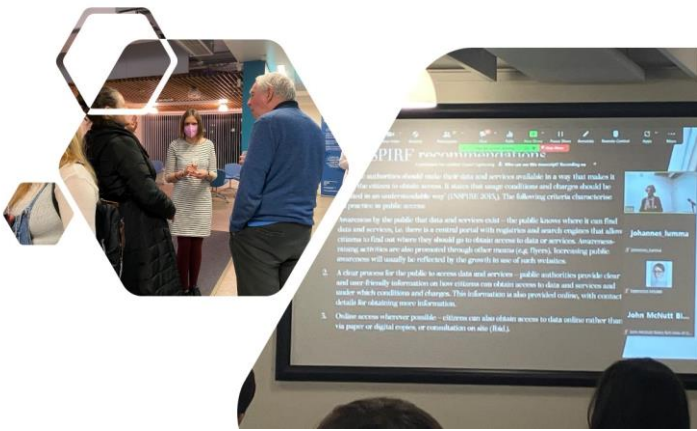




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# VALUING PUBLIC SECTOR DATA IN SCOTLAND AND EUROPE

Data Governance for Economic,  
Environmental and Social Development

## SUI KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES SUMMARY REPORT

May 2024



## MAIN OBJECTIVES AND CONTEXT

### CONTEXT

Our programme considered the issue of public sector data and its uses and governance to serve the purposes of economic, environmental and social development, from a comparative Scotland-European Union perspective. Whilst the focus remained on examining the differences around practices, policies, definitions and cultures around public data between Scotland and Europe – especially within the post-Brexit environment – the programme also took into account cross-sector and cross-disciplinary insights from the rest of the UK and the rest of the world. Public sector data-gathering and use for government objectives, for research and for innovation and development are key issues for stakeholders internationally. This is due to the richness and comprehensiveness of data collected by the public sector, its functions to provide better government services but also its potential value for onward and secondary uses in research, innovation and development both within the public sector and by the private sector, third sector and academia. Another issue too is public authorities' access to data held by other actors, especially in the private sector. These issues are highly relevant to the policy agenda in Scotland, with the Scottish Government's Unlocking the Value of Data (UVOD) programme along with EU developments including the Data Act and the Data Governance Act.

**OBJECTIVES** Our main objectives were:

- To facilitate knowledge exchange, dialogue and discussions between academics and practitioners, Scottish and EU stakeholders, and representatives of different sectors, on public data through a series of online workshops and a hybrid event, which included public engagement.
- To build, maintain and deepen relationships between Scotland and EU stakeholders in this area to understand how Scotland is situated alongside broader post-Brexit EU data governance frameworks, and the ongoing links between Scotland and the EU whilst also extending these connections more widely beyond the EU to other global partners.
- To understand the diversity of different publics and their interplay with public sector data in Scotland and the EU, and address inequalities in data to ensure economic, social and environmental development are both ethical and equitable.
- To produce a report containing recommendations for further policy and research in this area in Scotland and the EU.



## AN ACCOUNT OF THE INSIGHTS RESULTING FROM THE PROGRAMME

Through the programme, which comprised running three online workshops during autumn 2023 (on social development, economic development and environmental development, respectively) and a final hybrid event in January 2024 in the University of Strathclyde/online, and work done between the workshops, we gained various insights from our researcher-practitioner community in Scotland, the EU and beyond, the most key of which are:

- The sheer complexity of the term, ‘public data’ – to the point where we had to specifically request contributors to provide a slide at the start of the presentation on *their* definition of ‘public data’. This resulted in dynamic discussions around the term itself, not just context.
- Numerous examples of ‘public data’ across different sectors, countries and approaches: although the theme was Scotland in Europe, discussions were enriched by contributions from Algeria, the US and different parts of Europe and the rest of the UK.
- Challenges in public understandings of public data (from collection, use to access) – and across different publics.
- Challenges of working with public data across different socio-legal, cultural, economic and technological infrastructures and frameworks. This was particularly evident when discussions were comparative, shedding light to the tension between the regionality and contextuality of public data, that is equally a necessary part of a global data ecology.
- The different kinds of inequalities that arise from issues relating to data access and use, particularly the disparities between urban and rural areas, between local, regional and national sites, between public and the State.
- The tensions involved in issues surrounding the sharing of public data for ‘public good’, and issues relating to data protection and privacy. This tension was particularly relevant during discussions involving the relationship between the private and public sector.



## MAIN OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The main outcomes of our programme, with expected impacts, are:

- The four workshops – which were conducted and delivered successfully, they were genuinely multi-disciplinary, multi-sector, international opportunities for dialogue, networking within a hybrid context.
- Public engagement through digital artist Tim Murray-Browne's session during the final workshop. Around 50 people attended it (across both in-person and online modalities) including members of the public unconnected with universities.



Tim Murray-Browne delivering his talk, *Joy and Ethics in Making AI Art, or, How I found the Universe in my Data Self*, to an enthralled audience online and on-site at the SUII building. The work being discussed here is *Sonified Body* by Tim Murray-Browne and Panagiotis Tigas. The performer pictured is Catriona Robertson. Permission to use this screenshot has kindly been given by Tim.

- A general report on key outcomes and recommendations from our programme activities, discussions and contexts, aimed at policy-makers and researchers; a vehicle for ensuring insights have policy-led impact. We are currently working on this report and aim to publish it by September 2024.
- An edited book – aimed at, and with contributions from, both researchers and practitioners; contributing new knowledge and basis for future synergies. The expected impact is the advancement of policy and research knowledge and engagement on public data from Scottish, European and international perspectives. We intend to publish it on an open-access basis (Scottish Universities Press) to maximise impact and reach, and aim to publish in May 2025.



## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR END USER / POLICY / PRACTICE COMMUNITIES

We group our recommendations under the following headings:

### **Definitions of ‘Public Data’**

We recommend that policymakers recognise the challenges in defining what public sector data or ‘public data’ is, along with concepts of control and ownership over data, and engage with public discourses and understandings of how data and technologies are used.

### **Public Understandings of Data Use**

We recommend that policymakers seek to increase the public’s understanding of what public data is, who is collecting it and why, and how it is being used and shared.

### **Digital Literacy**

We recommend that policymakers seek to increase the public’s capacity to understand and properly contextualise data (whether public, environmental or economic) relevant to their areas and needs. In addition, we recommend that policymakers seek to increase the public sector’s own understanding of data use, meaning and contextualisation, with consideration of the fact that the public sector is ultimately comprised of individuals who may not share the same expertise and understanding as others.

### **Health Data**

We recommend that specifically for health data, policymakers and practitioners acknowledge the complexities around the balance of opening up data and keeping patient data private, and the challenges concerning data on attributes that can be used to identify individuals, while ensuring joined up and interoperable data where appropriate so individuals do not need to retell stories when consulting with multiple health professionals.

We recommend too that policymakers and practitioners in other public data sectors learn from the ethics processes and research standards already in place there to devise wider codes of ethics and standards to help govern acceptable and unacceptable uses of data. In doing this, developments in the EU, such as the forthcoming AI Act, provide complementary examples for the kinds of standards and frameworks that could be implemented.

### **Data Sharing**

Policymakers and practitioners should acknowledge the tensions within data sharing, including vis-a-vis power imbalances between the public and the state, and between the public, and companies.

Policymakers should also consider ways in which greater ‘data altruism’ from the private sector in terms of it sharing its data with the public sector and with the public, can be achieved.



## PLANNED FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

We are currently working on producing our programme report aimed at researchers and policy-makers across various sectors and disciplines, translated into Spanish (and possibly Portuguese and/or French) to maximise international impact. We aim to finalise and launch the report in September 2024 and will organise an online event for it, to which we will invite all contributors to the programme workshops. We envision reflections from selected contributors.

We have already submitted a proposal to the Scottish Universities Press (SUP), for a cross-disciplinary, cross-sector and cross-border edited book, which at the time of writing, has 15 chapters with contributions from both researchers and practitioners. It is now undergoing peer-review. Should the SUP accept our proposal, we aim to finalise and launch the book in September 2025, at an online or hybrid event, to which contributors will also be invited.

Both events will be free and open to the public.

May 2024