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Behavioural Research UK (BR-UK) Current and future priorities for UK behavioural research: A review of national and international strategy documents

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Executive Summary

Purpose

This documentary review was undertaken as part of the Behavioural Research UK (BR-UK) Capability Scoping Study to identify current and future needs for behavioural research in the UK. It synthesises national and international strategy documents (2014–2024) to map:

1. Societal and scientific needs for behavioural research.
2. Strategies to strengthen behavioural research capability.
3. Strengths, gaps, and opportunities for the field.
4. The extent to which equalities, diversity, inclusion, intersectionality (EDII), and open science principles are incorporated in strategy.

Who is this for?

This review is intended for policymakers, funders, and research leaders who set priorities for behavioural science in the UK. It will also be of value to academics, practitioners, and early-career researchers seeking to understand the evolving behavioural research landscape and opportunities for capability building.

Key Findings

From 34 strategy documents, eight themes were identified:

1. **Strengths of the field** – Established theories and tools are increasingly applied in policy and practice, with particular impact during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. **Ethics and transparency** – Clearer ethical frameworks and transparent methodologies are needed to maintain public trust.
3. **Emerging technologies** – Artificial intelligence and digital tools offer opportunities for innovation but require interdisciplinary skills and safeguards.
4. **Interdisciplinary collaboration** – Stronger, structured partnerships between academia, government, and industry are needed.
5. **Systems-level approaches** – Strategies increasingly emphasise addressing structural and environmental determinants of behaviour.
6. **Capability and training** – Workforce gaps persist across career stages, with calls for advanced skills, interdisciplinary training, and leadership development.
7. **Leadership and advocacy** – Senior leaders must champion behavioural science and resource it appropriately.
8. **Funding models** – Current short-term and siloed funding mechanisms hinder growth; innovative approaches are needed.
9. **Diversity and EDII** – While equality, diversity and inclusion are widely referenced, concrete actions are limited, and intersectionality is absent.

Strengths of the Review

- Synthesises a decade of strategic documents from governments, funders, and learned societies.
- Provides a thematic analysis aligned to four research questions.
- Incorporates EDII and open science explicitly into the review framework.

Limitations

- Focused primarily on UK documents, with only selected international strategies included.
- Did not appraise the quality of included documents.
- Potential selection bias due to lack of standardised frameworks for documentary analysis.

Conclusions and Implications

This review demonstrates that while UK behavioural research is increasingly applied and visible in policy and practice, it faces significant challenges in capability, funding, and inclusivity. Addressing these gaps will require:

- Stronger ethical and transparent research practices.
- Investment in interdisciplinary training, leadership, and infrastructure.
- Sustainable funding mechanisms and innovative partnerships.
- Concrete EDII actions, including intersectional approaches and inclusive career pathways.

The findings directly inform BR-UK's scoping study and will support the development of a national behavioural research network and capability strategy to ensure behavioural science can meet future societal challenges.

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Abstract

Who is this review for?

This review is intended for policymakers, funders, research leaders, academics and early-career researchers, and practitioners working with or using behavioural research to understand the evolving landscape of UK behavioural research and opportunities for capability building.

Purpose:

This documentary review synthesises national and international strategy documents (2014–2024) to identify the current and future needs of UK behavioural research. The review examines how strategies propose to strengthen behavioural research capability, highlights strengths, gaps, and opportunities, and assesses the extent to which equalities, diversity, inclusion, intersectionality (EDII), and open science principles are embedded.

Background:

Behavioural research plays a critical role in addressing societal challenges such as public health, climate change, education, economic wellbeing, and digital transformation. To guide future investment and capability building, it is necessary to understand the current strengths, gaps, and priorities for behavioural research in the UK.

Aims:

The review aims to: describe current and future needs for UK behavioural research identified in recent behavioural and social research strategies published by or for national and devolved governments and research funders; summarise the ways in which these strategies propose to strengthen behavioural research capability; identify gaps and areas of unmet scientific and stakeholder needs, and areas for advancement.

Methods:

A documentary review and thematic analysis were conducted following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) scoping review framework, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guidance, and Morgan's (2022) recommendations for documentary reviews. Thirty-four eligible documents were systematically identified, screened, and analysed, with themes mapped against four research questions.

Results:

Eight themes emerged: (1) strengths of behavioural science across key societal domains, (2) ethical and transparent methodologies, (3) the potential of emerging technologies including AI, (4) the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, (5) systems- and population-level approaches, (6) capability and training needs, (7) leadership and advocacy, (8) funding models, and (9) diversity of behavioural researchers. While strategies highlighted the value of behavioural science in policy and practice, they also revealed persistent gaps in workforce skills, interdisciplinary structures, sustainable funding, and intersectionality considerations.

Conclusions:

Findings underscore the importance of building national capability through stronger ethical frameworks, sustainable funding, systems thinking, and inclusivity. This review provides a foundation for BR-UK's ongoing scoping study and will inform the development of a national behavioural research network and capability-building strategy.

Background

Behavioural research is crucial for informing policy and practice in areas not limited to but including public health, climate change and sustainability, economic wellbeing, education, crime and justice, social welfare, governance and digital technology including artificial intelligence (Chetty, 2015; Cheung & Ardolino, 2011; Hallsworth, 2023; Sanders et al., 2018; West et al., 2019). Making advances in these areas and in the way we conduct behavioural research will depend on large-scale transdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaborations, as well as developing more effective links between basic research, applied research, policy and practice (Matthew Flinders, 2020; Sumner et al., 2018).

Behavioural Research UK (BR-UK), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), is a multidisciplinary leadership hub, comprising a consortium of eight universities and five public and private sector partners, tasked with building national capability for behavioural research in the UK. One of BR-UK's first activities is a multi-part scoping study to understand the current landscape of behavioural research, including gaps and opportunities in relation to societal needs; and to establish a national network and a set of strategic priorities for BR-UK's future work and management of a commissioning fund.

To help inform the scoping study and the process of developing BR-UK's strategic priorities, we reviewed existing documents that describe strategies or agendas for advancing behavioural research capability in the UK and internationally. This report describes our research questions, search strategy, analysis, and findings from the review.

Aims

The review aims to:

- Describe current and future needs for UK behavioural research identified in recent behavioural and social research strategies published by or for national and devolved governments and research funders.
- Summarise the ways in which these strategies propose to strengthen behavioural research capability.
- Identify gaps and areas of unmet scientific and stakeholder needs, and areas for advancement.

Research questions

This review aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the current and future societal and scientific needs for UK behavioural research, as articulated in strategies from government and research funders?
2. In what ways do these strategies propose to strengthen behavioural research capability to meet societal and scientific needs?
3. What strengths, gaps and opportunities for behavioural research are highlighted by these strategies?
4. To what extent are equalities, diversity, inclusion and intersectionality (EDI) and open science principles incorporated and encouraged in these strategies?

Methods

Equalities, Diversity, Inclusion and Intersectionality (EDII) Considerations and Actions

This project assesses the extent to which national strategies incorporate and encourage equality, diversity, inclusion and intersectionality. We will use our findings to inform BR-UK's scoping study of behavioural research capability (e.g. what types of questions around EDII we ask in surveys and workshops) and our development of strategic priorities for BR-UK's future work and commissioning fund.

Search Strategy

Between 22 January and 28 March 2024 we identified a set of documents for inclusion in the study, through online searches and asking document authors and members of BR-UK. In an additional search step, we surveyed members of the BR-UK International Scientific Advisory Board (ISAB) for additional potentially relevant documents not identified in the search. Our inclusion criteria, online search strategy, document screening process and steps for contacting people are described below.

Inclusion criteria

Documents (including webpages) published since 1 January 2014 that focus on UK and international strategies or agendas for advancing behavioural research capability, authored by or for:

- UK government departments or public bodies, or
- research funding bodies, or
- learned societies

Strategies authored by or for other organisations or individuals were outside our scope. International documents were only sought when asking members of BR-UK and BR-UK's ISAB (due to the potential volume of online search results for international strategies).

We searched websites and databases (listed in Appendix A) through menu navigation using the keywords: "behaviour", "behavioural research", "behavioural science". We also conducted a systematic search of Google and [UCL Explore](#) (a library tool that searches a large set of academic literature databases) using combinations of the following keywords:

- ((behavioural OR behavioral) AND (research OR science))
- AND ((agenda OR strateg*) OR (ability OR capability OR capacity))
- AND (national OR UK OR "United Kingdom" OR England OR English OR Wales OR Welsh OR Scotland OR Scottish OR "Northern Ireland" OR "Northern Irish" OR international OR global)

Record screening

Step 1: Identifying documents.

One researcher (JDW) identified potentially relevant documents by reading the title and summary (or skim-reading the full text if a summary was not available) and saving them to Zotero reference manager. Given the range of websites searched and the high volume of non-relevant material, full search results were not saved.

Step 2: Screening documents against inclusion criteria.

Two independent researchers (NH & JDW) conducted full-text reviews of each document to judge whether it met the inclusion criteria, with a third independent researcher resolving any conflicts. To help with the judgements, the full texts were keyword searched to check whether they explicitly referred to behaviour (or “behavioural”, etc.).

Contacting document authors, members of BR-UK and the BR-UK International Scientific Advisory Board

After conducting our online search strategy and initial document screening, we contacted authors (organisations or individuals) by email (unless a contact email could not be found) with a request to check whether we held the most updated version of each document and whether they were aware of other potentially relevant documents. We screened responses using the process above. We then contacted members of BR-UK with an updated list of documents and a request to tell us of any other potentially relevant documents. We again screened responses using the process above. In a final step, we contacted the BR-UK ISAB with a request to tell us of any further potentially relevant documents.

Data charting

Definitions of concepts used in this review are listed in Table 1. To ensure a systematic data extraction process, we followed Arksey & O’Malley’s (2005) methodological framework for scoping reviews. Using this framework, a data charting form was developed based on the review’s aims and objectives. The year of publication, author list, record title, and URL were included in the form alongside the headings listed below in Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions of Concepts in the Review

Concept	Definition
Behavioural Research	Systematic investigation undertaken to advance knowledge and understanding about behaviour
Synopsis	A short summary of the document’s purpose and contents
Current needs for behavioural research in the UK	Current areas in which more or better UK behavioural research is needed to meet societal and scientific priorities
Future needs for behavioural research in the UK	Future areas in which more or better behavioural research is expected to be needed to meet emerging societal and scientific priorities
Existing initiatives	Existing (past, current or ongoing) interventions that have been put in place to strengthen any aspect of behavioural research

Strengths of the field	Positive attributes or characteristics of the current body of behavioural research activity and the people engaged in behavioural research, including benefits to science and society
Proposed strategies	The specific plans, methods, or approaches suggested to strengthen any aspect of behavioural research
How the strategies propose to strengthen behavioural research	The anticipated impact and improvements that the proposed strategies are expected to bring to the field of behavioural research
Opportunities	Specific areas in which there is an unmet opportunity for behavioural research to benefit science or society, e.g. commercial applications
Gaps and weaknesses	Areas in behavioural research which involve limitations or challenges, and places that are underexplored or inadequately addressed
EDII strategies	Specific plans, methods or approaches suggested to improve EDII in behavioural research
EDII considerations	Considerations about EDII in behavioural research, including possible ways to navigate challenges/barriers and improve EDII (that do not constitute a strategy)
Open science principles	Considerations about open science principles, which are propositions that serve to make research transparent and accessible to all levels of society, amateur or professional

Two independent researchers pilot-tested the data charting form on the first 10 included documents (five each) and modified it accordingly. One researcher performed the remainder of the extraction process.

The findings are presented in two ways:

1. Tabular, including a table on sources and their classifications, including year of publication, author(s), title, and document type.
2. Thematically, with a narrative summary of the key themes and concepts relevant to the research questions.

Thematic analysis

Of the literature available, qualitative approaches to analysing documents are usually conducted as they allow for a descriptive interpretation of the data. Morgan (2022) suggests that thematic analysis is an ideal method for analysing secondary data, such as documents, due to its versatility and the descriptive nature of the data extracted, making it the most appropriate approach. Thematic analysis is a six-phase research method not driven by a specific theory or ontological and epistemological frameworks, and it can be used to analyse

various studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Morgan (2022) encourages a reflexive approach to the thematic analysis of documents as it allows the researcher to utilise their subjectivity as a tool rather than view it as a limitation (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This includes researchers reflecting on how their thinking patterns influence the interpretation of the findings.

The analysis process in a documentary review and thematic analysis is iterative (Morgan, 2022). Data is interpreted through the researcher's experiences, assumptions and knowledge in that field of research. This iterative approach allowed us to move back and forth through the phases of analysis. For example, a code could be renamed or redefined as our interpretation of the data evolves.

We used a reflexive method and the following six phases of thematic analysis to analyse the documents:

1. Data familiarisation: After completing the data extraction process, we transferred the documents into NVivo v.14, highlighting all relevant information detected in the previous data charting stage.
2. First level of coding: All relevant sections from documents were annotated with code names and definitions provided for each. This process was inductive, where codes were derived directly from the data without pre-existing categories. The research group met regularly to inform and discuss the coding decisions made.
3. Second level of coding: We identified potential relationships and patterns of shared meaning between codes and began conceptualising themes in relation to each research question and objective. This process was both inductive and deductive. Categories and themes were inductively derived based on the data and the study's research questions were used to group themes in a deductive manner.
4. We reviewed all analyses to ensure coherence and consistency within codes and themes with bi-weekly researcher (JDW and NH) meetings.
5. At these meetings, we refined and named the themes, with clear definitions, produced from the coding process.
6. Documentary review write-up: The review was written in a journal publication style. This includes a narrative summary with all relevant information arranged by themes. The report includes a discussion section highlighting implications for future research, including BR-UK's capability scoping study, as well as any relevant implications for the BR-UK network and commissioning fund

Results

Thirty-four documents met the inclusion criteria for the review, from an initial 71 identified. A spreadsheet of included and excluded documents is available at the [OSF project associated with this study](#). Classifications (year of publication, author(s), title, and type of document) of the 34 documents included in this review are included in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Classifications of the Sources Included in the Review*

Year	Location	Authors	Title	Type of document
2024	UK	Economic and Social Research Council	ESRC Response to Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences	Response to Review
2023	UK	Hallsworth	A Manifesto for Applying Behavioural Science	Report
2023	UK	Economic and Social Research Council	ESRC Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Living Action Plan 2023 to 2025	Strategy report
2023	UK	Government Social Research	Government Social Research Year 2 Review	Strategy Report
2023	UK	Government Social Research	GSR Strategy Year 3 Delivery Plan	Strategy delivery plan
2023	UK	Cancer Research UK	Longer, Better Lives: A Programme for UK Government for Cancer Research and Care	Report
2023	UK	The British Academy	Strategic Plan 2023–2027: Understanding our World, Shaping a Brighter Future	Strategy delivery plan
2023	UK	Flinders	Strategic Scaffolding: Supporting Mid-Career and Senior Research Leaders in the Social Sciences	Report
2022	International	World Health Organization	Behavioural Sciences for Better Health Initiative: Report by the Director-General	Report
2022	UK	Economic and Social Research Council	ESRC Strategic Delivery Plan 2022–2025	Strategy delivery plan
2022	UK	Government Social Research	Government Social Research Year 1 Review	Strategy report
2022	UK	Government Social Research	Government Social Research Year 2 Delivery Plan	Strategy delivery plan
2022	UK	Hunt	The Technology-Led Transformation of Competition and Consumer Agencies: The Competition and Markets Authority's experience	Discussion paper
2022	UK	Data-Driven Research Skills (DDRS) Steering Group	Scoping the Skills Needs in the Social Sciences to Support Data-Driven Research Skills Across the Academic Career Life Course	Scoping study report
2022	UK	Ferrie, Wain, Gallacher, Brown, Allinson, Kolarz, MacInnes, Sutinen & Cimatti	Scoping the Skills Needs in the Social Sciences to Support Data-Driven Research	Scoping study report
2021	UK	Government Social Research	Government Social Research Strategy 2021–2025	Strategy report
2021	UK	Government Social Research	Government Social Research Strategy Year 1 Delivery Plan	Strategy delivery plan
2021	UK	Nesta	Nesta's Strategy to 2023	Strategy delivery plan

2021	UK	Tazzyman, Moreton, Bowes, Wakeling & Stutz	Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences	Review Report
2021	UK	Competition and Markets Authority	The CMA's Digital Markets Strategy: February 2021 Refresh	Strategy Report update
2021	UK	Department of Health and Social Care	Transforming the Public Health System: Reforming the Public Health System for the Challenges of our Times	Strategy report
2021	International	UN Innovation Network	United Nations Behavioural Science Report	Review Report
2021	UK	The Scottish Government	Strategy for Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research 2022-2027	Strategy report
2020	UK	Rahman & Mulimba	Behaviour Change Development of the Workforce	Report
2020	UK	Flinders	Fit for the Future: Research Leadership Matters	Review Report
2019	UK	Academy of Medical Sciences	2019 Richard & Hinda Rosenthal Symposium Key Messages	Key messages report
2019	UK	Economic and Social Research Council	Delivery Plan 2019	Strategy report
2019	UK	Competition and Markets Authority	The CMA's Digital Markets Strategy	Strategy Report
2019	UK	Academy of Medical Sciences	The Future of Behaviour Change Interventions	Blog
2018	UK	Public Health England	Improving People's Health: Applying Behavioural and Social Sciences to Improve Population Health and Wellbeing in England	Strategy delivery plan
2018	US	National Academy of Sciences	Integrating Social and Behavioral Sciences Within the Weather Enterprise	Consensus study report
2017	International	World Health Organization	Behavioural Insights and Public Policy: Lessons from Around the World	Report
2017	UK	Campaign for Social Science	The Health of People: How the Social Sciences Can Improve Population Health	Report
2016	International	Shankar & Foster	Behavioral Insights at the United Nations: Achieving Agenda 2030	Report

The next sections, including Table 3 below, address all four research questions and outline the areas in behavioural research that the researchers have coded as strengths, weaknesses, and/or opportunities for development in relation to current and future societal needs, including EDII and open science principles. Often, themes covered numerous research questions. For example, a weakness in behavioural research could also be interpreted as an area of EDII consideration. To avoid duplication, we chose to present the findings through an overarching theme, with sub-themes describing how a related research question was answered.

Table 3. Areas of Weakness and Opportunities for Development in Behavioural Research

Theme	Research Question(s) Addressed	Related Sub-Theme	Example Quotations	Example Strategy/Existing Initiatives
Behavioural research for key societal issues	Strengths of behavioural research	Environment & Sustainability	“Research in the behavioural and social sciences, and the rapidly developing field of implementation science, has led to the development and ongoing refinement of theories, frameworks and practical tools. These can help us to predict behaviour, explain variability in behaviour between and within populations, understand the factors influencing the translation of research evidence into real-world impact, and use these insights to develop more effective approaches to behaviour change, service design and policy implementation” (Cancer Research UK, 2023)	Behavioural science has been integrated into public policy and is increasingly being applied by governments, which are using it to address issues ranging from poverty reduction to climate change to public health emergencies (UN Innovation Network, 2021).
		Health & Wellbeing		
		Technology		
Transparent methodology and ethical procedures	Current and future societal and scientific needs	A need for strong ethical provisions	“The application of behavioural science entails several ethical questions, which need to be addressed to produce reliable results, maintain respect and ensure public trust.” (UN Innovation Network, 2021)	ESRC will work to increase fair, safe and equitable data sharing by creating and strengthening partnerships with the Office for National Statistics, UK Government departments and other data infrastructure providers (ESRC, 2019)
	Open science principles	The importance of open science		

			the new unit’s collaborative strategic focus.” (ESRC, 2020)	
The potential role of emerging technology, including AI	Area of weakness	Challenges with utilising technology, including AI	“Through machine learning and rule-based algorithms, ontological programmes can identify connections between diverse data to not only extract and synthesise but also interpret relevant information” (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2019)	The Human Behaviour-Change Project, a collaborative effort between behavioural scientists, computer scientists, and systems architects, uses AI to help people find answers to questions such as: "What intervention(s) work, compared with what, how well, with what exposure, with what behaviours, for how long, for whom, in what settings and why?" This is achieved by creating a Behaviour Change Intervention Ontology to organise the knowledge extracted from the research literature (Rutter, 2019)
	Current and future societal and scientific needs	Opportunities with emerging technology		
	EDII consideration	Use of AI to support EDII		
Interdisciplinary collaborations	Area of weakness	Lack of collaboration between differing disciplines	Leaders should “commit to a systems thinking approach, to work collaboratively across organisations, to be aware of how complexities affect the impact of their work, and to use transdisciplinary approaches where appropriate” (Public Health England, 2018)	The British Academy (2023) will actively seek opportunities to work with other colleagues across a range of disciplines through international and national funding, policy and public engagement programmes.
	Current and future societal and scientific needs	Collaboratively working across organisations, academia and beyond		
Systems- and populations-level approaches to behavioural research	Current and future societal and scientific needs	Systems and population-level approaches in areas of health	“To optimise attempts to improve population health, a comprehensive systems approach is required, with evidence-based interventions needing to be both “upstream” and “downstream”.” (Public Health England, 2018)	The UKHSA will lead a collaborative, partnership-driven health protection system with the needs of local communities at its core. It will act to strengthen health protection capability from top to bottom, ensuring clear roles, relationships and accountabilities to enable a ‘whole system response’ to health threats, with robust arrangements for emergencies. (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021)
	EDII consideration	Systems approaches to EDII		

Capability and capacity to employ behavioural methods	Strength of behavioural research	Postgraduate Training and Employability	There is “a need to build capacity by developing the skills and competencies of the workforce to deliver behaviour change.” (Rahman, 2020)	Health Education England with a range of partners, has developed a framework that aims to help understand what behaviour change skills are required for different workforce segments. The framework is a person-centred approach which summarises the levels of behaviour change training by first articulating what the service user needs and what they need from the workforce. (Rahman, 2020)
	Current and future societal and scientific needs	Skills, training and employability provision	“Current staff should be trained in behavioural science through online modules, and behavioural science should be integrated into professional training curricula to educate future staff.” (Cancer Research UK, 2023)	
	Area of weakness	Future training needs for behavioural scientists		
Leadership and the championing of behavioural research	Current and future societal and scientific needs	A committed culture to encourage behavioural research	“Once there is a basic awareness of behavioural science, UN Entities need to work towards creating a culture that allows behavioural science to flourish” (UN Innovation Network, 2021)	The British Academy (2023) is committed to advocating for their disciplines and to providing them with strategic leadership.
	Area of weakness	Capability for leadership roles		
Funding approaches for behavioural research capability	Area of weakness	Weaknesses in current funding models	“Both private capital and public investment can be used more effectively to drive impact” (Nesta, 2021)	The British Academy (2023) will work in partnership with the other national academies and funders on joint agendas and promote work across disciplines, enabling new kinds of discovery and applied research.
	Current and future societal and scientific needs	Innovative funding approaches		

<p>Attracting and retaining diversity in research and the workplace, and early career behavioural scientists</p>	<p>EDI consideration</p>	<p>Creating diversity in the research and practice</p> <hr/> <p>EDI considerations of early career researchers in social science</p>	<p>“There are inequalities for key groups in access to, participation in and outcomes following doctoral study. Access to research council studentships by students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds is low, especially among Black students.” (Tazzyman et al, 2021)</p>	<p>ESRC will “promote EDI through our funding and reflect the diversity of career trajectories for early career researchers by removing time-bound eligibility criteria from our New Investigator scheme.” (ESRC, 2019)</p>
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Behavioural research for key societal issues

This section summarises the ways in which the documents described the current strengths of behavioural research for key societal issues. The UN Innovation Network (2021) describe how governments are realising behavioural science is a cost-effective means to enhance the impact of policies and programmes. Behavioural science has been described as pivotal in understanding and managing behavioural responses to the pandemic, with authors highlighting the importance of cross-disciplinary and challenge-led research (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021; Tazzyman, 2021; WHO, 2022). Key areas in which behavioural research and science play a pivotal role in addressing challenges and guiding effective solutions include:

Environment & Sustainability: An example of this work can be seen through the weather enterprise, which integrates social and behavioural insights into weather-related practices and policies (National Academies of Sciences, 2018). Some of the work that National Academies of Sciences (2018) do include engaging with stakeholders to align forecasts with user needs, expanding data collection, and refining communication strategies to convey risks and uncertainties better.

Health & Wellbeing: Public Health England (2018) highlighted that behavioural science has gained significant recognition in public health, particularly for its high return on investment and systematic, evidence-based methodology. This document also stated that local health authorities have been increasing their capacity to apply behavioural insights by hiring behaviour change leads, creating behaviour change hubs, and collaborating with academic experts. Behavioural science has also enhanced public health practices by informing external funding applications, redesigning services, and embedding its principles in interventions (Public Health England, 2018). Further, other health organisations, including Cancer Research UK and the World Health Organisation (WHO), have utilised behavioural sciences in their initiatives, continually enhancing this area as a crucial tool for creating impact at individual, community, country, regional, and global levels (Cancer Research UK, 2023; WHO, 2022). For example, Cancer Research has utilised behavioural science to investigate factors affecting cancer diagnosis delays, smoking cessation strategies, and perceptions of early detection tests (Cancer Research UK, 2023).

Technology: Behavioural science has significantly advanced in understanding what drives behaviour, leading to its widespread adoption by technology organisations (CMA, 2019, 2021), particularly among user experience researchers (Hunt, 2022). Hunt (2022) highlighted that technology firms have increasingly leveraged behavioural science to influence consumers, designing products and interactions more effectively and conducting large-scale experiments.

Methods and Ethical Practices

A need for strong ethical provisions

Documents reviewed state the need for strong ethical provisions in behavioural research, with improving individual and collective welfare as the core objective of any behavioural research (Ferrie et al., 2022; UN Innovation Network, 2021). The UN Innovation Network (2021) states that the application of behavioural research entails several ethical questions, which need to be addressed to produce reliable results, maintain respect and ensure public trust. Firstly, transparency of methods and objectives in behavioural research processes and

data privacy can help ensure that participants are not harmed or at risk. Further, rigorous and transparent research methods ensure that results are trustworthy. With that said, it was suggested that UN Entities would benefit from guidance and support to ensure the appropriate ethical application of behavioural research. This could include training on rigorous and ethical research methods and data privacy, and establishing a UN Entity ethical review support mechanism (UN Innovation Network, 2021).

The importance of open science

Eleven documents reviewed stated the importance of open science in behavioural research (Campaign for Social Science, 2017; CMA, 2021; Data-Driven Research Skills Steering Group, 2022; ESRC, 2019, 2022; M Flinders, 2020; Nesta, 2021; Rahman, 2020; The British Academy, 2023; The Scottish Government, 2021; UN Innovation Network, 2021). Documents discussed the need for digital technology, methods, insights and opportunities to be made available to all researchers and organisations where possible and that capturing, sharing and disseminating behavioural research should be considered best practice (Campaign for Social Science, 2017; M Flinders, 2020; Nesta, 2021; Rahman, 2020; The British Academy, 2023; UN Innovation Network, 2021). The Scottish Government (2021) suggested that intermediary researchers and knowledge brokers could play a vital role in bridging research and practice by freely sharing results and facilitating knowledge exchange events to engage stakeholders.

Data-sharing and open science can transform how behavioural science data is accessed and utilised by researchers and policymakers (Campaign for Social Science, 2017; Data-Driven Research Skills Steering Group, 2022; ESRC, 2022). To promote fair and safe data sharing, ESRC aims to strengthen partnerships with organisations like the Office for National Statistics and UK Government departments by developing linked administrative datasets for policy-relevant research (ESRC, 2019, 2022). For open science to thrive, a Data-Driven Research Skills Steering Group (2022) stated that skills in data management—such as cleaning, enhancing, and preserving data—are essential for building social science capabilities. The CMA (2021) also discussed how advancements in technology, including interoperability and anonymous data-sharing techniques, further support open science practices which is discussed further in the section below.

The potential role of emerging technology, including Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Challenges with technology and AI

Speakers at the Richard & Hinda Rosenthal Symposium (2019) discussed challenges in analysing and interpreting data from technology, including AI, which they suggested can lead to it being poorly utilised in behavioural intervention design (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2019).

Opportunities with emerging technology

Authors discussed how emerging technologies, including AI and computer simulation, can offer rapid and innovative ways to design, test, and evaluate strategies, enabling the analysis of complex systems changes and saving resources (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2019; Department of Health and Social Care, 2021; ESRC, 2019; Nesta, 2021; Public Health England, 2018; Rutter, 2019; Tazzyman, 2021; The Scottish Government, 2021). To harness these advancements, it is suggested that PhD programmes in the social sciences should integrate

cutting-edge technological methods to equip early-career researchers with advanced skills (Tazzyman, 2021).

In behavioural research, existing initiatives like the Human Behaviour-Change Project, an ontological programme, exemplify how machine learning and rule-based algorithms can connect, synthesize, and interpret diverse data (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2019; Rutter, 2019). Another emerging technology in behavioural research is large-scale modelling which is being applied to critical areas like environmental sustainability (The Scottish Government, 2021) and health and wellbeing (ESRC, 2019; Public Health England, 2018). However it has been suggested that collaboration between social scientists, engineers, and technologists is essential to maximise benefits, mitigate risks, and develop new capabilities for leveraging technological advancements (ESRC, 2019). This interdisciplinary approach is critical, as emerging technologies intersect with diverse research areas (ESRC, 2019), further explored in the next section.

Use of artificial intelligence to support EDII

Hallsworth (2023) stated that machine learning techniques (a type of artificial intelligence) could help behavioural researchers and users better understand what works best for certain groups and consequently tailor an intervention to them. This would lead to more equitable solutions and identify ways in which interventions or situations increase or reduce inequalities.

Interdisciplinary collaborations

Lack of collaboration between differing disciplines

Documents reviewed highlight the need for interdisciplinary collaborations between organisations, academia, and beyond, as these relationships can help foster behavioural capacity (Cancer Research UK, 2023; CMA, 2019; National Academies of Sciences, 2018; Nesta, 2021; Rutter, 2019; UN Innovation Network, 2021; WHO, 2022). Yet, ESRC states that there is often a lack of systematic connection between research and the work done by policymakers, teachers, practitioners, and clinicians who make economic, health, and education decisions (ESRC, 2019).

Collaboratively working across organisations, academia and beyond

In some cases, collaboration and partnerships are essential, as presented by the CMA's Digital Marketing Strategy (CMA, 2019, 2021). As the digital economy is across international boundaries, competition authorities need to work in partnership with each other and across governments to support innovation whilst also protecting consumer interests. The CMA and its predecessors have always closely collaborated with foreign counterparts through both bilateral and multilateral arrangements. One way to work collaboratively is by building relationships with external partners (Nesta, 2021). External partners can offer new perspectives, which complement existing technical capacities. One example of this is the work that Nesta do with energy companies to test different business models that generate revenue by helping consumers reduce or shift their energy consumption behaviour (Nesta, 2021).

In academia, some partnerships can temporarily enhance capacity through fellowship programs, embedding behavioural scientists in non-academic settings as recommended by ESRC (2024). Fellows, typically academics or researchers skilled in experimental research, can design and analyse interventions while training staff and disseminating findings. These

programs serve as an effective way to bridge and strengthen capacity in the short term. To enable these interdisciplinary connections and partnerships, it has been suggested by ESRC that doctoral students should be provided with opportunities and skills training necessary to work in complex interdisciplinary environments (ESRC, 2024). Further, ESRC suggests that this prepares behavioural doctoral students for either academic or non-academic career pathways, building behavioural capabilities in the workforces in which behavioural graduates are hired. Therefore, high-quality doctoral training must be based on partnerships between funders (e.g., ESRC, UKRI), research organisations and stakeholders (ESRC, 2024).

Systems and population level approaches to behavioural research

Systems and population level approaches in health

Public Health England (2018), Academy of Medical Sciences (2019) and Rutter (2019) discussed the need for systems and population-level approaches to provide opportunities to develop more effective interventions specifically for public health. Previously, public health professionals have utilised health education and promotion to change behaviour (Public Health England, 2018). More recently, it's been recognised that many of the behaviours targeted by information and education campaigns are more effectively changed by addressing psycho-social and structural issues (e.g., food environments) and other wider determinants of health. This approach is being encouraged by Public Health England to shift systems towards helping people make healthier choices (Public Health England, 2018).

Systems approaches to EDII

In terms of EDII, documents state that individual-level approaches, are more likely to widen inequalities than population approaches (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2019; Rutter, 2019). Changing environments at the population level can improve equity as it does not rely on individuals' ability to engage with an intervention for them to reap its benefits (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2019).

Capability and capacity to employ behavioural methods

Postgraduate Training and Employability: Although not specific to behavioural research, documents state that UK Research Organisations deliver internationally recognised doctoral training, with ESRC investment helping to drive best practice and high standards (ESRC, 2024; Tazzyman, 2021). Further, social sciences graduates were regarded as highly employable and resilient by (The British Academy, 2023) due to their highly desirable skill sets, including critical thinking and analysis, creativity, communication skills, and capacity for independent learning and working effectively with others.

Although documents did highlight that postgraduate training in the UK is considered strong, many other documents stated that there is an overall need to build behavioural capability in areas like academia, the workforce, and the government (CMA, 2019; Data-Driven Research Skills Steering Group, 2022; Department of Health and Social Care, 2021; ESRC, 2024; Ferrie et al., 2022; Flinders, 2023; Hunt, 2022; Public Health England, 2018; Rahman, 2020; Shankar, 2016; Tazzyman, 2021; The British Academy, 2023; UN Innovation Network, 2021).

Skills, training and employability provision

A report by the Director General of the WHO (2022), stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, it became apparent that few countries could collect and analyse social and behavioural data from the population to inform interventions, policies, and risk

communication strategies. Further, a report by the UN Innovation Network (2021) stipulated that very few UN Entities have the capacity or the resources required to implement behavioural science projects, with only some UN Entities at the stage where they have completed initial projects and/or are considering how to increase their internal capacity to apply behavioural science. Lastly, the report stated that very few UN Entities are advanced with their use of behavioural science and have embedded it in their organisation. Documents state that providing tailored skills and competencies training for individuals and organisations to design, implement, and evaluate behaviour change interventions provide organisational behavioural capability (Rahman, 2020; UN Innovation Network, 2021). Nesta (2021) reported that education, social care, and health practitioners are continually altering and improving their work. However, they often lack time, resources, and capacity to plan interventions around the context of interest, draw on evidence of effective approaches, or develop and test new solutions. Further, Nesta (2021) stated that experimental or quasi-experimental methods can be inaccessible to voluntary or private organisations, particularly those considered relatively small and with limited funding. A report on workplace behavioural needs (Rahman, 2020) highlights the inconsistency and confusion about what level of behaviour change training workforces should receive, with levels of behaviour change training often identified by the seniority of employees or the amount of time they spend with people rather than through an analysis of the employee's training needs. Skills needs have been mapped by the Public Health Workforce Review and the Public Health Skills Framework (Public Health England, 2018). Some conclusions from this report included the need for more practical solutions to deliver behaviour change to the population and the capability to change the environment to implement interventions successfully.

Future training needs for behavioural scientists

A scoping study commissioned by the ESRC to assess the skills needs of UK social science researchers for conducting data-driven research found that data collection and analysis are currently the primary focus of behavioural research in the UK (Ferrie et al., 2022). This leaves project management, design, and dissemination skills less emphasised due to their absence in the core requirements outlined in ESRC guidelines. Furthermore, the study highlights a gap in the guidelines regarding digital research design, particularly about data collection from digital sources, encompassing data ownership, curation, storage, and digital data analysis.

Regarding doctoral-level behavioural research training, Ferrie et al. (2022) found that early-career researchers feel they must present themselves as experts but often lack confidence in their data-driven skill needs and start research without adequate specialised training. It was also found that researchers at all career stages find the specialised training provided by ESRC investments difficult to locate. Another review highlighted several weaknesses and gaps in Social Science PhD programmes (Tazzyman, 2021), including a lack of adequate advanced quantitative skills and employability skills training, short funding periods for interdisciplinary experience, mixed engagement of students with advanced skills training, increasing mental health concerns for students highlighting gaps in the PhD culture and support systems, and supervisory limitations (including limited experience in advising students on non-academic careers). In response to that same review, ESRC (2024) stated that PhD training in social sciences is too focused on individual research and that students need more interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration opportunities.

Ferrie et al. (2022) outlined critical training needs for behavioural scientists:

Project Management & Design: Training should cover data management, intellectual property regulations, ethics, research integrity, teamwork, communication, and legal knowledge.

Digital Skills: Integrating soft skills (e.g., dissemination strategies) and technical skills (e.g., app development, machine learning) into training is vital to address gaps across disciplines and maintain the UK's research competitiveness.

Dissemination Skills: Training should focus on innovative ways to share research with diverse audiences, leveraging digital platforms.

Structural Issues: Methods courses need depth, conceptual integration, and interactive formats like 'flipped classrooms.' Digital skills should be woven into qualitative and quantitative training, and assignments should emphasise research design and project management over mere skill acquisition.

Specialised Training: High costs and lack of supervisor support limit access. Supervisory training and a cultural shift are needed to promote advanced, data-driven skills.

These recommendations align with Tazzyman's recommendations for PhD programmes (2021), which also included preparing social sciences PhD students for non-academic careers, enhancing consistency in doctoral training standards, and ESRC ensuring minimum standards by integrating practice-based research into assessments and accrediting training to reinforce its value. Further to doctoral training, a recent report by Flinders (2023) highlights the need for greater connectivity within the research ecosystem to address any barriers mid-career and senior behavioural research leaders face. The report recommends creating a network to support interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral research leadership, offer skills-based training, and foster reciprocal learning.

Leadership and promoting behavioural research

A committed culture to encourage behavioural research

The documents reviewed discussed the need for behavioural research to be championed and supported by disciplines and the workforce (Cancer Research UK, 2023; Public Health England, 2018; UN Innovation Network, 2021). A championing and leadership role of behavioural research is particularly important amongst senior people and leaders who are responsible for commissioning and delivering services by demonstrating their support and application (UN Innovation Network, 2021). Support for behavioural research can also manifest through senior leaders allocating time and resources to behavioural research projects and training. To increase buy-in of behavioural research at the senior level, reports suggest the use of effective behavioural research case studies (Public Health England, 2018; UN Innovation Network, 2021). Using case studies can encourage a basic understanding of behavioural research approaches and key concepts and explore potential solutions.

Cancer Research UK (2023) highlights that to achieve a significant shift in the use of behavioural research, it is necessary to gain government support. One way they suggest doing this is by establishing a national position within the central government, such as a Chief Behavioural Scientist for Health, to promote the adoption of behavioural science in policymaking and health systems. This behavioural-specific role within the government

would be held by a high-profile, respected senior professional with established expertise in behaviour change and implementation science.

Capability for leadership roles

One report (Flinders, 2023) highlights that mid-career and senior social science researchers understand the importance of research leadership roles in behavioural science but often feel unprepared and unsupported for these roles. Flinders (2023) suggested this could be due to a lack of strategic infrastructure to develop leadership skills, limited peer support, and a lack of clear professional frameworks. The same report states that research leadership requires a broad skill set and team-based approaches, but most researchers are not trained for these demands. Key challenges include inadequate training, time constraints, excessive bureaucracy, limited mentorship, and insecure employment models. There is also a lack of career mobility, insecure employment models including short-term research funding streams, and targeted support for mid-career researchers (Flinders, 2023).

Funding for behavioural research capability

Gaps in current funding models

Reports found that weaknesses in behavioural research were due to challenges with funding (Nesta, 2021; Public Health England, 2018; Tazzyman, 2021). For example, there are uneven relationships with the supply versus demand of resources for behavioural research. In 2015/16, the Local Government Association launched a behavioural insights grant programme, which was later re-run. By 2018, the programme was oversubscribed, even with the requirement of matched funding (Public Health England, 2018). Similar challenges have been described in a review of the PhD programme within social sciences (Tazzyman, 2021). Whilst not just reflecting on behavioural research PhD programmes, Tazzyman (2021) stated that often social science PhD students lack the sufficient time required to advance their skills training due to the limitations of many PhD programmes only being funded for three years. Tazzyman (2021) stipulated that PhD funding bodies (i.e., ESRC) should fund and allow additional time for students to complete their programmes, providing additional time for students to complete advanced skills training, including research in practice through placements. However, implementing these kinds of requirements in funding change comes with its own challenges, as without additional resources to support this strategy, there could be a reduction in the number of funded studentships by funding bodies (ESRC, 2024).

Innovative funding approaches

Many of the issues presented by lack of funding resources would benefit from innovative funding approaches. For example, Nesta (2021) emphasises that combining private capital and public investment can be utilised more efficiently to create positive changes. For instance, Nesta has implemented alternative forms of finance, including impact investing, repayable grants, and challenge prizes to enhance impact. However, the same report stated that significant untapped funding potential remains, as procurement rules often hinder innovation, limiting opportunities for public and private sectors to scale new behavioural research ideas (Nesta, 2021).

Attracting and retaining diversity in research and the workplace, and early career behavioural scientists

Equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI) were discussed in 22 of the analysed documents (Campaign for Social Science, 2017; Cancer Research UK, 2023; Data-Driven Research Skills Steering Group, 2022; ESRC, 2019, 2022, 2023, 2024; M Flinders, 2020; Flinders, 2023; GSR, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b; Hallsworth, 2023; National Academies of Sciences, 2018; Nesta, 2021; Public Health England, 2018; Tazzyman, 2021; The British Academy, 2023; UN Innovation Network, 2021). Intersectionality was not discussed in any of the documents reviewed.

Encouraging diversity in research and practice

Hallsworth (2023), of the Behavioural Insights Team, stated in a Manifesto that the homogeneity in behavioural science regarding gender, race, physical ability, sexuality, and geography limits the diversity of perspectives influencing research and practice. ESRC (2023) states that to gain insight and knowledge on the challenges and opportunities ahead, a diverse research base in terms of people, institutions, disciplines, and collaborators is essential.

Some documents outlined specific goals their organisations have in place to advance equity, diversity and inclusion (Cancer Research UK, 2023; Nesta, 2021; The British Academy, 2023). For example, The British Academy (2023) has embedded an inclusive culture as a fellowship, employer, funder, and convenor with initiatives including engaging more diverse researchers, pioneering sector-leading activities, and securing funding to support underrepresented groups. Nesta (2021) sets goals to advance EDI in their workplace, emphasising staff diversity and organizational culture. They also aim to ensure that ideas are shaped by those impacted by their work.

EDI considerations of early career researchers in social science

Documents reviewed highlight that actions should be taken to increase diversity (of several kinds) among behavioural scientists, teams, collaborations, and institutions (ESRC, 2024; Hallsworth, 2023; Tazzyman, 2021). Solutions proposed include increased support for starting and completing PhDs, reducing the significant racial gaps present in much public funding of research (ESRC, 2024; Tazzyman, 2021), and building professional networks that connect the Global North and Global South (Hallsworth, 2023).

Tazzyman (2021) review of PhD programmes in the social sciences stated that there are inequalities for key groups in access to, participation in and outcomes following doctoral study. For example, access to research council studentships is low for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, with women also underrepresented in certain PhD disciplines. The review also found that socio-economic inequalities and insufficient funding create barriers, favouring those with additional financial resources. Recommendations of the review included ring-fenced funding and broader entry routes to support underrepresented groups and address earlier inequalities in the education pipeline.

In response to this review, the ESRC (2024) will require all Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) to develop and annually review an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) strategy as part of their funding bid. These strategies must address all protected characteristics, socio-economic backgrounds, and student well-being, and include plans to make entry

requirements more inclusive. The ESRC (2024) encourages DTPs to consider ring-fenced funding for underrepresented groups and promotes flexible study options (for example, students' ability to move from full-time to part-time study). They also plan to work with their sister councils and the wider sector to tackle the inequalities in access to doctoral funding and consider the financial and other support provided for students. As part of ongoing work across UKRI to increase diversity in doctoral study, ESRC is already part of a cross-UKRI project which seeks to strengthen the quality of data on applicants for doctoral study and develop UKRI-wide guidance/requirements for best practices in doctoral recruitment as well as developing a campaign/series of campaigns targeted at under-represented groups to encourage participation in higher education (ESRC, 2024).

Discussion

This documentary review synthesises current and future priorities for UK behavioural research by examining national and international strategy documents. The findings answer four research questions, highlighting both opportunities and persistent challenges for the field.

RQ1: What are the current and future societal and scientific needs for UK behavioural research, as articulated in strategies from government and research funders?

The review shows that behavioural research must respond to urgent and evolving societal challenges, particularly in public health, climate change, sustainability, and digital transformation. Strategies highlight the importance of transparent methodologies, ethical frameworks, and systems-level approaches that address structural determinants of behaviour rather than focusing solely on individuals. Emerging technologies such as AI are seen as both an opportunity and a challenge, offering innovative ways to design and evaluate interventions while raising concerns around interpretation, accountability, and ethics. These findings underscore the need for behavioural research to remain responsive, rigorous, and equitable as societal priorities shift.

RQ2: In what ways do these strategies propose to strengthen behavioural research capability to meet societal and scientific needs?

Documents consistently emphasised the importance of building behavioural research capability across academia, government, and the wider workforce. Priorities included interdisciplinary training, leadership development, and cross-sector collaboration, particularly between academia, government, and industry. Several strategies recommended fellowships, mentorship, and structured career pathways to develop leaders who can advocate for behavioural research and embed it in organisational culture. Infrastructure investment, particularly in data resources and open science platforms, was also seen as essential for supporting capability growth.

RQ3: What strengths, gaps and opportunities for behavioural research are highlighted by these strategies?

The review identified clear strengths in behavioural research, including well-established theories, proven methodological tools, and growing application in policy and practice, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, significant gaps remain. Current funding models are often short-term and siloed, limiting innovation and scalability. Workforce training needs were identified at multiple career stages, with concerns around access to advanced quantitative, digital, and interdisciplinary skills. These gaps also represent opportunities for innovation: reformed funding models, expanded doctoral training, and integrated cross-sector partnerships could substantially enhance the reach and impact of behavioural science.

RQ4: To what extent are equalities, diversity, inclusion and intersectionality (EDI) and open science principles incorporated and encouraged in these strategies?

Although many strategies referenced equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), none referenced intersectionality and few documents provided specific EDI actions. This highlights the risk of

superficial engagement with EDII principles, with implications for representation and equity in research careers. Suggested actions included flexible PhD models, ring-fenced funding for underrepresented groups, and embedding inclusive practices at all career stages. Similarly, open science principles were widely endorsed but inconsistently operationalised. Greater commitment to data sharing, interoperability, and transparency will be needed to embed open science into behavioural research practice.

Findings from the review align with recent literature advocating for systems thinking, interdisciplinarity, and knowledge mobilisation in behavioural research, particularly in health and public policy (Feitsma & Whitehead, 2022; Parkinson et al., 2025; Tweed et al., 2024). These approaches align with BR-UK's strategic aims as a behavioural research leadership hub, particularly in promoting cross-sector collaboration and diverse stakeholder engagement to enhance the translation of behavioural science into practice. This review also aligns with a recent international analysis (Naru, 2024), documenting the global rise and evolution of behavioural public policy (BPP) bodies. Both highlight the importance of leadership in embedding behavioural science, with Naru (2024) noting the risks of over-reliance on individual champions and the need for formal structures to ensure sustainability. Shared priorities include advancing methodological innovation, with Naru (2024) emphasising a shift beyond narrow "nudge" approaches to more diagnostic, problem-driven, and context-sensitive methods is required. This review adds to the evidence base by offering a UK-specific synthesis across domains and providing a more detailed analysis of gaps in EDII, which are less developed in Naru's account. These insights highlight the need for strategic investment in behavioural leadership, inclusive capacity-building, and the development of robust ecosystems to support impactful and ethical behavioural research.

Strengths and Limitations

This review provides a synthesis of a diverse set of documents from 2014 outlining the needs for behavioural research in the UK context from organisational strategies, including strategy documents, general organisation reports, scoping studies, one blog, and a discussion paper. The review provides clear areas of required development to strengthen behavioural research. Further to this, this documentary review is only one piece of a larger BR-UK Scoping Study, and the findings from this study will complement the other methods used and contribute to developing a national network for behavioural research in the UK and a capability-building strategy.

To ensure the review was conducted rigorously and systematically, we utilised the guidance from Morgan (2022) for conducting and analysing documentary reviews, Arksey and O'Malley (2005) scoping review guidance and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Utilising Morgan (2022) and Arksey and O'Malley (2005) as frameworks to conduct the searches and analysis for this review allowed us to be iterative and transparent with the processes and flexible with how we could adapt our methodology to analyse diverse documents.

There is the potential that relevant materials have been missed due to the nature of our search strategy. For example, only international documents were included in the analysis if signposted by BR-UK's ISAB, if deemed particularly relevant to the study's aims. It is also possible that smaller UK organisations include behavioural research in their strategies, but may not published or open access.

Furthermore, due to the nature of the review, we did not appraise the quality of the evidence used. Rather, we have been able to scope out all evidence in the area to summarise organisational strategies in relation to the needs and gaps of behavioural research. Lastly, the review was limited by the absence of standardised frameworks for documentary analysis in behavioural research, increasing the potential for selection bias and variability in document quality. This is a recognised challenge in documentary reviews (Morgan, 2022) and highlights the need for greater methodological development and standardisation in future research synthesis efforts.

Conclusion

This review addressed four research questions on the current and future priorities for UK behavioural research. It showed that (RQ1) societal and scientific needs are rapidly evolving, requiring behavioural science to adapt to challenges in health, environment, and technology; (RQ2) capability must be strengthened through investment in skills, leadership, collaboration, and infrastructure; (RQ3) while behavioural science has strong theoretical and applied foundations, gaps in funding, workforce training, and interdisciplinary structures present barriers and opportunities for development; and (RQ4) although EDII and open science are acknowledged as priorities, they remain insufficiently embedded in practice, with intersectionality notably absent.

Together, these findings provide a roadmap for advancing behavioural research in the UK. They highlight where investment, leadership, and structural change are most needed, and will inform the broader BR-UK scoping study in building a national network and capability strategy to ensure that behavioural science can meet the complex societal challenges of the future.

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