North Node Privacy Advisory Committee Process and Guidance Notes for Applicants

NNPAC process
Guidance for applicants
V3, 27/02/2026

Guidance for Applicants

Applications for access to datasets via the Grampian Data Safe Haven (DaSH) are made through NNPAC which is the North Node Privacy Advisory Committee. The remit of this Committee is to provide University of Aberdeen and/or NHS Grampian researchers with access to NHS patient/health data within NHS Grampian for research purposes via a streamlined approach that incorporates Sponsorship, Ethics, NHS Grampian Caldicott and R&D. The application form is completed online and can be found here:

Application form – for completion on a University of Aberdeen computer

Application form – for completion on an NHS Grampian computer

The application should be carried out in collaboration with DaSH. Their process is outline below.

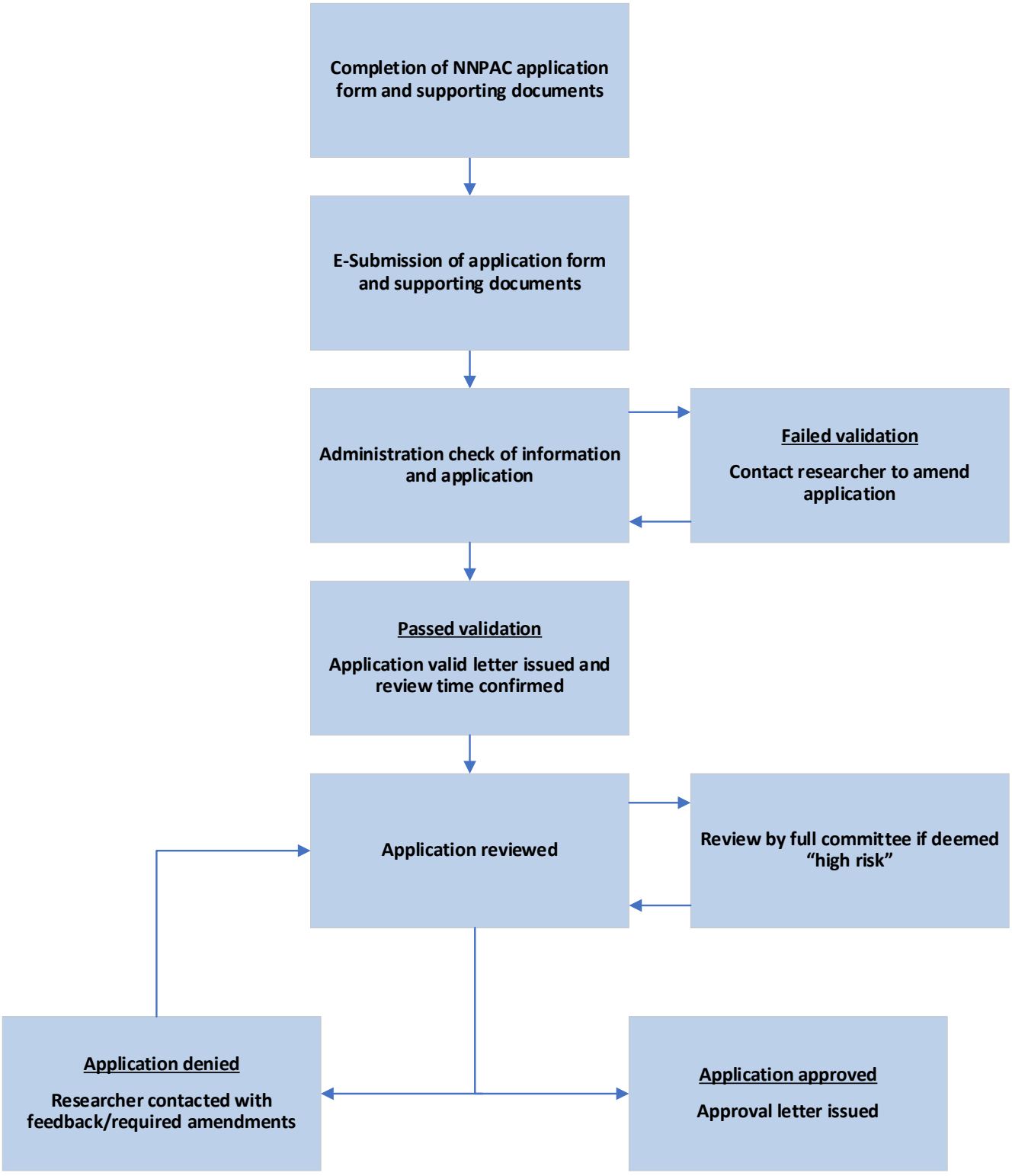
1. Contact DaSH to discuss costings, feasibility, study design and data specification via dash@abdn.ac.uk
2. Complete and submit the NNPAC application form
3. Application reviewed and referred to full committee if deemed "higher risk"
4. Approval for project
5. Contact DaSH for data linkage plan to commence
6. Begin Project

Any project identified as carrying additional risk will be subject to review by the full NNPAC Committee. This review process may extend the standard estimated timeline. Estimated review times can be found on the NNPAC website.

Projects considered higher risk include, but are not limited to:

- Projects involving very small participant numbers or geographical areas
- Projects concerning rare diseases
- Projects requesting inclusion of additional identifiable data (e.g., postcode, date of birth) for any reason
- Projects involving special category data (sex life or sexual health, race or ethnic origin, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data or biometric data. Please see the ICO website for further information on what constitutes special category data)
- Projects where researchers will access the data out with the UK
- Any other project deemed higher risk during the initial submission and validation process.

NNPAC process flowchart



Guidance on the Application Form

Section 1: Overview

Commercial Partners

Currently the Committee **will not** be approving projects with commercial interest and separate approvals applications should be submitted for Sponsorship, Caldicott, Ethics & NHS R&D.

Small geographical areas or rare events Please provide details if the project is to identify small geographical areas or small numbers (e.g. rare events or diseases) and provide a justification.

Data access out with the UK

Please indicate whether any member of the research team will require access to the Safe Haven from outside the UK. If so, specify the country of access and the reason for this request. All international access requests must be reviewed and approved by the relevant data protection team(s) and, depending on the country, may require additional scrutiny or assurances. To facilitate this process, please inform DaSH of any current or potential requirements as early as possible.

Identifiable variables

Please list any identifiable or potentially identifiable variables (CHI, date of birth, name, address, postcode etc.) to be included in your de-identified research dataset and justify why you need access to these for your study.

Data protection law requires that the use of either directly or indirectly identifiable data variables is minimised to those which are strictly necessary. This is known as the 'data minimisation' principle. Please justify the need for all of the identifiable or potentially identifiable variables to be included in your de-identified research dataset

Special category data

The NNPAC committee need to know whether your study will use any special category personal data because this type of information is considered particularly sensitive under UK GDPR and requires stronger legal and ethical safeguards. If your research involves data such as health information, ethnicity, political or religious beliefs, genetic or biometric data, sexual orientation, or trade union membership, the panel must ensure that you have a valid legal basis, appropriate protections, and proportionate methods in place to minimise risks to participants. Providing this information helps the committee assess whether the study meets regulatory requirements and adequately protects participant privacy and wellbeing.

Conflict of Interest

Please provide details on any potential conflicts of interest. If the CI/researchers will have any financial gain or personal benefit from the project and/or if the CI/researchers have a connection to a business that could profit from the information derived from the study, this should be fully disclosed.

Public Involvement

Questions on public involvement are included in the application form because involving patients, carers, and members of the public helps ensure that research is relevant, acceptable, and accessible to the communities it seeks to serve. From a researcher's perspective, public involvement strengthens the design, conduct, and communication of studies, leading to higher quality outcomes and greater trust in research. Please describe the level of public involvement undertaken in this project. If none was undertaken, please provide a justification.

Section 2: Peer review

Please note – if evidence of a peer review is not included with the application, it will not be reviewed.

The review must be carried out by someone who is independent to the project but with relevant expertise in the field of research being conducted.

Peer review and protocol templates are available on the Grampian Research Office website https://www.abdn.ac.uk/gro/qa-and-sops/sops/

Section 3: Funding

As the Grampian Data Safe Haven is a cost recovery service, assurance that funding is available or will be sought is essential. Please provide details.

Section 4 - 12: Applicants

Please provide details of the applicants involved with the study including any students or additional collaborators, as applicable, and who will be accessing the Data generated by the Safe Haven.

All researchers accessing data must complete and maintain information governance training as per DaSH standard processes. Accepted courses are:

- Medical Research Council (MRS) Confidentiality and Data Protection in Health Research: Applicants must complete the four modules and undertake the quiz at the end of the training. Completed quiz certificates must be provided to DaSH and to NNPAC during the application stage.
- Office for National Statistics Safe Researcher Training (ONS-SRT): applicants must attend of a scheduled online ONS-SRT session and complete the online ONS-SRT test. Completed certificates must be provided to DaSH and to NNPAC during the application stage.

Section 13: Research Proposal

Please provide details of the project. A lay summary of the project will be made available on the DaSH website along with the name and email address of the Chief Investigator or Academic supervisor.

Please give information on how the statistical aspects of the research have been reviewed and who was responsible for this.

Section 14: Datasets and variables

Please identify which datasets will be accessed with this application.

If you intend to use data from the Aberdeen Maternity and Neonatal Databank (AMND) or the Aberdeen Children of the 1950s (ACONF) dataset, you must apply to their respective steering committees via the appropriate application form to obtain permission.

This approval must be secured before submitting your application to the NNPAC committee, and evidence of this approval must be included in your submission documents. Applications without this evidence will not be validated, and the review process will not begin until the required documentation is provided.

Aberdeen Maternity and Neonatal Databank

Aberdeen Children of the 1950's

If you plan to use data from any of the following datasets, you must obtain written confirmation from the relevant data custodian. This confirmation should state that they have reviewed your study protocol and agreed to provide the data for the specified research project.

Applicable datasets include:

- Aberdeen Birth Cohorts (ABC)
- Aberdeen Children of the 1950s (ACONF)
- Aberdeen Maternity and Neonatal Databank (AMND)
- Grampian Renal Biochemistry Database
- National Stroke Audit
- Parkinson's Incidence Cohorts Collaboration (PICC)
- Parkinsonism Incidence in North-East (PINE)
- Study of Eczema and Asthma To Observe the Influence of Nutrition (SEATON)
- Study of Trends in Obesity in North East Scotland (STONES)

This permission must also be secured before submitting your application to the NNPAC committee, and evidence of approval must be included in your submission documents. Applications without this evidence will not be validated, and the review process will not commence until the required documentation is provided.

Requests to these data custodians must be made through DaSH, who can assist with the process.

Section 15: Disclosure control

Please tell us about what you will do to ensure no individuals will be identified in the published findings. Tell us how you will handle small numbers (<5) in your analysis and how you will present your analysis so that it can be released from DaSH e.g. obscuring/not reporting low numbers or

merging data categories. Demonstrate that you understand it is your responsibility to ensure published results do not contain any information or combination of information that could identify an individual.

Section 16: Timescale for Data Access & Data Storage

Please provide details on the timescale for the data access. It is important for Governance and Sponsorship to know when the study has been completed. If this date changes, NNPAC (nnpac@abdn.ac.uk) should be informed and if necessary an amendment submitted to change the end date.

The definition of the end of study should be clearly documented in the research protocol; it should refer to the point of final data capture (the point at which all required data has been collected and processed to answer the research question(s) in the protocol).

Section 17: Dissemination of results

Registering research projects and making them publicly available is important because it promotes transparency, accountability, and trust in research. A public record helps prevent unnecessary duplication of studies, supports collaboration, and ensures that valuable findings, whether positive, negative, or inconclusive, are accessible to the wider community. It also allows patients, the public, and other researchers to see what work is being carried out, which can improve recruitment, reduce research waste, and enhance the overall quality and impact of studies. Give details on how the results of the project will be disseminated and shared.

Section 18: Document upload

Please upload the study documents and indicate the version number and date of the protocol and data linkage plan as instructed. Version numbers must be whole numbers (e.g. v1 xx/xx/xx). Version control including decimal places (e.g. V1.2 xx/xx/xx) will not be accepted. Documents that must be included are:

- The most recent version of the project protocol
- The most recent version of the data linkage plan (provided by DaSH)
- The most recent version of the data specification document (provided by DaSH)
- Evidence of funding
- Evidence of an independent peer review
- Up-to-date CVs for all members of the research team (signed and dated)
- Evidence of information governance training (MRC or ONS)
- Any other documentation that may be relevant to your application

Section 19: Declaration

This declaration is essential because it ensures that applicants formally acknowledge their legal, ethical, and governance responsibilities when requesting access to health data. By signing, applicants confirm the accuracy of their application, commit to using the data only for the approved purpose, and agree to notify NNPAC of any changes. This protects data integrity, promotes responsible research practice, and ensures that the Committee can maintain effective oversight throughout the project.

The declaration also reinforces accountability by requiring applicants to abide by any conditions applied during the approval process and to ensure that all team members understand their confidentiality obligations. Acknowledging the Data Controller's right to inspect data processing activities and confirming the legitimacy of all individuals named in the application further supports transparency and safeguards data security.

Before submitting your application, you will be asked to agree to terms set by the Committee that outline expectations around validation, review timelines, and your responsibilities during the process. These terms ensure appropriate governance by allowing the application to be shared with DaSH for their records. The validation step safeguards both applicants and the Committee by confirming that submissions are accurate, complete, and ready for review, while enabling early clarification of any issues to prevent unnecessary delays.

Clarifying that the review period only begins once all outstanding matters are resolved helps manage expectations and ensures that turnaround times reflect the Committee's active work, not delays caused by incomplete applications. Requiring timely and constructive engagement from applicants, and pausing the review clock while amendments are completed, supports fairness and keeps the process consistent for all.

Amendments

Once the application is approved, all amendments must be notified to and approved by the NNPAC committee before they are implemented. Amendment applications are completed online and can be found here:

Amendment application form – for completion on a University of Aberdeen computer

Amendment application form – for completion on an NHS Grampian computer