves

Our reserves policy is to hold funds to cover at least six months of core expenditure. Our current annual budget for operational costs (excluding development and specific project spending) totals £2m, therefore our reserve fund retention target is £1m.

Year-end forecast

RDS has prepared its budget for the financial year to 31 March 2026 to maintain its current level of funds into 2026/27 as shown in the table below:

Research Data Scotland: Budget for the year 25/26	
Income	£
Scottish Government Core Grant	3,100,000
ADR funding via Scottish Government	640,000
Other Grant funding (research projects)	225,000
Commercial Income (Research Access Service)	<u>220,000</u>
Total Income	4,185,000
Expenditure	
RDS Staffing	2,545,975
Project costs: Digital/RAS development	722,000
Project costs: RAS support costs	564,000
Project costs: Data non-staff ADR costs	21,500
Project costs: Partnership and Communications	205,000
Operational costs	173,240
Governance costs	19,500
Total expenditure	<u>4,251,215</u>
Estimated loss for year*	<u>(66,215)</u>
<i>*£66k represents 2.5% of payroll and is expected to be saved during payroll movements in year.</i>	
Estimated brought forward funds 1 April 2025	Approx. £1m
Estimated funds held by RDS 31 March 2026	<u>Approx. £1m</u>
(RDS funds held in reserve are considered restricted for the purpose of its charitable aims)	