



MAKING THE CASE

FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

No.1 WELLBEING



Foreword by Professor Cary Cooper CBE AcSS
Chair of Council, Academy of Social Sciences

As a Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health, as well as Chair of the Academy of Social Sciences, I am well aware of the real difference social science makes to our wellbeing. With good information derived from solid, scientifically based research, it is possible to bring about improvements to our society and make changes where and how they will actually have impact.

Social science research has to be at the heart of public policy, and Nick Moon AcSS, the Director of national survey company GfK NOP, summed it up well when he wrote to us:

“As a survey researcher working mainly in the field of government-funded research I could be said to be part of the whole phenomenon known as ‘evidence-based policy’ and I am certainly proud of the contribution to knowledge, and indeed to society, that has been made by many of the surveys I have worked on. There are some things that government can only really find out by carrying out interviews with large numbers of the people who are users of government services or affected by government policy, and as someone at the sharp end – the data collection end – of this process, it is very gratifying to see the hard work put in to making a survey work properly and translated into usable data for policymakers.”

I am delighted to be able to show you some examples of ‘social science in action’ in the UK, in this first in a series of booklets making the case for social science; other titles showcasing work under other themes will follow.

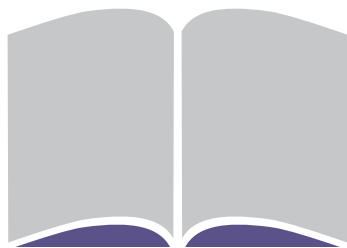


Foreword by Professor Ian Diamond AcSS
Chief Executive, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

The UK funds much of the best social science research in the world and hosts many of the best social scientists. Their work deepens and expands our collective understanding of where society is and where we, as a global community, are heading. Social science research has a real impact on the world that we live in by providing insights that, for example, inform new policies and practices, as well as providing the basis of assessing existing initiatives. The success of innovation, be it in the public, private or third sector, is dependent not only on research evidence about current practice and the potential for improvements, but also on knowledge about how to optimise implementation and uptake in the targeted area.

At this point in time, where all public funding is under pressure, there is an understandable demand from the public to see the impact of research investments on society, and on their own lives. As the examples in this booklet show, the social sciences impact across a wide range of areas – from crime prevention, poverty and re-employment to healthy diets and child wellbeing. I believe these cases illustrate both the breadth of social science research and its contribution to improving life and wellbeing in the UK and beyond.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ian Diamond' in a cursive style.



Eradicating illiteracy

Illiteracy and low educational attainment are major problems in areas of social deprivation. Between 1997 and 2007 Professor Tommy MacKay AcSS, an educational psychologist at the University of Strathclyde, set up a project with West Dunbartonshire Council which succeeded in eradicating illiteracy in a sustainable manner for the first time anywhere in the world.

Tommy MacKay and his team tried various teaching and motivational methods in different ways and found that using a combination of educational techniques led to a dramatic improvement in literacy levels. They asked the schools to teach reading by building up words from letter sounds (a process called synthetic phonics) and also to improve attitudes towards learning and self-image by getting the children to declare that they were going to be good readers. In addition, struggling readers were identified and given intensive support, even at secondary school level. As a result, children were no longer being hampered

in their learning by poor reading ability, and family attitudes had also been changed.

This remarkable outcome led to the formation of the National Literacy Commission in Scotland to transfer these techniques to other local authorities, both in Scotland and the rest of the UK. The work gave rise to many front page headlines in the national press as well as TV and radio interviews, and is the subject of a chapter in a book written by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, published in July 2007.

Kathleen, a pupil at Braidfield High School, Clydebank, summed up the project's success when she said:

“When all this started I couldn’t read. I was a failure. Now I have a cupboardful of books at home. My favourite authors are Roald Dahl and JK Rowling. Now I am a success.”



Effective crime reduction and prevention

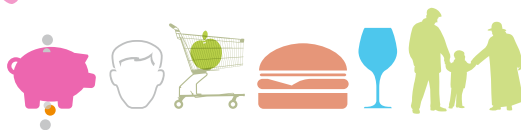
Effective crime solving and reduction requires solid problem-solving techniques, and Nick Tilley AcSS, a Professor of sociology at Nottingham Trent University, played a key role in helping police and other crime reduction partnerships with this. He introduced a method involving Scanning for crime patterns, Analysis of incidents, Response and Assessment, known as SARA. Whilst this sounds a simple linear process (completing one stage and going on to the next), in practice it is anything but. However, by using a formal method to identify and analyse recurrent patterns in problems brought to them by the community, police forces can avoid guesswork and feel more confident as they tackle crime and disorder.

The Home Office was so impressed by the help this gives to those trying to reduce crime, that it now recommends the method in much of its guidance and also makes an annual 'Tilley Award' for the best examples of its use. For example, one of the 2009 winners acted successfully against lead theft, which was a major problem for community

buildings in Avon and Somerset. They worked out that a key part of the problem was the local scrap metal market. Among other things, dealers were persuaded to manage and record their transactions in ways that made them less open to receiving stolen lead, and they were also encouraged to pass on information about suspicious activity. Theft of lead fell as it became more difficult and more risky to sell it.

Nick Tilley has also encouraged the use of 'situational crime prevention', which focuses on reducing or removing the opportunities for criminal activity. This approach is now routinely used in both the public and the private sectors to prevent crime. A lot of scientific evidence has now been amassed which dispels the myths that reducing opportunities for crimes simply moves them elsewhere and that victim fear is an inevitable corollary. Instead, wider crime reduction and a sense of empowerment for victims appear to be more common side-effects.

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The New Entrepreneur Scholarship: empowering disadvantaged groups

Could developing budding entrepreneurs help socially deprived areas? Some evidence suggested that this might be the case, so the then Chancellor Gordon Brown encouraged Higher Education Institutions to discover how to promote enterprise to disadvantaged communities through the New Entrepreneur Scholarship Programme (NES). Professor Oswald Jones and Dr Dilani Jayawarna helped develop this programme in Manchester Metropolitan University Business School. NES ran in England from 2001 to 2008, providing training courses to develop the skills required to run successful businesses.

NES participants were recruited from areas in the lowest 25 per cent of communities based on income, employment, health, education, housing, crime and living environment. The research team found that the people taking part in the programme did not generally respond well to

conventional lectures, so they chose 'action learning' as the teaching method. They organised would-be entrepreneurs into groups, which were encouraged to develop a questioning approach to solving their own problems. In this way people learned within their business activities and developed both support networks and ways of dealing with the real issues they were facing as nascent entrepreneurs.





The project concentrated on helping participants prepare detailed business plans and the project team also offered mentoring and presentations on key themes, such as understanding the market, identifying opportunities and obtaining finance.

Many new successful businesses resulted. Rebecca, one of the entrepreneurs, said:

“NES has been amazing, it showed me how to make a business out of something I love. It has been brilliant, with heaps of support. I don't know what I would have done without it.”

The figures speak for themselves: before the Northwest programme 86 per cent of its participants were economically inactive but after the programme 79 per cent had

become economically active and, in 2006, they were contributing approximately £35.2 million a year to the Northwest economy. Unemployment was left behind as the participants began to make a useful contribution to their local areas and the region as a whole.



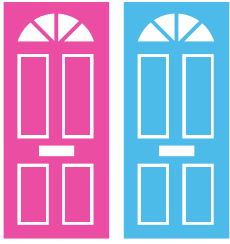


Coping with large scale redundancies

When large manufacturing firms collapse a key challenge is to help former workers find suitable and acceptable re-employment. Professor David Bailey AcSS of Coventry University led a team of researchers in carrying out ESRC-funded research on the economic and social impact of the MG Rover closure in 2005.

The team found that, three years after closure, over 90 per cent of workers were back in work but many workers had taken significant pay cuts. Sixty per cent of workers had undergone training and education: two thirds of them took up the offer of free training places offered by local agencies, whilst others underwent training by their new employers. The types of assistance and support that people found most helpful were free travel to a training course or job interview, a free place on a training course, being sent on a training course by a new employer, and help with setting up a business. However, most of those who found a new job still did so through their own initiative or through personal contacts.

The research suggested that a mix of different policies is required in such situations to help people who have been made redundant find new employment and to ensure that local needs are suitably addressed. As a result, the researchers were able to inform public agencies and employers how best to deal with plant closures: employees need to be given the necessary skills to cope as industries change; they must have access to high quality, flexible education and training programmes so that they can find different types of work; and they must have support from information and mobility programmes. This research has been used recently, for example with LDV in Birmingham, by helping to frame policy responses to situations where plants have closed and, in turn, help ex-employees improve their chances of finding new work.



What really is a 'deprived neighbourhood'?

The Government quite rightly targets its regeneration policy at deprived neighbourhoods, which are normally identified by how the community is made up: for example, what proportion of its inhabitants are unemployed or on low incomes. The problem is that this takes no account of the different functions that deprived neighbourhoods play in the context of the housing market, so they might not need or benefit from the same assistance.

On behalf of the Department of Communities and Local Government, Professor Brian Robson of the University of Manchester looked at differences between deprived neighbourhoods by discovering where its residents came from and where they go to: in other words, whether they are moving up the social scale anyway – or not.

From his research he developed a new way of classifying deprived neighbourhoods based on their different functional roles.

He found that each type of area had different needs in terms of government assistance. Three of these areas can actually be thought of as performing 'normal' roles in the housing market and require less intensive attention as residents are moving upmarket in coming to them or upmarket when they leave. The most intensive assistance can be focused instead on the fourth group, where people move in from equally or more deprived neighbourhoods and also move out to equally or more deprived areas, so that the neighbourhood is not improving on its own.

Identifying those communities in real need of help makes better use of resources and the Government's latest 'Regeneration Framework' has incorporated this classification scheme, which is also being widely used by local authorities.



How volunteering helps

In recent years the Government has been emphasising and encouraging volunteering as a way of getting people back into the workplace, but it was not clear that this was the real reason people volunteered. In an ESRC-funded research project Professor Irene Hardill AcSS of Nottingham Trent University and Dr Sue Baines looked at one particular community deeply affected by lack of employment to discover why people come to be volunteers.

The research team interviewed many residents and found that most people volunteer to make a difference in the community rather than for career development; in fact many volunteers are outside the labour market anyway because of their age, disability or care responsibilities. So, understanding volunteering simply as a way of getting back into employment is too narrow and risks excluding those who are not aiming to return to traditional paid employment.

The researchers also noticed that this fact did not devalue the role of volunteering within communities blighted by limited employment opportunities. Rather, they found that volunteering enhances levels of active citizenship and community spirit in an area and helps people build up a sense of belonging to a place.



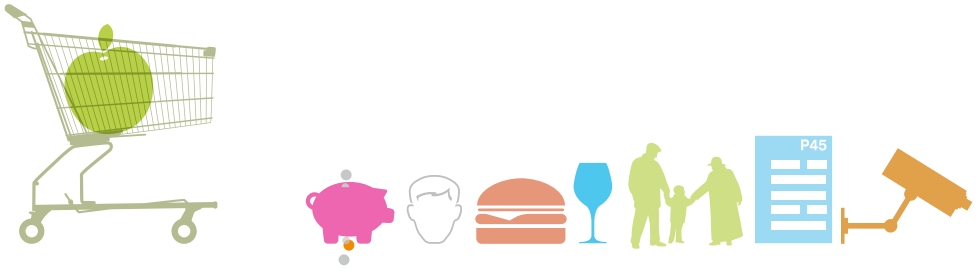


On a personal level, it can develop an individual's self-confidence and provide a structure for their lives, getting them out of the house and interacting within the community, providing the same sense of meaning and identity that many people find in a satisfying job. Linda, who is registered blind, said:

“If it wasn't for the volunteer work I would be stuck in the house 24/7.... I want to give something to the community, where there are people worse off than I am. The day will come when I have to give in and I just hope that someone will be there to support me.”

Having demonstrated the value of volunteering – especially for those beyond the labour market – Irene Hardill has worked with the Disability Rights Commission (now Office for Disability Issues) and Age Concern to develop material that helps communities to recruit, value and use older and disabled volunteers.





Improving eating advice and challenging myths about families and food

People often think they know how families eat now and how they ate in the past, and they use this 'knowledge' to make suggestions about current problems concerning weight, healthy eating and family cohesion. Professor Peter Jackson AcSS led some research into families and their relationship with food to try to find out what was really going on. He and his team surveyed many different groups of people and analysed the data on families and their eating habits. For example, they looked at where eating habits and traditions come from; how families decide what, when and how they eat; where they buy their food and how they decide; how mothers feed their babies and toddlers, and what children's lunchboxes are really like.

The research found that, in fact, people still see shared and home cooked family meals as an important symbol of family life, although many weren't able to achieve this on a regular basis. It also found that popular statements about the decline of family meals are exaggerated, as family meals have actually taken a variety of forms in different times and places.

Much health education material assumes that 'healthy eating' is a simple matter of individual choice and lack of 'healthy eating' is down to weak wills, or mothers who can't cook or parent properly. The research showed instead that, because food choice is governed by a whole range of social and economic circumstances, apparently 'unhealthy' choices may seem quite rational in some circumstances – where 'healthier' food will not be eaten, for example, and simply go to waste.

As a result the project demonstrated that the way in which people eat is related to the way they live the rest of their lives, and that health advice must be offered to people so that it makes sense in terms of their everyday lives if it is to work effectively.



Battling unfair labour practices

In 1999 the Government included a clause in the Employment Relations Act that said that, if the majority of a workforce demonstrated through a ballot that they wanted a union, then the management should recognise it. When this law was reviewed in 2003 it appeared to be working well. However, some people suspected that some employers were unfairly influencing workers to vote against unions, but it was only a suspicion and the Government initially regarded such practices as too difficult to legislate against.

Professor Stephen Wood AcSS, from the Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield, led a team of researchers which investigated this law. Overall, their research supported the government's conclusion that the procedure was working as intended. However, it also exposed deficiencies which were allowing some employers to frustrate claims for union recognition.

The research team looked closely at what was really going on when employees held a ballot to decide whether they wanted

union recognition, and found that various tactics had been used to influence the vote or to limit those voting in several cases where less than half the workforce had voted for a union. Examples included: using supervisors to let the workforce know the employer didn't want a union; one-to-one meetings between managers and employees about the implications of union recognition; victimisation or dismissal of pro-union activists; and threats to move production elsewhere. The team also found a significant relationship between the use of two or more such tactics and a failure to achieve a majority vote in favour of a union.

The researchers published their results widely, providing powerful evidence of a need for change, and the law was subsequently altered to include specific provisions to prevent employers from using unfair practices with the intention of influencing the result of a ballot; for example they must respect the privacy of union meetings and refrain from trying to persuade workers not to attend union meetings.



How social science saves lives

We often think that industrial accidents are, well, accidental. In other words, they are inevitable, cannot wholly be prevented, and putting safety equipment in place is the best a company can do. But studies show over and over again that industries can reduce their accidents by good management. This does include designing the workplace so that it is safer and training workers how to use the equipment properly. Yet, all industries find that these 'technical' solutions can only go so far. They may reduce the number of accidents, but you never reach zero. This is a sure sign that something more is needed.

In the 1980's and 1990's several major industries became aware of this challenge. They initially thought that what they needed to do was urge their workforce to take more care, put up notices and ensure there were safety officers active in every department. They approached Professor David Canter AcSS to help them with this, but it became clear that simply urging

people to be more careful was not enough: it was necessary to change the way the organisations thought in relation to safety. This followed the experience and theories of many social scientists who emphasise that day-to-day actions are embedded in a framework of the expectations we all have of how we should behave and how we see others behave.

Unsafe working practices have to become completely unacceptable and creating such a social climate cannot come from the 'top down'. So, Professor Canter and his team set up procedures to make each department in a factory agree what safety procedures they should be following.



They found that some departments already took some of the 'house-keeping' seriously (for instance, they always tidied up oil spills and ensured that potentially dangerous objects were not left lying around), but they perhaps wouldn't be so careful about wearing appropriate head protection. Following the surveys and discussions the departments knew where they had to act and, as these were decisions they had made themselves, the workforce owned them.

Within the first year of the research team's involvement the most dangerous part of the steel factory, where they were continuously casting molten metal, managed to avoid accidents altogether!

Marketing people already understand the power of social processes in getting us to buy their product, but this understanding has also been drawn on to save lives in non-industrial contexts. For example, it is particularly important in understanding and

managing behaviour in emergencies. Fire regulations often assume that people will panic when they see smoke and just run, but actually they don't. In reality people try to work out what is happening and look to others to help them decide whether they need to get out. This discovery has led to an emphasis on management and training rather than simply sounding fire alarms. Similarly, with crowd control: in the past it was suggested that people in a crowd lose their human sensibilities and become like animals – and this is sometimes still claimed – but it has been shown to be very misleading. Rather, crowds need to be understood as individuals who take their lead from others with whom they identify. These ideas are finding their way into the training of those who control major crowd events, especially football matches. When these ideas are acted on there has been virtually no crowd trouble.



The importance of good parenting and child wellbeing

How to help children at risk of social exclusion and what can be done policy-wise to maximise the potential wellbeing of every child was a question pursued by Professor Ann Buchanan AcSS of the University of Oxford.

Using existing data gathered over a long period as well as new material, Ann Buchanan and her team looked at the outcomes for children with psychological problems, who were less satisfied with life and who had poor social networks. They found that children in separated or divorced family situations or in extreme poverty were at some risk of social exclusion, but the biggest risk factor was a child spending time in state care. The research, supported by the ESRC, also showed that fathering helped protect children from later exclusion. Although many fathers were not very involved in their children's lives, simply 'being there' protected children against many adversities.

When the research team looked at children with divorced parents they found enormous damage was done to children when

their parents were in conflict over their futures following divorce. Ann Buchanan's most recent research has shown that grandparents can be important in helping children cope with family difficulties.

As a result of this and other research, policies have changed: children are now kept with their families wherever it is safe to do so and extra support is given to those who have to be taken into care. Much greater efforts are now made to involve fathers in the legal processes after divorce and in their children's lives, and other attempts are being made to reduce conflict around post-divorce arrangements for children.

More recently the research on grandparenting has hit the headlines and is now incorporated in the policy of both the Government and the Opposition.



Better ways of tackling poverty

Even today many children live in poverty and, whilst governments generally agree that this should be changed, they don't always know the best way to go about it. So, Professor Ruth Lister AcSS of Loughborough University explored how to understand poverty better. For example, the last Conservative government wanted to pay Family Credit to poorer families through the pay packet; similarly, when the Labour government was thinking about how to improve the situation of children living in poorer families, it too decided to pay families extra tax credits (which replaced Family Credit), through the pay packet of the main wage earner.

Ruth Lister and her colleagues had already been investigating how families with low incomes actually used and thought about their money by talking to a wide range of them. Their research showed clearly that the main wage earners, who were usually male, often regarded additional income paid to them in a personal way, so that it would probably be spent on items for themselves,

for example on technical gadgets. They also demonstrated that mothers were far more likely to spend additional money on items specifically for the children, such as food or clothing.

Earlier solid scientific research on how people really live and make spending decisions helped to persuade the last Conservative government to pay Family Credit direct to the mother, rather than through the pay packet. The later Labour government wondered if the findings were outdated because more mothers work nowadays, but Ruth Lister and her colleagues were able to demonstrate that they were not, and a compromise solution was proposed for the Working Families Tax Credit. Later, when the Child Tax Credit was introduced, Ruth Lister's research and discussions with government ensured that it was paid directly to the main caring parent – still typically the mother – and their research findings concerning the difference between 'money in the purse and money in the wallet' were widely quoted.



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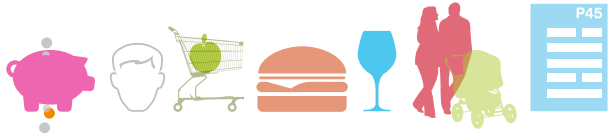
Perceptions of older people

As we all live longer lives the number of older people in the UK is increasing, but local councils have not appeared to be paying enough attention to this fact and their policies have focused on older people as users of care services rather than as potential active citizens, able to live active and independent lives in their local communities.

The Audit Commission used a mixture of social science methods to find out what was happening, taking existing information and investigating what these figures meant in practice. It interviewed older people about their needs and experiences, employed 'mystery shoppers' to check how well services work for older people, and set up focus groups to discuss particular issues. For example the mystery shoppers, all older people themselves, enquired about leisure facilities to find out if they were suitable, and they were often offered an assessment for care needs even when they said they were fit and well.

The research found that many councils were not adequately prepared for this shift in age and increasing diversity of the older age group. It also found that myths and stereotypes still abound so that councils, and other local services, often fail to understand how most older people actually use a wide range of local services.

The Audit Commission published its findings in the report *Don't Stop Me Now*, which recommended that councils should work with older people to 'age-proof' council services, and it made a particular point that councils should tackle social isolation and support independent living.



The Audit Commission also discussed its research with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Cabinet Office. It gave councils clearer guidance about what they should be doing for older people, and many now use the Audit Commission's tools to help them understand the needs of older local people. The new Department for Work and Pensions strategy, *Building a Society for All Ages*, has addressed many of the issues the research raised and will be the basis for government policy on the ageing population, improving life for older people.





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