



Understanding Society

THE UK HOUSEHOLD LONGITUDINAL STUDY

# Generating impact from your research (UK focus)

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(includes adapted material from Meghan Rainsberry,  
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January 2024



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 Verian



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# Session overview

1. Context
2. Research and policy impact case studies
3. Planning your impact ... and effective communications
4. The policy environment
5. Practical exercise

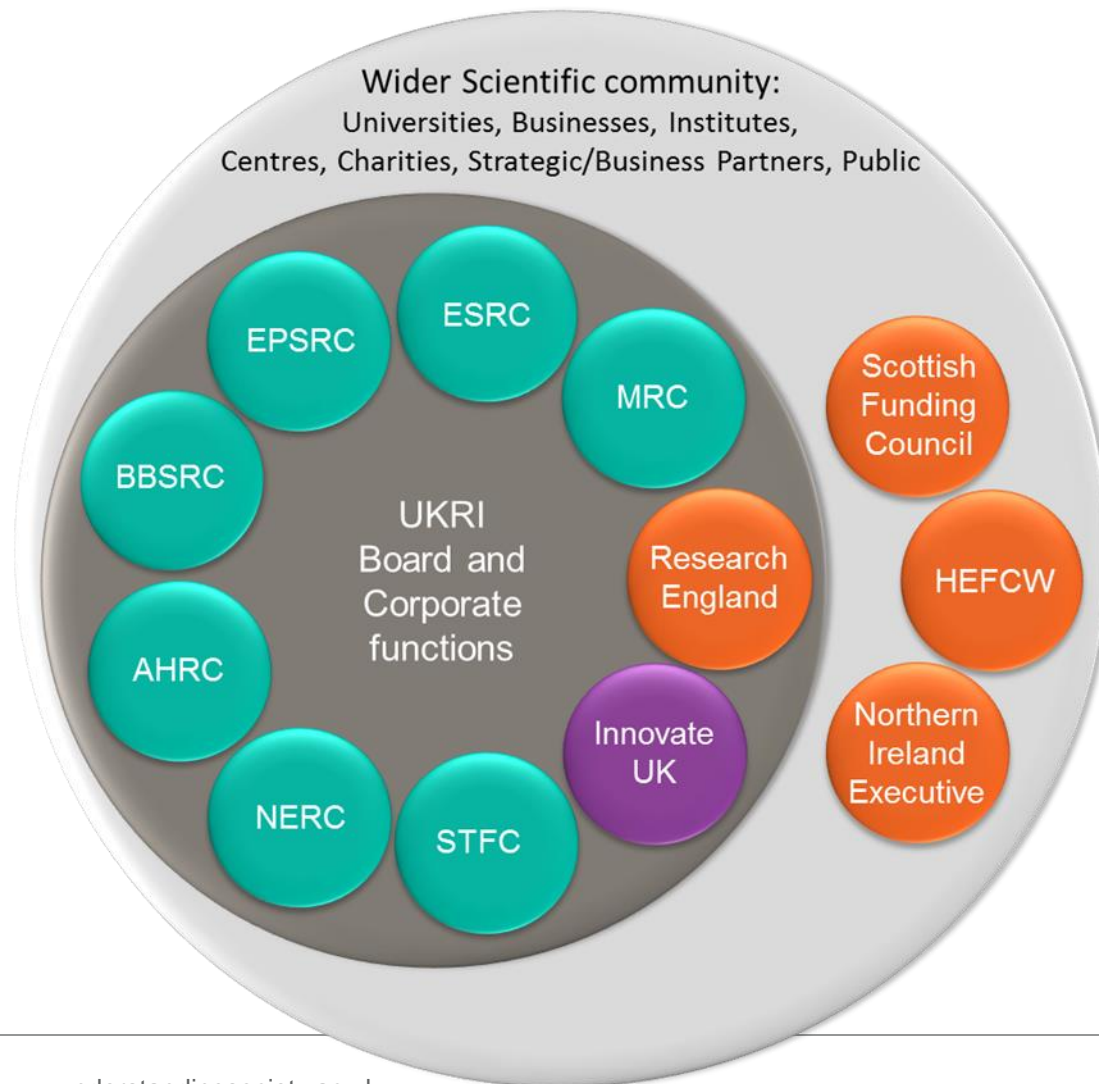
# Context: types of impact

- Broad ESRC definition: ‘..demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy’:
    - **Academic impact:** demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to scientific advances, across and within disciplines, including significant advances in understanding, method, theory and application
    - **Economic and societal impact:** the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy, of benefit to individuals, organisations and nations
    - **Good knowledge exchange** (or mobilisation) is as much about approach, mindset, personal qualities and **researcher mission** (UKRI)
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# Focusing on policy impact ....

- **Policy - how we effectively solve societal problems:** through laws, regulation, influencing market behaviour, public services, tax/levies, subsidies & incentives, etc.; as *a process*, “the sum total of government action, from signals of intent to the final outcomes” (Cairney, 2016)
- **Public engagement:** how communities can play a vital role in research, e.g., in the planning and execution of your research or inspiring the next generation (see [UKRI website](#))
- **Commercialisation:** taking an idea arising from research and development and applying it to solve a real problem by taking it to market (patent, prototype, etc.)

# Context: UK Research and Innovation and wider environment



- “Research & innovation must serve the society that fund them”
- “Encourage research **across** disciplines, activities and structures”
- Research Excellence Framework (REF)
- Knowledge Excellence Framework (KEF)
- Chief Scientific Advisers in government depts
- Parliamentary Thematic Research Leads



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# Exemplars



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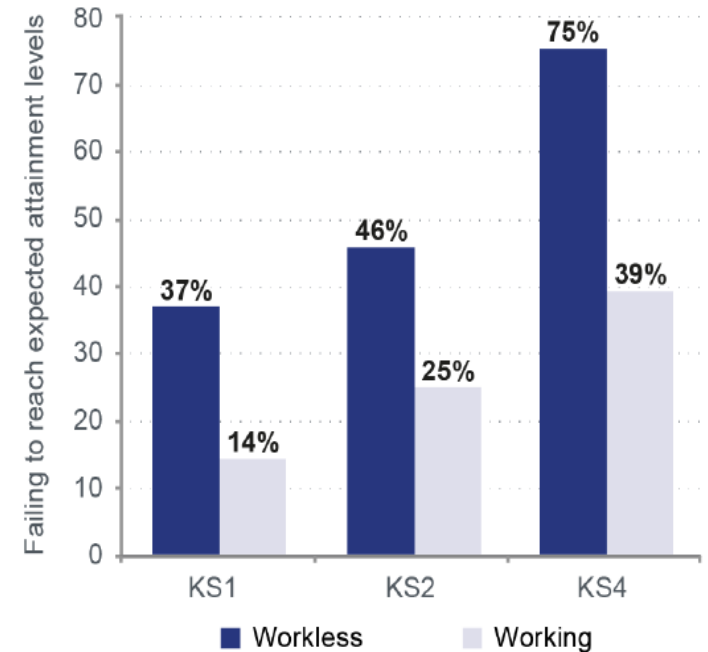
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# DWP: Worklessness and children's outcomes

- Uses Understanding Society and linked National Pupil Database for England
- Three quarters of children in workless families failed to the expected level at GCSE compared to just over half of all children from 'lower income' families
- Workless overlapped with other disadvantages such as ill health, low qualifications or living in social housing
- Hard to isolate the impact of any one disadvantage – either on parental worklessness or children's outcomes through this research but found higher incidence of parental conflict and poor parental mental health

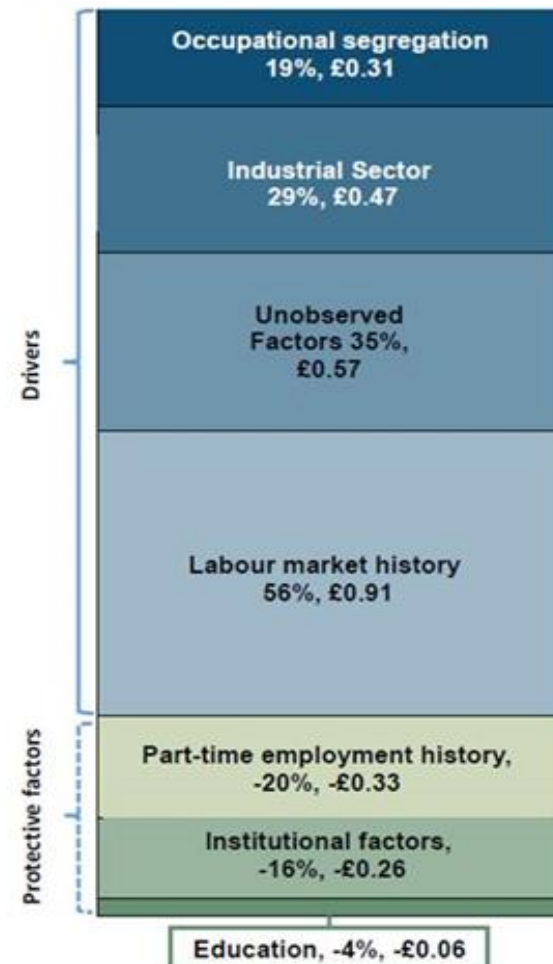




# Explaining the gender pay gap

- Commissioned by the Government Equalities Office (2018)
- What's driving the pay gap?  
Quantified drivers and protective factors (these *reduce* the pay gap, e.g. education, working in public sector, etc.)
  - Occupational segregation
  - Industrial sectors: manufacturing, construction and banking & finance
  - Unobserved factors (discrimination, preferences, social norms, etc.)
  - Differences in labour market histories

Figure 3: Main drivers and protective factors of the pay gap in the UK





# Chief Medical Officers – children's screen time

We're told that too much screen time hurts our kids. Where's the evidence?

*Andrew Przybylski and Amy Orben*

The authors of a landmark study argue that social media use has only minor effects on wellbeing. But an entire industry says otherwise



- Prof Andrew Przybylski, Associate professor and director of research at Oxford Internet Institute, was one of our 2018 policy fellows
- His project, Building Robust Evidence-Based Policy for Children in the Digital Age, shaped the advice from the UK's CMOs on screen time as well as their call for new research
- He also engaged with Ofcom, the Digital Culture Media & Sport select committee, and Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and wrote for the *Observer*

# SAGE – vaccine hesitancy

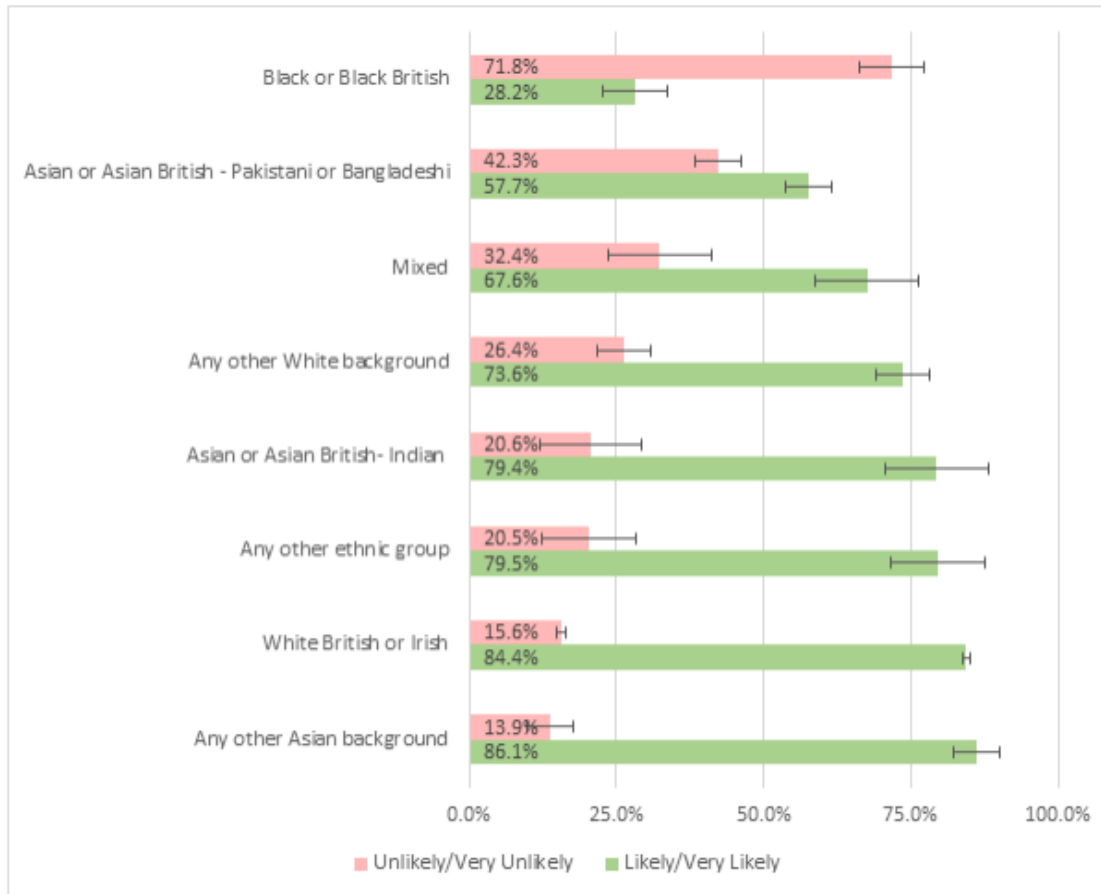


Figure 1. Willingness to be vaccinated in the UK Household Longitudinal Study by ethnic group

- The government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies asked Understanding Society to analyse information on Covid vaccine take-up – particularly among ethnic minorities
- Overall, a high number of people planned to be vaccinated – 82% overall
- However, 72% of Black or Black British people said that they were unlikely or very unlikely to be vaccinated

# Can some types of housing be bad for your health?



- Many aspects of housing are linked to health, but psychosocial elements are less well understood
- Using Understanding Society, this research used blood samples processed to estimate biological ageing
- Showed that people living in a privately rented home tended to age faster than those who owned their home outright
- Renting linked to ageing: every year of private renting was associated with an extra 2.4 weeks of ageing on average
- Suggests that renting has a greater effect on biological age than being obese unemployed, or being a former smoker



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# Planning your impact ... and effective communications



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# Planning your impact (1)

- Three central questions:
    1. **Who** will benefit from this research?
    2. **How** will they benefit from this research?
    3. **What** will you do to share your *research and expertise*? Future implications of generative AI?
  - Morton (2012) proposes three stages for (1) and (2):
    1. **Research uptake**: people are interested in research, read it, talk about it, come to a presentation etc.
    2. **Research use**: people do something with the research, change their view, pass it on to someone else, apply it to practice or policy
    3. **Research impact**: a *contribution to change* as a result of research use
-

# Planning your impact (2)



- **Start early:** activities often thought about at the end of the research process rather than at the beginning
  - Set out a **clear goal** and **measureable objectives/outcomes**
  - Who is your **audience**? Do you know anything about their interests? Identify the lead players and organisations
  - How will they be engaged? Be specific about the **activities** you hope to undertake; time and resource needed
  - Identify assumptions, **risks** and be adaptable
  - **Measurement: record everything** so there is an evidence trail to the results
  - Review, evaluate and **reflect on your experience** – any lessons?
-



# Planning your impact (3)

**Activities** can include (not comprehensive):

- Direct communications and 1-2-1 meetings
- Seminars and Workshops
- Publications and presentations: writing for non-academic audiences
- Online reach (social media, blogs, podcasts and videos) – be visible!
- Collaborative research / co-design and co-produce
- Short-term placements / secondments
- Materials, professional training, webinars or toolkits
- Exhibitions
- Media engagement

Co-production workshop



Not mutually exclusive but  
focus on cost-effectiveness!



# Knowledge exchange (KE)



- Knowledge exchange (KE): the “process brings together academic staff, users of research and wider groups and communities to **exchange ideas, evidence and expertise**” (University of Edinburgh)
- Think long-term, i.e. what might happen after your research? What kind of **relationships** do you want to build up with external stakeholders and how will you maintain these? Is reading the literature enough?

# Types of policy stakeholders

Politicians and officials in  
Parliament  
Parliamentary groups  
Whitehall departments  
Funders  
Arms-length government bodies  
Cross-government bodies,  
working groups and commissions  
Devolved administrations  
International organisations  
Combined Authorities and Local  
government  
Political parties

Business and consultancies  
Professional associations  
NHS  
Public service contractors  
Regulators  
Third sector  
Think tanks  
Employer trade associations  
Sector-led bodies  
Trade Unions  
Media / Trade press

Try and differentiate between **key decision-makers** (KDMs) and others who may be influencers in that process



**NICE** National Institute for Health and Care Excellence



THE COLLEGE OF  
**SOCIAL WORK**



**Telegraph**



**theguardian**

**THE TIMES**

# Seek internal and external support

- **University**

- Communications staff within the dept. or faculty
- Impact Officers
- Impact Accelerator Accounts by ESRC can fund activities (received by research intensive universities)
- 'Intermediaries/knowledge brokers', e.g. Policy Units

- **External “intermediaries/knowledge brokers”, e.g.:**

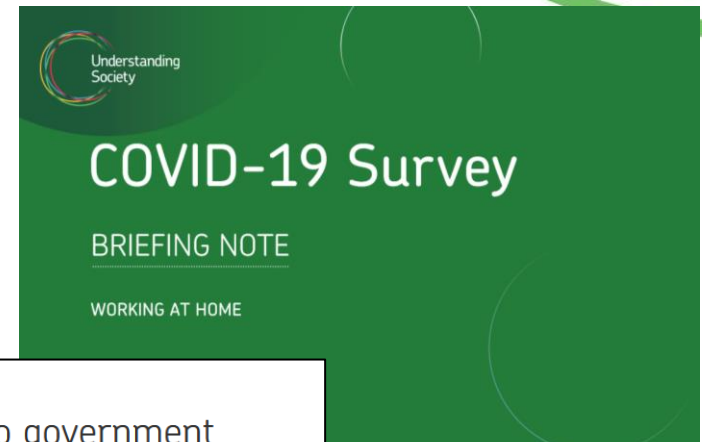
- Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology
  - Network of What Works Centres
  - Wales Centre for Public Policy
  - Scottish Policy & Research Exchange (SPRE)
  - ESRC funded hubs: on productivity, housing, economics
  - Health Foundation establishing a health inequalities evidence hub
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# Understanding Society: Championing research



Insights  
2022-23

Findings from the UK Household Longitudinal Study



## How do we respond to government 'stimulus payments'?

How do people react to government stimulus payments, designed to encourage spending in a recession or other crisis?



Paul Fisher, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Essex, and Associate Director of Understanding Society, talks about how governments can potentially boost the economy with stimulus payments. But how do we react? Do we spend the money, or share it with family and friends?



## New policy evaluation: did the 'bedroom tax' work?



New series of policy evaluation case studies launches with examination of 2013's under-occupancy penalty



Image by Benjamin Elliott on Unsplash

A new case study from Understanding Society tells how researchers at the London School of Economics used Understanding Society in research to assess a government policy. Our data showed that what became known as the 'bedroom tax' saved less money than expected, and did not encourage people to downsize.

# The art of explanation



- Making **essential evidence accessible** to others by breaking down concepts, using relatable examples, and organizing thoughts in a coherent structure
- Make delivery **informative and engaging**; find the right balance between simplicity and depth, while ensuring that the audience retains the information being shared
- **Utilize visual aids** like diagrams, charts, or images to complement your verbal explanation. Visuals can often clarify complex ideas more effectively than words alone



# Effective communications



- When communicating externally think about:
    - what is your **core message**
    - how will your research **benefit them** (your core audience)
    - what is your **call to action**?
  - Framing: when our decisions are influenced by the way information is presented; facts don't win arguments - how can you frame a problem responsibly?
  - Using narratives and metaphors: can you apply ideas from the art of story-telling, e.g. villain and heroes? See Understanding Society guidance on [Writing for a Policy Audience](#)
  - Communication 'hooks': e.g. aligning research with a topical agenda, other campaign's going on, key calendar events, festivals
  - Offer a 'broader canvas': single pieces of research can struggle to generate impact, collaborate with other researchers/organisations
-



# Effective communications: blogging example (how)

- Quick off the mark – when a debate is happening
- Short sentences
- Keep it simple (KISS) – multiple blogs for multiple issues
- Relaxed style – conversational
- Key points at the beginning
- Don't assume knowledge - include basic facts!

## **Blog structure:**

- **Briefly mention the core issue/what is happening**
- **What are you bringing to the debate/my research**
- **Describe your research findings**
- **Reach a well-rounded conclusion**



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# The policymaking environment



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# Understanding policymaking



- Effective problem solving of public issues .... **that is politically achievable**
- Involves **making choices** about what issues to prioritise, considering the potential impact and cost of different policy alternatives
- About **government action as well as inaction** – although inaction is also a policy choice
- Policymaking itself is shaped by **political priorities and environmental constraints**

# What shapes policy-making (UK)?

- Manifestos of political parties
- Crises and high-profile events
- Debate and scrutiny during the passage of legislation
- Scrutiny of executive by legislative bodies such as Select Committees
- Government supported enquiries and reviews
- Reports and ideas from think-tanks, lobby or interest groups
- Consultation exercises and Working Groups by Government Departments and Statutory Bodies
- Legal judgements
- Devolution: Parallel set up in home nations; [Mayoral Combined Authorities](#) in England

# Parliament vs Government

## Parliament:

- Both reactive and proactive
- Interest tied to parliamentary debates, bills, Select Committee investigations, etc.
- Formal engagement methods, e.g. call for evidence
- [Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology](#)

## Government:

- Can be highly reactive to external events
- Occasional peaks and troughs in research interest, e.g. spending reviews
- Informal and formal communications channels
- [Areas of Research Interest](#) (Government depts. and Parliaments)
- Commissioned research

# Being aware of the complexities when working with government

## Politically Supportable

What is the problem? Why does it matter?

Is it really for Government? Goal?

Political values / government priorities

Public expectations/buy-in

Competing perspectives: lobby and interest groups

Media reaction

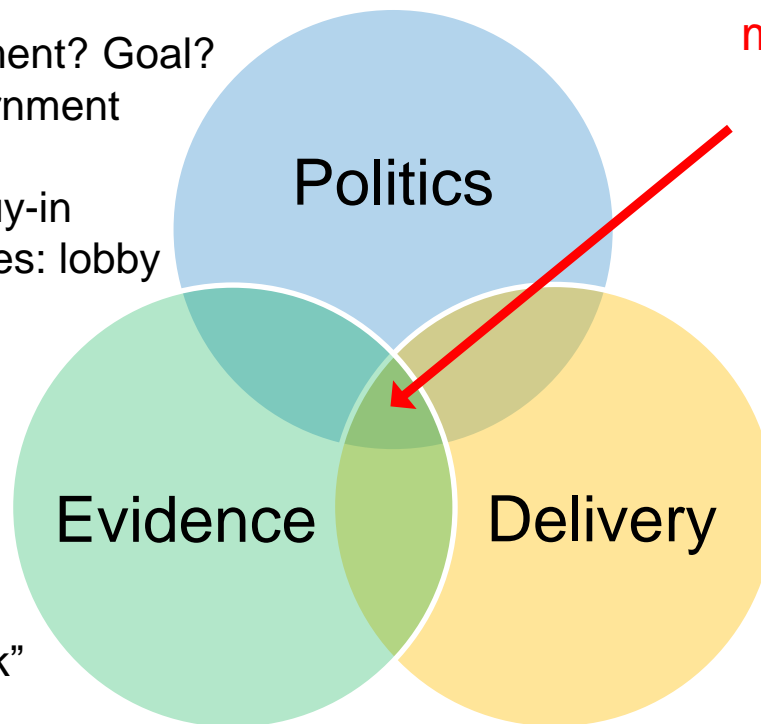
## Workable (based on evidence)

Access to the latest thinking

Creative ideas v “group think”

Underpinning scientific evidence and synthesis

Triangulating different forms of evidence



Effective policy making

## Deliverable

Action proportionate to the problem

Cost benefit analysis, affordability & incentives

Short delivery chains; enforceable processes and good governance

Public/provider support

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

# Covid-19 and science

## ‘Politicians don’t understand science’: advisers give evidence at UK COVID inquiry

Patrick Vallance, Chris Witty and others reflect on advising the UK government during the ongoing investigation into the country’s pandemic response.

By [Katharine Sanderson](#)

Source: Nature, 2023

## Governments cannot just ‘follow the science’ on COVID-19

[Alex Stevens](#) 

[Nature Human Behaviour](#) 4, 560 (2020) | [Cite this article](#)


33k Accesses | 50 Citations | 307 Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

**Politicians may present themselves as merely implementing scientific advice, but Alex Stevens argues that, when science meets politics, it can be a case of survival of the ideas that fit.**

“As Albert Einstein discussed with Karl Popper shortly before his death, science proceeds through a series of mistakes. So when a government claims to be ‘following the science’ in response to a global pandemic, we need to treat this claim with caution” (Stevens, 2020)



# Barriers and facilitators to evidence in policymaking



	Barriers	Facilitators
Values/ideology/beliefs	32%	15%
Actors' relations	26%	44%
Policy capacities	17%	21%
Types of evidence	14%	7%
Interests	6%	2%
Institutional/ processual arrangements	4%	9%
Number of selected papers	231	205

Capano, G., Malandrino, A. Mapping the use of knowledge in policymaking: barriers and facilitators from a subjectivist perspective (1990–2020). *Policy Sci* 55, 399–428 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-022-09468-0>

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# Practical Exercise



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# The task

In small groups, please draft an external 'engagement plan' for a piece of research

Each group will need to answer to 3 questions about the research:

1. Who are the potential policy stakeholders?
2. How would you reach them?
3. What obstacles might you face?

# Further reading and additional resources (free)

- Office of the European Union (2019): Understanding our Political Nature: How to put knowledge and reason at the heart of political decision-making  
<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC117161>
- Patel (2020): Transforming Social Policies: Insights, ideas and challenges for mobilising data and evidence  
[https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/general/transforming\\_social\\_policies.pdf](https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/general/transforming_social_policies.pdf)
- CLOSER Policy Hub: Provides basic information researchers need to mobilise research findings: <https://closer.ac.uk/policy-hub/>
- Understanding Society “Your Impact” information: Links to potential impact opportunities and resources  
<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/policy/generating-impact>
- LSE Impact Blog: Ongoing perspectives on impact as well as tips  
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/>

# Reading list provided:

- Weiss CH (1979) The many meanings of research utilization. Public Adm Rev 39 (5):426–431. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3109916>
- ESRC Impact Toolkit: Impact guidance for researchers applying for and receiving ESRC funding <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/>
- Reed (2023): What is good practice engagement and impact? For institutions and researchers: <https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/post/what-is-good-practice-engagement-and-impact>