MHCLG AREAS OF RESEARCH INTEREST – 2025

Foreword

Collaboration and drawing expertise from academia and industry are important in the development of well-evidenced policy. This document provides a summary of the Areas of Research Interest of the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in order to stimulate interaction and build on the relationships that we have with academics and other experts across the UK. MHCLG and our predecessor department have published two previous documents, in 2018 and 2022. This shorter document builds on these. It reflects the department's ongoing and latest priorities and summarises our key research interests, with some illustrative questions. We have sought to highlight our re-focused priority areas, so as to continue the conversation between the department and research providers, funders, and others interested in helping us further build our evidence base in areas of mutual interest.

We are particularly keen to hear about research which connects to our priority areas, and look forward to hearing from you.

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Background

Meeting the Government's missions will require ambition, boldness and the best possible evidence base. The Government has set out five core missions – backed up by clearly defined milestones:

- Kickstarting economic growth - with rising living standards in every part of the UK.
- Making Britain a clean energy super-power – with 95% clean power by 2030.
- Taking back our streets and reducing crime – with a named officer for every neighbourhood and 13,000 additional police officers, PCSOs and special constables.
- Breaking down barriers to opportunity – with 75% of five-year olds ready to learn by the start of school.
- Building an NHS fit for the future – with an end to hospital backlogs.

It also has several other key strategic goals, including:

- Reducing child poverty.
- Reforming public services.

To support these missions, milestones and strategic goals, the Deputy Prime Minister has in turn set out seven key priorities for MHCLG including:

- Making Work Pay and Strengthening Employment Rights.
- Getting Britain Building – including the commitment to 1.5m net additional homes during this Parliament and fast-tracking planning decisions on 150 major infrastructure projects
- Improving housing quality and security – including through strengthened Renters' Rights.
- Reducing homelessness and rough sleeping.
- Strengthening local government – including through improved and reformed funding.

- Delivering growth in every corner of the country – including by extending English Devolution and by building stronger communities.
- Responding to the Grenfell Inquiry report – including by accelerating remediation of unsafe buildings.

A robust evidence base is key to the department being able to deliver on these priorities. The department has a strong track record in data collection and publication, research, evidence gathering, evaluation and associated analysis. We have strong working links with other departments on cross-cutting agendas. Alongside analytical work led or commissioned by our department, we are always keen to hear about research and analysis led by others, and keen to learn from any examples of local level initiatives that are relevant to our key policy areas, including new and innovative approaches that have a strong test and learn approach, are generating clear evidence on what works, and that could be applied more widely.

The department also has extensive engagement with academia, think tanks, what works centres, consultancies and the wider private sector, civil society and other sources of expertise across all its areas of responsibility in both this country and internationally. This network is a considerable asset, and we are always interested to hear from individuals and organisations that may not yet be linked with us.

This Areas of Research Interests (ARI) document sets out some of the key areas where the department would welcome more evidence, building on its links with organisations who are carrying out research, evidence gathering and analysis that aligns closely to our interests. But please note, the department cannot respond to speculative approaches for research funding, as research projects are competitively tendered.

Working with MHCLG – Making contact

MHCLG collaborates with external organisations and academia through various mechanisms, including:

- Strong working links with the What Works Centres that are closest to our interests.
- Seminar, roundtables, *ad hoc* meetings and more where external researchers and experts share key findings and insights with analysts and policy colleagues in the department.
- Short and long-term internships for undergraduates and postgraduates.
- Partnering with academic and non-academic organisations to support research and integrate findings into our evidence base e.g. through membership of advisory groups.
- Secondment opportunities for colleagues to work in external organisations, and for secondees to join us.
- Understanding what the research community values from us to foster closer collaboration.
- Exploring initiatives to increase transparency about our evidence needs, to enable effective engagement and collaboration.

We welcome such engagement, and contact can be made with us at ari-contact@communities.gov.uk. Drop us a line to continue the research conversation.

Topics

The sections below list a broad range of research themes of priority interest to MHCLG across its different policy areas.

1. Driving growth
2. Delivering 1.5 million new homes
3. Improving housing quality
4. Ending homelessness
5. Reforming local government, local government finance and local public services
6. Make work pay
7. Stronger, more integrated and more cohesive communities
8. Supporting resettlement programmes
9. Elections
10. Cross-cutting - research methodologies and related issues

Within each topic, we have briefly outlined some of the research interests in relation to the policy priorities and provided examples of some potential research questions.

1. Driving growth

Driving growth across the UK is a key priority for the department and it is keen to have the best possible evidence on what are the most effective interventions to support it.

- What are the best methods for robustly estimating productivity differentials across different parts of the UK and what are the main reasons for these differences?
- What are the key drivers of economic growth and rising living standards, and how do they vary between different parts of the UK – regionally and locally?
- How can digital infrastructure be integrated with physical infrastructure to improve service delivery, enhance connectivity, and optimise resource use?
- How do we ensure the economic benefits of city centres or industrial clusters generate spillovers for surrounding towns, villages and sectors? What is the key to prosperous local towns and villages?
- What are the key policy levers needed to ensure the most deprived communities can share in the benefits and opportunities from growth?
- What are the qualitative and quantitative evidence for the way that an increase in housing supply or an improvement in housing affordability has an impact on economic growth and productivity?

2. Delivering 1.5m new homes

MHCLG is committed to delivering 1.5 million net additional homes during this parliament. Some of our research interests include:

- What can we learn from recent experiences of planning reform both across the UK and internationally?
- How best is land value captured to pay for social housing and infrastructure? What are the limits to the capture of land value, and why?

- What are the best examples of how to incentivise local residents to support new housing and infrastructure in their local areas?
- What are the contexts in which the different types of Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) are likely to be most useful? Are new standards for module interfaces required to facilitate the use of MMC? If so, in what terms should they be defined?
- What is the most constructive way to address the issue of empty homes – particularly long term vacants?
- Why has construction sector productivity declined in the UK and in other countries in the recent years? Are there examples of policies across the world which have successfully addressed this?

3. Improving housing quality

Following the Grenfell inquiry, MHCLG committed to accelerating building remediation and ensuring building safety. The department is interested in developing its understanding of the drivers of behaviour across the industry, and the benefits and potential risks that technological change may bring. These include:

- What are the gaps between the design performance, and the actual energy usage or other measured performance of buildings?
- What are the most cost-effective ways of making new homes more energy-efficient?
- What research can provide robust evidence about the health impacts of poor indoor air quality, overheating, fuel poverty, and exposure to hazards?
- What are the capability and capacity gaps (both in delivering high quality new housing and remedying issues in existing stock) facing the construction workforce in the UK and what impact do those gaps have on housing quality and safety?
- What are the long-term impacts of housing quality on social cohesion, health, educational attainment, child poverty, life chances, wellbeing and other outcomes? What are our best quantified and monetised estimates of these relationships? –

We also have a focus on exploring the issues that affect different housing tenures. Some key questions include:

- What are the strongest policy levers for improving living conditions for tenants and is there evidence from any locally driven initiatives we can learn from?
- What role can housing policies play in helping to alleviate child poverty and longer-term life outcomes?

4. Tackling homelessness

One of MHCLG's top priorities is to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. The evidence base in this policy area is good but there's more to do.

- What are the monetised economic, social and fiscal costs of homelessness and rough sleeping for different groups in the short, medium and long-term?
- What are the most cost-effective measures for moving households out of temporary accommodation – and keeping them out?
- What further evidence is available on locally driven initiatives to combat homelessness that has positive outcomes for service users?
- What support do children and victims of domestic abuse living in temporary accommodation and domestic abuse safe accommodation need and to what extent is this being delivered?

- What data, evidence and analytical tools (preventative analytics) are required to identify populations at risk of homelessness, such as families facing eviction, victims of domestic abuse, or individuals with precarious work conditions? What are the best means of outreach and engagement with at-risk populations?
- What are the challenges associated with delivering infrastructure to support housing development and how best can they be overcome?

5. Reforming local government, local government finance and local public services

MHCLG's goals in relation to local government include putting it on a sounder financial footing; allocating resources more tightly according to need; addressing longer term financial risk in the sector; and reforming and improving the delivery of public services.

- What is the evidence that prevention and early intervention in adult social care, children's social care and other local services improve outcomes – compared with treating problems – and lead to better value for money for taxpayers?
- What examples are there of local public service reform initiatives that we can learn from?
- What are the lessons to learn from successful insourcing of services by local government? What are the common themes behind failures of outsourcing relevant to local government?
- What are the best examples of local initiatives to reduce child poverty – what levers were used and how can central Government provide support?

6. Make work pay

The department wants to build the evidence base for the impacts that jobs with higher pay, better working conditions and security can have on employees and the knock-on impacts on society as a whole.

- What are the broader social benefits to individuals from jobs with higher pay, better working conditions and security, and can we link these benefits to wider society e.g. through savings to the Exchequer *via* reduced healthcare needs?
- How can we further quantify the impacts of planned changes to employment law on raising living standards across the UK, as measured by real household disposable income?
- What is the regional picture on jobs with higher pay, better working conditions and security?
- What are the impacts from jobs with higher pay, better working conditions and security on affordability and supply in the private rented sector?
- What are the long-term impacts from prolonged insecure work on the life chances of individuals, including on family formation and stability, opportunities to get on the housing ladder and healthcare needs?
- To what extent have weaknesses and limitations in the UK's employment rights protections – such as exploitative zero hours contracts - contributed to poor productivity, regional inequality, or child poverty?

- How can the evidence base illustrate the extent to which outsourcing and the position on pay and conditions in social care has resulted in a) a greater reliance on foreign workers, b) poorer quality of care and c) inefficiency in public service delivery?

7. Stronger, more integrated and more cohesive communities

Strong, cohesive and integrated communities are a departmental priority:
- Why do otherwise similar areas experience different health, education and other outcomes?
- What is the best evidence for the social and economic impacts of living in a more integrated and cohesive place?
- How can technology be utilised to enhance and strengthen systems for gathering, analysing and using data and information to assess community resilience and cohesion?

Devolution is a policy priority. It is important that the accountabilities and incentives are in place for it to improve outcomes and that we have the evidence to back this up.
- What devolved or new powers would support increased productivity in regions which are falling behind?
- What opportunities does devolution offer for strengthening local resilience and improving community cohesion?
- How can different public services, delivered by different scales of devolution and methodologies, be compared to learn best practices and improve efficiency?
- What can we learn from variations in the performance of different public service providers within each public service (taking account of area cost differences and differences in the characteristics of the population served)? To what extent does devolution, the adoption of best practice, or other interventions reduce such variation and improve overall public service performance?

8. Supporting resettlement programmes

- How different (if at all) are the pressures facing local authorities when welcoming resettlement cohorts? What is the reason for any differences?
- What are the long-term impacts/implications of community-based sponsorship?
- Are there any local examples of effective strategies to help individuals settle, which generate better outcomes for people?

9. Elections

Engaging as many people as possible in the democratic process is a key MHCLG goal. The department is keen to understand the interventions that can help facilitate higher levels of engagement, especially from young people, including registering and voting.
- What are the barriers to, and drivers of, political participation by young people? What interventions would be effective in engaging young people (16+) to register and vote in elections when they are enfranchised to?
- How have instances and levels of harassment and intimidation in elections changed over time? Who in the electoral process experiences harassment and intimidation, by (1) their role in the electoral process e.g. voter / candidate / staff, (2) their demographics?

What are the barriers (if any) to individuals reporting instances of harassment and intimidation to police, and to the police investigating these reports?
- How does susceptibility to mis- and disinformation, and its impact (if any) on voting behavior, vary by age? What impact could extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds have on this?

10. Cross-cutting - research methodologies and related issues

We are keen to hear about the cutting-edge approaches the research community is using which could have applications in MHCLG's work. Particularly in ground-breaking evaluations, with a robust focus on impact and value for money. We are also interested in innovative techniques (such as preventative analytics) and data sharing.
- Are there any examples of AI tools being used effectively for data gathering from local authorities creating a less burdensome approach to gathering data, analysis or reporting?
- What are the best ways in which the use of AI could speed up the planning system, reduce costs for local government and improve the delivery of public services?
- Are there any analytical tools we should be aware of that could support work at the local level?