Structurally unsound

Exploring Inequalities: Igniting research to better inform UK policy
Governments have taken a significant role in tackling the embedded structural inequalities prevalent in UK society today. Whilst welcomed, further work undoubtedly remains. As those in Government have themselves noted, “Attitudes have changed. New opportunities have been won. But still, ingrained, systematic barriers persist and they must be torn down.”

Discussions throughout the project recognised this, whilst also highlighting key evidence gaps and areas for further exploration. These are summarised in the actions that follow.

We don’t set out specific interventions or policies that will ‘fix’ inequality. Instead, we suggest actions and considerations that policymakers could adopt to better approach the study, analysis and tackling of structural inequalities. These follow the five approaches outlined on page 52 in our main report.

- Inequalities cannot be tackled in isolation – to make progress a joined-up approach is required. Recognising there is no single initiative that can tackle structural inequalities, there are key approaches governments could adopt to close gaps and align policies.

- There is a clear need for branches of governments to collaborate and communicate across each other. This would enable the creation of a fabric of equalities policy for delivery. Currently the lack of facilitation and support to achieve this means the necessary systems for cross-government departments to make joint funding bids to enable collaborative working do not exist.

- Governments should develop centrally allocated funding schemes for tackling inequalities, moving away from a model in which one department must ‘own’ a policy initiative.

- No UK Government department is responsible for ‘transitions’ areas, for example the transition from school to work. Improved scrutiny of such areas should be considered and policies aligned to encourage accountability and close such gaps.

- Current instruments being used in government to measure inequality are not ambitious enough, focusing merely on compliance (for example, the Equality Act does not consider intersectionality). Equality Impact Assessments should be more rigorously enforced, and those with responsibility for conducting assessments should receive adequate training to reduce subjectivity in how tests are conducted and equalities measures considered.

- Governments could give consideration to adopting one common shared language to be used across policies for discussing social inequalities. The current lack of a sufficient shared understanding of language makes it difficult to share datasets, evaluate policies, and conceptualise the intersections and cumulative effects of disadvantage. Consideration should therefore be given to what is lost in policy terms by using different terms, for example, social mobility (Social Mobility

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Commission), equality (Government Equalities Office), and injustice (Office for Tackling Injustices).

Place:
- Adopting a place-based approach is key. The next step in enacting this would be greater joined-up action from policymakers with a range of local services.
- The next step in devolution should be improved dialogue around research undertaken in devolved nations and effectiveness of policy interventions. Learning is not currently shared and this should change.
- Measures should be put in place to diversify the make-up of policy professionals. For example, all six Metro Mayors elected in 2017 were white men, and women held just 6 per cent of seats in their cabinets in 2018.

Data:
- Governments should invest in data – recognising that the trimming of sample sizes has significant implications for analysing intersectionality. If samples need to be trimmed, budgets for booster samples should be made available.
- There is a need to better link data across government services to gain a deeper understanding of cross-cutting issues and intersectional disadvantage. The Race Disparity Unit’s work to create the Ethnicity Facts and Figures website demonstrates the importance of working across government to align and link data sets.
- Data collection at local government level is often patchy, inconsistent and not mandated. Local government should be supported to change this so that there is systematic collection and analysis of data.
- Likewise, shifting definitions and the changing nature of work is resulting in true rates of employment for different groups being difficult to capture. For example, a quarter of all workers in the gig economy are BAME, but this type of work cannot be captured by a single tick box on a traditional workforce survey with such workers often having multiple jobs or changing hours of work per week. Policymakers could therefore consider alternative, innovative methods for capturing statistics and evidencing inequalities.
- There is an urgent need for analysts and researchers to consider how best to future-proof data collection to ensure access to continuous, comparable data.
- In many areas it is not the case that significantly more data is needed; for example there is extensive awareness and knowledge of the main factors underpinning health inequalities. Instead, the ‘evidence gap’ exists in identifying, developing and applying effective policies to address these. Undertaking systematic evaluation of policies would be a key way to begin to fill this gap.
Areas for policy-researcher collaborations:

- Better evaluation of policies and evidencing what works is required. Undertaking systematic evaluation of policies would be a key way to begin to address this and to explore the tension between qualitative data being valued in policymaking processes, but quantitative data being the measure of choice for accountability and policy evaluation.

- A methodology gap exists around how best to pragmatically assess the intersectionality of a policy, and there is no clear thought on how best to do this. Co-developing a checklist to be used by policymakers and researchers alike could help to tackle this.

- More broadly, further research is required into what inclusivity in policy would look like and how intersectional inequalities can be addressed within a broad strategic portfolio of policy measures.