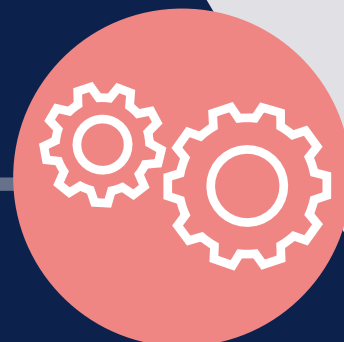


# Business plan 2024-25



Reference **OfS 2024.40**

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# Foreword

## **This business plan explains the work the Office for Students (OfS) will do in 2024-25, the last year of our current three-year strategy.**

Our strategy sets out two interconnected areas of focus: quality and standards and equality of opportunity. These are underpinned by enabling regulation – areas of our work that are necessary for the higher education system to operate effectively. This business plan explains how we will continue to make progress in these areas, ensuring that students from all backgrounds have equal opportunity to enter higher education, succeed in their courses, and then reap the life-changing and lifelong rewards higher education can offer.

The financial sustainability of the higher education sector is a high priority for the OfS this year. Our annual report on financial sustainability highlighted the risks facing the sector, and universities and colleges need to take action to ensure that they are well placed to weather financial storms. We will continue to monitor individual providers, intervening where necessary, as well as producing sector-wide analysis and facilitating discussion in this important area.

Our first quality assessment reports were a significant milestone for the regulation of the sector. I'm pleased to see how universities and colleges have responded to them, reflecting on the lessons for their own courses. The OfS, too, has learned lessons and we will continue to develop our approach following discussions with those providers we have assessed and with the wider sector.

This year we will continue to publish assessment reports, including some on the outcomes students achieve, and will consider where we may need to take further regulatory action. We also expect to launch a focused number of new

investigations, which are likely to look in particular at courses delivered through subcontractual partnerships. We will take action where we have concerns about the quality of these courses or the proper use of public funding.

We will implement a new condition of registration to tackle harassment and sexual misconduct, recognising the importance of these issues to students. We expect to consult on revised initial conditions of registration for management and governance. We will listen carefully to the views of students and the providers that we regulate before making decisions. We will also assess the actions set out in providers' access and participation plans to address risks to equality of opportunity.

To effectively deliver all the activity I've described, we need to have robust, productive and trusted relationships with those we regulate and effective mechanisms to understand students' perspectives. We're continuing our engagement and events with the sector, including meeting students up and down the country in our visits to providers. We are working hard to reform how students are involved in our work, to ensure their experiences and expectations are at the forefront of our thinking. This includes generating a more coherent, external-facing definition of the student interest, and a step-change in our work seeking insight from students through qualitative and quantitative methods, remodelling our Student Panel, and re-conceptualising our role in bringing information to students about higher education. As you would expect, we will continue to work on core regulatory activities. This includes assessing applications for registration, degree awarding powers and university

title. This is important, technical work which ensures that only providers that offer high quality education to students can access the benefits of registration. Universities and colleges are right to expect that their applications will be dealt with thoroughly and efficiently, and this activity will be a priority throughout this business year.

Higher education remains a great option for students, with many benefits to individuals and society. But these are difficult times. Students have faced challenges from increases in the cost of living, and rightly expect a high quality higher education which will leave them well placed to succeed after they graduate. Providers face growing financial risks and taking the necessary steps to put them on a sure footing will not be easy.

At times like this, effective, risk-based regulation is more important than ever, to protect the interests of students and ensure they and providers can continue to thrive.

**Susan Lapworth, Chief Executive,  
Office for Students**



# How the business plan works

**This OfS business plan sets out the work we intend to do in 2024-25 to make progress on our three-year goals. These goals are the outcomes we want to achieve, as set out in our strategy for 2022 to 2025.<sup>1</sup>**

In the strategy, we specify two areas of higher education that we will focus on over this strategic period: quality and standards, and equality of opportunity. The goals either advance our two areas of focus or they facilitate our work. They are listed on the next page.

The business plan also includes the operational activities that support our work and our plans for continuous improvement.

For simplicity, we refer throughout this document to our expectations to publish information. However, we will take final decisions about whether or not to publish particular information after carefully considering all relevant matters.

- The online version of the plan is available at: [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/our-business-plan/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/our-business-plan/).
- To provide feedback on the plan, contact [info@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:info@officeforstudents.org.uk).

<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-strategy/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-strategy/).

# Our eleven goals



## Quality and standards

Students receive a high quality academic experience that improves their knowledge and skills, with increasing numbers receiving excellent provision.

Students are rigorously assessed, and the qualifications they are awarded are credible and comparable to those granted previously.

Providers secure free speech within the law for students, staff and visiting speakers.

Graduates contribute to local and national prosperity, and the government's 'levelling up' agenda.



## Equality of opportunity

Students' access, success and progression are not limited by their background, location or characteristics.

Prospective students can choose from a diverse range of courses and providers at any stage of their life, with a wide range of flexible and innovative opportunities.

Providers act to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct and respond effectively if incidents do occur.

Providers encourage and support an environment conducive to the good mental health and wellbeing that students need to succeed in their higher education.



## Enabling regulation

Providers are financially viable and sustainable and have effective governance arrangements.

Students receive the academic experience they were promised by their provider and their interests as consumers are protected before, during and after their studies.

The OfS minimises the regulatory burden it places on providers, while ensuring action is effective in meeting its goals and regulatory objectives.



## Quality and standards

**Students receive a high quality academic experience that improves their knowledge and skills, with increasing numbers receiving excellent provision.**

### What we will do in 2024-25

We will take action where our requirements for a high quality education, including positive outcomes for students, are not being met. We will also encourage providers to go beyond these requirements by continuing to engage with them, including on the teaching excellence ratings for individual providers.

Work area	Description
<b>Investigation and enforcement</b>	<p>We will conclude our current quality assessments for individual providers</p> <p>We will undertake assessments into quality at some providers where teaching is delivered through subcontractual partnerships</p> <p>We will continue to use independent academic assessors to undertake assessments</p>
<b>Quality and standards assessment</b>	<p>We will continue to assess the quality and standards of courses offered by providers seeking to register or to award their own degrees</p> <p>We will continue to use independent academic assessors to undertake these assessments</p> <p>We will provide external quality assurance for degree apprenticeships</p>
<b>Student outcomes</b>	<p>We intend to maintain and update the student outcomes indicators we publish for individual providers<sup>2</sup></p> <p>We will assess the student outcomes delivered by individual providers and take action where appropriate</p> <p>We expect to publish the outcomes of our assessments of student outcomes</p>
<b>Insight and improvement</b>	<p>We will work with the sector to ensure that all providers can understand and learn from our quality assessments</p> <p>We will ensure providers focus on the support needed by students from all backgrounds</p> <p>We will publish an insight brief on the findings from our quality assessments</p>

<sup>2</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-data-dashboard/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-data-dashboard/).

Work area	Description
<b>Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)</b>	<p>We expect to publish updated TEF indicators for individual providers<sup>3</sup></p> <p>We expect to complete and publish the outcomes from the evaluation of the TEF</p> <p>We will continue to engage with students and providers about how TEF ratings inform student choice</p>
<b>Transnational education (TNE)</b>	<p>We will continue to work with the designated data body on the approach to collecting data on providers' TNE activities</p> <p>We will engage with UK and overseas stakeholders about the regulatory arrangements for TNE</p>

**Students are rigorously assessed, and the qualifications they are awarded are credible and comparable to those granted previously.**

### What we will do in 2024-25

We will investigate potential concerns about assessment and awarding practices at individual higher education providers, and publish insight and data to influence other providers to meet our minimum requirements.

Work area	Description
<b>Investigation and enforcement</b>	<p>We will conclude our investigations of potential concerns that providers may not satisfy our regulatory requirements for rigorous assessment and awarding practices</p> <p>We expect to publish the outcomes of these investigations</p>

<sup>3</sup> Guidance on TEF 2023 is available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-22-guidance-on-the-teaching-excellence-framework-2023/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-22-guidance-on-the-teaching-excellence-framework-2023/).



## Providers secure free speech within the law for students, staff and visiting speakers.

### What we will do in 2024-25

The government has announced that it will stop the implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. Ministers are currently reviewing the legislation. Should they decide to implement some or all of the legislation, the OfS will be ready to implement these decisions.

If the legislation is commenced, we will open and operate a complaints scheme and consider cases as appropriate. Similarly, we will develop and consult on new conditions of registration relating to free speech, as well as on overseas funding where this relates to free speech within the law, according to the legislative timetable.

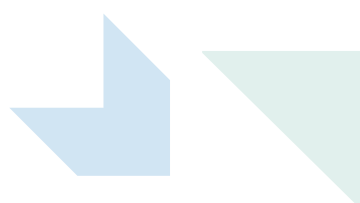
Work area	Description
Response to new legislation	We will continue to implement free speech legislation as provisions are commenced
Investigation and enforcement	We will consider complaints submitted to the free speech complaints scheme if the scheme is introduced We expect to publish the outcomes of investigations

## Graduates contribute to local and national prosperity, and the government's 'levelling up' agenda.

### What we will do in 2024-25

We will continue to ensure that providers satisfy, or exceed, our minimum requirements for students progressing to professional employment or further study. We will also continue to run programmes to address skills shortages and will work with partners to shape wider skills policy.

Work area	Description
Student outcomes	We expect to update published data on student outcomes indicators for individual providers, including the rate at which students progress to professional employment or further study
Access and participation plans (2024-25 onwards)	We will assess the actions set out in providers' access and participation plans to address gaps in progression rates for different groups of students



Work area	Description
<b>Funding to address skills needs</b>	<p>We will continue, with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, to provide funding for degree conversion courses in artificial intelligence (AI) and data science</p> <p>We will continue to monitor and evaluate the success of our funding and we intend to publish our findings</p> <p>We will engage with the sector on the expansion of medical places</p>
<b>Wider skills policy</b>	<p>We will work with the Department for Education (DfE) and other stakeholders to ensure our regulatory approach is appropriate in the context of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement<sup>4</sup></p> <p>We will continue to work with DfE, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and Ofsted to ensure an efficient and effective regulatory system for higher technical qualifications and degree apprenticeships</p> <p>We expect to develop and publish guidance for an additional wave of degree apprenticeship funding</p>



<sup>4</sup> The Lifelong Learning Entitlement is a government policy to provide individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime.



## Equality of opportunity

**Students' access, success and progression are not limited by their background, location or characteristics.**

### What we will do in 2024-25

We will continue implementing our reforms to regulating equality of opportunity, to tackle risks for students. We will work to ensure providers are delivering high quality education and good outcomes for students from all backgrounds.

Work area	Description
<b>Access and participation plans (2024-25 onwards)</b>	<p>We will assess plans and, where appropriate, engage with providers to finalise them</p> <p>We will prepare to assess plans for 2025-26 onwards, refining existing guidance as appropriate</p>
<b>Access and participation plans (current)</b>	<p>We will assess and approve variations to current access and participation plans submitted by providers</p> <p>We expect to publish updates to our access and participation data dashboard</p>
<b>Equality of Opportunity Risk Register</b>	<p>We will continue to monitor how providers are using our Equality of Opportunity Risk Register</p> <p>We will review and update the risk register to ensure it provides an appropriate and evidence-based reflection of risks to equality of opportunity in higher education</p>
<b>Evaluation</b>	<p>We will continue to evaluate the impact of our revised approach to regulating equality of opportunity</p>
<b>Quality regulation</b>	<p>Our regulation of quality and student outcomes will consider whether individual providers are delivering high quality courses and positive outcomes for students from all backgrounds</p> <p>We intend to publish an insight brief on the findings from our quality assessments, and will engage with providers to incentivise improvement in this area</p>
<b>Funding</b>	<p>We will continue to allocate recurrent funding to eligible providers to support student access and success</p>

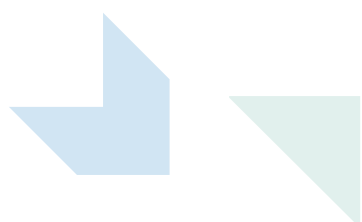
Work area	Description
<b>Uni Connect</b>	<p>We will continue to deliver our Uni Connect programme, supporting local partnerships of providers to advise underrepresented groups about entering higher education</p> <p>We will embed learning from the previous evaluation to make improvements</p> <p>We will monitor phase three of the programme and engage our stakeholders to plan and develop phase four</p>
<b>Effective practice</b>	We will continue to support effective evaluation and evidence-based effective practice resources

**Prospective students can choose from a diverse range of courses and providers at any stage of their life, with a wide range of flexible and innovative opportunities.**

### What we will do in 2024-25

We will improve and promote the information available to prospective students for choosing courses and providers. We will also enable greater choice for students by allocating funding and supporting effective validation arrangements.

Work area	Description
<b>Information for student choice</b>	<p>We will run the National Student Survey for 2024 and will publish the results</p> <p>We will continue to provide information and guidance about different options for study through the Discover Uni website and will review its content</p>
<b>Funding</b>	<p>We will continue to allocate funding to subjects and courses that would otherwise be undersupplied by providers, via competitions, our recurrent grant and specialist provider funding</p> <p>We expect to publish the results from our recent funding call for evidence</p>
<b>Registration and degree awarding powers</b>	We will continue to register new providers and authorise degree awarding powers, increasing high quality choices for students



Work area	Description
<b>Validation arrangements</b>	<p>We will monitor the ongoing validation partnerships (launched with DfE and the Open University) to offer validation partnerships to further education colleges that want to provide higher technical qualifications</p> <p>We intend to publish an insight brief on subcontractual partnerships, and will engage with providers to deliver improvement in this area</p>
<b>Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE)</b>	<p>We intend to publish our response to the recent call for evidence</p> <p>We will continue to work closely with government, students and providers in undertaking further development in relation to the LLE</p>

## Providers act to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct and respond effectively if incidents do occur.

### What we will do in 2024-25

We expect to publish the results from our recent harassment and sexual misconduct consultation and prevalence survey. We will continue to work closely with stakeholders on these issues as appropriate.

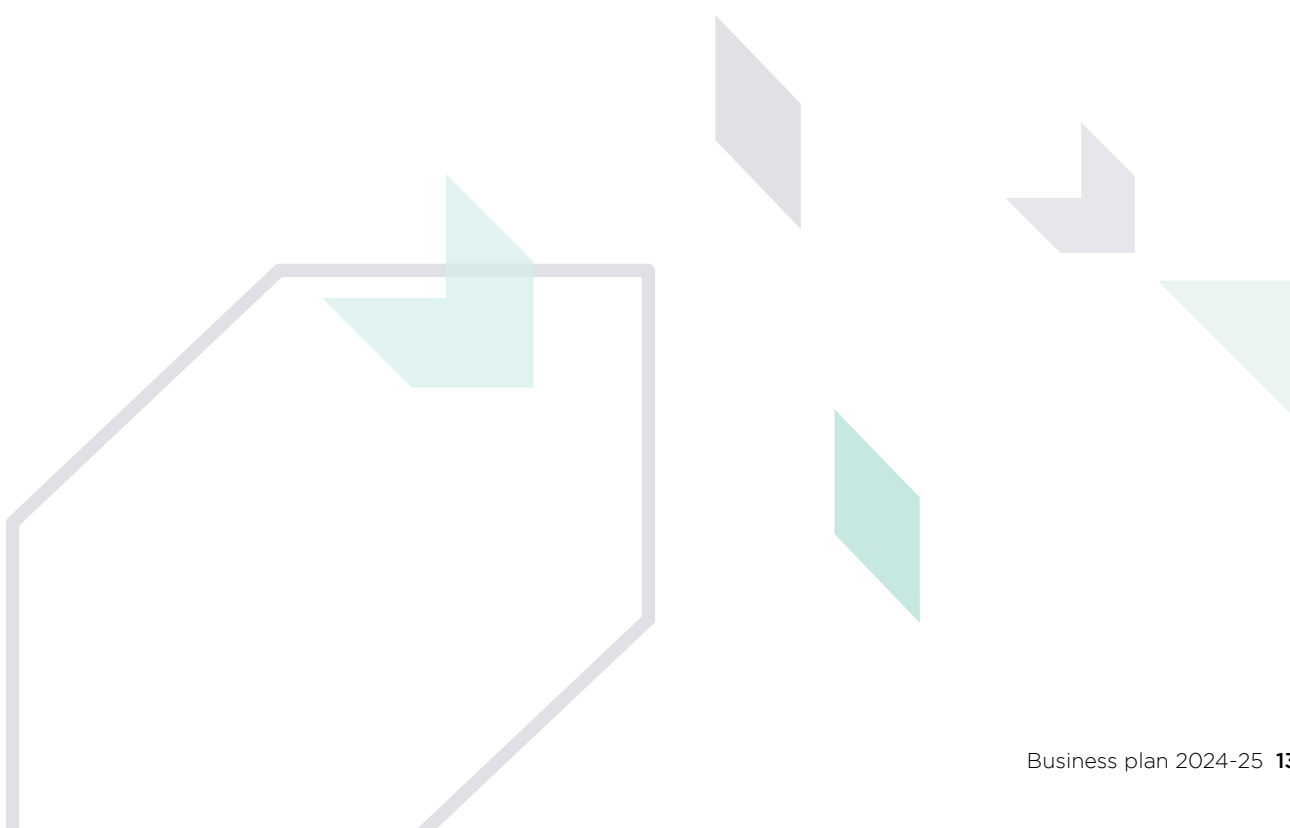
Work area	Description
<b>New approach to regulating harassment and sexual misconduct</b>	We expect to publish our decisions following consultation on a new condition of registration to tackle harassment and sexual misconduct in higher education
<b>Prevalence survey of sexual misconduct</b>	We intend to publish the results from the prevalence survey of sexual misconduct in higher education
<b>Stakeholder engagement</b>	<p>We will continue to engage with other organisations with expertise to inform our work</p> <p>We will continue to work with students to ensure providers act to prevent and respond to incidents of harassment and sexual misconduct</p>

## Providers encourage and support an environment conducive to the good mental health and wellbeing that students need to succeed in their higher education.

### What we will do in 2024-25

We will continue to encourage higher education providers to address mental health among students as a risk to equality of opportunity. We will ensure that providers understand the scale and nature of mental health issues in higher education and know how best to support their students.

Work area	Description
<b>Access and participation plans (2024-25 onwards)</b>	We will assess and approve access and participation plans, including those that address mental health among students as a risk identified in our Equality of Opportunity Risk Register
<b>Effective practice</b>	We will continue to monitor projects funded under our Mental Health Funding Competition
<b>Communications</b>	We expect to publish an update to our access and participation data dashboard, including data on students with a declared mental health condition
<b>Student Space</b>	We will continue to manage and monitor with our partners online resources to provide wellbeing information and support for students





## Enabling regulation

### Providers are financially viable and sustainable and have effective governance arrangements.

#### What we will do in 2024-25

We will monitor the financial viability and sustainability of higher education providers in England, individually and across the sector. We will continue to identify providers with significant financial risks, or management and governance weaknesses, and intervene to protect the interests of students and taxpayers.

Work area	Description
<b>Management and governance</b>	<p>We will identify providers with management and governance weaknesses and intervene where appropriate, with a focus on protecting public funding</p> <p>We will consult on new initial conditions of registration relating to management and governance with a view to implementing any new conditions</p>
<b>Financial risk</b>	<p>We will continue to identify and model the impact of financial risks on providers, to anticipate issues and better protect students</p> <p>We publish an annual report on financial sustainability across the sector</p>
<b>Monitoring and intervention</b>	<p>We will continue to monitor the financial viability and sustainability of providers, including through the annual financial returns they submit, and intervene where appropriate</p> <p>We will investigate concerns relating to the operation of subcontractual partnerships</p>
<b>Market exit</b>	<p>We will identify and engage with providers at risk of exiting the market and establish student protection measures</p> <p>We will respond to cases of likely provider closure and will intervene to protect the interests of students</p> <p>We will continue to work closely with the DfE to ensure financial sustainability risks are clearly understood</p>
<b>Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC)</b>	<p>We will compile and publish TRAC data, helping providers and public funders understand the costs of teaching and research</p>
<b>Funding assurance</b>	<p>We will give assurance to the National Audit Office and other funders over the public funding distributed to providers by the OfS</p>

**Students receive the academic experience they were promised by their provider and their interests as consumers are protected before, during and after their studies.**

### What we will do in 2024-25

We will continue to take action where providers may not be complying with consumer protection law.

Work area	Description
<b>Investigation and enforcement</b>	We will refer student consumer protection cases to National Trading Standards, through our partnership <sup>5</sup> We expect to publish case reports relating to terms and conditions in student contracts
<b>Advice and guidance</b>	We will identify learning from cases referred to trading standards to support the development of an improved approach
<b>Consumer protection</b>	We will consult on a new initial condition of registration relating to consumer protection, with a view to implementing any new condition

**The OfS minimises the regulatory burden it places on providers, while ensuring action is effective in meeting its goals and regulatory objectives.**

### What we will do in 2024-25

We will continue to use a risk-based approach to monitor compliance and take enforcement action. We will continue to seek opportunities to reduce burden and will engage with providers to test the burden of our regulation against the benefits.

Work area	Description
<b>Risk-based approach</b>	We will continue to focus our regulatory activity on areas of greatest concern  We will continue to consider proportionality in our requests to individual providers for additional information

<sup>5</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/new-ofs-national-trading-standards-partnership-to-protect-students-rights-as-consumers/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/new-ofs-national-trading-standards-partnership-to-protect-students-rights-as-consumers/).



Work area	Description
<b>Dialogue with providers</b>	<p>We will continue our provider engagement activities, including events and visits to providers by senior OfS staff</p> <p>We will invite providers' views on regulatory burden when consulting on any changes to our regulation</p> <p>We are developing our data portal to make engagement easier for providers</p>
<b>Exempt charities</b>	<p>We will fulfil our responsibilities as the principal regulator for those higher education providers in England that are exempt charities, and for exempt charities that are closely connected with them<sup>6</sup></p>

## Regulatory operations

### What we will do in 2024-25

We will continue to operate and improve the core regulatory activity that enables both the OfS and the English higher education system to function. These operations underpin our ambitions for quality and standards and equality of opportunity.

Work area	Description
<b>Regulatory operations</b>	<p>We will consider applications from providers seeking to register with the OfS</p> <p>We will consider applications from providers seeking powers to award their own degrees</p> <p>We will consider applications from providers to use 'university' in their name</p> <p>We will monitor registered providers' compliance with our conditions of registration, considering reportable events and notifications</p> <p>We will monitor higher education providers' compliance with the Prevent duty</p> <p>We will improve the way we deliver our regulatory operations, including recording information and managing cases</p>

<sup>6</sup> An exempt charity is not directly regulated by the Charity Commission and instead has a principal regulator, thereby avoiding duplicate regulatory burden.



# Operations

## What we will do in 2024-25

We will run effective operations that enable us to deliver our work, and seek to improve these over the year.

Work area	Description
<b>Student engagement</b>	<p>We will continue to work closely with our student panel</p> <p>We will continue to improve our engagement with student representatives beyond our student panel, including working with students' union officers to make them aware of our role and remit</p> <p>We will continue to poll students regularly and undertake wider research to gather students' views to inform our policy development</p> <p>We will demonstrate where student insight has had an impact on our work</p> <p>We will reform our communications with students</p> <p>We will continue to work with students to define the student interest and craft our next strategy</p>
<b>Communications</b>	<p>We will rerun our survey of providers' perceptions of working with the OfS and report on the findings</p> <p>We will continue to produce Insight briefs and will host events addressing current issues in higher education</p> <p>We will continue to make improvements to the OfS website</p>
<b>Efficiency and effectiveness</b>	<p>We will continue to seek ways to improve the operation and efficiency of our corporate and professional services functions</p> <p>We will continue to develop our evaluation team to best support ongoing effective regulation</p>
<b>Data operations</b>	<p>We will oversee the work of the designated data body, including its delivery of the Data Futures programme</p> <p>We have commissioned an independent review of the Data Futures programme, supported by a steering group of stakeholders from across the UK nations</p>



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