PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Episode 1: How can research data influence policy to save lives

Summary keywords

Research data, policy influence, UK Data Service, CLOSER, longitudinal studies, evidence synthesis, storytelling, interdisciplinary collaboration, parliamentary engagement, policy briefs, third sector, evidence needs, research impact, knowledge exchange, early career researchers.

Speakers

Rodney Appleyard, Jennie Blows, Rob Davies, Emily Marchant, Steve McEachern, Natasha Mutebi

Jennie Blows 00:05
Welcome to the CLOSER and UK Data Service collaborative podcast exploring how research data can influence policy to improve life.

I'm Jennie Blows, Digital Communications and Events Manager at CLOSER, the UK's partnership of social and biomedical longitudinal population studies. And I'm presenting alongside Rodney Appleyard, Communications and Stakeholder Manager for the UK Data Service.

Joining us on the panel today are Dr Steve McEachern, Director of the UK Data Service, Rob Davies, Head of Policy and Dialogue at CLOSER, Dr Emily Marchant, Lecturer in Education at Swansea University and Natasha Mutebi, Social Sciences Lead at the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology and Strategic Oversight Board Member of Understanding Society.

In our first episode, we discuss how we can raise awareness of research data among policymakers so they can be used to guide better policymaking. So let's get started. Over to you, Rod.

Rodney Appleyard 00:55
So it's a pleasure to be with you all today. Could you please introduce yourself individually and briefly explain your background and experience with research data. So if I can start with Steve, that would be fantastic.

Steve McEachern 01:09
I'm Dr Steve McEachern, and I'm Director of the UK Data Service. I've been in the role since August of 2024 prior to that, I was the Director of the Australian Data Archive from 2009 to 2024 so I've had a long

term role in supporting access to data in two countries and collaborations in other countries as well for coming out 20 years now.

Rodney Appleyard **01:31**
Thank you very much, Steve. And I go to Rob, if you can tell us about your work and your experience of research data.

Rob Davies **01:37**
Thank you. Hi. I'm Rob Davies. I lead the Policy and Dialogue team at CLOSER which is the UK's partnership of UK longitudinal population studies. My team consists of communications, public affairs and policy research specialists, and we're working to increase the visibility, use and impact of UK longitudinal population studies, data and research.

My background is more in the kind of policy world. So I've worked kind of in and around governments and parliaments across the UK for the past 25 years.

Rodney Appleyard **02:08**
Thank you very much, Rob. Next, we move on to Emily. If you could give us a brief introduction and your experience in research data.

Emily Marchant **02:16**
Sure. Hi. My name is Dr Emily Marchant. I am a lecturer in education and a child health researcher in Swansea University's Department of Education and Childhood Studies. Prior to that, I was a PhD researcher and an ESRC postdoctoral fellow within population data science in Swansea University's medical school.

My experience with research data kind of starts well from from my PhD baby I called it, which was the development of a primary school network called Happen, which started out as a kind of local project in Swansea. And my task during my PhD was to expand this across Wales, so it's now kind of national cohort study and a platform with over 50,000 pupil's responses on a self report survey. But I've also worked with data within the SAIL Databank, so looking at anonymised electronic health and education records.

Rodney Appleyard **03:04**
Brilliant, thanks very much. Very good. And yeah, next we come to Natasha. If you could briefly tell us about your role or your experience in research data. Thank you.
Natasha Mutebi **03:12**
Yeah, of course. Thank you. So my name is I'm Natasha Mutebi, and I lead the Social Sciences section of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology in the UK Parliament, and I've been on this team for around three to four years. I started in 2021 and I have also worked in the health section in that team as well, because my background is actually in global public health and policy.

So I have been working with research data in specific longitudinal data for quite a few years now, especially in my role as a social science lead. I am also on the Understanding Society Strategic Oversight Board, and I've been in this role for almost a year as well.

In specific I would say, the most prominent briefing that has used longitudinal data has been the POST brief on the impacts of remote and hybrid working you know, for workers and organizations. And this policy briefing has actually been our most popular briefing that has been downloaded on on the UK Parliament POST website. So it shows that utilizing this data and showing how it's very robust and useful in policy is one of the reasons why I'm very much interested to speak on this topic.

Rodney Appleyard **04:32**
Thanks so much, that's fantastic. Really good. Thank you. So next, I'll hand over to Jennie for the next question to get into the meat of things.

Jennie Blows **04:40**
Thanks Rod and thank you all again for being here with us today. As we start our discussion, we explore the kind of insightful information that research data has to offer, information that has the potential to be used to guide better policymaking.

To start things off, I thought it'd be great to get an understanding of whether there are any new and innovative ways in which we can raise awareness of research among policymakers. I'll direct this question over to Steve to begin with.

Steve McEachern **05:02**
Yes, it's always interesting challenge trying to figure out how to get connections into policy makers. I mean, I find sort of various ways of sort of connecting, often co-location is quite helpful with so how do you deal with the problem of distance and disconnection? There, fundamentally, a lot of the sorts of communications approaches that we take are an important part of that, being able to express a lot of the outcomes and outputs of the use of the data that we have in sort of concise and immediate ways, such as it's digestible, becomes an important part of that.

Things like infographics, you know, short briefs and so forth, really a key part of that communication process. But then finding mechanisms whereby we you can kind of get that in front of the policymakers in an effective way, and often that involves essentially one to one or small group communication is an important part of that process as well. And so that's part one of the roles of both the working with, in our case, the depositors, in the Data Service, and then alongside that, our engagement and access teams working directly with users and eventually with the policymakers, flowing on from there, it's sort of those, here's the broad story, and then, you know, we're sort of, sort of the personal tapped in the mix there, and that's not easy, but I think it's important part of that process.

Jennie Blows **06:35**
Brilliant, thanks, Steve. And a great point there about how important it is to get that information to the right format before you take that next step, to get it over to the policy makers.

And so Rob, over to you. Do you have any reflections on what Steve has just highlighted?

Rob Davies 06:40
Thanks. Yeah, I agree with what Steve said. And I think one of the words that Steve said kind of jumped out on me, and that's digestible, and I would, I would add accessible to that. So I think it's absolutely critical to kind of speak to the target audience.

And I think one of the most powerful ways I found in terms of mobilizing research data, particularly longitudinal research data, is through storytelling. So it makes it more accessible. You're able to kind of tell a story, and it really resonates with the target audience.

I think one of the kind of consistent pieces of feedback that I get from policy actors, whether in governments, parliaments, is the importance of evidence synthesis as well. So not necessarily pushing forward kind of one paper or one finding, but looking across, you know, the kind of landscape, and looking across the the issue you know, potentially looking at generations, generational change, which, again, longitudinal data is really powerful at communicating.

I think a couple of other points I'd be keen to make is, I think the importance, and not sure it's innovative, but perhaps it is, of linking research to real world challenges. And I think related to that, it's absolutely critical to listen to policy actors and learn what their evidence needs and their gaps are, and then meeting these and one of the ways that researchers can do this is looking at the Areas of Research Interest documents published by UK Government departments and parliaments across the UK, and, more recently, by regional bodies, including local councils and combined authorities. And these documents give a really clear kind of steer an indication of their evidence needs for researchers to directly respond to.

Jennie Blows 08:25
Thanks, Rob. Brilliant point there about ensuring that researchers are mindful of what questions are in the minds of policy actors and the value of synthesizing evidence.

Moving over to Emily now and in light of what Rob's just said, how do you think the research community could work more closely together to raise greater awareness about the value of research data?

Emily Marchant 08:43
Yeah, great question. I think it follows on very much from what Steve and Rob have said. I think we're seeing such a shift now in how we value the non-academic outputs as important as the academic outputs, if not more important really, and how we can align it to both policy and practice.

I think things like this so interdisciplinary podcasts. It's very dependent, I suppose, on your field, my field, I sit very much in between children's health and education. So that opens up doors, I suppose, to work in more of an interdisciplinarity way, but I think in terms of how we can work together.

I think what Rob said was a great point the parliamentary Area of Research Interest opportunities, and instead of just responding to consultations and calls with you know, one paper or key finding is working in working groups, research groups, to compile, kind of multiple sources of evidence and to share that with parliamentary committees. And I've had experience working with a parliamentary committee in Wales who put out an Area of Research Interest, very much timely, aligned to my field of health literacy, which led to a body of work. So yeah, I think it's opening conversations across disciplines. Aligned very much. I think we used to be trying to bridge the gap between research and policy and practice, and now it's actually, how can we align with them?

Jennie Blows 09:58
Thanks, Emily, so you highlight the strength there of working in groups to draw together multiple sources of evidence to share with parliamentary committees. Now, finally, same question to you, Natasha, how do you think the research community could work more closely together to raise greater awareness about the value of data?

Natasha Mutebi 10:13
Yeah, thank you. I think I'll just follow on from what has, from what has previously been said, because all are very valid, and I come to the conversation speaking as an impartial science advisor. So I sit, I'm also in between research and the outputs of the data, but also how to engage with the actual policy makers. So for me, it's really important to highlight those things have been mentioned already, ensuring that the research is accessible, it's relatable, and that the researchers and institutions are actually aware of of the actual mechanisms and the pipelines as well as the actual network.

So what I wanted to actually share is that my team itself POST we have a unit called the Knowledge Exchange Unit, and so we're there to really try to facilitate and to support researchers to engage with parliament through various activities, because we are aware of the barriers, but we know that there are ways to actually overcome these barriers. So for example, we also do training and guidance. So this can be, for example, a seminar online on how to write for the actual policy, for the policy audience, how to understand how Parliament works, as opposed to government. These are actually two separate ways of engaging, but the but the audience is the same and also knowing which networks and to use.

So for example, there are things like networks, like the University Policy Engagement Network. There's also CAPE that has actually finished funding, but there are certain institutions that have funding to actually proactively engage with these institutions.

I also wanted to talk about how we aim to actually diversify different types of research data, and how to feed that into parliament. And lastly, on the pipelines as well. So we have something called the Knowledge Exchange Roundup. So that's a way we try to be innovative in how we engage with researchers and all across the UK. So for example, the Knowledge Exchange Unit in POST sends a newsletter to all of the knowledge mobilisers across the UK in more than 300 research institutions which shares call outs for the evidence that we seek some of evidence for research institutions to share to Parliament. So this could be for a different Select Committee Inquiry, or this could be for a fellowship, and these are all different pipelines in which we get the researchers and their data into parliament in front of the policy makers.

So to summarize, like essentially, I think it's ensuring that that the research being shared is accessible and relatable, and that the institutions know of the different mechanism and pipelines, and that they are a part of different networks. And I think if you summarize in those three you're then giving the researchers and their data and different ways to increase and the like awareness and use of the data.

Jennie Blows 13:39
Great, thanks. Tash, really important points there about making research accessible and relatable, and thanks for sharing these valuable resources from the Exchange Unit and the networks that are also working to help researchers with this.

Rob, did you have something you wanted to add to Natasha's point?

Rob Davies 13:53
I wanted to emphasize one of the points that Tash made, which I think is a really important point about the different roles of Parliament and governments in the UK. Parliaments play a scrutiny role, and governments are in the delivery business. And I think it's really critical for researchers to understand this point, because you have to have different approaches, different methods, different mechanisms, use different language to engage and connect with these different audiences, that very scrutiny role is very, very different to a delivery role. So it's absolutely crucial for researchers to understand that.

Jennie Blows 14:29
So true, there's definitely that need to tailor approaches, depending on whether researchers are targeting Parliament or government.

And Emily, am I right in thinking you've had some experience of engaging with an Area of Research Interest recently? Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Emily Marchant 14:42
I responded to a call for Senedd Cymru's Health and Social Care committee about health literacy, thinking as an early career researcher that I'll hear absolutely nothing, and nothing will come from this. And to my surprise, I did have response, and I followed it up, and I was slightly persistent, and said I'd love to chat more, because I've got more to tell you.

And I just want to pass on my advice to other early career researchers, really, because how we, you know, find people and connect them with data. A fantastic avenue is responding to these ARI calls and parliamentary groups, you know, I think Rob and others have made great points, are there to scrutinize policy, and part of it as an ECR is actually understanding the landscape of it all and how it works, attending training sessions within your university, or I went to a conference, and I went to a skills building seminar about how to write a policy brief, and that kind of transformed how I actually think about research.

But just to encourage ECRs to just keep an eye out, sign up to email bulletins and things from parliamentary groups relevant to your research, because it really can open up so many doors in

communicating your findings to a wide range of audiences, not only parliamentary groups, but in how you disseminate those findings after I think often we don't feel senior enough or don't feel important enough, but actually we're just the people that parliamentary groups want, because we're still quite proactive and still fairly optimistic. So hopefully, yeah, it can open up doors for future early career researchers and their research fields.

Jennie Blows 16:05
That's brilliant. So encouraging to hear that you had that experience and some really great advice there for ECRs. Natasha, did you want to add something to Emily's point there?

Natasha Mutebi 16:14
Yes, I did. And thank you, Emily for that live example. I think it's really important to show people that it's possible as well, just to encourage them, you know, to just take that a leap of faith, to share your research and to have a chat with them.

So I also have a few points and a, and one live example I'll try to be quick. So similar to what has already been mentioned when you are submitting any evidence to any team. So that can be either the, sorry, that could be a government consultation or for an inquiry. Ensure that it is so clear and accessible, we really underestimate how busy policy teams are. So you want to have it in a actual clear structure. Have things that we write of an academia is often, is is often the actual other way around. So we have our core findings at the end. You don't want that in policy. You want your core findings at the very beginning, clear and concise, and you want it to be engaging. And use a table if you have one so that you are engaging the reader.

You also want to communicate in a way that is not just clear, but it raises the awareness that you understand why it's relevant. So what I'm trying to say is to hook that to something that is current, or hook that to something that has happened in policy, or to a recent government, like, announcement just really show that you understand why it's important.

Something else that's really key to do is follow the APGS as well. They may not have power to legislate, but they have chairs that are always a Member of Parliament, so follow one that is of your core research area, the other one that I've already mentioned, sign up to POST KEU. They do send things every week. So this will include an opportunity to engage with parliament, as well as what POST briefings have just been announced, so you can also submit your evidence to an inquiry as well as a POST briefing. And the other one that I was going to say is follow up for the actual government's alerts as well.

So there's the parliament alerts and there's the alerts from a government also the the KEU you have a web page that shows various resources. So we talk and we inform the public on what types of fellowships may suit you better. So we have fellowships for PhD students as well as early career researchers. So you want to have a look on there to figure out where you are in your career, and how you can feed into work there.

And the last thing that I was going to say, which touches on some of my previous points, was different types of networks. So I've already mentioned, for example, UPEN, but also there are think tanks or third

sector organizations that engage with researchers. So one of our stakeholders, which is I'm the Nuffield Foundation. They also have an early careers research network as well. So have a look at some of the other some of the other institutions that may not be in policy, but have really good networks and good partnerships with policy makers or with parliaments.

And the example that I really wanted to quickly share is that when I did do that briefing on hybrid working I met with an academic who was so helpful in their research, so much so that once I was invited to do a round table discussion, and that was organized by the International Public Policy Observatory. I had taken this upon myself to then invite that fellow academic, you know, because I knew that I only knew things from a secondary research kind of perspective, but this researcher was doing all the primary research, so stay in contact with the people that you're engaging with in parliament, in government, because once you do, they are there to help plug you into other policy conversations. And that roundtable was so important and so powerful that it turned into a briefing that has been used and cited internationally. So those are my examples. I hope they're helpful.

Jennie Blows 20:39
Thanks Natasha, brilliant advice there about those initiatives that researchers can tap into. And it's so inspiring to hear the power of those networks and partnerships can have in getting research noticed. Steve, I can see your hand up. Do you want to come in here?

Steve McEachern 20:51
A quick follow up on Tash's point about there are multiple ways to, sort of, to engage with policy and policy makers. And that point about the third sector engagement, I think, is actually really quite an important one.

Certainly our engagement team at UKDS, you know that that's one of the pathways that we've seen is actually really quite important for that transfer of knowledge is not directly, actually the policy makers, it's through the third sector and, you know, community organizations who actually enable that knowledge transfer. It's just a sort of a point of support there.

Jennie Blows 21:22
Yeah, such a valuable role there that the third sector and community organizations can play. Rob, did you also want to come in?

Rob Davies 21:28
Yeah, I thought that Tash made a really important point about what I often say is reversing your academic paper when you're communicating, when you're engaging with policy makers. So, yeah, academic paper, you know, you start off with the methods, you know, generally, as Tash said, there's the kind of conclusion and discussion at the end. It's reversing that, because that's what's really, really important, and what policy actors are, yeah, really interested in.

I just wanted to do a bit of a plug to be honest with you. So CLOSER has a Policy Hub which has kind of guidance and advice on how to engage with policy. And I think two things in particular that I'm really proud of is that we've developed a couple of interactive tools to help researchers mobilize their

research. So one of them is a template or form to create an impactful policy briefing note, and the other is a template to help researchers create a response to a select committee inquiry, what we found, particularly from early career researchers feedback, is that dealing with looking at a blank piece of paper is really, really difficult. So what we've done is try to provide some tools to help them mobilize their research more effectively.

Rodney Appleyard 22:35
It's actually really good to hear that you also have those resources available to help researchers create impactful briefing notes and responses to select committee inquiries. Now I just want to give you all an opportunity to add any final comments you might have after reflecting on what the other panelists have discussed today.

Steve McEachern 22:51
Yeah, nothing to say, not specifically to this, but actually I was as you were going through Tash talking about the POST reviews and so forth, one of our real challenges is figuring out what the connections are there, and working backwards, particularly from outputs to policy, is one of the biggest leaps there.

Natasha Mutebi 23:07
I think that that's something that we, even as a team, we're trying constantly to find new KPIs in a sense of of impact. And so POST have a Board, and the Board have been saying, like, we know that POST is doing amazing things, we know that the POST notes are reaching internal and external teams, but it's about finding that that thread.

So I'm quite fortunate to have that like list of case studies, and there's a few that I left out, actually, where we can showcase that a POST note went into an inquiry, or that it was read by a member. But it's, it's not very often, for example. So it's something that's hard to it's hard to monitor, but it's, it's there. It's a very subtle thread. So happy to have a chat with, you know, with you about that, as well as how to encourage researchers, you know, to not lose that that like steam, because obviously, we were like, obviously REF, it takes a bit of time.

But I personally love researchers, so I even write sometimes, like a little letter for, like an academic that I've engaged with, you know, you know, to share with their institution and their their funders, but I know that not all, but not all people that work in policy. I have that time and space, but I'm, I'm here for I'm like, yes, they helped me. It was great.

Jennie Blows 24:18
What a great point to end on highlighting that there's even more support out there for researchers.

Thank you so much to all our panelists for sharing your suggestions today on how researchers can connect with policy makers, and also your tips on how to communicate their research in ways that will help their findings be useful and used to guide better policy making.

That's all we have time for today. But tune in for the second episode where our panelists share some examples of where research data has been used to guide policy making, discuss some of the challenges

that researchers face in getting their research into policy and learn how Parliament assesses the research that comes in to decide what evidence to use in.