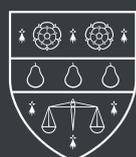




Report of the Tri-Nuffield Conference, *Delivering Public Good, Building Public Trust*

Setting the agenda for UK social
policy research in the 2020s

16–17 May 2019



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1. Introduction

In convening the conference, our aim was to harness the experience of the Nuffield Foundation, the Nuffield Trust and Nuffield College to stimulate cross-disciplinary thinking on the major challenges for UK social policy in the 2020s and the research agenda that could help address them. We brought together delegates from academic and other research institutions, the civil service and other public bodies across the fields of health, education, justice and welfare. The conference will also be instrumental in defining an agenda for the Nuffield Foundation Strategic Fund and in encouraging the involvement of those beyond the research community in the framing of research.

The report summarises the main themes that emerged from the conference sessions. They provoke a number of broad reflections:

- The importance of **community** – and the damaging consequences to individual well-being from its erosion – was widely mentioned. However, in our discussions, the term itself and the characteristics of what makes a successful community in the 21st century were not clearly defined.
- Although many different aspects of disadvantage are understood quite well on an individual basis, there is an inherent **intersectionality** to different aspects of disadvantage – public health, mental health, education and skills, the early years of life, digital exclusion, access to justice, social geography; inter and intra-generational relationships.
- Connected **interventions** across organisations, public services and public institutions are a precondition for those disadvantages being successfully addressed.

Advancing our understanding of these themes will require imaginative use of a variety of research methods and innovative uses of data. The following points were made:

- **Interdisciplinary** research is necessary to understanding the interrelation of these issues and the empirical basis for such interventions. Though there has been growing awareness in the research community of the importance of interdisciplinarity, research incentives still too often encourage siloed approaches that fail to take account of the complexities of these intractable social problems.
- Potentially transformative understandings of this agenda are made possible by the opportunities for new and experimental research **methods**, using big data, matched data, new digital social datasets and linkages and bio-social data.
- As government looks to independent research to offer fresh perspectives to improve decision-making, it would benefit from **research syntheses** that offer a guide to the wider and historical context of policy issues for departments that often have lost much of their own historical memory, and hence the ability to learn the lessons of past experience.
- Research needs to be framed in a way that primes it to achieve social **impact** without being overly reliant on simply setting out “what works” or relying on mechanistic, very local and sometimes unrealistic pathways to impact.

The breadth of the conference discussion was a stimulus to break through boundaries between the perspectives of research, policy and practice, quantitative and qualitative methods and between data-driven and normative judgements. There was a general consensus that our society was undergoing radical and disruptive changes that called into question previous assumptions about the basis for individual and collective well-being. However, it was not quite clear what exactly was changing and why. What is the balance

between fundamental external drivers – for example austerity and changes in demographic and labour market patterns – and a generational shift in social norms?

Technological change is removing communications boundaries between individuals and resets the terms of communication between individuals and institutions; national, devolved and local government are all finding it increasingly difficult to respond. In a culture where communication networks are now universal, dynamic, instantaneous, and interactive, government and institutions face new challenges of legitimacy. New techniques for engaging more directly with the experience of those who are the subject of research will be an important precondition of the perceived validity of research findings if they are used for the implementation of policy.

We will shortly be launching the Nuffield Foundation Strategic Fund which aims to provide a means of addressing some of these broad cross-cutting questions, with a range of approaches that reflect the challenges to impact and public legitimacy that participants identified.

2. Conference framework

The conference was structured around a number of themes and questions:

- What are the implications of the changing nature of inequalities and vulnerabilities for future policy?
- What are the challenges and opportunities in using new sources of data and data linkage to understand population trends, attitudes and behaviours?
- An assured start: What will best support the health, social, and educational development of children and improve their chances of good health and attainment in adolescence and adulthood?
- Education and skills for living in a digital society: What changes are necessary in the British education system to equip the next generation to best succeed in a digitally driven society?
- Restoring trust in our institutions: How does representative democracy and its institutions have to change to command greater legitimacy and trust in the digital age?
- Better research, better social policy? How might research better inform social policy-making and successful implementation?

3. Themes that emerged from the discussion

- The increasingly complex nature of disadvantage, vulnerability and inequality, and the urgency of the need to address them.
- The interconnection between inequities of public health and wider social disadvantage; the related impacts of public health, child welfare and educational outcomes.
- The rapidly changing nature of family dynamics and implications for childhood.
- Poor digital skills correlate with low levels of numeracy and literacy; there is a mismatch between the current education system and the changing skills needed on the pathways from formal education to the world of work.

- The impact of digital technologies on relationships between individuals, public institutions and the state.
- Corresponding challenges to the credibility, organisation and delivery of public services and social structures.
- Those charged with delivering services – whether in education, health, the justice system – across all parts of civil society are continually under scrutiny, and, arguably, driven more by measurement systems than outcomes that matter to individuals.
- The challenge of preventing institutional decline and an erosion of perceived legitimacy, even if levels of trust as previously measured have not altered significantly.
- The significance of online and social media data as research tools and the challenges of access to these data sources.
- The development of robust methods of public engagement alongside other research methods better to understand public understanding of key issues and how policy is experienced and perceived by those it affects.

4. Summary of insights from the conference presentations and discussions

4.1 Keynote lecture by Sir Angus Deaton, Senior Scholar and Professor Emeritus at Princeton University: *Why is democratic capitalism failing so many? And what should we do about it?*

Sir Angus’s lecture addressed the changing nature of inequalities in the US, the degree to which similar trends are a threat to the UK, and the urgent need to address them.

Well-being cannot be considered only in terms of material well-being – “the Chicago heresy”. The experience of 21st century inequality may not be defined in financial terms so much as by the loss of status, dignity and self-worth, and meaningfulness, “losing the basic support structures of life”. Inequalities manifest themselves in differences in health, education, gender and ethnicity and democratic participation.

For those most disadvantaged, increased inequalities have brought with them experience of chronic pain, drug and alcohol addiction and difficulties in socialising. These in turn are related to radical alterations in the nature of family life and the level of religious participation over the past generation. Though these trends are most marked in the US, there are increasing signs of them in the UK and other comparable societies.

Research that can address successfully these new interleaved challenges to social well-being will require different methods and a greater interdisciplinary range. In the face of such complexity, disciplinary siloes are “a real catastrophe”. Economics must engage with demography, history, sociology, psychology and epidemiology. There also needs to be a preparedness to think more broadly if we are to engage successfully with these broad questions; an emphasis on randomised controlled trials as the dominant research tool can limit and define questions too locally and too narrowly.

- [Watch Sir Angus’s lecture in full](#)
- [Find out more about the IFS Deaton Review, funded by the Nuffield Foundation](#)

4.2 Early years and childhood

As inequalities “interact and clump together”, the best advice for securing well-being in the course of a life remains to “choose your parents well”. There have been profound changes in family structures over a generation. Government interventions to improve opportunities in the early years of life continue to confront complex systemic issues. Although the context of austerity has had a bearing on policy outcomes, there remains the question of why levels of investment have not yielded the levels of improvement expected. The role of government-led interventions should be to reduce pressures on families and to enhance their capabilities.

When considering disadvantage and vulnerability in children’s early years, the experience of paediatric care reinforces the need to co-ordinate sectoral expertise when trying to resolve the complexity of individual cases. Many cases that present as health issues relate directly to other areas of social disadvantage. Different incentives across different public services have left the system as a whole ill-equipped to co-ordinate responses. The focus on early years intervention has arguably led to a neglect of adolescent issues, especially in relation to mental and physical health.

The mindset in both policy and research needs to give greater acknowledgement of the place of the individual in order to create better policy outcomes and to increase buy-in to changes. A related challenge is how best to give vulnerable adolescents a voice in order better to understand their assumptions and identify unmet needs. Both research and practice are failing to find effective ways of engaging with the evidence in vulnerable children’s narratives of their experiences. There remains the issue of trust when collecting evidence; there is limited trust for the NHS institutionally (and hence for the use of individual data by official services), but there is trust in individuals, such as GPs.

A multi-agency approach to engage vulnerable young people

Paediatric healthcare has become more about the individual and their “journey” rather than the particular medical intervention. This requires multi-agency approaches and time. Joining up agencies/actors is not always aided by system “breaks”, such as health authority boundaries. Finding the *right* time to intervene is important: find the teachable moments; (one example given was with victims of knife crime).

Social policy that demonstrates benefit for individuals can only develop if related services connect their thinking and practice. This (and the effects of losing local services) cannot be discussed without considering the impact of austerity and the growth of our reliance on digital environments to reduce costs (with a tacit assumption that there are consequent improvements in access, uptake, and outcomes).

In a complex civil society, it is necessary to revisit co-location/coordination of services and how best to make this work for children and young people. Whilst there is no ideal way to organise services and there will always be joins, there are good examples where this has paid dividends (such as Sure Start or London Challenge). There should be an audit of

individual examples of effective initiatives, though it is important to look beyond solely big/metropolitan examples.

View conference snapshots

- [Dr Dougal Hargreaves, Clinical Senior Lecturer in Paediatrics and Population Health at Imperial College London: How can we improve children's health outcomes?](#)
- [Leon Feinstein, Director of Evidence at the Office of the Children's Commissioner: Which are the most vulnerable populations of children in the UK?](#)
- [Naomi Eisenstadt CB, Research Fellow at the International Inequalities Institute at LSE: How can we help young people in their transition to adulthood?](#)

4.3 Education for a digital world

A digitally-mediated society, for all its many potential benefits, brings new inequalities of access and inclusion. It raises particular questions about the shaping of education and preparing young people for a cross-disciplinary, digital world – both as participants in the labour market and as citizens. What skills will citizens need and what variety of digital capability/competency/literacy are we aiming for?

The key questions were defined as:

- **What skills does the digital labour market need?** What skills do humans need (or indeed what skills do they have that machines won't)? A significant proportion of people of all ages are ill-equipped for this emerging labour market; the technological trends that replaced muscle jobs have now reached the service sector and will reach into the white collar/professional sector.
- Once we have established what these skills may be, **what then do we need to teach?** Data and digital skills are not only required in technical environments: we need to understand how to develop them to support, for example artistic and design-led practices. However, though there is a desire to encourage greater "creativity", or non-cognitive, "soft" skills, current evidence is that the labour market rewards numerate, analytic, scientific or data skills; so by creativity do we really mean the creative application of analytical skills and specific data skills? There is little evidence that schools are currently equipping students with the right kinds of skills to develop a critical intelligence for a digital world.
- If we can define the skills we need, **how will we find the teachers to teach them?** The inability to attract qualified teachers in critical subject areas remains as intractable a problem as a decade ago. How do we improve the teaching quality, particularly for those from low socio-economic backgrounds where those with potential depend even more on successful teaching to realise it?

Difference is good

Could we find and understand “*positively deviant schools*” – ones that embed learning about (say) mathematics in humanities or the science of art, blurring subject boundaries and teaching about co-dependencies?

Poor digital skills correlate with low levels of numeracy and literacy. Social capital and internet/digital media use are closely linked, and we cannot assume that the young are inherently digitally ‘able’ in ways that support learning and engagement in society. Some young people are as digitally disengaged or disregarding as the older generations. There is a weak correlation between confidence in skills used at home and at work. This poses a challenge to employers - should the digital workplace be more capable of drawing on the abilities young people develop through their use of apps and devices?

View conference snapshot

- [Professor Simeon Yates, Professor of Digital Culture at the University of Liverpool: What are the most significant digital inequalities in the UK?](#)
- [Elena Sinel, social entrepreneur and founder of Teens in AI: What would you change about the UK education system to enable young people to thrive? Elena was joined by Sara Conejo Cervantes, a Teens in AI Ambassador who spoke at the conference.](#)

All transitions matter

Whilst we have rightly looked closely at the early years and an assured start for all, post-16 transitions may be as important, especially for the majority of young people (perhaps 60%) who do not progress to higher education. We need to develop understanding of the transition from level 2 to level 3 (GCSE to A-level, typically, or Nationals and Highers in Scotland), where digital skills development is placed alongside numeracy and literacy. How do we make sure young people are resilient and can manage transitions?

4.4 The place of “Community”

The limitations of the concept of Meritocracy as a driver of wider social well-being was mentioned in a number of contexts. Participants referred to the renewed significance of “place” and social geography in the understanding of disadvantage as the socially mobile have distanced themselves from their former communities.

A recurring focus of discussion across the different conference themes was the significance of “community” in efforts to address disadvantage and vulnerability. However, the concept of community itself lacks definition. In government research, community integration is often simply a proxy for ethnic minority inclusion. Complex interrelated challenges of improving education, health, family resilience, early years and childhood outcomes are conditioned by their interaction with the wider communities in which they are situated. Communities in a digital world relate not only to locality and ethnicity, but to online communities and other forms of identification.

A recurring theme was the importance of establishing a clearer account of the different component aspects of a community that can characterise its strengths and weaknesses.

4.5 Rethinking approaches to research

We need to get better at measuring the world how it is, not how it used to be.

Future research can be greatly enhanced by the availability of new kinds of data (and improved access to older data and speed of processing it) from the public and private sectors and by the ability to link, mine and interpret them before introducing new interventions.

In addition to new linkages between official data and wider administrative data, new sources of unstructured data from social media – the “nowcasting” of social indicators - will offer a dynamic and broader understanding of behaviours and attitudes. Social media has become the architecture of people’s lives and shapes their identities in ways that have not been true in previous generations. Research methods will move from centralised to decentralised data models, with self-generating data offering faster and finer grained insights. A priority is how to unlock social media data productively and ethically and to work out the basis on which it can be used robustly and ethically in conjunction with other sources.

Researchers and those in policy need to be alert to biases within data collection systems. Gaps in participation (and the dangers of data determinism – where the data and the way in which it is collected defines a new version of reality) and better alignment and use of existing data will take us a long way to understanding what are the next, tractable, big questions. Socio-genomics, the linking of genetic and social data, will become increasingly significant, though it brings with it unresolved issues of representative inclusion, ethics and trust.

More enlightened policy making processes may result from capturing the interactive data and evidence inherent in digital and social media. However, there needs to be more interactions between social scientists and data scientists, otherwise tech-led solutions will result in “engineers effectively doing social science without knowing any social science”.

Sweating the data

There is a vast volume of data, but questions that sound relatively straightforward are still difficult to answer. For example, different aspects of children’s vulnerability, such as neglect (physical and mental) and disability, challenge the data systems. Do we know how many children fall into each “category” of vulnerability? And for how long? Are they in multiple categories? We can often say more about where they are “in the system” than how well (or not) they are faring.

View conference snapshots

- [Professor Melinda Mills, Nuffield Professor of Sociology, University of Oxford and Director, Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science: What is Nowcasting and how can it inform social policy?](#)
- [Dr Ridhi Kashyap, Associate Professor of Social Demography and Fellow of Nuffield College at the University of Oxford: What is driving population growth in the UK?](#)
- [Professor Helen Margetts, Professor of Sociology and the Internet at the University of Oxford, and Director of the Public Policy Programme at the Alan Turing Institute: What are the opportunities for using data science in policy-making?](#)

4.6 Trust in institutions and evidence

The main challenge for the UK public administration system is “the prevention of institutional decline”. Trust in public institutions depends on public access to them. This challenge applies in different ways to education and health, wider social policy and access to and experience of the justice system. The credibility of an effective justice system is a precondition for public trust in wider concepts of social justice and in a State that is seen to work in the interests of its citizens. This in turn depends on harnessing technological change in the service of public administration to demonstrate open, fair and efficient decision-making. In a digital future, the successful engagement of data-driven technology in policy making will determine the future of what it means to be a State.

Trust is both public and personal

Why should I trust this system to work? Where will my data go? Will my data prejudice how the system “sees” me? Questions of public trust are challenged by matters of definition and measurement. Has trust in civil society declined and do we know why? Has this loss of trust happened across all areas: has it changed as much in attitudes to the health service compared to the justice system? Can we have, for example, social justice with reduced access to legal aid?

Has loss/change in trust occurred as the ways of participating in society have increased but have not resulted in better outcomes? Are there examples of organisations that are running better services and have managed to do so whilst maintaining/improving user trust? Are there good, transferable, international examples?

There are links between trust in public administration and the manner in which research is conducted if it is to be the stable foundation for effective and trusted policy. In a society where identities are digital and self-generated, policy dependent on the greater interrogation and linkage of data depends on trust in the way that data is gathered and deployed. Different people at different life stages are more or less interested in sharing data, expressing views, relying on public services. Whilst there is a continual tension between designing systems for the majority and the individual, the research process should be careful not to create more excluded groups.

View conference snapshot

- [Professor Jane Green, Professor of Political Science and British Politics, Nuffield College, University of Oxford: Are we losing trust in public institutions?](#)

4.7 Public engagement and deliberation as an element of research

In the current state of public trust in institutional authority, data-driven policy, if it is to be seen as legitimate, has to take account of the importance of direct engagement with the perspectives and experience of those people most affected. Research projects from the outset need better to understand the public understanding of a question. Framing questions in that light may allow the conclusions from research to have better traction with those whose lives they affect.

Government departments increasingly recognise the need to balance data-led approaches with qualitative evidence. It is likely that Ministers' confidence in propositions will increasingly depend on users being part of the development of research and policy. Methods of public deliberation – citizen' juries, deliberative assemblies - will become more prevalent and there is an important role for independent research to ensure that the understanding of public understanding is in itself robust.

4.8 The right relationship between research and policy

The discussion identified the need to establish clearer pathways connecting the academic and wider research communities to those in policy and on the front line of practice. Most government departments now publish their areas of research interest. Government needs implementable responses to problems; it looks to independent research to give a substance to the questions to which it seeks answers, but which, given the pressure of events and resources, government does not always have the capacity to address with the depth of perspective that academic research can.

Government also needs synthesis and context. Departments, focused on delivery, have frequently lost their historical memory and could benefit greatly from timely research that provides the wider context and lessons of past experience to inform a proposed policy. However, the value of the Academy lies in its independence, and the independent framing of questions that may not easily fit the perspective of government. Indeed, this is what can make the academic questions valuable – they have the capacity, by thinking long and differently, to reframe the argument and offer original alternatives to entrenched problems.

View conference snapshot:

- [Melanie Dawes, Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government: What are policy-makers looking for in research?](#)

5. Beyond the conference

This report summarises many of the views expressed at the conference, both by speakers and participants, but in providing this record, we do not imply that these are views universally held by all participants, or that they are necessarily the views of the Nuffield Foundation, Nuffield Trust or Nuffield College. A valuable aspect of the conference was the opportunity to

hear different perspectives and divergent views, and we look forward to further interrogation of the issues discussed through the research we fund.

Feedback from the conference noted the value of conversations between participants from different spheres and disciplines which led to intersecting discussions that would not normally take place. The three Nuffield organisations are extremely grateful to all who took part for the way they linked their perspectives and shaped the overall direction of the event. It was especially valuable to have a contingent of civil servants and those from other public bodies engaging directly with the research community, and to be able to place research in the context of creating and delivering policy.

We intend to build on the conference to offer participants, and others, a network of further seminars over the coming months to contribute to the developing research agenda on the main themes that the Nuffield Foundation intends to fund in the course of the next two years.