Good practice in sharing research data
Brief guide for third sector researchers

Who this is guide for

This guide is for people who undertake and commission research in the third sector – and are interested in sharing your own or other people's research data. This guide might also be of interest to academics.

Background and definitions

Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum (TSRF) published a **Guide to Applying Ethical Research Principles in Third Sector Research** in June 2021. While creating this guide people researching in the third sector told us that they would benefit from a further guide on the related issue of data sharing.

By **"data"** we mostly mean quantitative and qualitative data collected **for research purposes** but we might also mean data collected for other purposes such as administrative data that could then be used in research. We include raw data and published data.

The most obvious way to "share" data is to publish it in research findings but we are focusing here on exchanging research data with another organisation for their research or as part of a research partnership. This might be done through a data sharing agreement but there are other ways such as open data or a data use license.

Sometimes data sharing isn't just about sharing data, it might also be about **co-design** of data collection.

The benefits of sharing data

Third sector data-sharing can help you:

- Avoid reinventing the wheel – research is expensive and often involves ordinary folk giving up time to tell you something. So using data more than once can add value and lead to better outcomes from that data.

- Access data that you don't otherwise have the expertise or resources to collect yourself. (In terms of third sector accessing other people's data)

- Have access to unique data – e.g. qualitative experiences - that others, including public sector or academics, couldn't easily replicate. (In terms of third sector sharing its data)

- Combine data from different pieces of research to tell richer stories and draw richer conclusions. Two smaller studies added together might make for more convincing conclusions or prevent you drawing the wrong conclusions.

- Combine quantitative and qualitative data – different types of answer to a question, giving a better sense of what, why and how.
- Help the third sector make an even stronger case for need in the communities you work with or the impact you make; and amplify the voice of vulnerable people.

General things to think about

Be clear about your **purpose** for sharing data. It might be to improve understanding of an issue or need, or to improve services or policies to address that issue.

Know when you don't have the expertise to collect data yourself and what expertise you do have – and find complementary partners.

Data sharing partnerships can happen serendipitously – such as a chance meeting at a conference - so be alert to opportunities. Your organisation might have a relationship with another organisation that could be developed into a data-sharing partnership.

Evaluate the **benefits** of sharing – what has sharing enabled you both to achieve that you couldn't have done on your own. Share your learning to encourage others (inside your organisation or externally) to see the benefits.

How to share data

Data sharing agreements are formal contracts that set out the purpose of the data sharing, cover what happens to the data at each stage, set standards and help all the parties involved in sharing to be clear about their roles and responsibilities.

A written agreement is particularly helpful if original staff move on (taking their tacit knowledge and memory with them) or to help resolve a problem.

The data-sharing agreement might include the following:

- Who is sharing the data
- What the data is
- The purposes for sharing
- Who is responsible for using the data/overseeing the use of the data
- The conditions under which the data may be used
- The legal basis that justifies the sharing of the data, if required
- Obligations and arrangements around confidentiality, data security, intellectual property etc.
- How data will be stored and when it will be destroyed
- How long the agreement lasts and (if ongoing) when it will be reviewed.

A data-sharing agreement is not the only approach. You could share your data – or a synthesised version of it – online and allow anyone to access it. If so try to make the data as easy for someone else to use as possible.

Deciding whether to share data

As far as possible try to plan ahead and think at the planning stage about how data collected through research might be used. You might want to build broad parameters for its use into permissions and data sharing agreements.

If someone asks you to share your data think about whether sharing data helps you achieve your organisation's mission or charitable purpose and whether sharing the data is in line with the original purpose for which it was collected.

If the data shared is personal data then you **must follow your data protection policies** (GDPR). Organisations must avoid sharing or using personal data for a different purpose for which it was collected (ie outside the terms of their privacy agreement). You may need to consult the people who participate in the research about how data could or should be shared.

But research data is not always "personal data" as defined by GDPR. It could be personal data fully anonymised (unattributable quotes) or synthesised (X% said this). Or it be data that isn't about people – such as grants data.

You should always think about the **ethics** of sharing data. You should talk to research participants about data sharing. You will want to keep safeguarding paramount. However, sometimes it might be unethical **not** to share data; for example if you have collected data from people but not used it yourself. Or if the research participants expect their experiences to be heard far and wide.

Sources of support

UK Data Service

Scottish Information Commissioner:

Third Sector Research Forum guide to applying ethical research principles:

Other guidance on TSRF website