GeoDS RESEARCH APPROVALS GUIDELINES (including RAG TERMS OF REFERENCE)

Last updated 20 February 2026 (v1.1)

1. Scope

The aim of this document is to define the role and remit of the Geographic Data Service Research Approvals Group (RAG or Group) within the Service's research approvals process. This includes describing where the RAG sits within the Service's governance structure and detailing the operational procedures for the Group.

2. Description

University College London with the Universities of Edinburgh, Liverpool and Oxford have been funded under Smart Data Research UK to create the Geographic Data Service (GeoDS or Service). GeoDS offers a three-tier data service with a safe and secure data infrastructure to facilitate high quality social science by maximising the value of diverse and nationally significant Smart Data through geographic integration, enrichment and validation. GeoDS will enable access to Smart Data for public benefit, whilst protecting privacy.

The RAG will play a key role in ensuring the quality, public benefit and/or scientific merit of research being conducted through the Service. It will typically consider applications remotely. The process has been designed to be lightweight but robust, enabling timely decisions on user applications.

3. Governance

It is an ESRC requirement that the use of the GeoDS Safeguarded and GeoDS Secure services be permitted independently of the GeoDS Senior Management Team (SMT). The RAG will fulfil this role with membership comprising the RAG Chair, independent academics in the research field, and a GeoDS Data Scientist (DS) in an ex-officio capacity. For active data licencing agreements (DLAs) the Data Partner(s) (DP) involved in the project will be invited to join the RAG as co-opted members, but will review proposals in advance of other RAG members in order that permission for the use of data is determined at the earliest possible stage. In circumstances where DP interests have lapsed, a member of GeoDS SMT may be co-opted to fulfil the DP rile. The RAG's composition will ensure that it has expertise in research design and analysis, and in research ethics, as well as having representatives of policy interests. The RAG will report back on decisions made to the GeoDS who will communicate these to each prospective user.

4. The Role of RAG within GeoDS's Research Approvals Process

The role of the RAG within the research approvals process is to provide independent and transparent assessments of applications by researchers for access to data through both the GeoDS Safeguarded and GeoDS Secure services.

Applications for use of Safeguarded and Secure Data

Applicants will submit an initial project proposal to the GeoDS who will assess whether the project fits the Service's remit and whether the DP(s) are likely to approve the use of their data for this purpose. The DP is notified if a Non-Disclosure Agreement is required or if there is a specific query. The applicant will then be invited to submit a full proposal and be allocated a Centre Data Scientist (DS) to act as an advocate for the project. Once completed, the proposal documentation will be reviewed by GeoDS staff and DP. The former will be required to comment on the resource implications and the practical feasibility of the proposed project, while the latter will be asked to approve use of the data and supply any stipulations they may have. A DP can reject an application where they do not consent to the use of the data for a particular research purpose.

Safeguarded Data

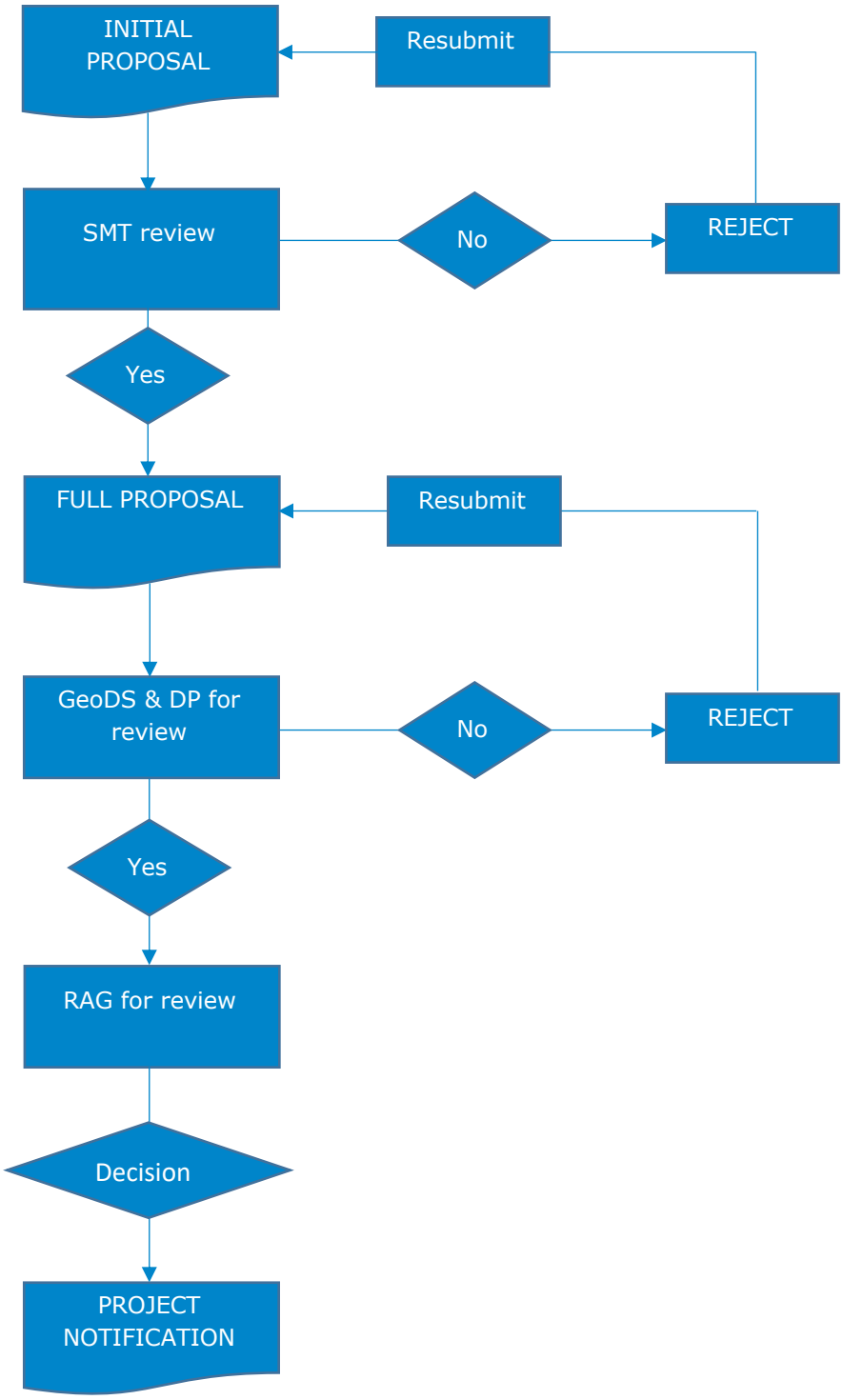
Once approved by the DP, a proposal is then forwarded to the RAG Chair, or their nominee, to review in order to monitor use and guard against misuse or misinterpretation of the data. Permission to use this data will not normally be withheld.

Secure Data

If use of the data is approved by the DP, the proposal will then be forwarded to two independent social science academic reviewers who will review the proposal based on a set of standard evaluation criteria (listed below). The RAG Chair will be responsible for overseeing the review process and make the final decision. If required, they will co-ordinate any follow up online discussion along with the GeoDS. The assigned DS will be available to the Group to address any queries or concerns, but will take no part in the decision making process.

All RAG members must keep all details of Project Proposals and Data Partner details confidential.

Geographic
Data Service



Research Approvals Process

Criteria for Approval
To receive RAG approval, project proposals must demonstrate:

- **Scientific advancement –** how the project has the potential to advance scientific knowledge, understanding and/or methods using Smart data;
- **Public good** – how the project has the potential to provide insight and/or solutions that could benefit society;
- **Privacy and ethics –** the potential privacy impacts or risks, and wider ethical considerations relating to the project
- **Project Design and Methods –** how the project will be conducted and who will be involved with a focus on demonstrating project feasibility.
- **Cost and resources issues –** what impact the project is likely to have on GeoDS resources**,** including GeoDS staff time and use of infrastructure, as well as any data acquisition costs. Resource requirements should be justified.

Approval will not be granted without evidence that the applicant has obtained or is seeking ethical approval for the research through their institution, or has supplied justification that these are not applicable. For non-academic projects, these requirements will be assessed by the GeoDS.

5. RAG Terms of Reference

The RAG will:

- Provide an independent and transparent assessment of applications by researchers for access to data through both the GeoDS Safeguarded and GeoDS Secure services. It will:
    - Assess proposals based on the GeoDS Criteria for Approval
    - Provide referee comments to RAG Chair using RAG Review document
    - Carry out online discussion between its members (if required)
    - Assign each proposal to one of the following categories
        - Recommended for data service
        - Recommended for data service subject to minor changes or minor additional conditions
        - Not recommended for data service in current form but invited to resubmit a revised application
        - Not recommended for data service
        - Referred to other Smart Data Research UK Services or other ESRC data investments
    - List any required stipulations to project proposal with explanation
    - Provide justifications of its decisions, which may include guidance to researchers on revisions to aid re-submission
    - Chair to report Group's decisions to GeoDS for onward communication to applicants using Project Notification document
- Make decisions within 15 working days of the date of submission. If a RAG member is unable to complete the review in this period they will notify the GeoDS within 5 days. A quorum of 2 members for safeguarded data applications and 3 members for secure data applications, which must include the data partner, will be required to make a decision. A majority decision will be accepted with the Chair to have a casting vote in the case of a tied decision.

- Offer independence in judgements and declare any potential conflicts of interest. In making assessments, data providers should remain cognisant of the GeoDS's mission to broaden the user base for all legitimate research applications.

GeoDS staff will provide RAG with:

- The applicant's research proposal application, including ethics approval or justification as to why these are not required
- SMT comments on the feasibility of the study and implications for GeoDS infrastructure and existing resources
- The DP(s) decision on use of their data for project
- The contact details of the assigned data scientist and member of GeoDS SMT who will be available to provide any further information or guidance but will not be involved in the decision making process
- A project proposal review document for submission to the RAG Chair
- A Project Notification document for completion by the RAG Chair to convey RAG's decision to the GeoDS and applicant including any stipulations from RAG and/or DP(s)
- A continuously updated log of all RAG's decisions. RAG decisions will be reported to Smart Data Research UK on a quarterly basis.

6. RAG Membership

Name	Organisation	Role	Background	Role on RAG
Kim Cassidy	Edge Hill University Business School	Professor of Services Marketing	Academic: Services marketing and consumer behaviour	Member (Chair)
Academics	A pool of UK social science academics		From relevant academic background/experience in research methodology	Member
Data Provider(s) (DP)		Supply of primary or value added dataset	Dependent upon dataset (business, value added reseller, etc.)	Co-opted member(s)
GeoDS Senior Management Team (SMT)	GeoDS	To provide information on project feasibility and resource implications; also co-opted when data owner provisions have lapsed	Academic/professional	Advisory Role
Data Scientist (DS)	GeoDS	Technical advice on application, not involved in decision making process	Academic/professional	Advisory Role