

James Nicholls

Senior user researcher | Defence, government and digital services

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Contracts via Upcurve Ltd (outside IR35) | Available from 15 September 2026

Professional summary

Senior user researcher with extensive experience across the Ministry of Defence and wider UK government, including MOD Data Services, Defence Digital, the Royal Navy, the Met Office, the Department for Business and Trade and the Ministry of Justice's Legal Aid Agency. Proven track record leading discoveries, alphas and betas in high-security, mission-critical environments, translating complex policy and operational requirements into user-centred, evidence-based services. Most recently led user research across MOD's defence data platforms, including multi-cohort research in OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE and SECRET environments and research into AI adoption across defence data services. Combines deep understanding of defence culture, service design and agile delivery in secure contexts with over 15 years of public-sector and international experience. Available from 15 September 2026.

Core skills

User research • Service design • AI adoption research • Research in secure environments (OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE / SECRET) • Agile delivery • Stakeholder engagement • GDS service assessments • Ethnographic, diary and remote research • Information architecture • Cross-functional collaboration • Workshop facilitation • Evidence-based delivery in secure environments • Practical AI fluency (daily hands-on use of AI and agentic tooling).

Professional experience

Senior user researcher – Ministry of Defence, Data Services (via Kainos)

November 2025 – September 2026.

- Leads user research for MOD's defence data services portfolio, including DDAP, the department's data and analytics platform, running discovery and evaluation across OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE and SECRET environments.
- Designs and runs multi-method programmes – depth interviews, diary studies and moderated usability sessions – with cohorts spanning DSCOM analysts, SpOps data scientists and RAF users, and sets the portfolio's research strategy.
- Identifies and visualises cross-classification tooling and workflow gaps, publishing interactive evidence packs to Confluence that inform platform and investment decisions.
- Brings user research into the department's AI adoption work, including early research support for a new defence AI task force standing up AI development capability.
- Consolidates hundreds of refined insights into a governed user-needs repository, giving product teams a reusable evidence base and demonstrable research value.

Senior user researcher – Ministry of Justice / Legal Aid Agency (LAA)

April 2025 – October 2025.

- Led provider-facing research for the “Means and Match” alpha, shaping digital solutions for controlled work in private family law, housing and debt.
- Designed and facilitated user interviews, usability tests and thematic analysis across legal providers, Citizens Advice and contract managers.
- Delivered insight for provider escalation and a client-front-door model for self-initiated legal aid.
- Produced artefacts including Miro journey maps, persona sets and prototype evaluation summaries.
- Collaborated with policy, design and delivery leads to align product direction with Legal Aid Agency operational needs.

Senior user researcher – Met Office

February 2025 – April 2025.

- Acted as principal researcher on a strategic discovery for the national Met Office website serving millions of citizens and professional users.

- Led stakeholder and professional-user interviews to inform an information architecture redesign.
- Delivered card-sorting and prototype-testing programmes to validate navigation hypotheses.
- Synthesised findings into journey maps, personas and thematic insights driving the new IA strategy.

Senior user researcher – Department for Business and Trade (DBT)

October 2024 – February 2025.

- Delivered user research for trade and investment services, ensuring compliance with GDS standards and alignment with wider government strategy.
- Conducted stakeholder engagement and qualitative testing with trade advisers and SMEs.
- Produced evidence-based recommendations to improve service performance and interoperability.
- Collaborated across departments to align research outputs with trade policy objectives.

Senior user researcher – Ministry of Defence / Defence Digital

April 2021 – September 2024.

- Delivered discoveries, alphas and betas across Defence Support, Fleet Maintenance and Supplier Cyber Protection services.
- Led research for Defence Support Hub, defining a single sign-on and data-integration capability improving operational efficiency.
- Conducted ethnographic studies with engineers to streamline parts-request workflows and reduce turnaround times.
- Supported design and delivery teams to align outputs with the GDS service standard.
- Facilitated workshops with DE&S, Navy Command and ISS, mentoring junior researchers and embedding agile practices.

Lead user researcher – Royal Navy (Digital Service Standard Discovery)

April 2020 – April 2021.

- Introduced GDS service standard methodology within the Royal Navy to assure digital project delivery.
- Conducted discovery research across naval digital services to identify maturity gaps.
- Designed assessment frameworks and advised senior teams on GDS-aligned delivery.
- Produced actionable insights informing Navy Command's digital transformation roadmap.

Earlier government experience (selected)

Department for Education (2017–2018) – Lead user researcher, Find Postgraduate Teacher Training (18/18 GDS score).

BEIS (2019–2020) – Digital Business Identity (alpha).

DFID / INSITUM / Acas – Lead and supporting research roles across discoveries and alphas.

United Nations and EULEX Mission (2005–2013) – Communications and research in peacebuilding and justice reform.

Education

BSc (Hons) Neuroscience – University College London.

MA Journalism – Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication.

Awards

UN 21 Award – Presented by Kofi Annan for humanitarian research and outreach work in the Balkans.

Availability

Based in Kent and the London area. Available from 15 September 2026. Operates through Upkurve Ltd; outside-IR35 engagements preferred. Clearance status available on direct enquiry.