



Ministry of Housing,  
Communities &  
Local Government

## Areas of Research Interest

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May 2018

ISBN: 978-1-4098-5234-6

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# Introduction

1. The purpose of this short document is to set out strategic research and evidence priorities across the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's key policy areas. It complements our high-level [Single Departmental Plan](#) and is a summary document through which the Department can promote its evidence needs to Research Councils, academics and the broader research community. It responds to the recommendations from [Sir Paul Nurse's review](#) about government departments communicating clearly with the Research Councils about their longer term research challenges.
2. It has been developed to inform Research Councils and other potential research funders or individual universities about the most important research questions currently facing MHCLG in order to help them to take decisions about research priorities. It provides an indication of the areas in which further academic research would be valuable in helping to improve understanding and to generate and implement policy solutions for the Department. It will be revisited and refreshed as needed.
3. We welcome contact from analysts and academics who wish to discuss their work with counterparts here in MHCLG.

## The role of evidence and analysis

4. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) aims to help create great places to live and work right across the country and to back communities to come together and thrive. We strive to:
  - Ensure people throughout the country have access to affordable and high quality housing
  - Provide opportunities for all parts of the country to thrive economically
  - Build integrated communities
  - Support effective local government.
5. Our objectives are to:
  - Fix the broken housing market
  - Grow local economies
  - Build integrated communities
  - Support effective local government
  - Ensure an effective response to the Grenfell Tower fire
  - Support local government, local economies and the housing sector to get ready for EU Exit, so that the department can continue to deliver its policies.

6. A robust evidence base is key to the Department being able to deliver on these priorities. MHCLG has a long tradition of evidence based policy making and regularly reviews evidence gaps across the areas in which it works. The Department has an active programme of data gathering, analysis and research (both quantitative and qualitative) to inform policy development in these areas and our analysts continue to build upon the expertise, knowledge and support of external parties, including academics, to build the evidence base we require to support policy development and delivery.
7. The Department is responsible for collecting and commissioning a whole range of data used to produce and publish over 50 National Statistics and other Official Statistics releases (of varying frequency) in accordance with the administrative, governance, and procedural arrangements set out in the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*. These include statistics on the housing market, house-building, homelessness, planning applications, land-use change, and Local Government Finance. In order to maintain 'National Statistics' status, the Department's statistical products meet strict professional standards set out by the UK Statistics Authority in their statutory *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. The Department is one of the largest contributors to <https://data.gov.uk/>.
8. Data is at the heart of our policy and decision making and service delivery. MHCLG is at the forefront of work in government to routinely release data in more open and useful formats. The Department has developed its own open data platform <http://opendatacommunities.org/> which now hosts over 200 fully open and linked datasets, mainly drawn from the department's statistical outputs. This is furthering our goal of being a data driven organisation and our vision for smarter working.
9. We work on the basis that statistics and research collected and used by MHCLG are made publically available and there are a range of professional codes of practice to support this. Externally commissioned MHCLG research is commissioned and managed in line with cross Government protocols, and we aim to publish final outputs promptly in line with Government Social Research Service Guidance. Our Ministers have access to emerging findings as appropriate and are consulted about the proposed publication and communications strategy well ahead of planned publication dates.
10. As well as ongoing data collection and systematic synthesis work of available evidence, we need to carry out new research and data collection to address key evidence gaps. Some work is carried out in-house but we also externally commission some projects, to bring in expert skills and the resources to undertake major projects, particularly those involving large scale fieldwork.
11. We contribute to the funding of four of the What Works Centres which most closely relate to our policy agendas: Centre for Ageing Better, Centre for Local Economic Growth, Centre for Wellbeing and the Early Intervention Foundation. We are linked in to the new Economic and Social Research Council's Evidence Centre for UK Housing (our Director for Analysis and Data has joined the International Advisory Board) and we will work collaboratively with the Centre to ensure it has access to the

data and research we are responsible for. Strong links are maintained with a range of academic institutions more generally.

## Thematic summary of evidence needs

12. We set out below a summary statement of our current research and evidence needs under a number of thematic headings which tie in with our strategic priorities and objectives. In addition there are cross-cutting themes which are not necessarily the lead policy responsibility of the Department but which we have an interest in.

### Fixing the broken housing market

13. The 2017 Housing White Paper highlighted a number of policy priorities including planning for the right number of homes in the right places; building homes faster; diversifying the housing market and helping people now including tackling homelessness and rough sleeping through a range of measures such as our Homelessness Prevention Programme. In-house analysis played a key role in underpinning the White Paper and further analytical work will be required to support these priorities in the future.

14. Over the years we have carried out an active programme of research and analysis on the housing market, land use planning and the social/affordable housing sector and we have a keen ongoing interest on all these issues. The department continues work to improve the quality and usefulness of its National and Official Statistics outputs, including in response to the [review](#) last year by the Office for Statistics Regulation in to Statistics on Housing and Planning in the UK. The work programme will include exploring the options for improving the quality of house building statistics.

15. We have made continuation of the annual English Housing Survey (EHS) a top priority in securing MHCLG's evidence base on the physical condition and energy efficiency of the English housing stock and household characteristics. 2017 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EHS, a demonstration of the importance of top quality research in informing housing policy and of the Department' commitment to such long term data collection and analysis. We actively encourage secondary analysis of EHS datasets which are deposited at the UK Data Archive and made available via the UK Data Service. The survey is also actively used by other Departments such as Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

16. Our key research interests going forward include:

- Developing an overarching strategy for housing and planning policy evaluations;
- Further work on modelling housing demand/estimating housing need building on the Department's Housing Market Model, developed by external academics and run in-house;
- Tracking the longer term impact of different policies to support home ownership; for example the ongoing Help to Buy Equity Loan evaluation;

- Projecting the demand for supported housing in England and monitoring the impact of policy changes;
- Exploring how support for housing costs influence labour and housing markets, work incentives, and household circumstances;
- Exploring how to update the evidence base on the transaction costs associated with the planning system and estimating the incidence and value of planning obligations and land transaction values;
- Better understanding the land market including White Paper proposals to improve the transparency and accessibility of planning and land ownership data;
- Commissioning research to understand decision-making in local planning authorities;
- Exploring the local and national data to understand the links between integration and housing;
- Using the EHS and other data to improve our understanding of consumer needs;
- Monitoring homes built on public sector land released by central government to provide a detailed annual progress check on actual numbers;
- Continuing to gain a better understanding of people's attitudes towards different types of housing by commissioning a housing/planning related module of questions in the British Social Attitudes Survey;
- Seeking to gain a better understanding of the position of private landlords and their tenants by setting up a new Private Landlord Survey;
- Continuing to gain a better qualitative understanding of what drives housing choices and take up of housing programmes;
- Ensuring we consolidate international evidence and best practice for example through PhD internships in partnership with the University of Sheffield and others;
- "What works" in relation to estate regeneration;
- Exploring how we can increase the transparency and availability of data on land for housing through increased digitalisation of the planning process;
- Understanding how best to monetise the external impacts of developing residential and/or commercial projects on previously developed land.
- Understanding the drivers of homelessness, particularly rough sleeping, working alongside DWP colleagues;
- Exploring the social, economic and fiscal costs of homelessness;
- Developing evaluations and learning the lessons from early prevention strategies targeted to help very vulnerable groups e.g. those at risk from domestic violence, rough sleeping and homelessness;
- Collating wider evidence on "what works" for preventing rough sleeping and homelessness;
- Building a better understanding of the impact of rough sleeping and homelessness interventions particularly in relation to tackling and preventing single homelessness and understanding what works.

## **Ensuring an effective response to the Grenfell Tower Fire**

17. Our analysts have led work on urgent building safety data collection and analysis to support work following the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, including the independent review of fire safety and building regulations. They will be involved in a range of longer term

building safety related work, as well as further work on the role of social housing and tenant participation.

## **Building regulation and energy performance**

18. New policy is emerging in relation to electric vehicle charging. The Government's [Industrial Strategy](#), published in November 2017, included a commitment to set standards through the Building Regulations to facilitate the future installation of electric vehicle charging in the home. Our Building Regulations and Energy performance team are working with the Office for Low Emission Vehicles on procuring research to support this commitment.

19. Other research interests going forward include:

- Responding to statutory commitments to reduce carbon emissions from buildings;
- Addressing risks in buildings due to a changing climate including overheating risk, indoor air quality, increased demand for comfort cooling and flood resilience;
- Understanding new structural risks such as those posed by the structural engineering design codes, product standards and those from existing forms of construction such as cladding;
- Improving our understanding of indoor air quality and ventilation in homes and reducing the risk of mould and damp including that associated with energy efficiency improvements in existing homes;
- Research to support the development of standards for fire safety and sound insulation;
- Gaining a better understanding of the role of buildings in responding to an ageing population and meeting the needs of disabled people for example by responding to increases in those with dementia or meeting the sanitary needs of increased numbers of disabled adults with multiple and profound disabilities;
- Complying with the Basic Safety Standards Directive, for example by assessing the risks of radioactive emissions from building materials and radon;
- Assessing the economic consequences of potential changes to the Building Regulations and supporting guidance, and reviewing the effectiveness of past changes.

## **Growing our local economies**

20. We continue to work with BEIS on local growth and place-based aspects of the government's Industrial Strategy and manage an economic impact evaluation of the European Regional Development Fund. We are also keen to understand the displacement effects associated with local-growth and place-based interventions. We are particularly interested in inclusive growth and the distributional impacts of policies on different groups of the population and the impact of our interventions and policies on places.

21. Key research interests going forward include:

- Mapping out the evidence requirements that will flow from withdrawal from the EU to inform a model of future local growth funding;



- Understanding the workforce implications after leaving the EU;
- Ongoing evaluation and learning from the European Regional Development Fund;
- Building a better understanding of what the impacts of local government finance reforms, (i.e. business rates retention) will be on economic and social outcomes
- Collation of ongoing evidence in relation to key programmes such as the Northern Powerhouse and the Midlands Engine, Oxford-Cambridge corridor, Thames Estuary as well as building the evidence base on the effects of Local Enterprise Partnerships.

## Supporting effective local government

22. Our analysts are leading analytical work to understand better local government and public services so they are able to deliver vital support to local people. Our analysts continue to work alongside policy colleagues to support the development of financial models and funding formulae to inform the Fair Funding Review and Business Rates Retention scheme. For the Fair Funding Review we are considering what local authority cost drivers and analytical techniques could be used better to measure and assess local authority need.

23. Our key research interests going forward include:

- Continuing to explore analytical options for measuring and assessing local need to inform the Fair Funding Review;
- Collating evidence to inform and track reforms of the Business Rates System;
- Exploring the relationship between funding and outcomes in order to quantify spending pressures;
- Bringing together better information to generate a deeper understanding of unit costs in local government;
- Consolidating the evidence on the costs and potential benefits of local government re-organisation and unitarisation;
- Developing sophisticated metrics to measure councils' financial risk, combining financial indicators, forecasts and other data in order to diagnose and explore trends in sustainability and identify outlier councils;
- Collating evidence on what lessons can be learned in relation to decentralisation and devolution;
- Collating evidence to explore the opportunities of and barriers to increased and improved digitalisation in local government.

24. In addition to these, we will continue to provide analytical support to incentivise the continued transformation of local public services and evaluate the reformed Troubled Families Programme to deliver improved outcomes for families. We also continue to work alongside other government departments to take stock of the evidence base in relation to integrating health and social care in particular collaborative work with Department for Health and NHS England on their evaluation of the Better Care Fund and New Models of Care.

25. Key research interests going forward include:

- Taking forward an annual report to Parliament on the process, impact and economic evaluation of the expanded Troubled Families Programme;
- Gaining a better understanding of the risk factors that can lead to domestic violence and;
- Exploring how service integration strategies and also innovative technology (machine learning, artificial intelligence, the internet of things, robotics etc) can help ease pressures on services such as adult social care.

## Building more integrated communities

26. We work in collaboration across government to improve the evidence base on what works to improve integration and to understand the causes of a lack of integration. We are providing analytical support to inform the Integration Strategy and a local integration support programme; providing analytical input to the appraisal of bids for the Controlling Migration Fund and longer term evidence base around the local impacts of migration (including those linked to Refugee and Asylum dispersal programmes); and working with other departments and local areas to measure integration outcomes.

27. We are also taking forward lessons learnt from a recent randomised controlled trial of community based English language pilots to inform the design of a new English language programme. We also play a key role in the cross Whitehall data audit looking into racial disparities in our public services, leading on some of the key analysis and sharing data on housing and public service outcomes with the Cabinet Office/MHCLG Race Disparity Unit.

28. Our key research interests going forward include:

- Evidence requirements linked to the Government's [Integrated Communities Strategy](#) around what works to promote better integration at local levels, and removing the barriers to integration;
- Exploring ways to measure, monitor and evaluate integration at a national and local level and working with other Departments to boost the quality of evidence on migration and integration impacts.

## Cross cutting issues, including Exit from the European Union

29. Our analysts work on a range of cross cutting issues that span our different Departmental interests and also link across other Whitehall departments. A particular focus is on understanding the implications of leaving the EU for MHCLG, including understanding workforce implications, understanding the effect on the demand for services provided by local government, understanding how local government finances may be affected and understanding the effect on for local economies and labour markets.

30. We will also be considering how we can support the work of the [cross-government loneliness team](#); for example by exploring local and national data to understand the links between loneliness and housing, planning, and local government.

## Methodological interests

31. In addition we are continuing to develop digital tools, interactive dashboards and other accessible outputs to communicate analysis and look to build upon this and explore further ways in which we can employ behavioral insight and make better use of real-time data. The Department has already made important strides in administrative data linking particularly in relation to our Troubled Families Programme but are keen to exploit other opportunities to do so.

32. Work is also underway in the Department to update its Statistics Plan which will set out a strategic approach to the task of collecting, compiling and publishing a portfolio of official statistics that cover the Department's key areas of responsibility. Last summer we scoped our Digital, Data and Technology plans, with the intention of employing robust and affordable digital tools, data and technology platforms to raise the quality and reduce costs of services both internally and externally. We are currently developing our quality assurance processes for key economic models. We are also interested in innovative research techniques and in particular methodological evaluation design on how for example to assess impact robustly when there is no obvious comparator or counterfactual.

## Ways of working

33. As well as carrying out in-house data collection, analysis and research, the Department commissions and manages external research to meet our evidence needs. All new requests for research are scrutinised by our internal Research Gateway team (a team of senior analysts, with procurement and finance colleagues) and must also be cleared by a lead Minister. We work closely with procurement colleagues and invitations to tender for new research are then advertised on <https://www.gov.uk/contracts-finder>. We aim to publish full details of our research, its findings and the supporting underpinning data, and work in line with different professional protocols.

34. We also have a wider range of different mechanisms for working with external organisations and academia. To illustrate:

- We run an economics and social research seminar series, where leading external researchers and experts share key findings and insights from their work with analysts and policy colleagues;
- We run bespoke round tables/practitioner sessions to discuss key policy issues and the range of external research and evidence available to inform further policy making;
- Our analysts contribute to external advisory groups and steering groups set up to oversee key research funded by other Departments and external organisations;
- We offer short and longer term internships for both undergraduates and post graduates;
- Several MHCLG senior analysts are now Fellows of the Centre for Science and Policy, University of Cambridge;
- We also work with external (non academic) organisations to support them with their own research/evaluation work and build this into our own evidence base.

35. The Department is open to exploring innovative ways in which it can engage with wider academia to support more effective policy making. Potential actions include:

- Further knowledge sharing and networking events on specific themes which align with the Departments strategic objectives;
- Ongoing and further supporting opportunities for secondments for our own analysts to work in external organisations, and for external secondees to join us;
- Ongoing and further supporting opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate/PhD Internships and;
- Exploring other initiatives which will support transparency about our evidence needs to enable effective engagement.

## Next steps

36. We welcome contact from external analysts and academics who wish to discuss their work with relevant counterparts here in MHCLG. Please note that as with other Departments' Areas of Research Interest documents, this is not a full list of projects or a potential invitation to tender and we cannot fund speculative research projects.

37. The key contact for follow-up queries is:-

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