Behavioural Research UK

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Building the UK's Behavioural Research Capabilities: A scoping study and strategy from the Behavioural Research UK Leadership Hub

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Executive summary

Behavioural research (BR) plays a critical role in understanding and addressing complex societal challenges, from health and sustainability to economic behaviour and public policy. However, the extent, distribution and type of behavioural research activity across the UK has not been systematically mapped, nor is it clear how well-equipped researchers and organisations are to translate this research into real-world impact. This report seeks to fill that gap. It presents a comprehensive overview of the current state of behavioural research in the UK and offers guidance for strengthening the field moving forward. Drawing on multiple approaches including national mapping, strategic document analysis, stakeholder surveys, and expert workshops, this report identifies both the existing strengths and persistent barriers within the behavioural research ecosystem and outlines future national priorities.

Key Findings

Strengths: The UK has a vibrant and growing behavioural research ecosystem. Notable strengths include strong postgraduate training, interdisciplinary applications, and evidence of impact across public health, sustainability, technology, and policy development.

Barriers: Significant challenges persist. These include fragmented collaboration across sectors, limited funding models, underuse of emerging technologies like AI, lack of training opportunities beyond postgraduate level, and organisational uncertainty around where BR fits within structures. There is also a need for more diverse and inclusive approaches and clearer ethical and methodological standards.

Sector-specific challenges: Startups and scaleups face unique barriers including resource constraints, lack of dedicated roles, limited access to participants, and undervaluation of qualitative insights. Nonetheless, they show strong motivation to integrate BR when leadership is engaged and relevance to product outcomes is clear.

Future priorities

Our findings suggest that the most pressing societal issues which need addressing through behavioural research sit within the broad topic areas of population and planetary health. To enable the behavioural research community to address these pressing issues our findings point to key capability priorities focusing on advancing research methods and approaches, and in developing our skills in these through a range of training and networks and building behavioural research into broader leadership training to ensure the value of behavioural research is clear to leaders across sectors, to champion its integration and application.

To address these priority societal issues, BR-UK will deliver an ambitious capability-building programme over the next three years t. Our strategy outlines how we aim to drive the national capability forward with a focus on advancing behavioural research methods, strengthening cross-sector collaboration, and expanding training and leadership opportunities across regions and career stages. This strategy will be supported by rigorous research and evaluation, including regular surveys, rapid evidence reviews, secondary data analysis, and participatory design methods to ensure relevance and responsiveness. As a national leadership hub, BR-UK is uniquely positioned to drive this work forward, helping to unlock the full potential of behavioural research in responding to today's most pressing societal and economic challenges.

Contents

Key definitions in this document

- **Behavioural Research (BR)-** "Systematic investigation undertaken to advance knowledge and understanding about behaviour." (BR-UK Behavioural Concepts Definition[1])
- **Behavioural researcher -** someone who works on behavioural research projects, as part of a formal role in employment, study or volunteering. For example, they might be someone who works on research grants in a university Anthropology department, someone who leads market research projects for a government communications team, or someone who conducts surveys within their organisation to develop HR policies.
- **Behavioural research project -** a research project that aims to understand what influences, characterises, changes or results from people's individual or collective behaviour.
- **Behavioural Research User -** Someone who draws upon behavioural research projects, as part of a formal role in employment, study or volunteering.
- **Capability –** an individual's psychological and physical capacity to engage in the activity (here the activity is behavioural research). This focuses on knowledge and skills, as per the COM-B model [1].
- **Research project** is a project in which data is systematically collected, analysed and interpreted to address a question or problem, and new knowledge documented, e.g. through a report, technical note, presentation, framework or strategy.
- **Individual Behaviour Change**: "A process that results in a difference in enactment of some individual human behaviour or individual human behaviour pattern from what would have been the case otherwise" (BR-UK Behavioural Concepts Definition)
- **Open Science-** Open science is a movement that promotes the free and open access to scientific research, data, and publications.
- **Open Science Framework (OSF) –** an online platform which promotes open science through sharing of research documents

[1] BR-UK 'Behavioural Concepts' working group is developing consensus definitions (ontological and informal) of widely used concepts in behavioural research. To view further information about the steps taken to define these concepts, visit the Open Science Framework document.

Introduction

The UK is expanding its leadership in behavioural science with the launch of the five-year £17 million National Capability in Behavioural Research (NCBR) programme, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The programme comprises two key components: Behavioural Research UK (BR-UK), which connects stakeholders and promotes innovation, and CENTRE-UB, a doctoral training centre to develop future research leaders. While the UK has been a global leader in applying behavioural research to public policy, health, transport, and sustainability, the field remains fragmented, with limited integration between academic and applied research. NCBR aims to build a more cohesive and collaborative behavioural research community to strengthen the UK's ability to address complex societal challenges. To maximise this impact, there must be a strong capability for behavioural research across a variety of sectors, including academia, the public sector, and within industry. The Behavioural Research UK Leadership Hub (BR-UK) has a core aim of building national capability for behavioural research. To ensure we achieve this aim, our Capability Building Work Package is one of four core work packages which sit across our four themes.

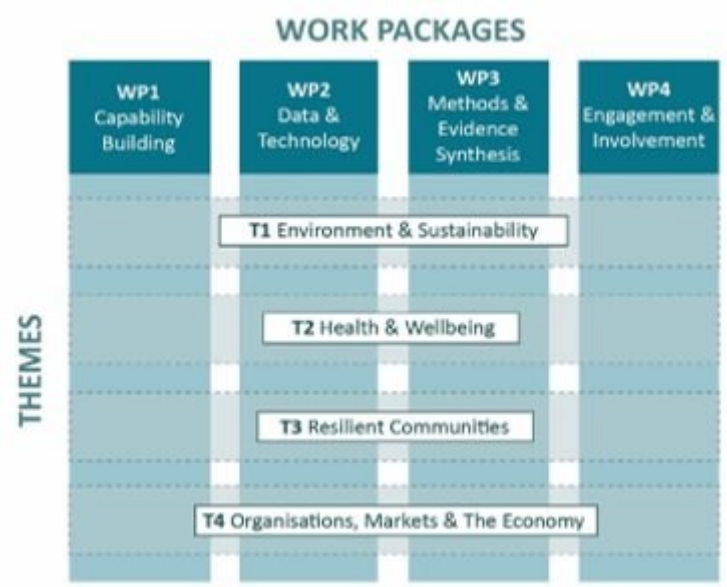

Figure 1. Behavioural Research UK's work packages and Themes

Capability Scoping

The amount and nature of behavioural research (BR) activity happening in the UK and how well-equipped UK researchers and organisations are to conduct and translate high-quality BR into effective solutions are unknown. To be effective in building capability, we first need to know who is engaging in what behavioural research where. Not only will this benefit collaboration, knowledge exchange, and impact, it is also essential so that we can access the range of viewpoints needed to fully understand the issues and develop inclusive strategies.

Therefore, the aims of the capability building work package are to 1) understand the current status of behavioural research activity in the UK and 2) guide future directions through synthesising existing strategies, and identifying future priority areas and barriers to addressing these.

To achieve these aims we have carried out a series of studies, the findings from which are drawn upon throughout this report. These studies are listed below, alongside links to related

documents uploaded to the OSF. Some further methodological information is provided in the Appendices.

1. **The BR-UK map** is an interactive map which provides information about UK organisations with behavioural researchers and gives a visual representation of where behavioural research is happening across the UK. The map is available here and will be updated on a three-monthly basis. A blog about the map is also available here. In September 2024 we had 899 entries covering 695 organisations with 741 locations. The protocol for the map is available on OSF here.

2. **A documentary review** to summarise and synthesise current and future needs for UK behavioural research identified in 34 recent behavioural and social research strategies published by or for national and devolved governments and research funders. The protocol for this study is available on OSF here.

3. **The cross-sector survey** is an online survey to gather further information from behavioural researchers and behavioural research users on their roles and capabilities. In the first wave we had 657 respondents across all UK nations and across sectors. This included 529 behavioural researchers and 128 behavioural research users also responded to the cross-sector survey. The survey is currently paused but will be rolled out in future waves. The protocol for this study is available on OSF here.

4. **A study of behavioural research in start-ups and scaleups** led by one of our partner organisations, Zinc VC. This included a landscape analysis, which included a cross-sectional survey (N=69) and exploratory desk research, qualitative interviews (N=14) and workshops (N=11) with behavioural researchers and users. The protocol for this study is available on OSF here.

5. **Sector Specific Workshops** to further explore findings regarding BR strengths and opportunities. This included five online participatory workshops with behavioural researchers and users from academia (N=14), public & third sector (N=13), SMEs (N=9), government (N=10), and cross sector (N=12). The protocol for this study is available here.

6. **BR-UK researcher in-person capability building workshop** to explore specific issues faced by our internal and partner behavioural researchers who considered themselves to be early-mid career (N=15). The workshop included structured discussions around and a pre-post survey. Findings from this have been disseminated as a blog on our BR-UK website.

Scoping the current UK behavioural research landscape

Drawing on the BR-UK map and results from the cross-sector survey, here we summarise where and what type of behavioural research is currently taking place across the UK.

Where is behavioural research taking place?

Respondents from the cross-sector survey represented all UK nations and regions. As shown on the map in Figure 2, there appears to be a concentration of behavioural research activity in England, specifically in the Greater London area (256 out of 741 locations), followed by the South-West of England, then the North-West of England. The majority of those working in behavioural research appear to be based within the academic sector, closely followed by the private sector within Greater London, South-East and the North-West of England. Relatively few organisations have so far been added to Northern Ireland.

Figure 2. BR-UK Map showing location and organisation type of behavioural research activity in the UK

Map key

- *Academic*
- *Public Sector*
- *Private Sector*
- *Third/Voluntary sector*

What types of behavioural research take place across the UK?

Across the **cross-sector survey**, researchers surveyed mainly conduct applied research *'designed to apply new knowledge to a particular problem, context or use-case'* (93.4%)

rather than pure research *'designed to gain new knowledge for its own sake, without a specific application in mind'* (27.0%). The largest job sector was academia (42.7%), followed by the private sector (26.4%), the public sector (24.3), the third/voluntary sector (4.9%), and 1.6% 'other'. Whilst 91.7% of 529 behavioural researchers work on behavioural research as part of their job, the majority (74.3%) of respondents in non-academic jobs (209) said that behavioural research is 'definitely' or 'probably not' what their organisation is known for.

In the highly interdisciplinary environments of **start-ups and scale ups**, behavioural research is often not explicitly distinguished from other types of research, and is often a small part of a broader role. Many of the ventures conducting or drawing upon behavioural research are working on software as a service platform (42%), AI/Machine learning (33%), and consumer facing software (33%). Over 40% of participants were conducting behavioural research in teams of 1-9 people, demonstrating this research can be conducted in low staff settings if prioritised. The main goals of the research being conducted was to achieve some type of behavioural change, such as increasing engagement with products, addressing a societal challenge and/or requiring people to support product credibility and marketing.

What societal issues and topics are being researched?

Figure 3 summarises the types of societal issues that behavioural researchers are currently addressing in their work across sectors, with Health and Social care being the most commonly reported with over 60% or respondents indicating this. Similarly, behavioural research in early-stage ventures is being conducted primarily in healthcare (33%), education (19%), climate (13%), and finance (10%).

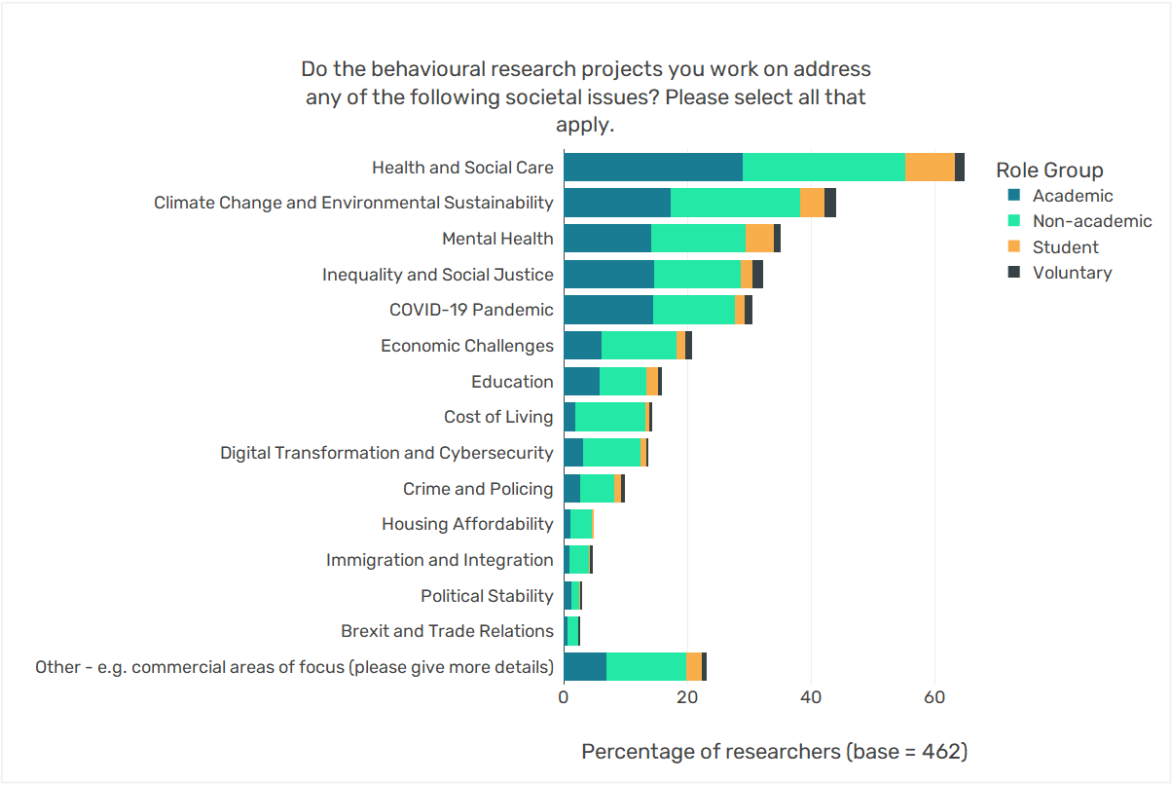

Figure 3. Societal issues being addressed by behavioural researchers in the UK

Free text survey items provided some more detail about the types of issues or topics being addressed across these pre-specified societal issues:

- **Health related behaviours and conditions** (Addiction, healthy ageing, obesity and weight management, sexual and reproductive health, vaccination uptake, Covid-19, medication adherence, cancer prevention, screening and treatment, health prevention and promotion, antimicrobial resistance, health professional behaviours, global health)
- **Climate & Sustainability** (sustainable healthcare; food waste; water and plastic use; sustainable fashion; net zero behaviours)
- **Environment & Nature** (Air quality; biodiversity; green space; nature connectedness; urban planning; agriculture and land use)
- **Online behaviours** (digital behaviours, cybersecurity; online safety; mis/disinformation)
- **Data and tech** (AI; big data; human-robot interaction; tech acceptance and usability),
- **Financial behaviours** (economics; finance software development; tax compliance)
- **Consumer behaviours** (consumer market and protection; consumption behaviours)
- **Organisational behaviours** (leadership; team organisation; organisational culture; organisational psychology; staff recruitment and retention)
- **Society and communities** (community cohesion; social connectedness; parenting; social prescribing; inequalities; culture change; criminal behaviours; dog control; immigration; levelling up)
- **Politics and policies** (Youth/student voting; emergency preparedness; political ideology; policy development; voting behaviour)

The free text boxes also identified additional areas of research around:

- **Behavioural research methods and implementation (**engagement and retention, developing research tools; engaging seldom heard groups; open science; evaluation; evidence translation; evidence synthesis; systems approaches; ethnography; theory development)
- **Understanding behaviour more broadly** (habit formation; motivation; decision-making; risk perception; persuasive messaging; “nudge” & “sludge”).

Which behavioural theories, models or frameworks are being used in behavioural research?

Behavioural researchers across sectors reported that they used published theories, models or frameworks in their work to address these topics, with 72% of academics and 62% of non-academics reporting applying these in all or most of their projects. Responders reported using a range of theories, models and frameworks, summarized by type in Table 1, with the ten most reported; COM-B [1] was by far the most commonly used across our respondents.

Specifically, for those working in **start-ups and scale ups**, use of these theories, models and frameworks varied from being used consistently throughout all stages of work, to barely used at all. Their findings suggest that some academic resources are not accessible or suitable for use in this sector. To begin to address this issue, some behavioural researchers have developed their own tools, such as Aim for Behaviour.

Group of theories, models or frameworks	Times reported (N)
Behaviour change – domain general (e.g. motivation)	**438**
COM-B [1]	258
Theoretical Domains Framework [2]	77
Theory of Planned Behaviour [3]	59
Self-determination theory [4]	27
Behaviour change- domain specific (e.g. specific health behaviours)	**164**
Transtheoretical Model [5]	26
Health Belief Model [6]	19
Intervention development and evaluation	**354**
Behaviour Change Wheel [1]	96
EAST [7]	45
MINDSPACE [8]	22

Table 1. Most frequently reported theories, models and frameworks used by behavioural researchers

Summary

Our overview of the current behavioural research landscape across the UK highlights its broad geographic distribution, but with a strong concentration in London and the South of England. Most behavioural research is applied in nature and spans sectors such as health, climate, digital behaviour, and finance, with academia remaining the dominant employer. While a wide range of behavioural theories and frameworks (most notably COM-B) are being used, the utility and accessibility of these in non-academic settings is less clear. Despite these challenges, there is clear momentum, particularly in start-ups and scaleups, where behavioural research is gaining relevance in product development and impact strategies, though often constrained by limited resources and organisational capacity. These findings underscore both the growing relevance of behavioural research and the need for targeted investment in capability-building, especially outside of traditional academic hubs, to ensure the field can meet complex societal needs nationwide.

What are the UK's current behavioural research strengths and areas for improvement?

Key strengths and areas for improvement for UK behavioural research from the survey and documentary analysis were presented at our multi-sector workshops to guide conversations. This enabled collection of more nuanced understanding of the current strengths and challenges and allowed identification of some further considerations. Zinc VC also conducted qualitative interviews to delve further into their sector specific survey responses. The main findings of these, along with the sources, are summarised below.

Research strengths

Key findings here highlight the growth of behavioural research as an interdisciplinary field, demonstrating that it is already being applied to address some of the biggest societal issues using theoretically informed and evidence-based approaches.

Strengths of behavioural research	Additional detail	Source(s)
Postgraduate training and employability within behavioural research	UK Research Organisations deliver internationally recognised doctoral level training, with ESRC investment helping to drive best practice and high standards within the social sciences more broadly.	Documentary Review
Cost-effectiveness and impact across sectors	Behavioural research is increasingly recognised for its cost-effectiveness and impact across sectors, notably in shaping policy, guiding pandemic responses, and addressing global challenges.	Documentary Review
Use and development of behavioural theories and methods	The field's interdisciplinary and evidence-based nature underpins its growing influence across diverse domains.	Documentary Review & Survey & Workshops
Research across a broad range of topic areas, with a particular strength in health and environmental sustainability.	BR is particularly well used in public health, where it enhances service design, funding success, and intervention effectiveness. Organisations like Public Health England, Cancer Research UK, and WHO have embedded behavioural science into initiatives spanning cancer prevention to global health strategies. Key strengths in environmental initiatives—such as integrating behavioural research findings into weather communication strategies. In technology, behavioural science informs user experience design and consumer influence through large-scale experimentation. Other behavioural research highlighted in the areas of communities, society and political behaviour, consumer and organisational behaviour, as well as its application to policy development & evaluation.	Documentary Review, Cross-sector Survey, Start-ups and scaleup report.
Collaboration	Joint work among and between academics and practitioners in other sectors is becoming more	Workshops

	common, helping projects draw on varied skills and resources.	
Cross-sector experience sharing	Opportunities to share case studies and lessons across sectors have been valued, which facilitates knowledge transfer.	Workshops
Increased accessibility of behavioural research	Improvements in the accessibility of behavioural science knowledge were identified, as concise webinars, plain-language summaries, and structured "what-works" repositories help more easily find, understand, and apply research evidence.	Workshops

Areas for improvement

Whilst the field continues to grow, there remains some significant areas for improvement to progress further, particularly in relation to facilitating structured interdisciplinary and multi-sectorial working, alongside harnessing technology, being actively transparent and inclusive in our approaches, with a focus on continuous learning for behavioural researchers.

Areas for improvement in behavioural research	Additional Detail	Source
De-fragmentation of behavioural research across sectors, domains and disciplines	Academics and behavioural research users often operate in silos, unaware of similar work happening in adjacent fields or within their own institutions.	Documentary Review & Survey & Workshops
Transparent methodology and ethical procedures	There is the pressing need for clearer ethical guidelines and transparent methodology using open science practices. These are not just recommendations but essential for maintaining public trust and ensuring participant protection in behavioural research.	Documentary Review & Workshops
The potential role of emerging technology, including AI	Emerging technologies like AI offer innovative ways to enhance research design and analysis. However, challenges in implementation and interpretation highlight the need for interdisciplinary collaboration and advanced training to maximise their impact. Guidance on leveraging AI in behavioural research is called for.	Documentary Review & Survey & Workshops
Systems- and population-level approaches to behavioural research	A shift toward systems and population-level approaches that address structural issues rather than focusing solely on individual behaviour change may improve systemic equity challenges, including	Documentary Review

	broader psycho-social and structural determinants of behaviour.	
Interdisciplinary collaborations	Interdisciplinary collaboration between academia, government, and industry are critically important to strengthen behavioural research. Yet, systematic connections remain insufficient, highlighting the need for structured partnerships, fellowships, and interdisciplinary training. There is a need to better synthesise our existing behavioural research evidence base. Academic research is often inaccessible and not aligned with industry needs, identifying a need to explore new models for knowledge sharing. A need to increase confidence of early and mid- career researchers in cross-sector working was identified.	Documentary Review, Cross-sector survey, Sector- specific Workshops, Start-ups and scaleup report, BR-UK internal researcher workshop.
Innovative funding approaches	Significant weaknesses in current funding models hinder behavioural research development. Innovative approaches like impact investing and combining public and private partnerships could create more opportunities for impactful research and overcome procurement barriers. Fundamental reforms are needed such as collective funding approaches from multiple research councils, simplified procurement processes, and mechanisms that support sustained capacity rather than short-term projects. It is also necessary to raise the awareness of funders of the nature of behavioural research.	Documentary Review & Sector-specific Workshops
The championing of behavioural research	Senior leadership understanding and championing of behavioural approaches is critical yet frequently insufficient. Senior leaders across sectors must champion behavioural research effectively by demonstrating commitment through allocating resources and showcasing behavioural research impacts. In startups and scale ups, opportunities to strengthen leadership buy-in include aligning research with company KPIs, sharing success stories from similar ventures.	Documentary Review, Sector- specific Workshops, Start-ups and scaleup report.
Skills and training provision	A pressing need to build behavioural capability across academia, government, and the workforce, addressing gaps in skills, training, and resources to design, implement, and evaluate interventions. This includes addressing structural barriers and gaps in specialised training to support researchers/users at all career stages. To address gaps in leadership, training, mentorship, and career support are required to prepare researchers for strategic roles. Researchers in start-ups and scale ups express interest in upskilling and may benefit from	Documentary Review, Cross-sector Survey, Sector- specific Workshops, BR-UK internal researcher workshop.

	strengthening data science skills, but may lack time or support to acquire and/or apply new skills.	
Organisational capability & capacity to engage in behavioural research	Organisations often struggle to position behavioural research effectively within their structures, uncertain about where it belongs organisationally and how to integrate it into existing processes. Dedicated behavioural research roles are rare in startups and scaleups, and behavioural research is often integrated into broader roles. They often struggle to allocate time and resources to rigorous behavioural research. Ventures also find participant recruitment challenging with limited funding, and would benefit from more strategies and new ways to access participants.	Documentary Review, Cross-sector survey, Sector- specific Workshops, Start-ups and scaleup report.
Embedding principles of equality, diversity, inclusion and intersectionality (EDII) in behavioural research	It is necessary to improve diversity in behavioural science, including both the researchers and those being researched, to broaden the perspectives and promote equity with the impacts of behavioural research. More initiatives are needed to embed EDII principles across career stages. For example, flexible work and PhD options and ring-fenced funding for underrepresented groups may enhance inclusion and representation. Further, EDII was mentioned in many documents, but the concept of intersectionality was not included in any strategies or initiatives.	Documentary Review, Cross-sector Survey, BR-UK internal researcher workshop.

Summary

Whilst a range of strengths have been identified in relation to behavioural research, a range of area for improvement remain. A consistent challenge that emerged across all our work is in relation to securing buy-in and deepening understanding of the value of behavioural research across sectors. This highlights the importance of our work to continue to raise the profile of behavioural research nationally, an in addition to capability building, developing meaningful connections and demonstrating practical value remain critical to embedding behavioural approaches across sectors.

National priorities for building capability in behavioural research

Here we provide a broad set of priority areas drawn from across all aspects of the scoping study.

What does the behavioural research community consider future priorities to be?

Reflecting the expertise, strengths and interest of the UK behavioural science community, two priority societal issues were identified from our work so far; Health prevention and improvement, and Climate change and environmental sustainability. Broadly, these can be understood in the context of **planetary and population health.**

Given the potential bias in these responses as most of our responders were already working in the field of health, we have also included here the less frequently reported priority areas which a smaller number of our community consider key to address.

- Organisational related behaviours
- Online behaviours
- Politics and voting behaviour
- Societal issues
- Economic and financial behaviours
- Transport behaviours
- Broader inequalities (e.g., digital divide, cost of living)

Throughout our work to date the importance of understanding how we can both harness **Artificial Intelligence** as well as better understand the potential risks around it have been identified as a priority for the future of behavioural research.

What is needed to address these priorities?

To better enable behavioural researchers to effectively address these urgent and important societal issues, our findings suggest a need to advance both the methods used and our ability to apply them:

1. Advancing behavioural research methods and approaches

There is a growing need to build on the field's interdisciplinary roots by advancing methods that can address structural and societal-level challenges. Strengthening systems thinking, co-creation, and implementation science will ensure behavioural research remains relevant and impactful.

Increase integration of AI and large-scale modelling

> Emerging technologies like AI offer powerful tools for behavioural researchers, but current use is inconsistent. Upskilling in data science and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration can help realise the potential of AI while mitigating risks around misinterpretation and bias.

Shift focus to systemic and population-level research

> Addressing individual behaviour alone is insufficient for tackling widespread societal issues. A shift towards systems-level and population-level approaches is needed to better respond to psycho-social and structural determinants of behaviour. There is also a

need to better capture sustained behaviour change over time with more longitudinal behavioural research.

Address funding/resource imbalances, particularly for smaller organisations

Smaller organisations and ventures face systemic barriers to securing behavioural research funding. Reforming procurement processes and exploring innovative models—such as pooled or impact-aligned funding—will unlock broader participation in capability-building. More funding opportunities would ensure researchers have sufficiency capacity to conduct, and support onward utilisation of, high quality behavioural research.

Promote ethical guidelines, EDII, and open science in all research stages

Transparent ethics, inclusive co-design, and open science are foundational to high-quality behavioural research. Current gaps in intersectionality, diverse representation, and guidance must be addressed to ensure credibility, equity, and public trust.

Continue to develop our interdisciplinary theories and models

As we increase our understanding of behaviour across context and disciplines, there is a need to update our theories and models in line with this. This may mean updating guidance on, and approaches to, applying models and theories in new contexts rather than overhauling existing frameworks.

Improve translation of evidence for all audiences

Behavioural research must be communicated in ways that support real-world decision-making, across multiple and diverse audiences. Producing accessible and open-access summaries, practical tools, and case studies will help bridge the gap between research and action across sectors. Feedback loops, and research into implementation, can underpin continuous improvement in this translation.

2. Strengthening behavioural research capability

Continuing professional development

Advancing behavioural research methods and theories alone will not be effective if we do not ensure behavioural researchers are well equipped in using and applying these. Whilst existing introductory and postgraduate training was identified as a strength, our broader findings suggest a need to expand training provision to provide more training outside of London, and more training beyond postgraduate level.

Opportunities to learn beyond formal training

To further support the application of BR in practice, particularly for those in sectors where there is little time to attend training and read academic articles. There is also a need for more informal support and peer learning opportunities. Resource hubs and community networks for accessible knowledge (and skill) sharing would also be helpful in cross-sector learning. This also ties in with the need for better synthesis and alternative approaches to translation of academic research.

Selling the value of behavioural research

Key issues discussed across our different projects within this work package suggest that 'buy in' from leaders and clients is a barrier to integrating behavioural research across sectors. Addressing this requires behavioural researchers to be able to 'sell' the value of BR, but findings from our scoping study suggest that behavioural researchers feel ill-equipped in doing this. Building confidence in selling behavioural research specifically to multidisciplinary teams and across sectors was also identified as a key requirement by our internal BR-UK researchers.

Leadership skills in behavioural research

Buy in to behavioural research from leadership also suggest that embedding behavioural research into broader leadership training such as the Masters of Business Administration (MBA), to ensure a cross-sector understanding of the value of BR, would be of value. Existing behavioural researchers also require continued leadership training as they become the next generation of leaders in the field.

We will continue to refine these priorities through our future work outlined in our strategy, outlined in the next section.

BR-UK's Capability Building Strategy 2025-2028

Based on our work to date we have developed our strategy for the next three years, a summary of which is presented in this section.

Overview of our next steps

The findings presented in this report from the capability scoping study have been considered in planning the next stage of our capability building work, resulting in the following aims:

1. Increase engagement with and uptake of behavioural research.
2. Enable behavioural researchers and users of behavioural research to advance its quality, application and impact.
3. Stimulate and support strategic cross-sector collaboration at regional and national levels to address societal and economic challenges.
4. Leverage existing investments, working with CENTRE-UB and others.

To meet these aims we are planning a range of applied capability-building activities outlined below, and we will use a range of research methods. These will include desk research, evidence reviews and secondary data analysis; a mixed-methods survey (adapting and extending the capability scoping survey with additional waves); qualitative interviews, focus groups and consensus exercises; and user research and evaluations studies.

Capability-Building Activities

Establish an internal **Early and Mid-Career Research (EMCR) Group** to shape and guide future in-house capability-building provision, such as mentoring, internal webinars and events. Findings from the first in-person meeting are available as a blog on our website.

Organise **Network Events** to support BR-UK institutions and network members to hold regional in-person events to facilitate local cross-sector networking, discuss key research issues, and stimulate collaboration.

Run bi-annual **Conferences** in collaboration with CENTRE-UB and future 'spokes'. We will deliver two cross-sector conferences in 2026 and 2028 to bring together diverse perspectives on progressing behavioural research and foster cross-sector collaboration.

Develop guidance on **Placements and Partnerships** for establishing successful cross-sector placements & partnerships in behavioural research.

Curate and host an **Online Resource Bank** in response to high demand identified for training, expert guidance, recommendations, resources & digital tools, and a specific AI repository.

Research Methods

To achieve the aims for our next stage of capability building we will use a range of methods outlined below. Across all of these methods we will explore AI-assisted analysis where appropriate and feasible.

- **Mixed-methods surveys** to extend and adapt the mixed-methods cross-sector survey to add regular future waves (e.g., at bi-annual intervals) which include items that would help to address each research question, as needed.
- **Desk research and qualitative research** to understand what existing behavioural research training is available (from introductory to advanced levels) we will develop a

search strategy and conduct desk research to catalogue opportunities across public, private and third/voluntary sectors. We will follow up with interviews and focus groups to identify ways that BR-UK can address barriers and enablers to engaging with training, building on findings of the capability scoping study.

- **Secondary data analysis** of behavioural research activity, compiled from databases of research grants, tenders and contracts to understand the extent to which national behavioural research activity responds to short- and long-term societal and economic challenges.
- **Evaluations of networks, conferences, placements and partnerships** to develop the BR-UK Theory of Change, and to help understand their effectiveness in enabling effective cross-sector collaboration.
- **Rapid reviews, consensus exercises and user research** to develop new expert guidance and recommendations on particular topics, starting with a focus on what makes for successful placement & partnership schemes in social and behavioural research (e.g. UKRI policy fellowships) and to understand what online content and user features would most help people to improve behavioural research and its implementation.

The results will build on the capability scoping study by providing more detail on: what is needed to increase engagement with and uptake of behavioural research and training opportunities; where there are gaps in behavioural research to address societal and economic challenges; what is needed to stimulate strategic cross-sector collaboration at regional and national levels, and the role of national network, conference and placements/partnerships in supporting this. The research will lead to online bank of expert guidance, recommendations and resources for behavioural researchers and users.

BR-UK is in a unique position to conduct this work because of our national (and international) reach, interdisciplinary and multi-sector team, and relationship to other UKRI investments. Our outlined plans go beyond research to deliver capability-building work which will further BR-UK and UKRI aims for the National Capability in Behavioural Research (NCBR) program.

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Appendix: Scoping Study Methods

Detailed protocols for each individual study are available on the Open Science Framework. Here we provide an overview the methods used for each study which has been drawn upon for this report.

1) BR-UK Map

The protocol for the map is available on the Open Science Framework.

Design

This is a descriptive mapping study which collates publicly available information gathered from existing databases, internet searches, stakeholder elicitation and snowballing.

Inclusion criteria

The units of interest in this study are organisations (e.g., company, public bodies) or networks (e.g., cross government network). We are including organisations and networks that fit one of the following descriptions:

- Organisation doing behavioural research: An organisation in which there is at least one person who carries out behavioural research projects as part of their role in the organisation.
- Behavioural research network: A network established to connect behavioural researchers and/or behavioural research users

2) Documentary Analysis

The protocol for the analysis plan is available on the Open Science Framework.

Design

A documentary review of existing documents that describe strategies or agendas for advancing behavioural research capability in the UK and internationally using Morgan's (2022) qualitative documentary guidelines.

Inclusion Criteria

Documents published since 1 January 2014 including:

UK government departments or public bodies, research funding bodies, learned societies and international documents if signposted by BR-UK members and the BR-UK International Scientific Advisory Board

Search Strategy

The search strategy involved menu navigation and keyword searches of the key websites, and contacting document authors, members of BR-UK and the BR-UK International Scientific Advisory Board for additional documents not collected in the search.

Screening

A two-step approach was conducted:

Step 1 Identifying documents: relevant documents were identified by JDW reading the title and summary and were saved to Zotero reference manager

Step 2 FT reviews of each document were conducted by NH & JDW, with any conflicts resolved by SM.

Analysis

NVivo software was used for the analysis processes. For the analysis, Morgan's (2022) approach to conducting qualitative document analysis was utilised which suggests the use of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data was coded inductively and deductive with the research question pre-determining the information relevant to coding, but themes were initially inductively derived using the research questions and then further refined.

To help organise the data further Arksey & O'Malley's (2005) data extraction guidance and a data charting form on Microsoft Excel was used.

3) Cross-sector Survey

Protocols for both the quantitative and qualitative analysis are available on the Open Science Framework.

Design

This was a mixed-methods, cross-sectional online survey which took a purposive, convenience and snowball sampling approach to recruitment.

Participants

Participants were people who do behavioural research (behavioural researchers) and those who draw upon behavioural research (behavioural research users) in a work, study or volunteering role. Participants aged 18 years and above who self-identified as either of these roles were invited to take part.

Materials and procedure

The survey was hosted online and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Survey items were split into two sections; part one focused on participants' roles and capability, and part two asked about optional background characteristics. Data collection was conducted between 15th April and 14th **August 2024.**

Data analysis

Quantitative data were summarised through descriptive statistics and graphs. Qualitative data of the free-text responses were coded using a qualitative content analysis approach.

4) A Study of Behavioural Research in Start-ups and Scaleups

Protocols for both the quantitative and qualitative analysis are available on the Open Science Framework.

Design

A landscape analysis was conducted, which included a cross-sectional survey and exploratory desk research. Qualitative interviews and workshops with behavioural researchers and users were also conducted.

Participant

Participants in the survey were behavioural researchers and behavioural research users primarily from UK startups and scaleups. Participants for the interviews and workshops were recruited primarily from those who had opted in for further research during the landscape analysis survey.

Materials and procedure
The survey (N=69) was hosted online and included questions about behavioral research practices, barriers, and enablers within startups and scaleups. Exploratory desk research examined communities, networks, tools, and frameworks through Google and LinkedIn searches. Qualitative interviews (N=14) were conducted using a semi-structured guide, lasting 30-60 minutes either online or in-person. Workshops (N=11) were conducted on Google Meet using Miro as a digital collaboration platform, where participants engaged in activities such as "Crazy 8's ideation" to identify challenges and generate potential solutions.

Data analysis
Regarding the landscape analysis, cross-sectional survey data was summarised through descriptive statistics, while exploratory desk research identified available resources and support for behavioural research in start-ups and scaleups. Regarding the qualitative research, interviews were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, and workshop data was analysed using a framework matrix analysis.

5) Sector-specific Workshops
The protocol for the study is available on the Open Science Framework.

Design
This study consists of five online participatory workshops with approximately 12 participants per workshop. Workshops were organised by sector (academic, public & third sector, SME, government and cross-sector) to allow for in-depth discussion of sector-specific challenges and needs.

Participants
Participants include behavioural researchers and behavioural research users from across the UK, primarily recruited from respondents to the previous BR-UK Cross-Sector Survey who consented to further contact.

Materials and procedure
Workshops were hosted via Microsoft Teams under Chatham House Rule. The workshop structure includes introduction, three main activities in breakout rooms focusing on strengths of existing behavioural research, barriers and missed opportunities, and potential capability-building strategies, with breaks and feedback sessions. Data collection was conducted in November and December 2024, mainly through notetaker notes and Teams chat records and transcripts.

Data analysis
Textual notes taken on workshop breakout room discussions were used for qualitative data analysis using a collaborative framework analysis approach.

6) Internal BR-UK behavioural researcher workshops

Design
One full-day in-person workshop took place in Manchester in February 2025.

Participants
15 behavioural researchers who work on BR-UK projects who identify as early or mid-career.

Materials and procedure

Participants were invited to complete a pre-and post-workshop questionnaire. The workshop structure includes an introduction, three structured group discussions (What specific capabilities do you need to be able to lead behavioural research in multidisciplinary, multisectoral teams? What would help build your competence and confidence in these areas? What wellbeing- and Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Intersectionality - related issues have you experienced in relation to career development?), and a capability-building activity on 'selling' the value of behavioural research to different audiences.

Data analysis

Textual notes were taken by participants (one per group), along with one main notetaker to capture broader discussions throughout the day. Notes were photographed and collated with duplication removed. The collated notes were then analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Pre-workshop survey responses were used to add further detail to the thematic analysis, though post-workshop survey response rate was low (N=4) as such no pre-post analysis was undertaken.