PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Episode 2: How can research data influence policy to save lives

Summary keywords

Research data, policy making, longitudinal studies, UK Data Service, administrative data, health inequalities, data linkage, Covid-19 pandemic, policy engagement, evidence-based policy, parliamentary scrutiny, public policy, research mobilization, interdisciplinary collaboration, policy actors.

Speakers

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

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

I'm Jennie Blows, Digital Communications and Events Manager at CLOSER the UK's partnership of social and biomedical longitudinal population studies and interviewing our panelists today is 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 this episode, we're discussing some examples of where research data has been used to guide policy making, and the challenges that researchers face in mobilizing their research. And we learn how parliament assesses the research that comes in to decide what evidence to use. So let's get started. Over to you, Rod.

Rodney Appleyard 01:03
So the next question is, can you please provide some examples when, in your experience, research data has been used to effectively guide policy making to the extent where people's lives have been improved as a result? I'll start with Steve,

Steve McEachern 01:14

Yeah. I mean, it's, I mean, it's sort of very wide base that you kind of have to think about a little bit here, sort of specific examples. I mean, a lot of my experience here draws on the Australian case, and say so I'll perhaps touch on that, but they're very clear parallels to the UK case. And an initial connection there is an extreme equivalent of the society, and actually a number of the cohort studies as well.

So there was a Millennium Cohort Study parallel and so forth. The in Australia, what we actually did is we observed what was going on in the UK, and particularly around the longitudinal studies themselves, they and looking at where some of the policy evidence was being used to coming out of the studies that were using those large longitudinal population studies to explore key questions around labor dynamics, child welfare, job participation and so forth.

The follow on from that was it actually got to the point in Australia whereby the department themselves, the equivalent Department of Work and Pensions, directly funded, essentially the equivalent studies in Australia, because they want to say, okay, here is, we can very clearly see the policy applications of these studies. And they're, they're quite broad based in what they could be. So we, what we want is a, you know, a series of, you know, general studies that are going to allow us to, you know, ask questions that we don't necessarily know, that we know. Yeah, we want. Yet we have some policy directions that are there, but we're then able to follow, over time, key directions for social and economic policy and and feed those into something thinking that's there.

So, you know, as I a lot of the learning that took place in the UK actually translated into, you know, sort of setting direction from policy makers in in Australia, for applying directly the learning from data into, you know, into setting the various social and economic policies that are in place there. And that, that knowledge is transferred back and forth. You see it actually between Australia, the UK, New Zealand, particularly the lot of the Westminster policy governmental systems actually quite a lot of that knowledge transfer has occurred, both internationally, say, within the policy domains as well.

Rodney Appleyard **03:28**
Yes, I agree those long term trajectories are so valuable. And it's great to hear how this knowledge transfer has extended internationally, and that there is an appetite from policy makers for longitudinal population study data. Are there any lessons the UK can take from Australia?

Steve McEachern **03:28**
Well, in point of fact, I think you can actually say that, yeah, that's very clearly the case, and say it's similarly a lot of the administrative data integration systems, say, again, have kind of moved in in similar ways.

The earliest work was actually being done in the UK, sorry, not in the UK, in New Zealand. And actually then we saw that type of model being picked up in DWP here in the UK, in Australia, as well. Different legislative environments allow for different sorts of capabilities, but that sort of direct knowledge, understanding the value of long term, I'm saying long term trajectories, and then looking at the data sources that are required to allow you to study those long term trajectories has clearly been the direction of travel, often driven by the policy makers, not the researchers.

The key goal for researchers has then often been, is that sort of the you know, sort of the both the methodological capability, but essentially the time, you know, and resources available to be able to effectively study those questions in a way that often policymakers simply don't have the time to do so. So it's that collaboration which kind of provides the key set of engagement there.

Rodney Appleyard 04:54
So just to follow on from this, do you feel that through your experience in the UK so far, is there a potential for research to have more of an influence on policy making. So key institutions and committees that can take aboard this research and make that pathway to policy much smoother.

Steve McEachern 05:08
I think that's actually better established here than most other places. Actually the mechanisms that kind of existed here. And I think that's that's a history of the sort of the deep tradition of, you know, longitudinal data in particular, and that the use of that has kind of allowed that sort of evolution of that policy engagement in a way that didn't always, you know, happen to be the case in in the Australian environment, and say, often co-location is quite handy here. So as I had that experience of being in Canberra, so we actually had the translation.

What it what it actually was, was people coming out of government and the civil service and going into academic departments and vice versa. That movement was very, very helpful there, but it's a fairly uncommon case. There's a strong emphasis on policy engagement here, but I think it's much more embedded, and say, much more a clear tradition probably hear that than was the case in the in the Australian circumstances.

Rodney Appleyard 06:04
That's encouraging to hear. So over to Rob. Now, Rob, can you please provide some examples when, in your experience, research data has been used to effectively guide policy making to the extent where people's lives have been improved as a result?

Rob Davies 06:15
Thanks, Rod. I think there's a couple of examples that I'd be keen to share. And I think whenever I'm asked this question, there's one study that really just immediately jumps out at me, and that is the study of Dolan Hill in the 1950s so these researchers surveyed doctors from the British Medical Association over time. So they took a longitudinal approach about their smoking habits and eventually linked this to their death registration data to obtain cause of death. This groundbreaking study was one of the first to show the causal link between smoking, lung cancer and cardiovascular disease. And I think as we as we know from living in the UK, this research led to a cascade of evidence based policies, mandatory health warnings on cigarette packets, advertising restrictions, smoke free, public spaces and tobacco taxes. And I think in terms of the impact of that research, these policies contributed to a dramatic decline in smoking rates, preventing millions of deaths from cancer, heart disease and stroke.

The other example, and I think this, this picks up on something Steve said about long term trajectories, is around health inequalities and a life course approach, taking a life course approach. So I think the comprehensive nature of UK longitudinal population studies has provided evidence for the life course

approach to health policy, showing that experiences in childhood affect health outcomes. Decades later, this has influenced the UK's approach to addressing health inequalities through early intervention and prevention strategies, and I think this is really evident in the UK government's new missions, the five missions, and the focus on prevention.

Rodney Appleyard 07:59
That's fantastic example there. This really highlights the value that these long term studies can show where those early interventions and prevention strategies can really make a difference. And do you think with these examples, especially the spoken one, which has changed the culture in the UK, do you feel that there's some more work to be done about making people more aware of how important the research is into having that influence on policy?

Rob Davies 08:17
Yeah, absolutely. And I think case studies and telling those stories relates back to the the the innovative ways that researchers can mobilize their research, their data and research. So I think, yeah, kind of surfacing these stories and showing how powerful not just longitudinal data, but research data as a whole has been in terms of influencing policies and saving lives is incredibly powerful, and I think resonates particularly with policy actors in government and parliament, because ultimately, we're all working together to improve this country, you know, to improve people's health, to improve people's life chances, to improve social mobility.

So I think, yeah, surfacing those stories and demonstrating how powerful research data has been, individually but also combined as well. You know, the Dolan Hill example, you know, involve data linkage. So it's not just one form of data influencing policy. It's bringing data together, longitudinal data and administrative data. And, you know, as an example to create an incredibly powerful case for change.

Rodney Appleyard 09:26
I think so if we could go deeper to that one, I'm conscious of time as well. That's really brilliant. Thank you. Next, Emily, so I wonder if you can give us some examples of when research data has been used for its government policy to improve people's lives,

Emily Marchant 09:38
Absolutely, I think it follows on quite nicely, actually, from Rob's last point about longitudinal data and administrative data at Swansea University, we have, we store the SAIL Databank, which stands for Secured, Anonymized Information Linkage Databank. That stores population level, I mean, I'm sure you're all very aware and the listeners, but it stores population level administrative, kind of routinely collected records.

So it's administrative, health education, social care. It's the wealth of data is incredible, and I think the example to draw upon has got to be from SAIL, because of the opportunities that it presents in kind of population level understanding of health, education, so on, trends, but also in how it's influenced policy since its inception.

And I think the example to really talk about here is the kind of very reactive and responsive research during the COVID-19 pandemic. The team was developed very quickly within SAIL, the One Wales approach, I think it was called, who brought together kind of a lot of different data sets and all the COVID testing data, they looked at national kind of transmission, a lot of modeling research to inform national policy and also international understanding. We were able to look at kind of settings, approaches. So some of my research looked at transmission within schools and what mitigation measures were associated with different transition of COVID within schools.

But, yeah, I think in terms of moving forward a lot of the points, some of this, you know, longitudinal research does take time, but having access to resources such as SAIL with such a wide kind of depth of data allows us to really get such a great understanding to influence policy.

Rodney Appleyard **11:10**
Yeah, there's a great example. So thanks for that as well.

Emily Marchant **11:14**
I should have mentioned, sorry, that was heavily influenced in all the research was shared with Welsh Government's Technical Advisory Group, the UK Sage Group and so on. So yeah, in terms of, I suppose, sharing data to key policy actors at the right time as well.

Rodney Appleyard **11:39**
So do you think working together in partnerships and collaborations across different organizations kind of helps as a bigger team to get the research to the right place and as a more powerful way of getting things changed?

Emily Marchant **11:50**
COVID was obviously a time when everyone's resources were put into one kind of one topic or one field, but at the same time, the different data sets available in SAIL open up lots of doors for interdisciplinary working as well across a range of fields,

Rodney Appleyard **12:05**
And moving on to Natasha from a different angle.

Natasha Mutebi **12:07**
Yes, thank you. So once again, I will probably speak from my experience of working in Parliament, so that's going to be slightly different from government, but I'll talk about the actual relationship there. And I wanted to also mention something that also Rob has just said himself, where he said it's important to highlight that we are bringing different data sources together to highlight the public policy priority areas, and I think that's what we do in post as well.

So my role as Social Science Lead is to also have a foresight lens and really try to monitor topics and then bring together all of the evidence from an impartial perspective. So here is what the research says, here is what the actual stakeholders have highlighted is an area for parliament to scrutinize all policy.

So I just wanted to highlight that kind of key, kind of unique place that I am in. And so this answer that I have actually prepared is quite a lengthy for that reason.

So research feeds in to UK Parliament, and it can surely be said that it does guide and influence policymaking as well as the actual public about their lives. So because Parliament scrutinizes it often has a soft power, so all of the parliament select committee and reports make a recommendation in which the actual government has to respond, and so they have to look at the data there and post is there to feed into those actual reports.

So one of my examples is how we can not exactly show that we have caused a change in policy, but that we can highlight that we have published a report that was then actually taken into account. So I've got quite a few case studies, and some are quite further away from now. So some have happened in the past, but also some are actually current.

So for example, I led a POST note on problem solving courts in 2023 and that instead of not only gathering data, but it also highlighted that we needed more longitudinal data on the actual effectiveness of these courts. And so this POST note was then highlighted in the House of Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee report. Sorry, that was looking at secondary legislation for the Sentencing Act in 2024 so late last year, and they had then highlighted and said POST found that there is a substantial international evidence base, but that also we need further evidence on the effectiveness, and looking at that from like a longer term kind of perspective. So it shows that when we gather the evidence and we put it in a report, it is then actually taken into account. And also this feeds into the wider work of the government, because this year, in March, the actual government had then further funded more pilots of these courts, and they have said that they are going to give £12.5 million to further boost this so I just wanted to highlight that an example of something that is current and that you can always come back to a report that highlights a gap in evidence or further evidence is needed.

Another example of a something that's more positive is the one that I mentioned in my introduction. So I was a lead author in a POST brief on the impacts remote and hybrid working, and this briefing was a core foundation in various discussions in both the research community as well as parliament. So this briefing was cited by the Liaison Committee of the House of Lords, where they launched a actual special inquiry in home working in the UK, and they cited this POST brief as a source of evidence in why further research is needed to actually continue looking at these impacts. And the briefing, which I mentioned previously has cited the substantial research that was published by the Understanding Society, which has waves that looked at the impacts of home working, especially in the pandemic. So it showcases that cycle of where the research starts, but it's used further down the line, we also see that there are larger studies that have been done that are also mentioned in POST briefs.

So last year, I also published a briefing. 2023, sorry, 2023, I published a briefing on food, diet and cancer, and so this briefing also was fed into an inquiry where they were citing, and the report, which has various citations of longitudinal cohort studies on the impact of diet on cancer, but also these teams that are writing these reports come to POST and ask us who are the experts and that are leading these, these actual studies, and how can they feed in? And so then the KEU had published a call out across the UK, for all of the experts that are working in food, diet, cancer and ultra processed foods as well, to feed

into the Lords inquiry. So once again, I'm just really here to emphasize that it is that cycle. It's those three things that I mentioned. Is the research accessible? Is it relatable?

And the actual the power of being plugged into these, these networks and these newsletters you know to then share your research, and if you are a part of a longitudinal study or just a research study that is looking at that field, and when we also meet with Government, because, like I mentioned, POST work with departments. And whilst we are doing the research briefings, they ask us as well. So even the actual departments, for example, GoScience met with myself and my colleague to ask us about how how we can feed into the futures of childhood project that has recently launched, and so we cited CLOSER and Understanding Society as core sets of data to use with and with the actual scoping of the core outcomes that they want to have in this project.

So I think it's about people in Parliament and in government, knowing where to look for this data, how to engage with different types of data. So I have, I have said to the project lead, it's really important that you speak to people working in CLOSER who know these trends and have the access to the data, like analysis over, like a longer period of time, as well as speaking to third sector, speaking to Parliament and speaking to teams that are working on the ground with the youth.

So those are, I think I mentioned four case studies there, but I was very aware that these are very long answers. So yeah, I hope that brings it back together. Those four points that I was making.

Rodney Appleyard **19:35**
Fantastic. You can see how this ability to raise the visibility of research is really valuable, and this cycle of research to policy is important to understand. So I've got a burning question I really want to ask. How do you assess the research that comes in? The reason I ask this question is because you might sometimes find that you have a very bright researcher with some groundbreaking studies, but they're not connected with the wider networks. So is there a way for them to get into the system and get assessed like everyone else?

Natasha Mutebi **20:00**
Yeah, and so we are very aware that it's challenging to be ahead of the curve all the time. So for us, we try to proactively, actually go to conferences, or we try to engage as much as possible with our KEU to share when, for example, we have a person that we've launched to ensure that we're reaching the experts that are working at a field, and so they will then send us an email to highlight their recent research. However, we also try to work with some of the other external groups. So for example, we meet with the British Academy every quarter, and we meet with the Academy of Social Sciences, we meet with the Royal Society.

So we have that bridge ourselves of trying to stay plugged into external groups, as well as sharing on our website or sharing through that newsletter roundup that goes to all of the research institutions in the UK, and this also includes think tanks as well as networks like, for example, CLOSER, also, we work with networks and larger surveys like CLOSER through our hub heads.

So we have something called, I'm sorry, we have something called Thematic Hubs, where we also have an academic fellow who is the lead of that hub, and they work with the actual policy head, and so they are intentionally working with external networks seeking to feed in the academic research come into parliament. So there's various networks which I've mentioned before, but it's, we are aware that it's challenging to stay ahead of the curve, so we're really trying to be more more internally transparent, and to collaborate with internal teams that may have their external relationships as well.

Rodney Appleyard 21:54
Thank you very much for sharing those valuable insights. Rob, do you want to add anything here?

Rob Davies 21:59
So I just wanted to pick up on a couple of points that Tash made about awareness and embedding researchers in policy organizations. So I think in terms of awareness and the points been made previously, directly responding to policy needs and kind of evidence gaps, and I mentioned that the ARIs as a great kind of resource for researchers to understand these is really critical, and that links to kind of, yeah, the need to be aware of evidence, the evidence needs of policy actors, I think better communication and translation. So research findings need to be communicated in accessible formats that policy makers can can readily understand and apply, and I think this includes creating kind of compelling policy briefing notes, infographics and blogs that distill complex research into actionable insights without jargon.

I think the other point is about is around kind of enhanced collaboration. So I think building stronger partnerships between researchers and policy makers can ensure that research addresses real policy needs, and this includes embedding researchers within government departments and parliaments through fellowships and creating formal mechanisms for ongoing dialogue, as Tash has mentioned, and also fellowships work both ways. It's also really important for policy actors to get experience in research organizations to understand how knowledge is created and mobilized.

Rodney Appleyard 23:26
Thank you very much for that. Just good for us to learn this too, so we can spread that message to researchers when we come across them, so they're aware of this also.

Jennie Blows 23:35
All right, that's all we have time for today. As we bring our podcast to a close, I'd like to thank our panelists for sharing their examples with us, which will hopefully inspire researchers to see how getting their research into policy making can really make a difference and improve people's lives.