

People of Data

Administrative Data Research UK

Emma Gordon^{1,*}¹Director, Administrative Data Research UK, Swindon, UK*Correspondence: emma.gordon@esrc.ukri.org<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patter.2020.100010>

ADR UK is helping to transform the way researchers access the UK's wealth of administrative data, enabling government policy to be informed by the best evidence available. Emma shares her insights into the ADR UK approach to making this happen, explaining why building trust is central to the ADR UK mission.

I have spent my whole career analyzing different forms of data—initially in academia as a zoologist, then a social scientist, before joining the Civil Service as an analyst. As such, it is unarguable to me that evidence-based decision making is a good thing. In the context of government, this means that policy development *needs* good-quality evidence to underpin decision making.

The National Audit Office (NAO) has repeatedly highlighted the importance of evidence-based decision making at all levels of government and the problems that arise when data are inadequate. To quote from one of their recent reports: “Getting the right data in the right place at the right time is a fundamental driver of value for money in government: making services work for the people who use them, improving government's systems and processes, and supporting better decisions.”¹

Understanding why, in 2020, this still isn't happening, and what we can collectively do to change things, is what energizes me, because the prize is so big. Like a moth to a light, this is an issue I have been circling around for much of my career—both in academia and in government—getting closer and closer to being able to make a difference.

To the outsider, it would be natural to assume that the solution to delivering data-driven change is all about having better analysts and data scientists to just “do” it. As a naive recruit to the Civil Service 15 years ago, this is what I thought too. This is not just about having brilliant analysts, though; there are plenty of them across the UK Civil Service, and the problems still persist.

Data-driven change needs a collective, shared vision across an organization about why doing something different

would be a good thing, and why it needs to be prioritized, whatever else the department is under pressure to deliver. Put simply, there is only so much the analysts can do; the data security people also need to be on board, as do the directors and other senior leaders. Otherwise, change programs focused around having better access to linked data to support decision making get deprioritized. It is easy to understand why, since these programs are all essentially “high risk” to departments, because they require new decisions to be made around what can lawfully be done with people's data. The default position—not to change preexisting decisions on what data can be linked and how they can be shared—is always the safest option.

I am now in a position to make a difference, as director of the Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) partnership. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), ADR UK's mission is about transforming the way researchers both inside and outside of government access the UK's wealth of administrative data. By joining up the abundance of data created across UK public services and making them available for research, we are facilitating vital new insights that have the potential to lead to more effective and efficient public services, across sectors from education and healthcare to crime and justice—essentially, fixing the problem that the NAO identified so eloquently. So why do I think change is now possible—indeed, is now happening?

Learning the lessons of previous investments that have tried to tackle these problems, ADR UK is very deliberately focused on facilitating government departments getting access to the right data they need to support their own evi-

dence-based policy making. It is only when they have these that they can take the decision about how to open access to researchers more widely.

More fundamentally, a large part of my role and that of my team is around building trust. That is why, alongside the secure data settings of our partners within the three devolved administrations of the UK, we chose the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to be our main Whitehall-facing secure data infrastructure partner. Government and the public already trust ONS to handle administrative data safely and securely, and they already have the award-winning ONS Secure Research Service (SRS).

The SRS has been the mechanism for researchers to access ONS data for many years. With ADR UK's investment in the platform, it is being transformed as a service to offer to the whole of government to facilitate data sharing and linkage.

Building trust doesn't just happen because the right infrastructure is in place, though. It is also about building trust through people—data owners, analysts, policy makers, and the public. These groups all need to have trust in each other if we are to truly deliver on our ambitions. Change involving the use of data by government and researchers doesn't happen unless everyone involved is trusted to deliver it.

We have a range of truly innovative data-linkage projects going on across the UK, involving Whitehall departments as well as the three devolved administrations. All of the data linkages we are taking forward, across all four corners of the UK, have been agreed on because they have data owner consent and address evidenced research needs. They are also underpinned by public engagement plans, to ensure people in those groups that are the focus of the



research are brought into the conversation about how that research is conducted and what research questions are asked.

Details of these projects are documented on our website (<https://www.adruk.org/>), and new updates are being posted all the time. Please do check in on us, and sign up for our newsletter. I look forward to continuing the conversation.

WEB RESOURCES

Administrative Data Research UK, <https://www.adruk.org/>

REFERENCES

1. National Audit Office (2019). Challenges in using data across government. <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/challenges-in-using-data-across-government/>.

About the Partnership

ADR UK was established in 2018 as an ESRC investment to work with government to create linked administrative datasets, enabling impactful research by both government and the wider research community. It is funded by £44 million over 3 years from the National Productivity Investment Fund. Each of ADR UK's national partnerships has a data processing partner responsible for safeguarding data and managing access:

SAIL Databank for ADR Wales; the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency for ADR Northern Ireland; and a collaboration of partners, including National Records for Scotland, for ADR Scotland. ONS is also a key data infrastructure partner. ADR UK follows the Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN), an ESRC investment from 2013 to 2018. Learning lessons from ADRN, ADR UK has a different model for engaging Whitehall departments, with ONS's role critical to building trust. We also have budget to support the creation of new datasets and research programs. In Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland—where ADRN was more successful—they are reaping the benefits of an extra 5 years of understanding what works in this space. ADR UK aims to achieve this in England too, so we have services to meet researcher needs across the whole UK.