The SafePod Network - six months on from launch

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Extending secure data access across the UK

Following its launch in September 2021, the development of the SafePod Network (SPN) is moving apace across the UK. The network provides the infrastructure, services and opportunities for researchers to analyse data that requires secure access. This includes datasets from the Office for National Statistics, SAIL Databank and the UK Data Service.

What is a SafePod?

A SafePod is a prefabricated room which provides a secure environment and controls to enable researchers to undertake analysis of data held by different UK organisations. Its purpose is to safeguard the security of datasets while making them available for re-use by approved researchers.

There are expected to be around 25 SafePods in the UK by the end of 2022. Further information is available from the SafePod Network website. The SPN is part of the Administrative Data Research UK programme (ADR UK) and is currently funded by the Economic and Social Research Council until 2026.

In most cases no data needs to be held inside a SafePod, and instead access is provided by secure remote connection from a SafePod to a Data Centre's server.

Opening opportunities to work with data which requires secure access

The central aim of the SPN is to remove the cost and time barriers involved in travelling to a Data Centre to access project data. By providing equitable access to data through the network, there will be greater opportunities for researchers to undertake public benefit research using data from organisations that have joined the SPN.

An important feature of the network is that no matter where they are based in the UK, a SafePod can be booked by researchers who have an active research project with the centres participating in the scheme.

Security

Security is paramount for data access from a SafePod. Four main SPN principles underpin the security of SafePods:

Safe researcher: A researcher must abide by the SPN User Agreement and pass a training questionnaire before they can book and use SafePods.

Safe access: A local SafePod Coordinator manages their SafePod in line with SPN procedures. SafePod Coordinators are background checked and must pass a training questionnaire.

Safe data: A hardened IT system stored securely in a SafePod provides connection over a VPN for a researcher to remotely access their project datasets from a SafePod.

Safe analysis: A SafePod provides a dedicated area for a researcher to analyse and work on their project datasets. The area is door access controlled and contains a CCTV system.

All SafePods are operated and managed under the same procedures. The strict requirements involved in attending a safe setting are replicated when using a SafePod. Further conditions of access, including whether CCTV is in operation for a SafePod booking are determined by the relevant Data Centre.

Using a SafePod

Mike Adkins is a Research Fellow in the School of Education at University of Nottingham who has worked on large-scale educational data projects with the Department for Education's National Pupil Database, Higher Education Statistics Agency database, and the Individual Learner Record provided through the ONS Secure Research Service for almost a decade. I asked for his reflections on using a SafePod:

"The SafePod really does replicate the experience of using a Safe Room provided by the Office for National Statistics, but with the added convenience of being accessible for researchers based at the University. It is well lit, provides a comfortable desk and chair and a large screen monitor, and hopefully later this year an additional monitor to help with writing code or writing up results. Compared to pre-GDPR working practice, it does require some adaptation – such as blocking out an entire morning or afternoon, or the entire day, and the time slots are limited to the working week, but this is a small inconvenience to access critical data for our projects. The only real downside, compared to my previous way of working, is that the space inside is limited to one person on one project (or two on the same project using one terminal)."

Partnership

It's important to recognise the partnership approach which is also a core aspect of the SPN.

As one of the first institutions to install a SafePod, the [University of Nottingham](#) is keen to promote the chance for researchers to make use of our new facilities. As a host institution, we feel privileged to be able to offer access to UK researchers. At the same time, it should be recognised that investment and resource need to be made by an organisation to install and operate a SafePod.

Installation of a SafePod is a significant project management challenge, requiring input from people across the university - senior academic sponsors, IT, network security, electricians, fire and safety personnel, estates, as well as library staff who run the service day-to-day.

Reflecting the importance of security, a team of SafePod Coordinators must be assembled who will be background checked and trained. For each booking, Coordinators are required to run through a checklist of procedures on a researcher's arrival and departure - workload planning and rotas are crucial to ensuring the smooth operation of a SafePod. The ongoing investment from a host institution is one principally associated with staffing.

The development of the network and its scope to expand mean there are opportunities for institutions to enhance the usefulness of SafePods. Our experience of working with SPN is very much a two-way street. The SPN Manager promptly attends to feedback from SafePod Coordinators and users, and, as Mike demonstrated, the SPN has taken up his suggestion to install a second monitor inside the SafePods.

Darren Lightfoot, SPN Manager, on the value of collaboration:

"As demand for data to be more accessible for research grows, it is likely to influence participation from further Data Centres to join the SPN and we will be working with them to provide access to their data through the network. This will include health, census and consumer related datasets.

At a local level, it is also possible for institutions to make use of their SafePod for work that requires a confidential space.   This collaborative approach taken by the SPN is designed to maximise impact for public benefit research in the UK."

Promotion to PGR and ECR users

It is particularly worth noting the potential of the network to support research opportunities for postgraduate and early career researchers, making it easier to undertake long and short-term projects using their local SafePod.

At the University of Nottingham, we are working with our Researcher Academy (PGR), local ESRC Doctoral Training Partnership, academic sponsors, and regional Mercian group of Libraries to promote the opportunity presented by the SPN. Similar work will be going on at each SafePod site across the UK to boost the profile of the network. This article is part of that effort!

We look forward to seeing researchers begin to understand the valuable opportunity afforded by the creation of the SafePod Network, incorporating its use into their grant bids, and steady growth in the number of papers which cite the use of a SafePod in enabling their research.

Notes:

ADR UK Press release launch of SafePod Network: https://www.adruk.org/news-publications/news-blogs/uk-wide-network-of-safepods-levels-up-access-to-data-for-research-in-the-public-interest-441/

For more information on the SPN visit www.safepodnetwork.ac.uk. SafePod is a registered trademark of the **University of St Andrews**.

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