

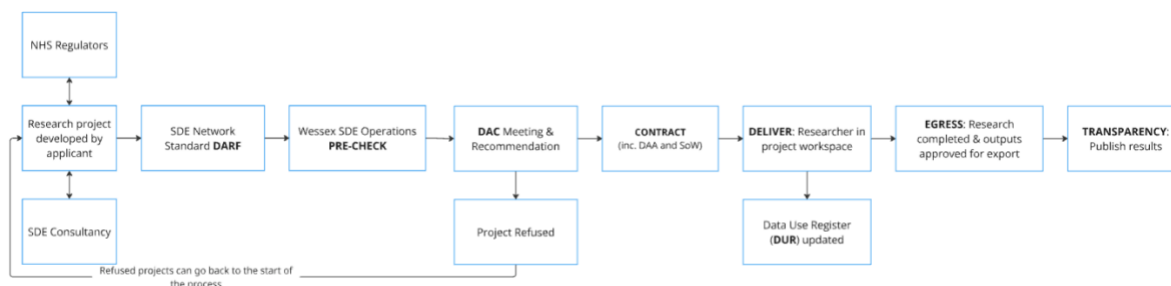
Researcher Handbook

This document provides high-level information for researchers to familiarise themselves with the Wessex SDE and how you can work with us.

Date	Author(s)	Version created	Approval committee	Date of approval	Date next review due	Key changes made to document
24-07-2026	Chantal Chaney, Michael Dahl	1	Managing Director Mark Heffernan IG Lead Shrayan Banerjee	28/8/26 	28/2/27	Newly created document

Background

The Wessex SDE follows a robust process for all research study applications as set out below.



This process is central to how the SDE operates to enable and accelerate new research studies.

Fundamental to achieving a successful approval for any study is delivering public benefit.

This document is the first of three key documents for researchers, taken together this document suite is intended to support and guide them through their journey using the SDE. The steps are:

- **Background and explore:** in two parts it covers Background, understanding the Wessex SDE, our Core Values, strategic priorities, and how patient data is kept secure; Explore, to see what data is available, details of existing or prior research using the SDE, and early expressions of interest to connect with the SDE

- **Apply and collaborate:** covering the SDE's approvals and onboarding process, including: user and organisation validation, Data Access Request Form (DARF) completion, Data Access Committee (DAC) approval process, services and tools, and workspace set up
- **Access and accelerate:** covering user training and onboarding, conducting research, outputs and publications. This final document is currently in draft as the SDE teams work together to create supporting training and information materials.

Public benefit and Core Values

Fundamental to achieving a successful approval for any study is delivering public benefit.

Working collaboratively with the Wessex public, we have co-designed eight Core Values, shown below. These values guide everything that the SDE does and how it makes decisions. Demonstrating alignment with these values in your application will help to ensure that your study is approved.

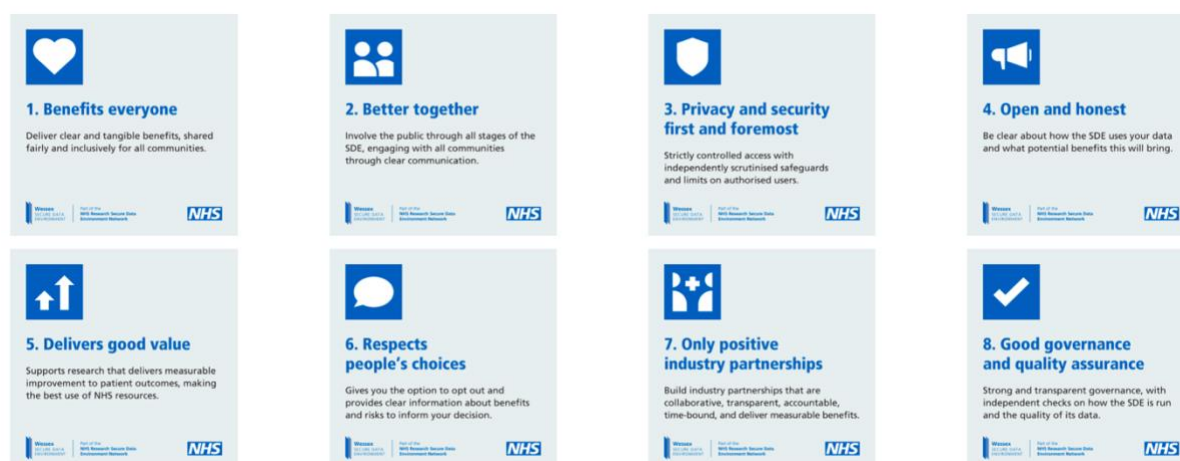


Figure 1: Wessex SDE Core Values

When preparing an application, researchers should clearly explain how their study supports one or more of the Core Values. This does not mean that every project must address all eight values, but applicants should be able to demonstrate how their proposed work delivers public benefit, protects privacy, uses data responsibly, and aligns with the expectations of the communities whose data is being used.

The Data Access Committee (DAC) considers alignment with these values as part of its review process, alongside legal, ethical, technical, and scientific considerations. Applications that clearly describe how they support one or more of the Core Values are often easier for reviewers to understand and assess.

Strategic Research Priorities

Alongside our Core Values, the Wessex public have also helped to shape the Wessex SDE's Strategic Research Priorities. These priorities were co-designed with

patients and members of the public through the Wessex Public Panel on NHS Data and reflect the areas where local people believe health data can deliver the greatest benefit for patients, communities, and the NHS.

The Strategic Research Priorities help guide decisions about the studies we support, the impact we aim to achieve, and how we evaluate success. Researchers are encouraged to consider how their work aligns with one or more of these priorities when developing proposals and completing their Data Access Request Form (DARF).

The priorities focus on delivering meaningful public benefit through research that:

- Improves health outcomes and helps people live healthier lives
- Supports prevention, earlier intervention, and long-term improvements in population health
- Improves NHS services, patient pathways, and the efficiency and sustainability of health and care systems
- Accelerates health innovation by helping to translate new discoveries into real-world improvements in care
- Supports economic growth, research excellence, and innovation across Wessex and the wider NHS
- Demonstrates clear and measurable value for patients, the public, and the NHS

All projects seeking access to data through the Wessex SDE are expected to demonstrate how they will deliver public benefit. Alignment with the Strategic Research Priorities helps the Data Access Committee (DAC) understand the potential value and impact of a study and is an important consideration within the overall review process. Further information on the Strategic Research Priorities and examples of research impact can be found on the Wessex SDE website.

The Five Safes Framework

The Wessex SDE operates in line with the nationally recognised **Five Safes Framework**, which provides a structured approach to enabling the safe and secure use of health and care data for research and innovation. The framework underpins all aspects of the Wessex SDE's governance, approval processes, technical controls, and operational procedures.

Researchers should be familiar with the Five Safes principles, as they form the basis on which applications are assessed and data access is granted.

Safe People

Only appropriately trained, validated, and authorised individuals are permitted to access data within the Wessex SDE. All researchers must complete the Wessex SDE researcher validation process, including providing evidence of relevant training and qualifications, before access can be granted.

Researchers are required to:

- Complete mandatory training, including Good Clinical Practice (GCP) and NHS Data Security Awareness training.
- Sign the Wessex SDE End User Licence Agreement (EULA).
- Comply with all applicable policies, procedures, and conditions of access.
- Use data only for the purposes approved through the Data Access Request Form (DARF) and Data Access Committee (DAC) process.

Access may be suspended or withdrawn where these requirements are not met.

Safe Projects

All projects must demonstrate a clear public benefit, have an appropriate legal basis, and align with the permissions under which the Wessex SDE operates. Applications are assessed through a structured review process, including technical, clinical, legal, ethical, and public benefit considerations.

Projects are reviewed by the Wessex Data Access Committee (DAC), which includes public contributors, clinicians, researchers, and technical experts. Researchers should clearly explain the objectives, methodology, anticipated outcomes, and public benefit of their proposed work when completing the DARF.

Safe Data

Researchers are provided only with the minimum data necessary to achieve the approved objectives of their study. Data made available within the Wessex SDE is subject to robust information governance controls and is managed in accordance with NHS policies, legal requirements, and national guidance.

Researchers will typically access pseudonymised data, where direct identifiers have been removed or replaced with unique study identifiers. Requests for access to identifiable data will only be considered where there is a clear legal basis and appropriate approvals are in place.

Safe Settings

Research is conducted within the SDE's secure Trusted Research Environment (TRE) that is designed to prevent unauthorised access, copying, transfer, or disclosure of data.

The Wessex SDE provides:

- Secure researcher workspaces.
- Controlled access based on approved user permissions.
- Monitoring and audit logging of user activity.
- Secure mechanisms for importing approved code, tools, and datasets.
- Technical controls to ensure compliance with approved project purposes.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring they use the environment appropriately and report any actual or suspected security incidents immediately.

Safe Outputs

All outputs generated within the Wessex SDE are subject to review before they can be removed from the secure environment. This process ensures that published results, reports, figures, and other outputs do not create an unacceptable risk of identifying individuals.

Researchers should factor output checking and disclosure review into project timelines and engage with the Wessex SDE team early where large or complex exports are anticipated.

Further information on approved projects is available through the Wessex SDE Data Use Register and HDR UK Gateway project listings.

1. Explore and connect

Data Capabilities Register

The Wessex SDE is developing a [Data Capabilities Register](#) (DCR) which includes details about all the datasets held.

The DCR is designed to help researchers understand what data is currently available for research through the Wessex SDE and to support the early planning of research projects.

The DCR provides a transparent and continually expanding catalogue of datasets that can be accessed through the Wessex SDE, helping researchers identify potential data sources, assess feasibility, and develop research proposals before submitting a Data Access Request Form (DARF). As new datasets are onboarded to the SDE, they will be added to the register, providing a single source of information about the data assets available across the region.

Each dataset entry includes a summary of the data available and key information to help researchers determine whether it may be suitable for their study. This typically includes:

- A plain English description of the dataset
- The organisation responsible for contributing or managing the data
- Geographic and population coverage
- Time period covered by the dataset
- Whether the data is available in real-time or as a historical dataset
- Therapeutic disease area
- Data modalities available (for example structured clinical data, pathology, medications, imaging, sensors, genomics, or free text where appropriate)
- Care setting and source systems

- Any restrictions on reuse or additional approvals that may be required
- Links to supporting resources such as data dictionaries and documentation.

The DCR is intended to support initial feasibility assessments and project design. It should not be considered a guarantee that a dataset will be available for a specific study, as access remains subject to governance review, technical feasibility, legal permissions, and approval through the Wessex Data Access Committee (DAC).

Researchers are encouraged to review the DCR before contacting the Wessex SDE team, as it can help identify relevant datasets, understand the scope and quality of available data, and inform discussions regarding data requirements. Where a required dataset is not currently listed, researchers should discuss this with the Wessex SDE team during the feasibility stage, as additional data assets may be available for onboarding or linkage where appropriate.

The DCR should be used alongside the Data Use Register (DUR), which provides information on approved research studies.

Data Use Register

The Wessex Secure Data Environment (SDE) is committed to transparency about how health and care data are used for research, innovation, planning, and service improvement. One of the key ways we achieve this is through our [Data Use Register \(DUR\)](#).

The DUR is a publicly available record of approved projects that have been granted access to data within the Wessex SDE. It provides information about who is using data, what the project aims to achieve, the organisations involved, and the expected public benefit. By making this information openly available, the DUR helps build trust and accountability by demonstrating how data are being used to improve health, care, and patient outcomes.

As a researcher, information from your Data Access Request Form (DARF) and supporting documentation will be used to populate the Data Use Register once your project receives approval. It is therefore important that project descriptions are written in clear, plain English and accurately explain the purpose, objectives, and anticipated benefits of the research. This information may be viewed by patients, members of the public, healthcare professionals, and other stakeholders.

The Data Use Register is updated regularly and follows the NHS SDE Network guidance. Publishing information about approved projects supports public confidence in the responsible use of health and care data while enabling greater visibility of the research being undertaken across the region to prevent duplication.

Researchers should be aware that maintaining accurate and up-to-date project information is an ongoing responsibility. Significant changes to project scope, participating organisations, approvals, or project status should be communicated to the Wessex SDE so that study information remains current and accurate.

Initial feasibility

The Wessex SDE has now launched a new online Expression of Interest (Eoi) form to be used by all researchers looking to complete an initial feasibility assessment. This document is provided as a live MS Forms [Eoi template](#) and automatically shared with our team once it is submitted by the researcher.

All enquiries will invite the researcher to provide information on:

1. The applicant
2. The research team
3. Study info, inc. title, summary, dates
4. Data required
5. Study status
6. Funding

For an initial feasibility check, the researcher does **not** need to provide:

- Full protocol
- Ethics approvals
- Detailed variable lists
- Data dictionaries
- Analysis code
- Exact matching rules
- Consent materials

Researchers are advised to refer back to our DCR above to help them to identify what, if any, data that might be required is already held by the SDE and the fields that are required by referring to the relevant data dictionary. Where the required datasets are not included within the existing DCR this should be referenced in the Eoi form.

There is no national SLA for feasibility responses, however we are committed to providing timely, proportionate feedback to support researchers. As standard, researchers can expect us to:

- Acknowledge feasibility request: 2-5 working days
- Complete initial feasibility review: 2-4 weeks
- Complete complex / multi-SDE feasibility: 4-6 weeks