Annex: ADR England Research Community Catalyst: Evaluation

Context

There is a strong history of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and ADR UK investing in policy-relevant data collection and infrastructure. ESRC and ADR UK programmes have increased the opportunities to incorporate administrative data and complementary datasets into the impact evaluation of public policy and practice, including through trials data and population studies. However, the potential of these assets is not being fully realised. The demand for high quality evaluation evidence, reliable data, and the technical expertise to generate actionable evidence within UK and devolved governments has increased significantly over the last decade. This increasing demand is evidenced by the creation of the Evaluation Task Force (ETF) in 2021 and is expected to continue.

The diversity of this demand is illustrated in the range of programmes supported by the ETF's recently awarded **Evaluation Accelerator Fund**. The type of input and evidence that policy makers require is also diversifying and becoming more nuanced with an increasing demand to evaluate what works in different contexts. Events such as the coronavirus pandemic and EU Exit have changed attitudes and expectations about how government can and should use data. There is also increasing recognition of the need to deliver at pace and integrate many different types of evidence and intelligence. Coupled with this, there remain longer-term policy agendas – namely net zero and levelling up – that require significant mobilisation of evidence, including impact evaluation of existing and historic policy.

Overview

Through this funding opportunity we are seeking to support researchers with expertise in evaluation and using administrative data to work with policy stakeholders. They will explore opportunities to harness existing data to evaluate public policy and practice. This includes using ADR England administrative data and appropriate complementary datasets, for example, population studies and research trials data.

An important challenge to improving evaluation of public policy interventions is the lack of awareness in both academia and government departments about what administrative data is available and how it can be used for policy evaluation. Building the capability and capacity of academia and government to work together to make best use of administrative data is an essential part of improving the evaluation of government programmes. It can help us understand if they deliver their desired outcomes and value for money.

ESRC, ADR UK and ETF are working together to support the academic and policy communities to realise the full potential of administrative data for policy evaluation. This aligns with ESRC's commitment to invest in understanding what works, ADR UK's strategy to drive up impactful use

of administrative data, and ETF's priority to put robust evaluation evidence at the heart of government decisions.

About ESRC

ESRC is the UK's largest funder of economic, social, behavioural and human data science. Economic, social and behavioural research provides an integrated approach to understanding how society interacts at every level, from the individual to whole systems and from the local to the global. ESRC research is designed to make a difference. It provides the evidence and independent expert insight necessary to understand how society and the economy are changing, how aspirations can be realised and how people, households, communities, businesses and governments can work to create positive change. Understanding what works in public policy and practice is an important part of the research ESRC funds. This includes how valuable datasets such as administrative data, trials data and population studies can be applied to understand the effectiveness of new and historic interventions.

About the Evaluation Task Force (ETF)

The Evaluation Task Force (ETF) is a joint Cabinet Office and His Majesty's Treasury (HMT) unit. The ETF works to improve people's lives by ensuring robust evidence on the effectiveness of policies and programmes sits at the heart of government spending decisions. The ETF's purpose is to drive continuous improvements in the way government programmes are evaluated in order to inform decisions on whether they should be continued, expanded, modified or stopped.

The ETF delivers a range of activities to tackle the main barriers to robust evaluations in government and foster a culture of evaluation and experimentation. These activities include:

- providing advice and support to HM Treasury Spending Teams, on the evidence and evaluation plans underpinning departments' spending proposals
- providing advice and support to government departments on designing and delivering robust impact evaluation
- encouraging and challenging departments to be transparent with their data and evaluation plans and findings
- building relationships with key stakeholders across government, including the policy, analytical and finance professions to promote evidence-based policy.

Objectives

The objectives for this grant are in line with those set out in the **main funding opportunity specification**. Below, you can read more details on how these objectives might be framed in the context of evaluation.

1.   Strategic research leadership

ADR UK, the ESRC and the ETF believe that administrative data has the power to unlock the answer to some of the most pressing questions for public policy. Under this objective, the grant holders will develop a strategy and research agenda that accelerates the use of administrative data. This will be done in collaboration with public policy stakeholders and should include ADR England and appropriate complementary data (for example, population studies and trials data) for conducting impact evaluations of public policy and interventions. The grant holders will also consider where there are significant gaps in the available linked administrative data and look to identify priority areas of data linkage for future exploration.

In developing an overall strategy, identifying and agreeing key research questions and exploring the extent to which they can be answered with existing data, grant holders will be expected to engage with the ETF, government departments (UK and devolved government) and intermediary evidence bodies These could include the What Works Network and ESRC-funded observatories, such as the International Public Policy Observatory and the Economics Observatory, to ensure stakeholder need and aligned activity is carefully considered.

2.   Build capacity for academic research using administrative data

The use of administrative data in policy evaluation is currently underdeveloped. The National Audit Office identified a number of key barriers to evaluation in government in their **2021 report**. To address this, the grant holders will build research community capability and capacity through development of training and resources. These will support researchers in using administrative data for policy and intervention evaluation purposes.

Applicants are encouraged to consider how training opportunities can be broadened to include policy makers and practitioners with an interest in data analysis for policy and intervention evaluation ("evaluation customers"). Building capacity in academia and creating a pipeline of researchers with an awareness of the value of administrative data, and the skills to exploit these sources, is an important objective. Grant holders will also be asked to provide training and development to two groups of relevant **UK Research and Innovation (UKRI Policy Fellows**:

- UKRI Policy Fellows 2023: Data and Evaluation (see **Appendix 1**)
- UKRI Policy Fellows 2023: What Works Innovation Fellowships (see **Appendix 1**)

This will require capacity in the grant team to consider the needs of the fellows in the core programme of capacity development, supporting their development, and delivering a set of activities informed specifically by the needs of the fellowship.

3.   Develop a diverse research community

Grant holders will build a community of researchers with interest and skills in the application of administrative data to impact evaluation of public policy. They will share knowledge and insights

and encourage collaborations across the research community. They will also encourage collaboration with relevant policy stakeholders as partners for researcher activity.

Grant holders will be expected to:

- grow the number of researchers addressing the challenges associated with the application of administrative data to the impact evaluation of public policy
- work with intermediary bodies such as What Works Centres, which focus on the effective evaluation and synthesis of evidence, to understand their needs and potential for collaboration
- undertake engagement and relationship building with policy makers who are seeking to evaluate effectively and efficiently.

Applicants should consider how they will build a community that supports a diversity of people, career stages and ideas. Activities may include, but are not limited to:

- mapping capability to identify priority areas or groups for community development
- tailored awareness-raising events and networking activity
- supporting thematic groups of academics and policy makers, e.g. administrative data in the evaluation of early intervention.

In consultation with the ETF, the successful team will also develop an output which supports policy makers to identify researchers with the relevant skills and experience to address pressing evaluation challenges.

4.   Address Research Priorities

As described in the **main funding opportunity specification**, the Evaluation Community Catalyst will administer the delegated research budget as a Test and Trial Fund to support demonstration projects and use cases to address public policy evaluation challenges. These are to include the application of ADR England linked administrative data and appropriate complementary datasets, for example population studies and research trials data.

The fund will seek to exploit administrative data in the evaluation of historic or current policy interventions that could help fill evidence gaps across high-priority policy areas. These will include, but are not limited to, the following UKRI research themes:

- **Building a Green Future**
- **Building a Secure and Resilient World**
- **Creating Opportunities, Improving Outcomes**
- **Securing Better Health, Ageing and Well-being**
- **Tackling Infection**.

Examples of the type of activity the fund will support include, but are not limited to

- integrating administrative data into the design of new evaluations and experiments
- using administrative data for retrospective evaluations of policies and interventions
- using administrative data to scope and set parameters for new evaluations.

The purpose of this fund will be to:

- deliver against areas of research and policy priority identified under Objective 1, and provide opportunities for the capacity and community built under Objectives 2 and 3 to advance the research agenda
- generate lessons learned in the utilisation of administrative data, and where appropriate complementary data (e.g., population studies and research trials data) in the evaluation of public policy initiatives/interventions
- generate learnings for the application of different methodological approaches to relevant administrative data
- support the community to work in partnership with policy stakeholders (UK Government, devolved government, local government, arms-length bodies and intermediary bodies) to realise the benefits of administrative data, and where appropriate complementary data, to policy evaluation challenges.

Projects funded through the Test and Trial Fund must undergo a competitive process led by the successful community catalyst team, following the principles of peer review, and comply with the **rules of full economic costing**. This will require a sufficiently funded administrative function as part of the award which will be costed for within the core grant. Funding partners should be consulted throughout the commissioning process to ensure best practice is followed. Projects funded are expected to engage with the wider programme of activities and report their progress and outcomes to the community catalysts. It is expected that the successful team will award projects by January 2025 at the latest with all funds spent by January 2026.

In addition to the delegated research budget, there is also funding available within the community catalyst core grant for the Evaluation Community Catalyst team to undertake their own small-scale research. Proposals should address the research priorities identified under Objective 1 and be consistent with the requirements of Objective 4. Funding available for the delegated research budget and community catalyst core grant are available in the **main funding opportunity specification**.

Applicants should consider opportunities for leveraging in additional funds to increase the scale of the commissioning pot:

- at fund level
- at individual project level.

Scope

Population of interest: The population will be determined by the policy intervention or evaluations of interest.

Collaboration: Collaboration and engagement with policy stakeholders including intermediary bodies will be essential at all stages of the programme, in order to address all of the objectives specified above. To support this, we:

- encourage the team to include a non-academic co-investigator from a policy stakeholder, for example a government department or intermediary body (see **UK Business, Third Sector and Government Body Co-Investigator Policy Guidance** for further details).
- expect clear plans for engagement and collaboration with policy stakeholders, for example government departments and or intermediary bodies in the delivery of the programme's four core objectives.

Datasets of interest:

There are a large number of datasets available. Relevant national level, cross-cutting linked datasets from the **ADR England flagship data** portfolio are available for research now.

The focus of this award is driving up the use of administrative data for policy evaluation. However, we recognise that in the context of policy evaluation, complementary datasets such as population studies and trials data have potential to increase the value of administrative data for this area of research and practice. As a result, this award will also support enhancing the understanding and application of complementary datasets which add value to the application of administrative data to evaluation challenges, for example:

- **Population Studies**: e.g. **Understanding Society**, the UK Household Longitudinal Study; the birth cohort studies managed by the **Centre for Longitudinal Studies**; cross-sectional surveys such as the **British Election Study**; support units for Census Longitudinal Studies in **England and Wales**, **Northern Ireland** and **Scotland**
- **Trials data:** trials data may be held by partners, such as policy partners (government departments) and intermediary bodies (What Works Centres). **Read an example of this**.

Support from ESRC and ETF for grant holders:

ESRC and ETF will support the Evaluation Community Catalyst in the following ways:

- Supporting the establishment of a Steering Group
- Being a member of both the relevant Steering Group and overarching Monitoring and Evaluation Group
- Contributing to a proposal on the sustainability of the outputs and momentum generated during the award, as well as recommendations for future strategic direction around the use and development of data and translation of evidence into practice.

- ETF can facilitate networking and engagement with analytical and policy teams in government departments, the central Government Analytical Function, and centres in the What Works Network.

Appendix 1

This Appendix Contains a list of specific opportunities within the UKRI Policy Fellowships in the area of Data and Evaluation, including What Works Innovation Fellowships.

- BEIS Research, Development and Innovation Analysis Fellowship

- Cabinet Office Data and Evaluation Policy Fellowship

- Cabinet Office Design and Knowledge Translation Fellowship

- DWP Model Development Fellow

- FCDO Economics, Data and Evaluation Fellowship

- MoJ Data and Evaluation Fellowship

- Department for the Economy - Evaluating Innovation Policy Research Fellowship

- NIC Improving Outcomes Economics and Applied Data Policy Fellowship

- Welsh Government Sustainable Futures Fellowship

- 10DS Improving Outcomes - Data and Evaluation Fellowship

- 10DS Economics and Data Science Fellowship

- DfT Urban Economics Fellow

- Centre for Homelessness Impact How Policing Can Add Value to Street Outreach Activities Fellowship

- College of Policing Sexism and Misogyny in Policing Behavioural Change Fellowship

- College of Policing Measuring Harm for Violence Against Women and Girls Social Research Fellowship

- Education Endowment Foundation Fellowship on Recruitment and Retention in Social Services Research

- Wales Centre for Public Policy Lived Experience Policy Fellowship

- Youth Futures Foundation – Understanding What Makes for Quality Work Fellowship