Leading change towards faster and simpler data access through a sustainable business model

Research Data Scotland: 2024-25 business plan

30 March 2024



Purpose

This document shows our priorities for 2024-25, describing how we will allocate budgets to those tasks, the performance we are aiming for, 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 access to public sector data about people, places and businesses: creating the conditions for collaborative data-driven research and innovation in the public good using that data.

RDS mission

To achieve our vision, Research Data Scotland (RDS) facilitates access to the excellent data already collected about people, places, and businesses in Scotland, helping researchers and analysts to access that data in a timely and cost-effective way, enabling collaborative work across boundaries to on common datasets, and access to the analytical tools they need to bring cutting edge insights that inform great decisions. We will enable research on different scales: from large international studies to simple and quick analyses of individual datasets, and support people to use the latest data science and geospatial approaches.

RDS is building a portfolio of research data assets that are held securely – with public support – and enable these datasets to be up to date and accessed at pace. RDS will introduce new services that help organisations to understand the impact of decisions they make and better hones their improvement of wellbeing and equalities.

Progress over the last year

We have made significant progress in the last year, with the input and support of our partner organisations. An independent review of RDS found that while Covid delayed the start up of the organisation, we have built strong relationships across organisations and are delivering well. It found that there is a need to further clarify ambitions and organisational purpose with users, and build a sustainable long-term organisation through diversifying sources of income.

Aligning approaches, demonstrating trustworthiness

Public engagement: we are only going to be successful if we demonstrate our trustworthiness to the public and data owners. Engaging with the public about what we're doing is a key part of this. So, launching the Scotland Talks Data public panel that we're jointly running with the Scotlish Centre for Administrative Data Research (SCADR) is an excellent development and has already proven useful across its eight



different meetings for testing changes to our Information Governance and on synthetic data.

We have also sponsored eight public engagement projects to explore approaches, and worked with the ScotPEN group of public engagement experts to reconvene an annual meeting to share best practice, and continue to contribute to the Public Engagement in Data Research Initiative (PEDRI) led by Health Data Research UK (HDR UK), support public engagement in the Data and Analytics Research Environments (DARE-UK) programme, and in the Understanding Patient Data programme.

Safe Havens: An important part of the Scottish Government health and care data strategy was in setting standards for the network of Safe Havens, that would better allow data sharing for research in the public good.

There have also been wider developments, such as significant investment in England, which affect the environment in which the safe havens are operating. The six projects in the first round of our system development fund are supporting this alignment across the safe havens, particularly in helping them to move to common technical standards. We've been monitoring first round of projects, all of which completed by the end of 2023 and were presented at a showcase in early 2024. We have agreed £300k of funding for the second round of the fund to build on this aim.

We are starting to codify those standards into a revised Safe Haven Charter. This will complement our shared vision of the future approach to federated data access across Scotland with the ambition of providing a coordinated access point for researchers accessing data held anywhere in the network as part of the Researcher Access Service and filling in geographical gaps in health data coverage.

Industry access to data: data driven innovation in healthcare often happens best when shared teams of NHS, industry and academia are collaborating using common datasets. At the start of the year RDS published an expert review on commercial access to data and undertook stakeholder engagement with industry, mapped current arrangements for industry access to data, as well as planning for how this could be piloted in the future. We then drafted an aligned policy for this across the safe haven network. We have worked closely with Scottish Government in this to align with principles and recommendations for an independent review of this area.

Communications and engagement with users, the public and other stakeholders have to be at the heart of how we drive the changes we are putting in place. Three targeted monthly newsletters have been developed and delivered (one each for users/researchers, partners, and more general interest).

We are building awareness and understanding of RDS's role and mission, so have had a presence at 20 relevant conferences, wider engagement including at the Scottish Parliament. We ran two hybrid partner forum meetings to build our crossorganisational team behind a common purpose. developed core materials including a new website (including 70 blog posts and news stories and five animations), a slide deck and briefing paper.

Shaping and delivering researcher services

Work has been moving at pace in the lead up to the launch of our first **Researcher Access Service** in March 2024. Through the Researcher Access Service, researchers



will access data via a faster, simpler, more intuitive digital application, speeding up their work and allowing them to generate more insights that improve the lives of people living in Scotland - a core deliverable of our business case.

This is tangible progress and central to our mission.

We have reviewed the end to end process for researchers accessing data, achieved buy in for improvement and started delivering on that. This began with the redevelopment of our website, relaunched in May 2023 and now includes a shared online enquiry service with the eDRIS team. We continue to streamline services across the system.

This is a brand new service for RDS delivered in collaboration with our service partners, and we're designing it specifically around the needs of researchers and data users. We have established an RDS **user engagement network** to get user views directly into shaping the services we're putting in place.

An area cited by researchers as a primary reason for delays to access was arrangements for approving data sharing. RDS led a **review of operations of data approvals** processes, made a set of recommendations that should reduce the friction for researchers and those operating data approvals, but without reducing scrutiny. We are starting to support the approvals panels in making changes.

Data management: Some of the current arrangements for the way data is stored, managed and how it is provisioned for research are inefficient and causing significant delay for researchers. Partners from Scottish Government, National Records of Scotland (NRS) and The Edinburgh Parallel Computing Centre (EPCC), led by RDS, came together to identify and agree ways to improve the way this is done. We are now working with them to implement those changes as a significant contribution to speed up data access.

Unlocking Scotland's data

RDS is expanding its work around people including health and other administrative data, businesses and places and we have developed a prioritisation approach to sourcing new data. This is a phased approach and will grow over time.

RDS is proud to have started supporting the delivery of the **ADR Scotland programme** - a UKRI funded initiative that aims to improve decision making in Governments through using admin data to support evidence-based policy making. The role RDS is taking focusses on ingesting and updating datasets for researcher access, and we have recruited a suitable team to undertake the work. RDS is working closely with the existing Scottish partnership to scale up the portfolio of de-identified, linkable datasets in the National Safe Haven in particular the pupil census, and health and wellbeing census.

Speed of approvals for data access is the issue most researchers complain about, and we know that data approval panels are concerned that in some cases researchers have not fully articulated their research plans. RDS agreed a new **Information Governance** approach with PHS where projects which have low risk could be fast tracked. We have worked with the eDRIS team to plan for its introduction as part of the Researcher Access Service.



We have built upon this to develop an approach based on the concept of **effective anonymisation**: i.e. using <u>Five Safes framework</u>, but moving from safe projects to safe programmes/portfolios and when data is part of an approved research portfolio, it is effectively anonymised speeding up approvals and reducing burden on researchers. This has been agreed in principle with SG for use with their research datasets, and we are now taking this approach to other data controllers.

RDS established an **Information Governance steering group** of data owners to oversee the changes to access arrangements we collectively want to put in place, as we can't do this without their buy in.

Synthetic datasets can enable researchers to quickly get a clearer view of the value of using real data and to enable researchers to develop code while waiting for approvals. RDS continues to lead the synthetic data community in Scotland behind our shared strategy. We've approved plans for RDS to take over the management and maintenance of the Synthpop tool and website to ensure that it remains viable. We have funded three projects to test approaches to delivering and using synthetic datasets, and are starting to look at bias concerns raised by public panel around using synthetic data.

Significant datasets about Scottish citizens and businesses are held by UK Government organisations. RDS has enabled data to be delivered to Scottish Government and building on this with the Office for National Statistics on a pilot project to improve the range and interconnectivity of data on Scottish businesses. We have also taken the first steps to make data linking Scottish post-school learning with work and welfare [the LEO dataset], which we're expecting to make available in summer 2024.

A sustainable system

To set up arrangements for ongoing service delivery, we have developed formal agreements with Public Health Scotland (PHS) and Scottish Government. We have established a **target operating model** that will consist of six services:-

- A data sourcing and curation service
- A researcher access service
- An analytical service
- A 3rd party indexing service
- A secure data hosting service
- A RDS corporate service

Blueprints for each of these services are being established in collaboration with our delivery partners as part of the Scottish Data for Research Alliance.

We have developed a desired model for the **longer term financial sustainability** for RDS beyond our initial funding period which balances SG funding as core funding, programme / grant funding from UK research councils and others (e.g. EU Horizon funding and other foundations/charities) and fees for using our services.

As part of this, we have applied to secure **Independent Research Organisation (IRO) status** with UK Research and Innovation which would enable RDS to lead collaborative research bids for funding relevant to RDS's mission. And we have contributed to a



successful bid with ESRC to make Scottish census data available for research, and to bids across Scottish Safe Havens.

We have worked with the eDRIS team to think through an approach on pricing of the Researcher Access Service.

RDS has put the relationships with its **partners** on a stronger footing by putting in place more formal agreements, such as memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with SAIL and SCADR and an MoU for the ADR Scotland programme, and have other agreements in development.

We are only able to do this work with a **capable and motivated workforce** held to account by an effective Board. We have recruited and onboarded 19 new staff, with a total of 38 employees at the end of March 2024. Our first employee survey had a participation rate of over 90% and a staff engagement index of over 80%, with over 80% of staff submitting comments about what they loved about working in RDS and what they would like to see change. We established a monthly corporate Management Group and org wide approach to managing programmes and projects based on our collective best practice. And we have refreshed the **RDS Board**, bringing in two new Board Advisors: Emma Gordon, Director of ADR-UK and Janet Egdell, Chief Executive of National Records of Scotland.

Short and medium term priorities

We are in the second half of the system transformation funded by Scottish Government and we've moved into operational delivery. In 2024-25, our focus has to be on establishing the fundamentals of a high performing system that reduces the friction for those who use and operate the data access system, improving service quality and efficiency whilst ensuring data is safe, secure and governed appropriately . It is the year where we use the reviews of how things work here and overseas, the user and public engagement and service design work to make that transformation real. Over the coming year we need to turn the foundations of sustainability into tangible pricing and commercial arrangements, and formal agreements with delivery partners that can be stress tested during 2025-26. And it will be vital to continue to deliver on commitments to Scottish Government, ADR-UK and other funders.

It is clear that the transformation won't be complete by March 2025 or even March 2026. We will have a high performing national service, and will move further towards the vision of a single entry point for researchers wanting data about people, places and businesses in Scotland; In doing so we will need to use feedback to continue to improve speed, quality and efficiency of the service enabling an increase in projects delivered.

The RDS strategy set a direction to March 2026, and this business plan reflects how we will deliver what that strategy laid out. However, an review of RDS in late 2023 found that, while some really good progress has been made, the Covid pandemic and reductions in expected budget have delayed some of the expected progress. As such, this business plan tries to set expectations about the pace at which our vision can be realised.



We will need to refresh our strategy that will focus on broadening the range of users, datasets and delivery partners, attract investment into Scotland, and support organisation in public value to Scottish people through new data insights and innovation.

We will need to draw on RDS's values: promoting inclusion and demonstrating **integrity** and **transparency** will breed trust in RDS with data controllers, partners and service users. This together with **courage** will be vital to agree and implement standard policies on data access by industry, on how data is managed/linked, and on data approval operations: making the persuasive case for reform in situations where people have established views and practices.

We will work in **collaboration** with and through partners across Scotland and the UK to ensure that we have well functioning components that underpin the full national Researcher Access Service and the ADR Scotland programme. In doing this, we will need to be forensic in understanding cost so that our enduring services are efficient.

We will need to display **humility** - evaluating best international practice, using feedback and performance data to improve delivery, and looking at how we organise and manage our work to give high levels of job satisfaction whilst delivering to time.

Aligning approaches, demonstrating trustworthiness

Alignment and clarity of policies and approaches to accessing data across Scotland and the UK will make it easier for the public to understand what happens with their data, reducing time and cost for researchers. Public engagement will continue to underpin this and indeed all the work we do, and be undertaken in conjunction with our partners. With the significant changes being delivered across the year, communication with delivery partners, users, the public and other stakeholders will be vital.

We will first build on existing strong relationships within Scotland, in particular Regional Safe Havens, Scotlish Government and National Records of Scotland to shape Scotland wide approaches. We will position Scotland as a well advanced and coordinated system to attract investment to trial further international best practice that could then become standard across the UK.

Key deliverables for 2024-25 are to:-

- Refresh the Scottish Safe Haven Charter that sets common standards, approaches and policies for all Scottish Safe Havens in ways that build on the work of DARE UK and are trusted by stakeholders.
- Develop and agree a service model for a single point of access to a Scotlandwide federation of Safe Havens, and a delivery plan for its implementation.
- Work with Scottish Government and the Scottish Safe Haven Network to agree and implement a policy on data access by industry;



- Continue to evolve arrangements for public engagement through Scotland
 Talks Data panel run in partnership with the Scottish Centre for Administrative
 Data Research (SCADR) and other activities that encourage public engagement
 and transparency around projects and activities;
- Support National Records of Scotland (NRS) to improve their indexing capability, in particular to enable the connection to data on businesses and places.

Likely deliverables for future years are therefore to:-

- Work with other Scottish organisations to promote our services across the UK and internationally, and attract investment into Scotland
- Look to develop further partnership arrangements with other organisations in Scotland who provide data access services, both with the intention of federating data, and of enhancing the range of services available.

Shaping and delivering researcher services

RDS has moved into delivering services following the launch of the first iteration of the RDS Researcher Access Service and will use continual feedback to develop that service. Our continued and relentless focus will be on implementing the changes needed to reduce the friction in the system: simplifying and aligning where possible to speed up research data access. This will include working with the data approvals panels to get to a sustainable way of working that continues to demonstrate trustworthiness. This will reduce the burden on those governing access to data for research.

Once we've enhanced the data offering and streamlined the provisioning of data via the National Safe Haven, we will scope and deliver new services that support organisations to make positive change and better decisions with data

Key deliverables for 2024-25 are to:-

- Run the first iteration of the Researcher Access Service, building the user base through targeted communications, engagement and fund to support high value early adopters;
- Develop the Researcher Access Service to be fully operational by Spring 2025;
- Agree and implement an effective anonymisation approach to information governance for scientific research.
- Work with Scotland's national data approvals panels to implement change, digitize processes and adopt a scalable, sustainable operations model
- Support eDRIS in business development for the data sets in the Researcher Access Service, as well as other areas such as Scottish Medical Imaging, planning for how to align this with the Researcher Access Service
- Oversee improvements in the user experience of working with data in the National Safe Haven collaboratively with EPCC and eDRIS

Likely deliverables for future years are therefore to:-



- Keep and extend the range of users moving from a predominantly serving academic teams to providing services to public, third and private sector organisations. We'd use this to build the scale that we're working at to 64 projects granted access to data during 2025-26 and over 100 projects by 2028
- Scope and deliver new services, such as an analytical support service for organisations who need this, a measuring impact service, and a service to support organisations to make change happen through data driven innovation
- Commission and oversee further developments to the National Safe Haven that widen benefits to users and further improve efficiency.
- Continue to take steps to standardise approaches to access to data for research across the Scottish public sector
- Working with partners to better train users of RDS's services and datasets in how to create public value from them.

Unlocking Scotland's data

Our ambition is to build access to a portfolio of data assets around people, places, and businesses in Scotland, that best meet user needs and are sustainable. In turn, this data needs to be governed, stored and moved in ways that allow a quick route for researchers to access that data and minimise the friction to people across the system. We now need to build on the work done to review how data is stored and linked, and how data approvals work to deliver the changes and benefits to data controllers, approvals bodies, data service providers as well as researchers themselves.

We will use the efficiencies these changes bring and our data prioritisation approach to step up the engagement with new data controllers and keep existing data series updated. We will start with the datasets where we know there is the most significant user demand and easier to source, and then broaden to other high worth datasets and creation of new valuable research resources using these data.

Key deliverables for 2024-25 are to:-

- Establish an enduring RDS data sourcing and curation service, working in collaboration with partners that will source, ingest, and update datasets that continue to be well used; the service will include working with Scottish Government as part of the ADR Scotland programme.
- Implement changes to the way that data is held, managed and linked following the review by Scottish Data for Research Alliance partners.
- In collaboration with partners, deliver high value datasets through the ADR Scotland programme, in health and with other data controllers, and establish the Cen-sable project.
- Agree an approach with the Office for National Statistics to for data sharing for research programmes using data about Scottish people, places and business;
- Make the first synthetic datasets available in the National Safe Haven, and move to bring "findable" synthetic data creation into the standard data ingestion process.



Likely deliverables for future years are therefore to:-

- Further simplify and standardise the process for data acquisition, in particular our offer to data owners to work with them, and support data quality improvements as part of the data preparation process.
- Further automate the process of data ingestion with a focus on improving the timeliness, regularity and findability of the data held through RDS.
- Move forward with widening the range of data available for research based upon the requirements of Government through the ADR Scotland programme, the RDS strategy and a clear understanding of user demand. To build up to 80-100 datasets available by 2030.
- Establish further standing portfolio or cohort datasets based upon user feedback, aligning with existing pertinent research data assets.
- Enable connections between people, places, households and businesses, building on the CURL linkage between addresses and people;
- Offer a wider range of data to researchers through the National Safe Haven by federating data with the Regional Safe Havens, the Office for National Statistics, and eventually other significant holders of relevant Scottish data.

A sustainable system

The focus for 2024-25 will be to start to establish the mix of funding required to support longer-term service delivery and system outcomes. This will mean continuing to diversify the funding for RDS and the Scottish data for research system, and preparing to implement new pricing and financial flows to partners in 2025-26 through formal agreements.

Once this is in place for national delivery partners, we will look to broaden the range of organisations whose data is available through the Researcher Access Service, supported with aligned policies, operational and financial arrangements.

Key deliverables for 2024-25 are to:

- Secure IRO status for RDS to allow the organisation to lead collaborative funding bids from UKRI;
- Build capability within RDS to win funding calls and lead collaborative funding bids with partners;
- Agreements in place with all key partners and new ones;
- Agree new pricing and commercial approach for the Researcher Access Service, including arrangements for money to flow across partners from this service;
- Draw together and secure agreement to a business case for extending funding from Scottish Government beyond March 2026;
- Scope out a project to integrate the RDS service within a collective Scottish data driven innovation offer to potential investors that is rooted in use of data for public benefit.



Likely deliverables for future years are therefore to:-

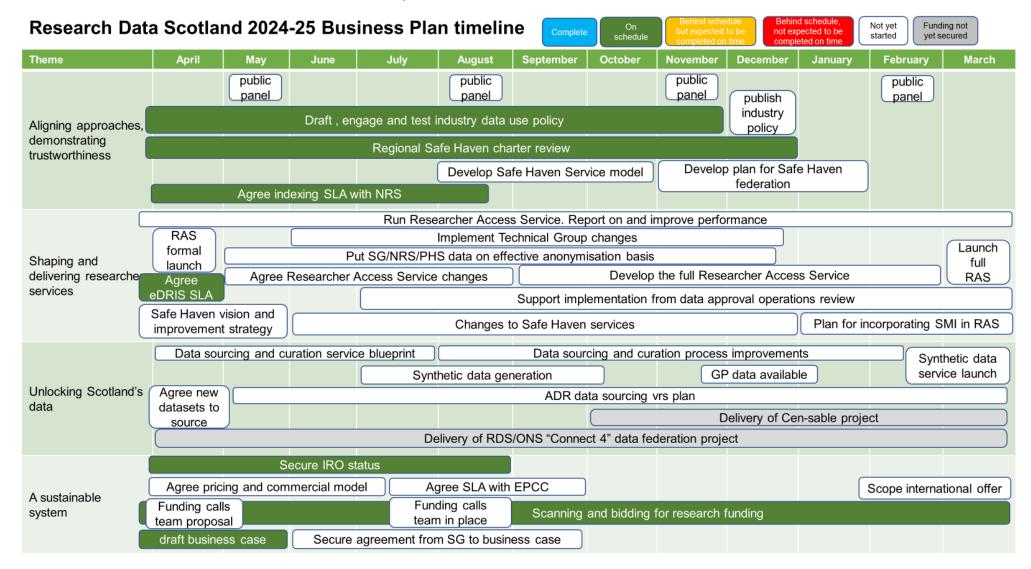
- Better measure and evaluate the impact that RDS has made, establishing further tangible examples of investment into Scotland because of the RDS offer.
- Agree service and financial arrangements for providing data federation services with Regional Safe Havens, the ONS, and then other organisations who have significant and relevant data holdings.
- Further broaden the range of funding for RDS and have established relationships and proposals as the basis for additional future funding
- Continue to scan for international best practice in keeping data safe, acting in trustworthy ways, and speeding up access to data.

To support the development of this sustainable system we will continue to develop our approaches to developing our people and culture; governance and business support; and performance and assurance.

The planned timeline for 2024-25 is shown on the next page.



Research Data Scotland 2024-25 business plan timeline



Budgets

Income

RDS will receive income from various sources in the financial year.

- · £4.6m in grants from Scottish Government,
- £650k for the ADR Scotland programme,
- £190k from other UKRI grant income
- £100k (plus) from RAS commercial income from Research Access Service¹
- £45k of other income
- £5.6m Total income

Expenditure

The budget will allow RDS to spend £5.6m on the following:

•	Staffing	£2.6m
•	Project Spend	£2.8m
•	Operations/Governance	£190k

Payroll figure assumes continued staffing of 36 posts and cost of living increase from 1 April 2024 in accordance with Scottish Government pay awards.

Project spending across our three main departments:

•	Digital	£2.1m,
•	Partnerships	£670k
•	Data	£58k,

A more detailed budget is shown on the next page

Reserves

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

¹ We have chosen £100k as a base line for a new service but income from this service may be higher in the first financial year and we expect it to be significantly higher in future financial years. The level of income will be closely linked to the level of costs we will distribute to eDRIS as a supplier/partner for the operational and development services. Should our income be higher than our base we may increase our payment to them proportionately without it affecting our bottom line.

Year-end forecast

RDS has prepared its budget for the financial year to 31 March 2025 to maintain its current level of funds into Y5 25/26.

Draft Y4 Budget (April to March 2025)	£	
Scottish Government Core Grant	3,300,000	
SG deferred funding from Y3 23/24	1,300,000	
SG Contribution for ADR Project	646,000	
Other UKRI grant income	185,000	
Commercial Income from RAS	100,000	
Other income (secondment)	45,000	
Total Income	5,573,000	
Payroll and staffing	2,623,000	
Project costs - Digital	2,127,000	
Project costs - Data and ADR	58,000	
Project costs - Partnerships	585,000	
Operational costs	167,000	
Governance costs	19,500	
Total spending	5,579,000	
Surplus/(Loss)	(7,000)	
Add - Retained funds brough fwd. April 24	979,000	
Target Reserves: Funds expected March 25	972,000	



Measuring success

KPIs are reported to the Research Data Scotland Board each quarter. Their intention is to help measure and manage progress against priorities, particularly around the implementation of the Research Access Service in 2024-25, but also against the RDS strategy.

The outcome measures in section 1 are tricky to measure. During summer 2023, we agreed a definition for these indicators and are currently making arrangements to collect the data on a regular basis.

Research Data Scotland: Key performance indicators

		Latest	Target performance		
1	Outcomes	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
1a	Published impact case studies	In development	Agree when indicator fixed	Agree when indicator fixed	Agree when indicator fixed
1b	No. citations to research from RDS data access	In development	Agree when indicator fixed	Agree when indicator fixed	Agree when indicator fixed
1c	No. publications from RDS data access	In development	Agree when indicator fixed	Agree when indicator fixed	Agree when indicator fixed
2	Researcher service -				
	enquiries	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
2a	Number of new enquiries per quarter	53	63	76	91
2b	Projects supplied with data per quarter	11	12	16	20
2c	Conversion rate: projects supplied with data as proportion of all enquiries	21%	19%	21%	22%
2d	Projects from non NHS or academic users	2%	2%	4%	5%
3	Researcher service – delivery times	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
3a			60	100	70



	Average project duration - Initial inquiry to researcher access (median days) ² (i) RAS ³ (ii) Other eDRIS	349	160		
3b	Initial inquiry to first Data Access panel submission (median days)		40	60	40
	(314	80		
3c	First Data Access panel submission to latest data access panel approval		10	30	20
	(median days)	344	30		
3d	Latest Data Access panel approval to researcher access (median days)		10	10	10
	, , ,	110	50		
4	Data offering	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
4a	Number of datasets available via eDRIS	36	50	65	80
4b	Number of synthetic datasets available	0	10	65	80
5	Partnerships / Communications	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
5a	Website traffic				
	Page views	6,318	6,950	7,645	8,410
	Users	1,154	1,270	1,397	1,537

⁴ Annual [2021-22] median for the Health and Social Care Public Benefit and Privacy Panel.



² Note that metric 3a isn't the sum of 3b-3d. Metrics 3a and 3d relate only to the projects where data was supplied in that period, whereas metric 3b relates to projects where the submission to the data access panel was made the that period, and metric 3c where data access panels approved projects in that period.

³ Note that in 2024-25, the Researcher Access Service is only for straightforward projects on limited group of datasets, with full service launched in spring 2025.

5b	Social media Engagement rate LinkedIn unique visitors Twitter followers	5.8% 1,082 977	5.8% 1,190 _{1,075}	5.8% 1,309 1,183	5.8% 1,440 1,301
5c	Newsletters New subscribers	58	64 ⁵	70	77
6	Finance	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
6a	% income from sourced other than Scottish Government	16%	27%	43%	To be agreed
6a	% income from sourced other than Scottish Government	16%	27%	43%	To be agreed
7	Net zero	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
6a	Kg CO2 per person per month (rolling average)	71.4	70	70	70

⁵ This is an ambitious target of 10% growth per quarter and we expect to potentially reach a saturation point in the future, as we are targeting a small community.



[Ends]

About Research Data Scotland

Research Data Scotland is unlocking the power of public sector data.

We help researchers find and make use of health, social care and administrative data to improve the lives of people in Scotland. Working in partnership, we do this by safely and securely widening the range of data available, creating new data assets and providing a single point of contact for effective access to public sector data.

We are a not-for-profit charitable organisation created and funded by Scottish Government. We are a partnership between Scottish Government, leading universities and public bodies, such as Public Health Scotland (PHS) and National Records Scotland (NRS).

www.researchdata.scot @RDS_Scotland

