



POLICY ROUNDTABLE

# UNLOCKING VALUE: BETTER USE OF INTEGRATED GOVERNMENT DATA FOR EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY



WEDNESDAY 30 JULY 2025

**In person:** National Portrait Gallery  
King Edward Terrace, Parkes, ACT 2600

# UNLOCKING VALUE: BETTER USE OF INTEGRATED GOVERNMENT DATA FOR EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

Integrated government administrative data offers an unparalleled opportunity to answer previously unanswerable policy and research questions and inform policy and programs which drive productivity and deliver better outcomes for all Australians. Recent government investments in Australia's integrated data assets have significantly improved access for research and policymaking. However, equitable access, data gaps and cost remain persistent challenges, and long-term planning is needed to sustain and strengthen the use of integrated government administration data.

On 30 July 2025, the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) partnered with Professor Henry Cutler, Professor Bob Breunig FASSA, Professor Adrian Barnett FASSA and Professor Philip Clarke FASSA to convene a roundtable exploring how integrated government data supports more effective, efficient policy development, as well as the barriers to access and use.

The invitation only event, held in Canberra, brought together more than 50 researchers, data custodians, policymakers, and funders, providing a unique opportunity to share cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral perspectives and consider a pathway towards strategic planning, sustainable funding models and the necessary capability uplift.

The conveners developed a discussion paper which established the current state of Australia's integrated government data ecosystem and served as the stimulus for short expert presentations. Presentations were followed by a series of open questions for participants and a facilitated discussion that tested the immediate and long-term actions that researchers, policymakers and funders can take to support Australia's integrated government data ecosystem. This summary provides an overview of the discussion, which took place under the Chatham House Rule.

## Opening remarks

The Australian Statistician Dr David Gruen FASSA provided opening remarks, describing the key assets in the national integrated data system and the kinds and scale of projects that they support.

Australia's integrated data system comprises several highly valuable, longitudinal datasets, including the Australian Bureau of Statistic (ABS) Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA) and Business Longitudinal Analysis Data Environment (BLADE), which include records of census data, service use and service providers, migration, business income and tax; the National Disability Data Asset (NDDA), which integrates deidentified information from different agencies about how people with disability engage with programs and services; and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) National Health and Data Hub, which links health and welfare data relating to hospital admittance, health service utilisation, pharmaceuticals, and mortality records.

These assets provide rich insights into how businesses perform across time and how individuals' characteristics, service use and outcomes interrelate, helping researchers and policymakers alike consider current and emerging policy challenges that have been previously unanswerable. The ABS' DataLab, for instance, provides government employees, researchers and research partners with the access and computing infrastructure to ethically and securely work with large-scale, human and culturally sensitive datasets. Almost 800 projects and more than 5,000 researchers have accessed PLIDA and/or BLADE via DataLab since 2017. DataLab supports diverse projects and end-users. As of June 2025, of the 420 currently active projects in DataLab, 119 are Commonwealth Government projects, 266 are Australian university projects, and 12 are for international and non-government institutions.

By maintaining and regularly updating assets, data custodians can respond effectively to evolving research and policy demands. Dr Gruen described innovations to expand the value and reach of integrated data and enhance users' experience. These include a location spine to enable new geospatial data linkage, automated project development and vetting tools, new TableBuilder features to better interrogate and present aggregated data, and expanding access to DataLab to international researchers analysing policy questions and trends relevant to Australia.

## Using data to improve productivity

The Hon. Dr Andrew Leigh MP, FASSA, Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities, Treasury and Employment, explored how integrated data is helping the Australian Government better understand Australian productivity and make policy decisions accordingly. Treasury used BLADE to assemble a firm-level panel by linking tax, business and employment records to explore why Australia's productivity growth had slowed in the past two decades. This integration allowed analysts to compare Australian companies with global leaders, revealing that the productivity gap has widened, exit rates have fallen, and market concentration has increased.

The National Health Data Hub shows that health service expenditure averages \$1700 per person per year, but this rate rises to \$24,000 in the last year of life, with hospital admissions being the main driver. These patterns allow policymakers to target palliative and preventative care, for instance, by deploying screening programs and community-based teams to avoid unnecessary hospital admissions.

Governments can continue to learn and build on these innovations, but this must be accompanied by investment in data skills, systems and governance frameworks. The Assistant Minister identified guiding principles to achieve high-impact data programs.

1. **Integrated data assets can enhance productivity and evidence-based policy** when used to reduce the cost and time of evaluating policy interventions.
2. **Leadership and collaboration matter**, and Australia's integrated data ecosystem needs senior decision-makers who authorise access and funding and champions who can share insights and stories of success with affected communities to build social licence.
3. **Data integration must earn and keep public trust** through privacy-preserving record linkage techniques, clear legislation, and transparency about how data are used.
4. **People and capabilities are as important as infrastructure**, and a priority for the Australian Public Service (APS) is recruiting and developing effective data scientists.

In the discussion that followed, participants agreed that the value proposition for integrated government data is clear, evidenced by the 22% increase in [DataLab usage](#) in 2023–24. Participants also agreed that the Australian governance model is best practice. The [DATA Scheme](#) provides the necessary safeguards and consistent, efficient processes that empower researchers to use data assets and collaborate with the Australian Government to continue developing and improving the infrastructure.

Participants agreed that it was critical to build an evidence base for the use of integrated data assets, identifying indicators of successful return on investment and communicating this to government and public audiences. National priorities, such as the [National Science and Research Priorities](#), the [Strategic Examination of Research and Development](#), and the Government's current focus on driving productivity growth provide strategic opportunities to broaden interest in the use cases for integrated government data.

These kinds of mechanisms would help government identify new partners and are the seeding ground for the relationships and cross-sectoral knowledge needed to sustain engagement with government across an individual's career.

## Efficient data use

Dr Phillip Gould, Deputy Australian Statistician, chaired a session exploring the tools and capabilities that support more efficient use of linked data. The discussion focussed on how TableBuilder, by allowing users to securely access, combine, and analyse a wide range of ABS datasets, streamlines data exploration and reduces reliance on manual data requests. Users can perform complex cross-tabulations and apply filters to generate outputs tailored to specific policy or research needs. Steering users towards TableBuilder reduces demand on DataLab by first establishing what data is available and helping users ask more informed and feasible research questions.

TableBuilder is not without limitations. Participants noted that users do not necessarily deeply understand the data they are working with, with risks of misinterpreting causation or using data that is not appropriate for the research or policy problem at hand. Capability uplift was identified as a priority, including the skills and knowledge needed to know the kinds of questions that can be reasonably answered by data. The [Data Profession](#) and [Evaluation Profession](#) mark important recent steps taken to embed data and evaluation capabilities across the APS, and support knowledge sharing and peer-based learning for more efficient, innovative use of data assets.

## Funding affordable access

Despite the strengths of Australia's integrated data system, the need for a sustainable funding model that facilitates access and promotes valuable research was a consistent theme. Professor Breunig chaired a session that explored funding challenges and canvassed potential solutions.

The right balance of public and private user pays funding was discussed. The ABS is currently heavily cross-subsidising researcher access. This system is not sustainable, and the ABS struggles to meet surging demand for access and has moved to a cost recovery model for some services. Researchers shared frustrations with the current turnaround times for

access requests and the imbalance created by the current funding approaches. There was general agreement that private funding will continue to play a role, but that a solely user pays system would risk limiting the kind of research done and crowd out individual early and mid-career researchers who may lack institutional support. The solution then is more innovative and effective use of existing funding streams.

Several ideas were canvassed for how to increase access without custodians having to reduce data prices. The idea of applying a membership charge was proposed, which would allow exploratory access to data with an additional fee per request to extract research outputs. This model would have the dual benefit of creating a more sustainable funding model and reducing the burden on custodians to vet extraction requests. The current frameworks within the ARC, National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF), and National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRSI) could be used to hypothecate government research funds to projects that use integrated government data. This could take the form of grants schemes that cover data access costs and researchers' time to analyse data.

The Academy's [Decadal Plan for Social Science Research Infrastructure](#) sets out detailed solutions to some access problems and outlines how to achieve an affordable, inclusive business model that meets growing demand and creates opportunities for a range of projects and researchers.

## Priorities, recommendations and timelines

Professor Cutler and Professor Clarke led a discussion about emerging priorities and the immediate actions researchers, policymakers and funders can take to support an efficient, effective integrated data system.

The key priority emerging from the day was the need for a data strategy to guide the prioritisation of funding, the creation of new assets, and methodology and other capability uplift. This strategy should be accompanied by principles and an implementation plan which clearly identifies roles and responsibilities. Participants agreed that a first step towards a national strategy would be an audit of existing assets to identify strengths, gaps and immediate priorities.



Some shared frustration at a lack of coherence within the research community. Engaging in a unified way around a series of agreed priorities would signal that a coalition exists, which could increase the likelihood of the Government engaging with the research community on Australia's data priorities. Participants encouraged the research community to use existing opportunities, including engaging with the development of the [2026 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap](#) and representation on the PLIDA Board.

## Closing remarks

Final remarks were provided by Louise Gates, Acting Deputy CEO of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Eleanor Williams, Managing Director of the Australian Centre for Evaluation, Professor Barnett, Queensland University of Technology, and Heather Cotching, Assistant Secretary, Data, Digital and Analysis in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The speakers observed that a key theme to emerge during the day was the importance of sharing tangible stories of how data is being used to deliver impact. Doing so in a compelling way that makes clear that integrated data is a public good is key to building momentum towards new collaborations, investments and innovations. Forward planning, thinking about the policy and research questions that data can answer—both now and in the future—and articulating outcomes is also part of this momentum building.

They also observed that the discussion had been largely Canberra-centric, and there is a need to bring the States and Territories into the discussion to leverage assets and share cross-jurisdictional lessons.

The conveners will draw on the insights from the roundtable to build on the discussion paper in coming months.

# PARTICIPANTS

Dr Talia Avrahamzon	Head of Policy   <b>Research Australia</b>
Professor Adrian Barnett FASSA	Australian Centre for Health Services and Innovation   <b>Queensland University of Technology</b>
Professor Janeen Baxter FASSA	Director   <b>ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families Over the Life Course, University of Queensland</b>
Professor Tony Blakely	Professorial Fellow in Epidemiology   <b>University of Melbourne</b>
Professor Paul Bonnington	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research Infrastructure)   <b>University of Queensland</b>
Dr Adrian Burton	Deputy CEO and Director, People   <b>Australian Research Data Commons</b>
Professor Robert Breunig FASSA	Chair of Tax Policy and Public Finance and Director Tax and Transfer Policy Institute   <b>Australian National University</b>
Dr Philip Chindamo	Chief Economist   <b>Group of Eight</b>
Professor Philip Clarke FASSA	Director, Health Economics Research Centre   <b>University of Oxford</b>
Ms Heather Cotching	Assistant Secretary, Data, Digital and Analysis   <b>Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet</b>
Dr Honae Cuffe	Policy Director   <b>Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia</b>
Professor Henry Cutler	Director, Centre for the Health Economy   <b>Macquarie University</b>
Dr Fleur De Crespigny	Assistant Secretary, Market Analysis and Data Branch   <b>Department of Education</b>
Dr David Gruen AO, FASSA	Australian Statistician   <b>Australian Bureau of Statistics</b>
Ms Louise Gates	Acting Deputy CEO   <b>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare</b>
Professor Rebecca Glauert	Chief Executive   <b>Population Health Research Network</b>
Dr Julie Glover	Executive Director, Research Foundations   <b>National Health and Medical Research Council</b>
Professor Kees van Gool	Executive Director, Pricing and Analytics   <b>Independent Health and Aged Care Pricing Authority</b>
Dr Philip Gould	Deputy Australian Statistician   <b>Australian Bureau of Statistics</b>
Dr Chris Hatherly	CEO   <b>Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia</b>
Mr Lee Harris	Director Evaluation and Impact Delivery and Policy   <b>Australian Research Council</b>
Dr Luke Hendrickson	Program Manager, Data Integration Services   <b>Australian Bureau of Statistics</b>
Ms Rosie Hicks	CEO   <b>Australian Research Data Commons</b>
Ms Laura Johnson	Assistant Secretary   <b>Department of Finance</b>
Mr Richard Juckes	Group Head, National Health Reform Reporting Group   <b>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare</b>
Dr Susie Kluth	Chief Data Officer   <b>Department of Education</b>
Professor Rosemary Korda	Professor, National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health   <b>Australian National University</b>
Professor Emily Lancsar	Chief Health Economist   <b>Department of Health, Disability and Ageing</b>
Mr Adam Lambert	Head of the Evidence, Priority Initiatives & Communications Branch, Cancer Australia
The Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP, FASSA	<b>Assistant Minister for Productivity, Competition, Charities and Treasury</b>
Ms Nadia Levin	CEO   <b>Research Australia</b>
Ms Gayle Milnes	National Data Commissioner   <b>Office of the National Data Commissioner</b>
Professor Francis Mitrou	Head, Human Development and Community Wellbeing   <b>The Kids Research Institute Australia</b>
Ms Nhi Nguyen	Chief Data Officer and Assistant Secretary   <b>Department of Finance</b>
Ms Clare Nulley-Valdes	Assistant Director, Evaluation and Impact Policy   <b>Australian Research Council</b>
Ms Rebecca Ostergaard	Chief Digital Officer   <b>CSIRO</b>
Professor Anushka Patel FAHMS	CEO   <b>The George Institute for Global Health</b>
Professor Sallie Pearson	Head of Health Systems, School of Population Health   <b>UNSW Sydney</b>
Mr Ben Rimmer	Deputy Secretary, Higher Education, Research and International   <b>Department of Education</b>
Ms Pippa Robinson	<b>Department of Health, Disability and Ageing</b>

# PARTICIPANTS

Adjunct Professor Neil Soderlund	Board Member   <b>Quantium Health</b>
Professor Brett Sutton AO	Director, Health and Biosecurity   <b>CSIRO</b>
Ms Emily Symons	Head, Evidence, Priority Initiatives and Communications Branch   <b>Cancer Australia</b>
Professor Wotjek Tomaszewski	Deputy Director (Research), Institute for Social Science Research   <b>University of Queensland</b>
Professor Beth Webster FASSA	Director, Melbourne Institute   <b>University of Melbourne</b>
Professor Steve Wesselingh FAHMS	CEO   <b>National Health and Medical Research Council</b>
Professor Mark Western FASSA	Director, The Queensland Commitment   <b>University of Queensland</b>
Ms Eleanor Williams	Managing Director, Australian Centre for Evaluation   <b>Treasury</b>