

UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY POLICY AND PARTNERSHIPS FORUM (PPF)

Introduction

How can we tell how people's circumstances, behaviours or outcomes are changing for better or worse, and what factors appear to matter most in explaining those changes? [Understanding Society's](#) main substantive function is to track the fluidity of human experiences overtime and identify their causes and consequences. These changes may be the result of the natural course of life, significant events, shifts in environments and technologies, or government policies.

To guide and strengthen the interaction between the Study's data, evidence and growing research community with policy, public reforms, economic growth, health and wellbeing, and equality, we have established an external **Policy and Partnerships Forum**. The Forum is an **advisory group** and will support the Study's [Scientific Leadership Team](#). It will consist of policy experts and practitioners from different organisations who can offer a dynamic perspective on knowledge mobilization, engaging new audiences, and optimising the impact of the Study across government, business and charities.

While the Forum is not a formal part of the governance structure, its creation is in parallel to the overhaul of the governance and committee structure for Understanding Society. The new governance structure, combined with various advisory groups, are designed to help inform the future direction of the Study, discuss needs and opportunities, manage key risks and ensure accountability (see Appendix 1). This paper sets out information on the Study and the role of the Policy and Partnerships Forum.

Overview

The UK, its home nations and local communities faces major challenges and uncertainties over the coming decade, not only due to the short and long-term effects of financial crisis, austerity, Covid-19, and cost of living, but also because of an ageing society, uncertain growth and productivity, the climate emergency, artificial intelligence, and social divisions.

Understanding Society is part of UKRI's multi-million pound investment in UK's [data infrastructure](#), and it is vital for the Study to continue to respond to changing user needs and innovate in how it works. The Study is funded by UKRI's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and supported by a number of government departments and devolved administrations. Alongside this investment, the [Knowledge Exchange Framework](#) (KEF) for universities, designed to improve the use of public funds for knowledge exchange (KE), provides an opportunity to think about how the Study engages with government, the third sector, business, the public and where it can add value through data and science.

In terms of external engagement with stakeholders, the Study has focused on engaging policy and practitioner audiences across a diverse range of sectors, for example, data and evidence users from government departments, charities, thinktanks, Parliamentary Select Committees, What Works Centres, local authorities, business bodies, etc. We directly work with a number of government departments and devolved administrations who are co-funders of the Study.

The number of data users has been consistently growing since the Study started, and alongside this there has been a growing volume of published papers and reports, with a higher than average footprint

in highly rated journals. Alongside the main survey, there is a programme of enhancements to the Study. The Understanding Society team are pioneering new methods of collecting specific types of data as well as collecting more timely data. Improving access and supporting users is critically important to the Study, including the development of new training courses and tools for users.

The Study delivers a range of knowledge exchange activities covering events, publications, blogs and podcasts. Its impact as a data infrastructure project can be viewed [here](#). It receives [regular and wide ranging media coverage](#) of new findings – both nationally and internationally.

Understanding Society goals for knowledge exchange and impact

Unlike physical or natural sciences, social sciences and humanities do not offer sudden breakthroughs or rapid discoveries or the next big technology. But they do provide knowledge for sense-making, stimulate collective understanding, and help forge new alliances and ideas.

The Study is currently pursuing a number of knowledge exchange goals delivered through the Policy and Partnership Unit, and in collaboration with other internal teams and external organisations:

1. Increase the use of Understanding Society data amongst policy facing organisations.
2. Facilitate knowledge exchange between academic researchers and policy audiences.
3. Build capabilities in longitudinal research amongst non-academic users.
4. Promote opportunities for generating impact amongst researchers and build their know-how in how to influence policy.
5. Identify and communicate impact stories.

Future funding rounds for the Study will provide an opportunity to revisit and update these goals. The UKRI ESRC, who specify the range of benefits and impact for the Study, have funded the Study to 2031, including a mid-term review. How the things we do reasonably generate the effects we want on science, policy and society, and our pathways to such outcomes, is presented in our [theory of change](#).

Terms of reference

Bringing a passion for action, critical reflection and change, you will strategically guide the Study's engagement, influencing and impact activities.

The Policy and Partnerships Forum will enable members to discuss both demand-side issues (e.g. policy issues to prioritise) and supply-side issues (e.g. access to data and user support). We hope you will also benefit from the diversity of expertise and perspectives represented on the Forum. Some members will have an interest in jointly working with the Study beyond their advisory role, e.g. partnering on an external event. Forum members will also have access to the Understanding Society's scientific and training events.

The Forum's advisory role will enable it to be flexible, creative, challenging and informal, and not be encumbered with formal governance and operational performance responsibilities that come with running a large, complex and long-term study such as Understanding Society.

The tasks of the forum are to:

- Advise on **general strategy** for knowledge exchange and opportunities for maximising the reach and impact of the Study – given its scientific direction, content and Benefits Plan
- Provide a **steer on knowledge exchange activities** for each year (in the context of public debates, emerging policy and environmental constraints).



Economic
and Social
Research Council



University of Essex

- Provide specific **advice on sectoral engagement and development** and how to build capacity in data analysis and longitudinal research, particularly in business and third sector organisations.
- Share experiences and insights on trying to **address more complex social and economic issues** (i.e. so called ‘wicked problems’), and where Understanding Society can add value.
- Propose ideas on **co-production and ‘demand-led’ problem solving approaches** (e.g. data dives)
- Offer **connections and pathways to potential individuals and organisations**, and act as ambassadors on behalf of Understanding Society.
- Provide **comments when requested** on consultation documents, reports or funding proposals prior to their submission to funding bodies or the Strategic Oversight Board.

Membership and meetings

The Forum will include around 8 to 10 external members who represent a range of senior individuals from across national and local government, third sector, business, trade unions and the media. Membership is by invitation.

Membership will be for three years, with an option for renewal for an additional term. Departmental members of Understanding Society Co-funders Group, with whom the Study has ongoing contractual arrangements, will be invited to join the Forum/attend meetings if they wish.

The Director of Understanding Society, Associate Director of Policy, and Policy and Partnership Manager will be ex officio members of the Forum. Secretariat will be provided by the Study team.

The Chair shall serve a three-year term and be eligible for re-appointment for an additional term after which she/he/they shall leave the Committee.

ESRC Project/Case Officers will not be members of the Forum as their involvement will be through other governance structures. They will be invited to attend meetings as observers.

The Forum will meet twice a year. Papers will normally be provided in advance. Forum members will be consulted through e-mail or task groups outside of the main meetings.

Members should be alerted to the fact that from time to time they may be requested to set up small task groups to address specific issues, with membership of any task group entirely voluntary.

If a member of the Forum resigns before their term is finished, they may be replaced with a new member by Understanding Society – either from their existing organisation or a different organisation.

Membership of the group will be publicly communicated for accountability purposes, and members are equally free to communicate their membership of the Policy and Partnerships Forum.

Members may receive reasonable travel expenses for PPF meetings in person.

The Chair of the Forum, jointly with Understanding Society, will periodically review the membership of the group, its work, and terms of reference.

Updated: Version 3.2, January 2026



Economic
and Social
Research Council



University of Essex

Appendix 1 Understanding Society's Governance and Advisory Structure

