



Local Area Research + Intelligence Association

## LARIA Mini Newsletter May 2026

### LARIA Updates

#### **Qualitative Analysis in Local Government:**

#### **Balancing Speed and Rigour**

Local councils are navigating a delicate balance, an increasing pressure to work at pace, often fuelled by new technologies like AI, versus the expectation of rigour, integrity, and public accountability in their research processes. This tension is particularly apparent in the analysis of qualitative data from consultations and other engagement surveys. On one hand, innovation and digital transformation agendas support AI as a powerful enabler, promising to scale up analysis and accelerate insights. Council teams, facing tight deadlines and limited resources, see the appeal of AI tools that can sift through hundreds of public comments or interview transcripts in mere hours, providing quick summaries of community sentiment and prevalent themes. This speed can be vital, especially when policy decisions must be informed quickly whether to meet funding deadlines or address urgent local issues.



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At the same time, local government researchers and data analysts are keenly aware of the risks of prioritising speed at the expense of thoroughness. Public consultation data is often rich in nuance: individual voices, subtle sentiments, and contextual details that automated algorithms might miss or misinterpret. Traditional qualitative analysis methods such as designing coding frameworks, performing thematic analysis, maintaining audit trails, and triangulating with multiple data sources, evolved to ensure that findings are credible, transparent and accurately reflect community input. The nature of these methods mean that analysts get close to the data, enabling them to talk about it confidently and bring added value

by understanding both specific comments and the wider themes behind them. Local government research operates in an environment of high public scrutiny and democratic accountability, meaning every finding could be subject to challenge through public committees, auditors, or Freedom of Information requests. If a consultation's conclusions were generated hastily by AI with insufficient methodological care, the council's credibility could suffer. Residents and elected members might rightly ask, "How do we know these quick results truly reflect what people said?", a question difficult to answer without clear, trusted methods and documented evidence of analytical rigour.

Qualitative engagement analysis is a prime example where this tension plays out. Imagine a local authority gathering extensive public feedback on a controversial change in policy or a service. Deploying an AI text analysis tool could rapidly cluster comments, flag common topics, or even generate a concise summary of residents' views. In terms of scale and efficiency, the benefits are undeniable: automation helps cover far more responses than a small team could manually process, ensuring that potentially important patterns aren't missed due to sheer volume. The technology might even uncover unexpected correlations or sentiments across datasets, augmenting human insight. But speed and scale can come at a price. AI's tendency to simplify or generalise findings may gloss over the insights that emerge only through methodological diligence, for example, the particular phrasing in a local dialect that signals underlying discontent, or the quiet minority voices that a broad-brush algorithm might incorrectly deem as outliers. Insight often comes from these detailed outlying comments which an analyst will pick up. In consultations particularly, it's not about patterns and votes but about informed understanding. There's also the matter of transparency, whereas a researcher's manual coding scheme can be clearly documented and explained to others, an AI's "reasoning" for categorising certain comments as positive or negative often remains a black box. In our hypothetical consultation scenario, if a council concluded that "most feedback was positive" based on an AI's output, only for community groups to later challenge those findings (perhaps via auditable records or their own examination of raw responses), the council would need to show evidence of how those conclusions were reached to maintain public trust.

Resolving the "pace vs rigour" dilemma requires thoughtful, objective strategies. The key is not to reject speed but to integrate it with safeguards. Many local government researchers are exploring ways to harness AI as a supportive tool, an "assistant", rather than a replacement for human judgment. In the consultation analysis example, a balanced approach might be to use AI to handle initial tasks like transcribing, categorising, or visualising large datasets of comments at speed, thus freeing human analysts to delve deeper into verifying findings, interpreting nuances, and ensuring each theme is justified openly and ethically. This combined approach can also include sense-checking insights with community representatives or colleagues, and cross-verifying with other data (for example, checking whether what the AI found aligns with what was observed in workshops or other engagement channels).

Importantly, any AI-assisted analysis in local government should come with clear documentation and transparency. By preserving codebooks, audit trails, and methodology explanations, councils can demonstrate that even when technology accelerates their work, the integrity of their research process remains intact. This level of openness not only addresses duty-of-care responsibilities but also reassures elected officials and residents that fast analysis hasn't replaced accountability or quality.

In conclusion, working at pace and working with rigour need not be mutually exclusive goals. For local authorities, the challenge is to carefully blend new AI tools with reliable research principles. Embracing innovation can yield faster insights and cope with growing data demands, but those insights must be underpinned by methodological care, ethical reflection, and transparency. Local government researchers and analysts, as stewards of public evidence and trust, are considering ways to manage this balancing act. By setting realistic expectations with organisational leaders, adopting AI judiciously, and reinforcing robust quality-check procedures, they can work towards ensuring that councils benefit from increased agility without compromising on integrity or public confidence. This balanced path respects the democratic accountability inherent in local government while harnessing technology's potential ultimately striving for informed decisions that are both timely and trustworthy.

We would love to hear from others who are navigating this challenge and/or embracing innovation in this area.

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LARIA Council Member & Business Intelligence Service Manager, Warwickshire County Council

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## Courses, Training Events and Webinars

**Making data accessible in the public sector with  
CACI & Snowflake**



[Join CACI & Snowflake at LGC Digital Futures on June 23rd](#)

Public sector organisations need to deliver the right services to the right people as efficiently as possible. That's why CACI and Snowflake have partnered to make data more accessible across the public sector.

We're co-sponsoring LGC Digital Futures 2026 on 23rd June, at The Kia Oval in London, where we'll be speaking with councils and public sector leaders about how to:

- Build strong data foundations
- Bring together service users, operational and commercial data
- Improve efficiency while delivering better outcomes for residents
- Make insights about communities easier to access and act on, faster

Together, CACI and Snowflake enable organisations to use data more effectively - helping drive better outcomes for residents and communities.

If you'll be at LGC Digital Futures, come and chat to us on our stand!

[Or you can register here.](#)

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**Get trained up! LG Inform Summer and Autumn Webinars dates now available**



Make the most of LG Inform and LG Inform Plus this Summer and Autumn. It's easy to book a place on one of our webinars and discover more about the data, report writing and the other useful tools on offer. Just visit our [online booking page](#).

In addition to the popular webinars, we have three new quick start training videos. Watch, share and feedback to us.

- [Text Token Editor](#)
- [Introduction to Data Tool](#)
- [Introduction to Natural Neighbourhoods](#)
- [Introduction to My Local Metrics](#)

Or, if you want something more tailored to your needs, just drop us a line at [lginform@local.gov.uk](mailto:lginform@local.gov.uk). We would love to meet you and share what's happening in our programme!

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## **Webinar on Innovation in Mortality Statistics**

**Organised by RSS Official Statistics Section and Health Statistics User Group**

**Thursday 9th July 2026**

**12:00 – 13:00**

The Health Statistics Users Group and the RSS Official Statistics Section are organising a webinar to discuss innovation in mortality statistics. The speakers will give an overview of the innovations they are making to the publication of their mortality statistics. This will include new ways of visualising the data as well as statistical techniques being used to improve the clarity of the statistics for users.

[You can register for this webinar here.](#)

Please note that the webinar is free to RSS Fellows and e-student members. There are also a limited number of free places available to the HSUG community. If you would like to apply to HSUG for one of these free places, please email [info@hsug.org.uk](mailto:info@hsug.org.uk). There is a registration fee of £10 for other participants.

### Speakers

**David Mais** (Office for National Statistics), England and Wales data

**Suzanne Napier**, (NI Statistics and Research Agency), Northern Ireland data

The presentations, a meeting report and a recording of the webinar will be posted on the Health and Care group on StatsUserNetwork (<https://www.statsusernetwork.ons.gov.uk/>), and also on the HSUG Community on AnalystX within the Future NHS platform (<https://future.nhs.uk/DataAnalytics/view?objectId=59118800#59118800>).

People who are not able to attend on the day will be able to view, and comment on, this material.

If you have difficulty accessing either website please contact [webmaster@hsug.org.uk](mailto:webmaster@hsug.org.uk)

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### **Free UK Data Service events**

#### **Code anxiety club**

Online, 13:30 - 14:00



Feeling overwhelmed by the command line? Confused by file pathways? Want to navigate the world of coding with confidence? Join the Code Anxiety Club! Viewers can follow along as we work through common beginner topics while coding live for a quick half hour. No prior experience, installed software or setup required.

There is no need to book a place, please follow the livestream link to join the session.

## **Workshop dates and topics**

### **What programming language should I use?**

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 19 May 2026](#)

### **For Loops**

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 2 June 2026](#)

### **While Loops**

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 16 June 2026](#)

### **Notebooks vs. IDEs**

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 7 July 2026](#)

### **SQL: Tables, databases, and the shape of your data**

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 21 July 2026](#)

### **Git structure**

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 4 August 2026](#)

## **[More information](#)**

### **Introduction to time diary data**

4 and 11 June 2026, 13:00 - 16:30

Online

This free online short course introduces participants to time diary data analysis, a multidisciplinary field that has made a sustained contribution to the social sciences for over 50 years. The course combines an introduction to the basic concepts of time use analysis with hands-on practical sessions using R. Exercises will draw on data from the Multinational Time Use Study (MTUS) and the UK Time Use Study. Participants will also have opportunities to discuss their own research ideas and applications.

## Event format

The course consists of two sessions, the [first will be held on 4 June](#) and the [second on 11 June](#). Attendance at both is not mandatory but is strongly encouraged if you are new to time diaries. Each afternoon includes two to three online sessions, combining presentations, live coding demonstrations and Q&A. Participants are encouraged to follow and reproduce the code on their own computers during the sessions.

## Prerequisites

Participants should have:

- Basic to intermediate knowledge of statistics.
- Some experience with programming/using syntax (Stata, R, Python).
- Familiarity with R is desirable but not essential.

## Target audience

The course is aimed at academics, doctoral and post-doctoral researchers, and analysts who are interested in studying how people spend their time.

[More information and booking](#)

## Health Studies User Conference 2026

25 June 2026, 09:30 - 16:30

UCL, London and online

**Are you interested in research using health-related data? Want to know what the future holds for population health surveys? Or are you curious how large-scale surveys are used in research, policy-making and monitoring?**

Join us for the Health Studies User Conference 2026!

Organised by the [UK Data Service](#) in collaboration with [UCL](#) and the [National Centre for Social Research](#), this free one-day conference brings data producers and data users together to share updates on the development of key health-related surveys such as the Health Survey for England, English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, National Study of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, and national longitudinal and cohort studies.

We are delighted to announce that our keynote speaker will be Professor Sally McManus, City St George's, University of London, who will present on Surveying the mental health of the general population: mapping three decades of inequality and change.

The conference will feature a session on the future of population health surveys, a session of lightning talks to provide updates from key longitudinal studies and a showcase of papers from researchers working with health survey data from the UK Data Service.

Join us to connect with fellow researchers and data producers and hear about the wealth of valuable UK health study data that are available.

Follow [LinkedIn](#) for updates and join the conversation on [Bluesky](#): #UKDSHealth26

[View the programme and book a place](#)

### **Family Finance Surveys User Conference 2026**

9 July 2026, 09:30 - 16:30

Friends House, London and online

Are you interested in research on family finances? Do you want to know the latest developments in family finance data from UK social surveys?

Join us for the Family Finance Surveys User Conference 2026.

This free annual conference is organised by the [UK Data Service](#) in collaboration with the [Department for Work and Pensions](#) and the [Office for National Statistics](#). The user conference brings data producers and data users together to share updates on the development of the surveys and to showcase research that is being carried out using the data. Surveys include the [Family Resources Survey](#), [Living costs and food survey](#) and [Wealth and Assets Survey](#).

Follow the event on Bluesky: #UKDSFamilyFinance2026

[View the programme and book a place](#)

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Events are online via Teams, free and open to all:

**Homelessness and Substance Use Disorder:  
dynamics of recovery over time**

Thur 16 Jul 2026, 10–11am [Book here](#)

A reminder of the June event:

**Can joint outreach by NHS and third sector  
homelessness workers reduce the risk of overdoses/drug deaths for people  
experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage?**

Wed 10 Jun 2026, 10–11am [Book here](#)



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Office for National Statistics website transformation programme usability testing sessions - contact [alison.davies@ons.gov.uk](mailto:alison.davies@ons.gov.uk) to find out how you can take part:

- Leicester 23 June 2026 – Leicester Tigers
- Newcastle 29 July 2026 – Crowne Plaza Hotel
- Peterborough 22 September 2026 – Peterborough United Football Club

Also I am looking to speak to people who request data from ONS that they can't find on the ONS website - this could be a one off or a regular basis. Also if people use data they find in our user requested data pages. This will be in the next six weeks.

Contact [alison.hawkesworth@ons.gov.uk](mailto:alison.hawkesworth@ons.gov.uk) for more details.

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## Jobs

To submit a job advert to appear in the newsletter or on the LARIA website, please download and complete this [form](#) (Full Corporate and Corporate Members only). You can also post Job Vacancies on the Jobs Board in the LARIA [Members' Area](#).

The next newsletter submission deadline is [Thursday 25th June](#).

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**Are you a Corporate or Full Corporate Member?**



Your LARIA Corporate Membership entitles you to submit content to the monthly LARIA newsletter, if you have any research, events, job adverts, resources or news which you would us to include please send it to [admin@laria.org.uk](mailto:admin@laria.org.uk).

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