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Research and analysis

DWP Areas of Research Interest 2023

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

DWP has a long-standing focus on applied Research and Development with a strong track record of producing, sponsoring and using high quality evidence to underpin the development of its policies and operations. DWP services support millions of citizens. Cutting-edge data, modelling, research and academic insight were used through the COVID-19 pandemic to inform key operational and policy decisions. As it looks to meet future challenges in work and pensions, DWP will continue to champion the further development of its evidence base to inform policy decisions.

Service transformation programmes at DWP are consistently underpinned by world class evidence, analysis and research. DWP initiatives are enabled and informed by a vast amount of data analysis, research (both qualitative and quantitative), trialling, evaluation and scenario modelling – by DWP analysts and by external organisations.

The continued development of DWP's evidence base is necessary to ensure that it can respond effectively to future challenges and learn from current policy and delivery to further improve its services. 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 its first ARI in 2018, DWP actively sought to grow and diversify its external engagement by holding a series of ARI workshops in partnership with UK universities.

To meet its policy and delivery ambitions, DWP seeks 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 DWP 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 of the DWP Areas of Research Interest (ARI) publication is to raise awareness amongst the external research community of the things that matter to DWP analysis.

Its ambition remains to foster continued engagement and collaboration between government and external research communities. DWP wishes to enhance its capability and capacity to answer complex and important questions:

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

DWP has extensive evidence requirements that evolve over time. This document is intentionally high-level and summative. It is neither exhaustive nor definitive and is intended to open-up conversations with the wider research community. The document is a summary of topics and areas where DWP analysts and policy officials have identified the scope and value of further research: areas of interest where the external research community is well placed to enhance the evidence base.

DWP already has some evidence on all the topics listed below. The depth and strength of the evidence varies across the topics and DWP is keen to deepen its understanding of these issues. This ARI statement seeks to encourage academics and researchers from any discipline to explore these topics to help build the evidence base and stimulate future collaboration. DWP remains interested in 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.

The scope of DWP analysis for policy and operations is wide. DWP is interested in research and analysis relevant to the entirety of the working age population, parents, children, families and people of pension age. Specific characteristics of particular importance for work and pensions policy include health status and morbidity, long-term mental and physical health conditions; socio-economic disadvantages, including area deprivation; “good” work and sustained in-work progression.

Policy makers require evidence to inform decisions and help make the case for action, including the design of specific measures that can be replicated, cost-

benefit assessments and robust evidence on the lived experience of the real-world implementation of government policies.

DWP hopes 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. DWP intend to continue to update this ARI at regular intervals.

DWP welcomes 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 collaboration on research more generally, contact the Chief Scientific Adviser's office at evidence.strategyteam@dwp.gov.uk.

DWP will disseminate its updated ARI to raise awareness of its priorities and to foster closer ongoing dialogue, engagement and collaboration with the external research community. This will include continuing the DWP programme of university ARI workshops.

DWP vision and priority outcomes

DWP aims to improve people's day-to-day lives and help them build financial resilience and a more secure and prosperous future. The DWP vision and priority outcomes are set out in the [Outcome Delivery Plan for 2023-25](https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40123/documents/195656/default/) (<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40123/documents/195656/default/>).

The services DWP offers improve the daily lives of millions of people. Every day, DWP supports thousands of people to move into work and progress. Through Jobcentre Plus and its key services and programmes, DWP supports individuals to develop the skills they need to live more independently, including supporting disabled people and those with long-term health conditions. DWP works with others across government to tackle the root causes of poverty, improve financial resilience, and support families with children.

In 2022-23, DWP provided cost of living payments to over 7 million low-income households, with millions of additional payments going to pensioners and disabled people. This year, DWP is administering further cost of living support to households that need it.

Alongside this focus on protecting the most vulnerable, the government is investing to boost workforce participation. A wide-ranging new package of measures has been designed to reduce economic inactivity, which has risen from a pre-pandemic historic low. This includes new employment programmes and support, targeted for those specific groups who face the greatest barriers to the labour market, for example the over 50s, parents and disabled people. Through [Transforming Support: The Health and Disability White Paper](#)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transforming-support-the-health-and-disability-white-paper>), DWP aims to improve the way the disability benefits system works, to better support and incentivise disabled people and those with health conditions to start, stay and succeed in work.

Research, analysis, and evaluation underpin:

- important transformational programmes such as Universal Credit and Health Transformation (developing a single new Health Assessment Service (HAS) and transforming the entire Personal Independence Payments (PIP) service)
- workforce participation measures designed to reduce economic inactivity and other interventions to help people move into/progress in work
- improvements to the delivery and efficiency of working age and retirement services and family support, including pensions and Child Maintenance, Cost of Living payments
- improvements to service delivery to tackle fraud and error

DWP has four priority outcomes (and a further cross-cutting delivery objective), and four strategic enablers to deliver this vision:

Priority outcomes

1. Maximise employment, reduce economic inactivity, and support the progression of those in work
2. Deliver financial support to people who are entitled to it
3. Enable disabled people and people with health conditions to start, stay, and succeed in work, and get financial support
4. Support financial resilience in later life

Cross-cutting delivery objective

5. Deliver high quality services, tackle fraud and maximise value for money for the taxpayer

DWP strategic enablers

1. Workforce, Skills, Location
2. Innovation, Technology, Data
3. Delivery, Evaluation, Collaboration
4. Sustainability

DWP evaluation strategy

The Departmental approach to ensuring that evaluation work delivers high quality evidence on the right questions at the right time, is set out in the [DWP Evaluation Strategy \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dwp-evaluation-strategy/dwp-evaluation-strategy\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dwp-evaluation-strategy/dwp-evaluation-strategy). All types of evaluation – process, impact and value for money – are relevant to the analytical research work of the Department. The DWP Evaluation Strategy sets out the principles that underpin the DWP approach to evaluation:

- strong and proportionate evaluation design, following best practice in the field, including the guidance of [the Magenta Book \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book)
- expert evaluation resource – evaluation work led and conducted by DWP analysts with a wide range of expertise, supported by a strong capability-building approach, and drawing on external expert advice and resource as needed
- rigorous quality assurance
- an active approach to knowledge management

Research questions around DWP priority outcomes

1) Maximise employment, reduce economic inactivity, and support the progression of those in work

This encompasses priorities around:

- supporting the economy and ensuring the UK's long-term prosperity by delivering the Plan for Jobs

- ensuring that it pays to work, and supporting in-work progression
- supporting those facing barriers to work to reach their potential in the labour market via Sector-based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs), In-Work Progression, support for older Jobseekers and the Youth Offer

Research questions include:

- 1.1 How do employment support programmes contribute to DWP objectives to maximise employment and support economic growth? How can DWP best assess value for money in different labour market programmes?
- 1.2 What sort of interventions are required to address barriers to employment, to reduce inactivity and support in-work progression?
- 1.3 What are the longer-term impacts and consequences on the labour market and on productivity of policies introduced to address the challenges of COVID-19?
- 1.4 What is most effective in ensuring employment support operates in a joined-up way with other forms of support?
- 1.5 How do economic cycles affect employment, unemployment, economic activity and wages? How do any effects vary for different groups?
- 1.6 How can DWP best support places, regions and sectors in levelling up? What approaches work best in addressing employment skills development, employment skills shortages and employment skills mismatches across the UK?
- 1.7 What are the most effective ways for government to work with employers and other partners to support people into sustained work? How are employers reshaping workplace organisation to support the health and wellbeing of their employees? How can further evidence-based practice be encouraged? How can effective evidence-based tools influence best practice?
- 1.8 What is most effective in preventing people from falling out of the labour market? Does this differ for different groups? Who is best placed to deliver support?
- 1.9 In what ways do housing circumstances affect the way people move into, and remain in, work? What role is played in labour market outcomes by temporary accommodation, housing affordability, poor quality housing, insecure accommodation and the private and social rented sectors?
- 1.10 What are the different ways to define and measure labour market progression and sustainable work? How does this vary by life stage and group? What are the implications for targeted policy measures in terms of health, employment and wellbeing outcomes?

1.11 What are the causes/drivers of the ethnic minority employment gap? What are the barriers to entry and progression in the labour market for ethnic minorities?

1.12 How might employers optimise job design and hybrid and flexible working arrangements to manage risks, accommodate employee care needs and build soft skills and team working to maintain attachment to the labour market?

1.13 How can Work Coaches most effectively use available support to promote movement into work and progression in work? How can DWP most effectively learn from, and promote, best practice across the Work Coach network?

1.14 What additional labour market barriers do those from disadvantaged groups (such as ex-offenders, homeless people), face? How can DWP best support those with multiple, complex needs to gain and retain employment?

1.15 How do the characteristics, needs and experiences of older workers vary in relation to work and health? What factors affect whether older workers continue in employment? What approaches work best to maximise employment options for older workers?

2) Deliver financial support to people who are entitled to it

This encompasses priorities around:

- promoting financial resilience and reducing poverty, including by harnessing the full set of levers available through the Department and its public bodies, other government departments and Local and Combined Authorities
- supporting people to help meet the cost of living and work across government to support the formulation and delivery of effective housing policies, particularly with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC)
- delivering financial security for low-income working adults, and for children in low-income households

Research questions include:

2.1 What types and combinations of support, incentives and conditionality are most effective at enabling and encouraging people in work and in receipt of Universal Credit to increase their hours and earnings to progress in work?

2.2 What impacts has COVID-19 had on income poverty, material deprivation and the cost of living?

- 2.3 How has rising inflation impacted on the living standards for different groups?
- 2.4 How effective has government's cost of living support been?
- 2.5 How can the benefit system best help low income and vulnerable households with their housing costs? What is the impact of DWP's expenditure on housing support? What factors impact on evictions, homelessness and rough sleeping? How effective are policies designed to reduce homelessness?
- 2.6 What are the causes, consequences and costs associated with parental conflict and family breakdown? What is effective in avoiding or mitigating parental conflict and for whom? How do parental characteristics including worklessness, low skills, lack of stable housing, ethnicity, parents in the perinatal stage, LGBTQ+, being (or having been) a member of the armed forces, mental health and parents with SEND children interact with conflict and influence what works?
- 2.7 How effective are child maintenance and associated policies at supporting separated families, encouraging family-based arrangements, reducing conflict and helping children and adults achieve better outcomes? And how does this differ by group?
- 2.8 How can DWP and its partners maximise sustainable compliance with child maintenance arrangements?
- 2.9 How does the most appropriate support (financial and non-financial) vary by groups? Including younger and older people, those from different minority ethnic groups, refugees, ex-service personnel, women, parents, victims of domestic abuse and those with complex needs, mental health conditions or homelessness?
- 2.10 How can DWP ensure all those entitled to claim benefits or access DWP services are reached? What barriers to accessing support services are faced by individuals from disadvantaged groups?
- 2.11 To what extent could increased progression help to move individuals out of poverty? How should in-work progression support be targeted?
- 2.12 How can the debt recovery system best identify & protect vulnerable households, and consider financial stability & resilience and sustainable repayments?

3) Enable disabled people and people with health conditions to start, stay, and succeed in work, and get

financial support

This encompasses priorities around:

- supporting groups that are under-represented in the labour market, including disabled people, who were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic
- initiatives to support people from these groups to start, stay, and succeed in work
- transforming support for disabled people and people with health conditions to promote independent living and improve the customer experience
- influencing positive employer behaviours and promote good Occupational Health practice to help people maintain attachment to the labour market

Research questions include:

3.1 Which interventions for disabled people are most effective in supporting movements into work? What barriers prevent disabled people and/or people with health conditions from moving into, and progressing in, work?

3.2 What are the distributions and drivers of psychosocial and cultural factors that affect employment and health outcomes (for example, illness perceptions, health beliefs, workplace cultures)?

3.3 What are the most effective ways to engage employers, health professionals, employees and other relevant stakeholders to retain and support disabled people and people with health conditions in employment? What policies and processes do employers have in place that could influence employee health, well-being and productivity (such as sick pay, access to occupational health services, health insurance provision)?

3.4 What new and better arrangements could be made to deliver effective health and employment support? What is the evidence base for effective joint working arrangements involving support delivered through, and beyond, the benefit system in partnerships involving DWP, the NHS, local authorities, the voluntary sector and other organisations?

3.5 Which disabled people are supported by the benefit system and which are not? How do policy choices impact this?

3.6 How does receipt of benefit payments affect disabled people and people with long-term health conditions? What impact does it have on independence, financial security, employment, wellbeing?

3.7 How does PIP assessment (and reassessment) affect people?

3.8 How could machine learning and predictive analytics be used robustly and ethically to create claimant personas/segments for disability benefits?

3.9 How is disability changing over time? What is the role of the benefit system in this change?

3.10 How have disabled people been affected by the recent Cost of Living challenges, compared with non-disabled people, and have they sought out extra resources to help them cope?

3.11 In what ways have homeworking, hybrid and flexible working arrangements helped or hindered employment for key groups, for example older workers, parents, disabled people, people living in remote areas?

3.12 How can DWP support carers in their caring roles? Including any return to work or progression in the labour market?

3.13 How can DWP enhance its understanding of the most appropriate measures of independent living?

4) Support financial resilience in later life

This encompasses priorities around:

- reducing the percentage of pensioners in absolute low income after housing costs
- Increasing the total number of people automatically enrolled in workplace pensions and building retirement savings
- continuing to explore how to make it easier for self-employed people to save for retirement

Research questions include:

4.1 What are the best ways to encourage engagement and awareness of the State Pension and Pensioner Benefits?

4.2 Is the Defined Contribution pension market functioning effectively? Could further reform address market failures and improve outcomes? How could collective Defined Contribution schemes help to achieve better outcomes for members?

4.3 What factors drive consumer engagement in private and workplace pensions? To what extent does engagement lead to positive outcomes or desired behavioural responses?

4.4 How do employers view pension obligations within overall costs and benefits packages or legal obligations? What evidence is there of employer cost mitigation through, for example, wage suppression?

4.5 How does financial insecurity impact later life and retirement? Who is financially insecure over the life-course? Who should prioritise short-term income over long-term pension saving?

4.6 What are the future trends for demographics and working/saving behaviour? How do these vary across demographic groups, including ethnicity and other characteristics? What further reforms to state and private pension provision might DWP require to ensure long-term sustainable financial security for older people and pensioners?

4.7 What factors are associated with greater financial resilience? What are the best ways of measuring financial resilience?

4.8 What factors help the self-employed to save for retirement?

5) Deliver high quality services, tackle fraud and maximise value for money for the taxpayer.

This encompasses priorities around:

- continuing to reduce and prevent fraud and error in benefit expenditure
- to deliver value for money for the taxpayer and an appropriate balance between effective fraud prevention and good customer experience
- becoming an increasingly data driven organisation with modern, secure, sustainable, and automated systems to drive better experiences for DWP customers, staff and taxpayers
- understanding customers' experience so DWP can target interventions when and where they have the most impact
- working smartly and flexibly to deliver services when, where and how DWP customers need them, increasing analytical capability to tailor services to customers' individual needs and circumstances

Research questions include:

5.1 What are the best ways to design systems and policy to minimise fraud and error, while maintaining excellent and accessible services? How can DWP maintain the right level of customer service and support, whilst keeping pace with the propensity to commit fraud and tackling new forms of fraud? What future functionality will DWP need to do this? How can the use of technological solutions including machine learning, network analysis and AI be maximised?

5.2 How can DWP improve the effectiveness of claimant access to DWP information in order to prevent fraud and error in the benefit system? How can DWP ensure its communication campaigns enable good claimant understanding of respective roles and responsibilities? How can DWP design

its systems and communications to encourage claimants to report their changes of circumstances in a timely and accurate way?

5.3 How can DWP best manage the fraud threat posed by organised criminal gangs? What can DWP learn from other organisations operationally using big data and risk analysis via Data Science techniques to target fraud?

5.4 Fraud and error is incorrect payment caused by us holding incorrect information about a claimant's circumstances. To what extent is this caused by non-compliant behaviour on the part of the claimant, whether intentional or not? What drives non-compliant behaviour and what levers might be successful in discouraging and reducing it?

5.5 What is claimants' experience of the welfare disputes process (Mandatory Reconsiderations and Appeals) and how does it affect them?

5.6 What are the root causes of complaints and disputes? What issues cause customers to be most dissatisfied with DWP?

5.7 How can DWP best contribute to net zero by driving reductions in emissions through work and pensions policies, estates and operations?

5.8 How can DWP best learn from serious cases to develop responsive and robust services for those most at risk?

5.9 What scope does data analytics and AI have to tailor services to claimants' needs? What are the benefits and risks of digital services? What is the effectiveness of digital transformation in driving efficiency and improving satisfaction?

5.10 What are the key factors that could drive improved productivity and efficiency in the delivery of DWP services? How can DWP services be designed to effectively identify vulnerable groups and those with complex multiple needs, in order to facilitate early intervention in partnership with other organisations?

5.11 What will be the future level and mix of demand for different DWP services through different channels, (digital/online and video, phone, face-to-face)? Does effectiveness vary for different groups? How effective are digital/virtual services (for example labour market support, drug and alcohol interventions, parenting interventions) compared to face-to-face provision, in helping people move into work?

5.12 What are the best methods for measuring actual productivity and efficiency against forecasts in large complex organisations?

5.13 What are the range of modelling approaches and tools for forecasting resource requirements? What are the strengths and limitations of these?

Research methodologies

The Department engages with experts to enhance its capability in using cutting-edge scientific, technical and analytical approaches, as well as established methodologies, to develop its 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 inter-disciplinary approaches to build a more complete understanding that can better inform decisions.

The DWP [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 supports the Chief Scientific Adviser, providing cross-cutting, independent scientific advice to ministers and senior officials. DWP uses the Methods Advisory Group and ARI to engage with as many external experts from as many different disciplines as possible to ensure it exploits the most effective methods, techniques and tools to build the evidence it needs. DWP operates a successful PhD placement secondment scheme, open to all subject areas giving new-career academics experience of policy facing analysis.

Many of 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, data analysts, and data scientists. DWP is keen to understand the latest developments in the methods it uses from across these disciplines and to learn about any methods it is not using, which can help address its research priorities. This includes methods that can enhance DWP's understanding of issues around inclusiveness, equality and diversity. For example, by enabling more granular understanding of DWP research priorities in terms of age, ethnicity, location, gender and disability.

The Department is keen to hear about, and understand, any cutting-edge approaches across multiple methodologies you might be using in your research, which could have applications to the evidence questions summarised here. DWP remain interested in innovation in data analysis and data developments including data linking, the economic analysis of social policies (such as the costs and benefits of health and employment initiatives), randomised control trials and evaluations (theory based, impact and economic) as well as innovation in qualitative research design including contemplative, observational, behavioural and ethnographic techniques.

The Department also continues to invest in developing its modelling, forecasting and quality assurance techniques, particularly in the field of microsimulation. DWP would be interested in hearing more about latest developments and relevant application of these in your research including novel use of statistical, validation and alignment methods, agent-based modelling, emulators, and simulation optimisation.

The Department is interested in hearing about cutting edge approaches to capture the uncertainties inherent in modelling exercises, for example when undertaking long-term (several decades into the future) pensions modelling. DWP would like to strengthen its understanding of behavioural impacts of policy change, for example on labour-market behaviour of claimants as a result of working-age benefit policy development. DWP also would like to understand better the driving influence of economic changes on Universal Credit volumes and caseload composition in the medium-term.

The DWP statistical work programme [Statistical work programme - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dwp-statistical-work-programme/statistical-work-programme) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dwp-statistical-work-programme/statistical-work-programme>) outlines developments regarding DWP official statistics. It reports changes delivered from April 2020 in statistical methodology and specific measures used in areas such as housing, income, employment, and welfare. The document brings together publication-specific plans and cross-departmental plans for future developments. Please also refer to the [DWP statistics user engagement strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/dwp-statistics-user-engagement-strategy) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/dwp-statistics-user-engagement-strategy>) setting out intentions to increase both the quantity and quality of user engagement on the National and Official Statistics produced by the Department.

Contact

The DWP ARI 2023 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 policy impact.

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

Work and Health Joint Unit

These research questions include the interests of the DWP and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) Joint Work and Health Directorate (the joint unit), jointly sponsored by DWP and the DHSC. 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 DWP and DHSC Joint Unit and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) cooperate and collaborate on matters concerning their respective health responsibilities. This includes matters of mutual interest such as research with

employers into demographics, occupational psychology and behavioural science, specific conditions and the workplace, work-related stress, and mental health at work and musculoskeletal conditions. DWP, DHSC and HSE also collaborate on horizon scanning and foresight work in terms of considering work-related ill health outcomes.

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