Experience of the National Statistician’s Data Ethics Advisory Committee

Simon Whitworth
Head of Data Ethics
UK Statistics Authority
“a legal framework providing the Authority with access to data held by Crown bodies, other public authorities and undertakings (including charities) to support the Authority’s statistical functions.”
Digital Economy Act: Statistics Strand

• Gives ONS a right of access to data for statistical/research purposes only

• Enable secure data shares with Devolved Administrations to support their statistical needs from devolution

• Protect privacy and security of data; reaffirm rigorous penalties for misuse

• Duty to consult statisticians on changes to data systems

• Uses of the DEA have to observe appropriate ethical standards
Ethical Principles

Public Good: The use of data has clear benefits for users and serves the public good.

Confidentiality, data security: The data subject’s identity (whether person or organisation) is protected, information is kept confidential and secure, and the issue of consent is considered appropriately.

Methods and Quality: The risks and limits of new technologies are considered and there is sufficient human oversight so that methods employed are consistent with recognised standards of integrity and quality.

Legal Compliance: Data used and methods employed are consistent with legal requirements such as Data Protection Legislation, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and the common law duty of confidence.

Public views & engagement: The views of the public are considered in light of the data used and the perceived benefits of the research.

Transparency: The access, use and sharing of data is transparent, and is communicated clearly and accessibly to the public.
National Statistician’s Data Ethics Advisory Committee

- Majority independent membership ensuring impartial and credible advice
- External perspectives & challenge to uses of data
- Supports consistency in ethical decision making across GSS and the wider research community.
- Independent justification in the face of challenge
- Greater transparency around how data is shared, linked, and used
The Self-Assessment

The self-assessment consists of 3 main sections for the researcher to complete:

1) Basic information
2) Weightings and sensitive research areas
3) Item scoring scales
National Statistician’s Data Ethics Advisory Committee

Guidelines on using the ethics self-assessment process

Introduction

To help maintain public trust and confidence in the use of data for research and statistics, it is important that researchers (in ONS, the wider Government Statistical Service, and beyond) whatever their particular discipline (statistics, economics, social research, operational research, etc.) who use data for statistical analytical and wider research purposes do not just consider what can be done with the data, methods, expertise and technology available to them. It is equally important that researchers consider what should be done. This ethical self-assessment has been developed to provide a framework to help all researchers to think about the ethics of their research.

This guidance is designed to support researchers and statisticians to complete the National Statistician’s Data Ethics Advisory Committee’s (NSDEC) ethical self-assessment form. NSDEC’s ethical self-assessment enables researchers to self-assess the ethics of their research by scoring their research against NSDEC’s ethical principles.
Users of the UKSA's ethics framework

- Government
- Academia
- Commercial researchers
- Charities
- Local Government
Example Projects

- COVID-19 Infection Survey – COVID-19 tests and antibody in 20,000 households.

- Linkage of Hospital Episodes records with Census data, mortality data and primary care data to determine the level of relative risk of hospitalisation or death from COVID-19

- Environmental and socio-economic impact assessment for siting geological disposal facilities

- Data for children: assessing the impact of family background on the outcomes of children in England
“To be recognised world-leaders in the practical application of data ethics for statistics and research, with a centre of excellence to deliver this.”
Continue to develop the self-assessment tool and guidance and provide NSDEC

A new ethics user support service.

New online ethics training

Publish new guidance on cross cutting ethical issues in research and statistics.

new collaborations both domestically and internationally.
More information

Contact: nsdec@statistics.gov.uk

Website: https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/committees/nsdec/