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Research and analysis

DWP Areas of Research Interest 2019

Published 1 March 2019

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ISBN 978-1-78659-138-8

Foreword by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Analyst

DWP has a strong record of producing, sponsoring and using high quality evidence to underpin the development of our policies and operations. As we look to the future, DWP will continue to champion the further development of our evidence base to ensure we are prepared to meet future challenges.

Since 2010, DWP has introduced Universal Credit, the New State Pension, the new Child Maintenance Service, Personal Independence Payment, and the Work and Health Programme and has implemented automatic enrolment into workplace pensions. All this was done while reducing operating costs by a third. The development of these initiatives has been enabled and informed by a vast amount of data analysis, research (both qualitative and quantitative), trialling and scenario modelling – by DWP analysts and by external organisations.

Just as having good evidence and analysis has played a vital part in DWP's recent successes, the continued development of our evidence base is necessary to ensure that DWP can respond effectively to future challenges. The Secretary of State, ministers and officials rely on high quality evidence to inform policy and operational decisions.

DWP has worked closely with academia and research organisations for many years. Since publishing our [2018 Areas of Research Interest \(ARI\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dwp-areas-of-research-interest) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dwp-areas-of-research-interest>), we have actively sought to grow and diversify our external engagement. Throughout 2018, we held a series of ARI workshops at universities across the UK, identifying and exploiting many opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration. We want to maintain and build on these links to ensure the scientific community remain up-to-date with developments in our evidence priorities, and continue to engage with us to maximise the impact of their research.

This document refreshes DWP's 2018 statement of research interest. In response to feedback we have received, there is a new section on methods, which cut across DWP objectives. To meet our policy and delivery ambitions, we will need to employ ever more innovative approaches to generating insight. This is best achieved in partnership with the cutting-edge research community, to further improve the design and delivery of our services for the benefit of citizens and society.

Trevor Huddleston CBE (Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Analyst, DWP)

Introduction and purpose

This document summarises the most important research questions facing DWP over the next 5 to 10 years. The purpose is to raise awareness and improve understanding of these amongst the external research community.

The ambition is to continue building our engagement and collaboration between the government and external research communities. This will enhance DWP's capability and capacity to answer complex and important questions by:

- drawing on a wider range of UK and international expertise and evidence
- exploiting more diverse and innovative methods, which can generate different perspectives and insights and therefore help provide more complete answers to particular research questions
- building and developing DWP's own internal capability to generate world-class analysis through knowledge transfer

DWP's evidence requirements are extensive and evolve over time. This document is not an exhaustive list of our research needs. It is intentionally high-level and summative. It is neither exhaustive nor definitive and is intended to open conversation^{[footnote 1](#)}. It targets areas where DWP analysts and officials have identified that there is most scope and value from further research and where we believe the external research community is well placed to enhance the evidence base.

We already have some evidence on all the topics we list below and we have more evidence on some than on others. However, we are keen to increase and deepen our understanding of these issues. This ARI aims to encourage academics and researchers from any discipline to explore these topics to help build DWP's evidence base and stimulate future collaboration. We are also interested in any research that is outside the areas outlined below, which may still be relevant to DWP policy or delivery, and research which focuses on particular facets of the areas listed. The purpose of this ARI is not to constrain the research done but to provide guidance about the topics where further research is most likely to have a positive impact on DWP policy.

We hope that this document will help applications to prospective funding bodies by enabling proposals for new research to draw a direct line to DWP's areas of analytical interest and thus strengthen the case for the possible public impact of the research. We intend to update this ARI at regular intervals.

We welcome feedback on this document and details of any work you are doing or planning that is potentially relevant to DWP. If you would like to discuss the ARI, or collaborating on research more generally, contact the Chief Scientific Adviser's office at evidence.strategyteam@dwp.gov.uk. We will disseminate our updated ARI throughout 2019 and beyond to raise awareness of DWP's priorities and foster closer ongoing engagement and collaboration with the external research community. This will include continuing our programme of university ARI workshops.

DWP vision and objectives

DWP wants rigorous, robust, relevant and timely evidence so that the department can design and deliver policies to achieve its vision and objectives. Consequently, our evidence priorities map directly onto our vision and objectives as set out in the department's [single departmental plan](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-work-and-pensions-single-departmental-plan/department-for-work-and-pensions-single-departmental-plan-2018) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-work-and-pensions-single-departmental-plan/department-for-work-and-pensions-single-departmental-plan-2018>) and summarised below. Many of our research interests also relate to cross-government objectives such as housing, productivity, migration and health. Consequently, we work closely and extensively with other government departments to build better evidence in many of these areas. Our specific evidence requirements may also adapt to reflect live departmental priorities, for example helping to inform the evidence base underpinning the government and department decisions on Brexit preparations and negotiations. Some research themes, such as geography, social structure, demographics and technology, cut across our objectives. For the sake of brevity, we do not repeat these themes throughout, but only refer to them in those areas where we think it is particularly important to focus on them. However, we do separately identify some cross-cutting methodological issues.

DWP is the UK's largest public service department. We develop policy and deliver essential services on work, welfare, pensions and child maintenance. Our vision is to deliver a modern, fair and affordable welfare system that makes a positive difference to citizens' lives by extending opportunity, strengthening personal responsibility and enabling fulfilment of personal potential. A transforming welfare system with services delivered in a sustainable and effective way whilst reducing costs and achieving value for money for UK taxpayers. Our objectives are to:

1. Build a more prosperous society by supporting people into work and helping them to realise their potential.
2. Improve outcomes and ensure financial security for disabled people and people with health conditions by increasing opportunities to realise their full potential with the help of the welfare system and through the labour market.
3. Ensure financial security for current and future pensioners by: helping people to increase their pension savings; providing information on their private and state pension provision to enable effective planning for the future; and supporting older people to extend their working lives.
4. Increase every child's opportunity to succeed by helping separated parents agree effective child maintenance arrangements and supporting families in distress to reduce parental breakdown and separation.
5. Transform our services and work with the devolved administrations to deliver an effective welfare system for citizens when they need it while reducing costs, and achieving value for money for taxpayers.

Objective 1: Employment and progression

Build a more prosperous society by supporting people into work and helping them to realise their potential

Context

We want to better understand how and why the labour market is changing and the implications for the number and types of people who need different support. We would like to improve our understanding of what determines the transitions people make between welfare and work and how DWP can support people to progress in work. We want to learn more about what works for whom, when, where, why, and under what circumstances. We would like to develop a richer picture of how disadvantages and barriers combine, reinforce each other, and manifest themselves throughout someone's life, and how this affects their opportunities and outcomes.

Research questions include

- 1.1 What are the different ways to define and measure labour market progression and sustainable work? How does this vary between groups and at different times in people's lives? How can DWP best support each individual to achieve the best outcomes for their personal circumstances throughout their life cycle?
- 1.2 How should DWP work with employers, and other third parties, to support people into work and help them realise their potential and improve skills and productivity?
- 1.3 What are the most cost-effective ways to support skills development, and fill skills gaps and shortages?
- 1.4 What types and combinations of support, conditionality and working age benefit design are most effective at enabling and encouraging people to move into, or closer to, sustainable work (employment and/or self-employment) with opportunities for progression? How does the most appropriate support vary between different places and groups including: younger and older people, those from different minority ethnic groups, women, carers, and those with complex barriers to employment, for example ex-offenders, care leavers, those with alcohol and/or drug abuse problems, homeless and those with mental health conditions. We are particularly interested in those with multiple barriers.
- 1.5 How is support and conditionality best delivered and by whom? This includes the role of different stakeholders including DWP, local authorities and the private and voluntary sector and the interaction between them.
- 1.6 What impact does Universal Credit have on individuals' and households' employment, earnings and well-being? How does this vary between different areas and sub-groups? How can we improve the overall impact of Universal Credit on the labour market for individuals and business?
- 1.7 What are the factors that influence levels of homelessness and rough sleeping? What is the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce homelessness?
- 1.8 How does DWP support for housing costs influence the geographical distribution of employment, progression opportunities, labour market flexibility and

commuting patterns? How can DWP support for housing costs better incentivise increased supply of quality housing?

1.9 How is the labour market evolving, including the demand for, and supply of, skills, and how should DWP respond to improve outcomes for individuals, employers and the economy? For example, how might the labour market change because of technological changes, economic and demographic trends, leaving the EU, changes in trade and migration, and other policy developments such as the National Living Wage?

1.10 How can DWP policies, in combination with those of other government departments, facilitate and encourage inter- and intra-generational social mobility?

Objective 2: Disability and health

Improve outcomes and ensure financial security for disabled people and people with health conditions by increasing opportunities to realise their full potential with the help of the welfare system and through the labour market

Context

We want to better understand transitions and fluctuations in health and disability over people's lives and how they affect people's employment, wellbeing and the support they need. We want to improve our understanding of the challenges disabled people and those with health conditions face in finding and/or sustaining employment. We also want to learn more about what roles different partners should play in providing an integrated approach to improving health and work outcomes, including employers and health professionals. We would like to better understand how we can best identify and support those who are unable, temporarily or permanently, to work^{[footnote 2](#)}.

Research questions include

2.1 What are the current and future trends in disabilities and health conditions that working-age people face that require targeted policy measures to improve employment, health and wellbeing outcomes?

2.2 What barriers prevent people with disabilities and/or health conditions from moving into and progressing in work, and which interventions are most effective at addressing these barriers?

2.3 What new and better approaches are there, including in how we assess capability, for delivering joined-up, tailored and personalised health and work support? How can we effectively engage employers, health professionals and other stakeholders to improve work and health outcomes?

2.4 What works to support people to remain in work, or once on sick leave, to return to work? Who is best placed to deliver this support?

Objective 3: Security in later life

Ensure financial security for current and future pensioners by: helping people to increase their pension savings; providing information on their private and state pension provision to enable effective planning for the future; and supporting older people to extend their working lives

Context

We want to better understand what determines how much people need and how much they save for their retirement, when they choose to retire and how they use their savings in later life. We would like to learn more about what deters and prevents some people from saving more for their retirement and how they can be encouraged and enabled to save more. An important aspect is how life expectancy and healthy life expectancy are changing now and in the future. We also want to better understand how the many cultural, demographic, economic, social and policy factors affect how long people work and how much they save.

Research questions include

3.1 How much do different people have to save during their working lives to enjoy the standard of living they need, expect or want in retirement? What does this imply for how long people should work and how much they should save?

3.2 How and when do people plan for later life and what are the incentives and drivers to work in later life? What are the current attitudes and behaviours of individuals and employers towards work and retirement in later life and how are they changing over time?

3.3 What factors prevent or discourage people, including the self-employed, from saving enough for their retirement? What things can encourage and enable people to save more and/or work for longer and what role do employers play? Does this vary and if so how and why?

3.4 How do individuals make decisions about how to use their private savings to provide income in later life? What support, guidance and information do people need, when and in what format to enable them to make informed decisions? How and why does the amount and nature of support required vary between different individuals?

3.5 How could we improve the regulation of the private pensions industry to deliver better outcomes for savers whilst minimising the costs to businesses?

3.6 How effective and efficient are current investment choices in defined benefit and defined contribution pension schemes? Is there a case for government intervention (either supply or demand side)? And if yes, what options are there for improving these choices to improve outcomes for the schemes and the economy?

3.7 What are the future trends for demographics and working/saving behaviour and what is driving these trends? What further reforms to state and private pension provision might we require to ensure long-term sustainable financial security for older people and pensioners?

Objective 4: Children and families

Increase every child's opportunity to succeed by helping separated parents agree effective child maintenance arrangements and supporting families in distress to reduce parental breakdown and separation

Context

We want to better understand what factors, including the stability and quality of family relationships, can facilitate and hinder children's prospects. We would like to find out more about what types of support are most effective at helping to overcome family conflict and the myriad of other factors that can prevent children, and adults, from fulfilling their potential. This includes improving our understanding of the most effective ways of delivering support so that it makes a real difference to families' opportunities and outcomes.

Research questions include

4.1 What are the causes, consequences and costs associated with parental conflict and family breakdown? What is the impact on children's outcomes and how are the costs and consequences exacerbated by the interaction between parental conflict and other sources of disadvantage such as worklessness, low skills, lack of stable housing, health, drug and alcohol dependency?

4.2 What are the most cost-effective interventions to support adults and children work through family breakdown, resolve family conflict and address other deep-rooted problems such as alcohol and drug dependency, so that they do not permanently affect opportunities and outcomes? To what extent and how do interventions need to adapt to reflect different local social and economic contexts?

4.3 What is the most effective and efficient way to provide support, across government and with third parties, to separated families?

4.4 How and when do separating families make child support arrangements? What support do they need? Do these arrangements vary or stay the same over time? How effective are child maintenance policies at encouraging family based

arrangements, reducing family conflict and ultimately helping adults and children achieve better outcomes?

4.5 How effective are the child maintenance arrangements and wider welfare system at ensuring parents have the financial support they need to achieve the best outcomes for them and their children? How can we improve compliance and the effectiveness and affordability of child maintenance arrangements?

Objective 5: Service delivery

Transform our services and work with the devolved administrations to deliver an effective welfare system for citizens when they need it while reducing costs, and achieving value for money for taxpayers

Context

We want to better understand what our wide range of different claimants need and expect, and how and why this is changing, for example, in light of the continued rapid development and use of technology, artificial intelligence and digitalisation.

We want to learn how we can improve how to measure and manage operational performance and productivity across the different parts of the business and identify and exploit opportunities to make delivery more effective, efficient and economical to reduce costs and ensure value for money for the taxpayer. We also want to better understand how to minimise the opportunity for fraud and error to enter our systems, and how to improve the speed and accuracy with which we detect it if or when it does.

Research questions include

5.1 To what extent can we better segment claimant services to reflect both different needs and capabilities, and to improve efficiency, effectiveness and customer service through more personalised support and preventative measures?

5.2 What are the underlying causes and trends in the number of claimants with complex claims and/or multiple needs, who require more intensive support? How do we design our services to identify vulnerable groups and those with multiple problems early, and address their needs effectively, in partnership with other organisations?

5.3 How many of DWP processes can we re-engineer, and to what extent, so that they are automated and/or digitalised? What are the potential benefits and risks associated with increasing digital take-up, self-service and automation? Which customers can DWP effectively serve digitally, and how can we best support them? How is this changing over time?

5.4 What will be the future level and mix of demand for different DWP services through different channels? What do these trends imply for the resources in terms of what we need to deliver more digitalised and data-driven services effectively and efficiently, including the number and skills of operational staff?

5.5 How can we improve the effectiveness and efficiency of DWP and customer service and labour market support through, for example, predictive modelling, automation, including use of automated bots, digitalisation, big real time data and machine learning? What scope is there to use data to intervene early and prevent rather than cure problems?

5.6 What are the best ways to design systems and policy to minimise fraud and error? How can we use new technologies, such as artificial intelligence/machine learning, network analysis and distributed ledgers, in this area?

5.7 How effective are claimant communications and campaigns at improving awareness and understanding of benefit rules and promoting take-up and compliance and how can we improve their effectiveness? To what extent is the current regime of penalties for benefit fraud (and error) an effective deterrent and how can we make it more effective?

5.8 How can advances in cryptography, distributed ledgers, personal data lockers and identity authentication be used to increase the resilience and efficacy of government services?

5.9 How can government maximise public service quality by delivering across the public, private and third sectors?

5.10 How important is place for the effectiveness of policy and delivery, that is how far do we need to adapt policy and delivery to account for the geographical variation in the social and economic context? What impact has devolving services to Scotland had on outcomes?

Cross-cutting research methods

The department wants to engage with experts to enhance our capability to use cutting-edge scientific, technical and analytical approaches, as well as established methodologies, to develop our evidence base in the areas outlined in this ARI. DWP recognises the insights that different disciplines and methods provide and the importance of using multi-faceted approaches to build a more complete understanding that can better inform decisions about policy and delivery.

We have established a [Methods Advisory Group](https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/dwp-methods-advisory-group) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/dwp-methods-advisory-group>) of external experts to support our Chief Scientific Adviser in providing cross-cutting, independent scientific advice to ministers and senior officials. We want to use the Methods Advisory Group and our ARI to engage with as many external experts from as many different disciplines as possible to ensure we exploit the most effective methods, techniques and tools to build the evidence we need.

The department's evidence, research and development activities are undertaken by internal analysis and science functions, including statisticians, social researchers, economists, operational researchers, behavioural scientists, psychologists and data scientists. We are keen to understand the latest developments in the methods we use from across these disciplines and to learn about any methods we are not using, which can help address our research priorities. This includes methods that can enhance our understanding of issues around inclusiveness, equality and diversity. For example, by enabling more granular understanding of our research priorities in terms of age, ethnicity, location, gender and disability.

The department is keen to hear about and understand any cutting-edge approaches you might be using in your research, which could have applications to these evidence questions.

Contacts

Send correspondence and further questions to evidence.strategyteam@dwp.gov.uk.

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1. The ARI is not an invitation to tender for DWP funding for specific research projects. It is to help those that fund and conduct research to design research that will have a policy impact.
 2. These research questions include the interests of the Work and Health Unit, jointly sponsored by DWP and the Department of Health and Social Care. The joint Unit exists to drive action across society to prevent health-related job loss and support disabled people and people with long-term health conditions to enter and progress in work, and enjoy the benefits of good employment. The Unit plans to set out its approach to building evidence, working closely with academic and research partners, and further Unit specific areas of research interest.

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