

Bringing voices together: Our first public engagement panel

Session One Summary Report – March 5th 2026

Who was there

The first session of the Data Voices public engagement panel was held online on 5th March 2026, 18:30-20:30 as part of Smart Data Foundry's ongoing public engagement work. The session brought together 18 of the 20 panel members, who are representative of the population of Great Britain (GB) and have diverse life experiences and backgrounds.

The meeting was facilitated by Kimberley Mitchell (Impact & Engagement Manager, Smart Data Foundry), Charlotte Binstead (Head of Communications, Smart Data Foundry) and Emily Elliot (Data Manager, Smart Data Foundry).

Additional support was provided on the call by Patricia Ruddy (Head of Information Governance, Smart Data Foundry) and Oliver Berry (Research Impact, Smart Data Foundry).

Purpose of this session - Agenda

The purpose of this session was to:

- Introduce panel members to Smart Data Foundry and its work
- Present different types of financial data and how it is processed
- Invite initial public perspectives on what “public good” means in the context of financial data
- Explore topics panel members would like future sessions to address
- Establish guidelines for working together over the next two years

Key topics discussed

- Introduction to SDF, our role and mission, and the big question of the panel: “How should financial data be used so it helps improve economic wellbeing for everyone?”
- Panel guidelines and ways of working
- Overview of financial data types and how they are collected and processed
- Governance safeguards, including de-identification and ethical review processes
- Examples of public good applications of financial data in research with partners such as charities and local authorities
- Exploring topics for next sessions

Introduction to Smart Data Foundry

Charlotte Binstead introduced Smart Data Foundry and explained our role in providing secure access to de-identified financial data for research. The presentation outlined:

- Who we are and our mission to open up data for good
- The core concepts for the sessions including:
 - What smart financial data is and how it is created

- How SDF works with banks to provide data for academic and public-good research
- Types of research supported, including studies on poverty, inequality, and economic wellbeing

Following Charlotte's presentation, Kimberley opened the discussion to the panel with the starter question, *'When you hear using financial data for good, what do you hope it means? What worries you?'* This provoked a lively discussion with the panel. They brought up some interesting points/questions:

- How do we make sure that the correct people are using it (data) for good and who those people are?
- What do I hope it means, the use of financial data for good? I hope that good is for the many and not for the few
- We haven't got a definition of what good is, and that worries me. Who is it that's deciding what is good?
- How many of us actually read the T's and C's before we click it when we play a game on our mobile phone? You know, how in the real world are we actually managing our own data?

Charlotte and Emily explained the feasibility, ethical and methodology checks research proposals go through to allow access to the TRE data, and the types of people we have currently using the data for research purposes, with Patricia explaining the 'five safes' framework we use.

We then had a short comfort break for 5 minutes before covering what Smart Data Foundry do. Kimberley covered that SDF work with trusted partners and has expert teams in place to manage our data in a highly secure research environment. She also covered our real-world impact, including providing insights to local government and working with universities and researchers to analyse data responsibly.

Presentation for this session. – But what does it mean? A guide to deidentified data

Emily Elliott provided a detailed explanation of the types of financial data collected, how it is anonymised, and our strict governance in place to protect privacy. She went on to explain that only approved researchers working on specific projects can access secure datasets and reiterated that all requests undergo rigorous feasibility, methodology, and ethics checks. Emily highlighted how these datasets are used for public good research, from looking at financial wellbeing, to supporting local authorities in evidence-based decision making.

The panel had a few questions during the presentation, including one about ethnicity: *"My question is that we've got postal district, age band, sex, but we haven't got self-defined ethnicity. Is there a reason for that?"* Emily and Oliver provided the answer that ethnicity is a protected characteristic under GDPR it is not automatically shared with us by our data partners. We could request this data from our data partners, but we would need a strong justification in the research proposal.

And another question: *do we pay the banks for the data?* Emily explained that banks are very interested in doing good with their data, and we don't pay for it – the banks can sometimes benefit from the research we do with the financial data. In the past, we have conducted research that we have passed back to the bank to help them better understand their customers and, for example, signpost them to financial help where applicable.

One last question concerned spotting unusual patterns in the data and whether we could identify specific individuals with that. Emily explained that we regularly conduct our own exercises to ensure we cannot identify anyone from the data the bank supplies to us. She used examples to illustrate the different categories of data provided and how spending is allocated across various buckets, such as energy, eating out, and discretionary.

One concern highlighted by a panel member related to access to data for non-research purposes, such as law enforcement. Emily and Patricia explained that we have the authority to accept or decline such requests, but we would comply if they had a valid reason and a court order. However, our data could not be used to identify individuals, and it would be more effective for the police to approach the banks directly if pursuing criminal cases.

Future Sessions

Kimberley asked the panel what they would like to cover in our sessions from a selection of topics and asked them to rank the most important topics using a poll. The poll results were collected from 12 panellists after the session, with the priority being on:

- Trust and transparency,
- Practical tools for change,
- Risks and unintended consequences of data use
- Early warning systems for financial hardship

Panel Reflections

Panel members were generally supportive of using financial data for research with a clear public benefit and discussed issues of privacy, ethics, acceptable data use, and access concerns. They expressed specific concerns, including the importance of ethical oversight and what 'for good' meant to everyone, as well as researchers having legitimate intentions. There were mixed views on sharing personal financial data, with some members willing to contribute their own data if transparency was guaranteed.

At the end of the session, the panellists were asked how they were feeling afterwards (this was collected in a poll after the session):

- I found the session highly engaging, and I particularly appreciated the thoughtful concerns raised by the other panel members. Their perspectives added depth to the discussion and highlighted important considerations that might otherwise have been overlooked.
- Really interested to find out more about practical applications of ethical data gathering.
- Feel a bit out of my depth and wondered if I had a lot to offer re questions and observations but nevertheless looking forward to future session
- Was a bit nervous when we started but as the session continued, I got more confident
- I feel much less anxious and interested and cannot wait for the next one

What comes next

Reflections from Smart Data Foundry:

"Hearing the panel's thoughts on the use of financial data for research, and their interest in knowing if their data contributed to public-good outcomes, has been invaluable. It will inform our approach to ongoing public engagement and guide how we communicate with data partners about public appetite for data use in research."

The panel will continue with seven further sessions over the next two years. Future sessions will build on these foundational discussions by exploring specific themes and topics flagged by the panel, as well as areas SDF needs to cover for research, including privacy and transparency, research applications, and public expectations. Outputs from these sessions will help shape Smart Data Foundry's approaches to responsible data use.

The next session will be held on 28th May at the same time, 18:30-20:30, online.