



Understanding Society

THE UK HOUSEHOLD LONGITUDINAL STUDY

# Generating policy impact: Study approach and challenges

Raj Patel, Associate Director of Policy

[rajpatel@essex.ac.uk](mailto:rajpatel@essex.ac.uk)

January 2022



University of Essex



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council

An initiative by the Economic and Social Research Council, with scientific leadership by the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, and survey delivery by NatCen Social Research and Kantar Public

# What is Understanding Society (UK Household Longitudinal Study)

Understanding Society surveys representative UK sample of individuals, interviewed within a household context

- starts with randomly selected sample of households
- collects information about all residents of these households
- core sample members are followed over their life course at 1-year intervals and within UK



- Public access to the data (various levels of access); study funded as a data infrastructure project – not for doing substantive research
- Other panel studies will be different, with many undertaking their own substantive research

# Approach to impact

- **Broad impact definition** - how Study contributes to:
  - Sciences (social, health, biological, humanities)
  - People
  - Policy
  - Innovation (a cross-cutting driver)
- **Direct policy impacts:** where we can maximise use and value through access to the data and research findings; dedicated **Policy and Partnerships Unit**
- **Indirect policy impacts:** impact generated by data users through their own activities and institutions; more complex to track and report as data is publicly available!
- Report produced in 2020: [Insights, ideas and challenges for mobilising data and evidence \(2020\)](#)



# Focus on key benefits specified by the ESRC

- Examples of benefits - not comprehensive list
  - improving capability in quantitative methods and multi-disciplinary use of the data
  - generate new insights into interactions between social and biological data
  - **inform development of new policy over time**
  - **inform development of practices in private and civil society sectors**
  - Etc.
- [Benefits Report](#): How Understanding Society has been used by researchers and policy audiences over the last 10 years

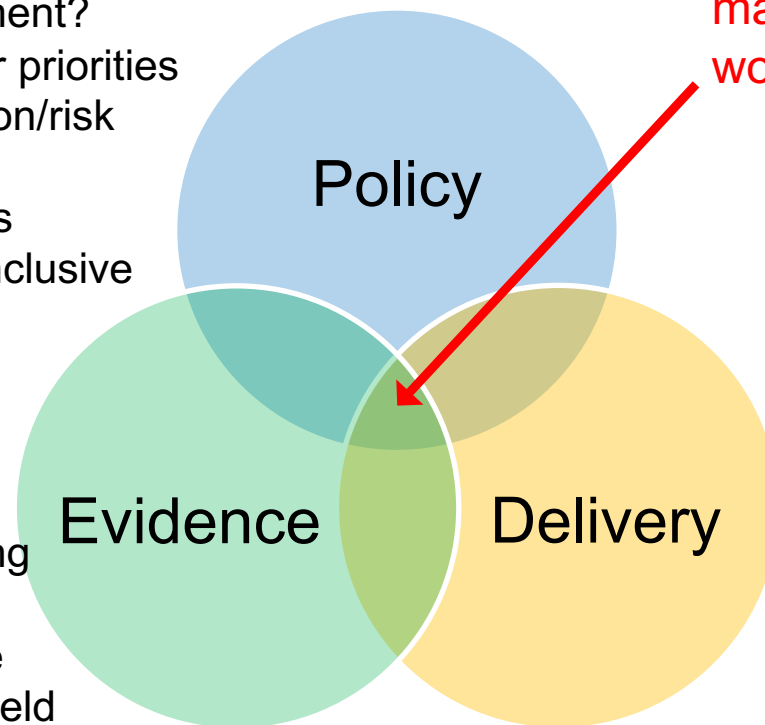
# Contributory approach to influencing policy – evidence only one factor

## Problems and Politics

What is the problem; why does it matter? Is it for Government?  
Gov't and Ministers: their priorities and appetite for innovation/risk  
Alternatives/competing perspectives from groups  
Winners & losers; how inclusive  
Media/public attitudes  
Managing expectations

## Evidence portfolio

Access to the latest thinking  
Triangulation between different forms of evidence and intelligence from the field  
Underpinning scientific evidence and synthesis  
So what?  
Cost benefit analysis



Effective policy making – how will it work?

## Deliverability

Action proportionate to the problem  
Systems engineering  
Simple transparent and enforceable processes  
Affordability & incentives  
Public / supplier support and adherence  
Short delivery chains and good governance

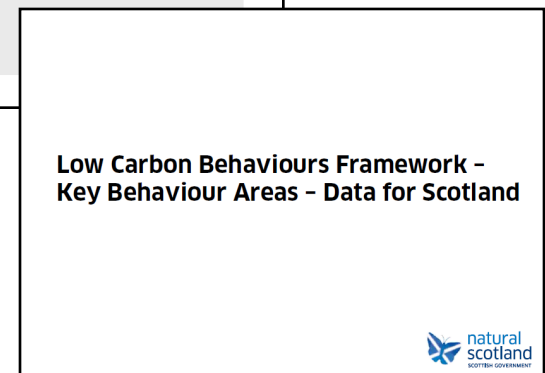
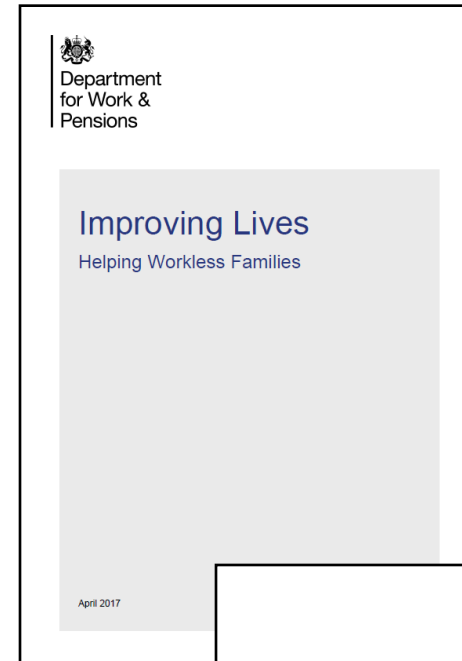
Adapted from: Hallsworth et al (2011), *Policy Making in the Real World* (2011), Institute for Government and Civil Service Reform Plan (2012)

# Three-pronged strategy to maximise impact on policy

- 1) **Responsive activities:** support direct requests from policy research users through Direct Access and general advice & guidance (outreach and demand-driven)
- 2) **Champion research of academic users:** produce annual *Insights* publication and podcasts series, host seminars and roundtables, submit evidence to parliament, and showcasing policy impact (knowledge mobilisation)
- 3) **Stimulate high quality policy relevant research:** through strategic uses of the data/demonstration projects, building partnerships and enhancing sectoral skills in using longitudinal data (problem-oriented)

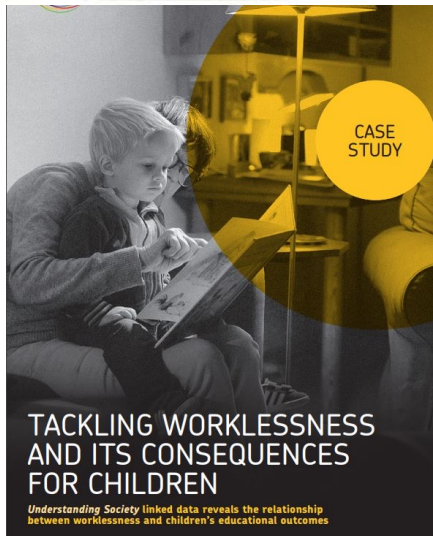
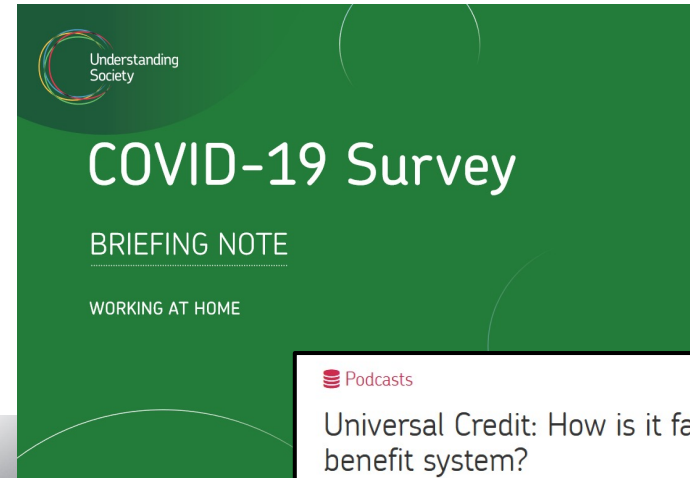
# Responsive activities: Direct Access

- We support research requests from government co-funding departments (CFG)
- We currently support
  - ✓ **Department for Work and Pensions**
  - ✓ **Department for Transport**
  - ✓ **Department for Health**
  - ✓ **Scottish Government**
  - ✓ **Welsh Government**
- Department of Education and ONS are also members of CFG
- Research projects limited in scope - not a consultancy service





# Championing research by others: publications and podcasts




 Podcasts

## Universal Credit: How is it faring as a benefit system?

With the topic area of income and expenditure for the second episode in our new podcast series, we take a look at Universal Credit – how it's designed, how it compares to the old benefits legacy system and the effects it has on people's lives.



  0:00 / 32:33 

 RSS

Series host [Catherine McDonald](#) speaks to [Tom Waters](#), Senior Research Economist from the Institute for Fiscal Studies about research that used Understanding Society data to take a longitudinal look at Universal Credit. With first-hand experience of supporting people on Universal Credit, [Kayley Hignell](#), Head of Policy for Families, Welfare and Work at Citizens Advice, responds to the research and shares her view on how one of the biggest benefit reforms in UK history is playing out.



# Championing research by others: events

- **Insights**

- Theme based annual publication primarily aimed at policy audiences – launched in January of each year
- Accompanied by series of events
- Moving to online delivery has seen significant growth and diversity in participation

- **Roundtables**

- Longer events with invited participants
- Participative format, incorporating wider knowledge and experiences

- **Transforming Social Policies**

- ‘Post-pandemic’ policy challenges: events programme held in September 2021 with the British Academy

# Championing research: COVID-19 response

- 60+ papers/reports
- Evidence to the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)
- News and media: e.g., shielding and mental health, long Covid

## BAME and single-parent families worst hit financially by Covid-19

Survey highlights discrepancies in earnings compared with white two-parent households

- [Coronavirus - latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



## Britons with life-threatening conditions denied care during pandemic

Exclusive: Majority of people with diabetes or high blood pressure had care cancelled by NHS

- [Coronavirus - latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



## Good neighbours? No, UK's community spirit fell in summer Covid lockdown

Despite feelgood stories such as Captain Tom Moore, people actually felt more estranged during restrictions, says report

- [Coronavirus - latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



## Covid vaccine: 72% of black people unlikely to have jab, UK survey finds

Some voices concern at BAME uptake and says more must be done to increase trust in vaccine

- [Coronavirus - latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



# Stimulating policy research



- **Collaborations with other organisations:**
  - Gender pay gap: Cabinet Office (Government Equalities Office)
  - Active travel (walking and cycling): Transport for West Midlands and Warwickshire/Coventry Councils
- **Using data to creatively investigate strategic problems**
  - Three-day climate change data dive: Cross-sectoral and co-produced research on the role and readiness of households in the transition to net zero
- **Funded Fellowships**
  - Three Policy Fellowships – ran Sept 2018 to 2019/early 2020
  - How events shape people's lives, using event history data: new fellowships (commencing from April 2022)

# Next step challenges



1. Further broaden access to the data:
  - Sector specific training courses
  - Trial Data Gateway (an online analysis tool for those who want summary statistics without downloading data)
2. Greater engagement of business
3. Building know-how in more complex policy applications of Understanding Society data, e.g.,:
  - policy evaluations
  - cost-benefit analysis (e.g., fiscal policy and wider outcomes)
  - micro-simulation (for policy scenarios/options)
4. Research as a process: greater partnership working to address huge cross-cutting issues such as ‘levelling-up’ communities left behind, public health, climate change and tackling inequality