THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Social Policies and Distributional Outcomes

in a Changing Britain

Layers of engagement: learning from the *Social Policies and Distributional Outcomes* research programme public engagement exercise

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SPDO research brief 4

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Purpose of this note

The purpose of this note is to share with the research community the lessons we feel we have learned from a public engagement exercise that we undertook, in collaboration with Sense about Science, as part of the Social Policies and Distributional Outcomes in a Changing Britain (SPDO) programme, funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

The challenge

SPDO is a major research programme which has generated a wealth of findings. Led by Polly Vizard and the late John Hills, and carried out by a large team across the London School of Economics, Heriot Watt University, the University of Manchester and the Institute of Education, the research investigated developments in ten areas of social policy: social security; employment; early childhood; compulsory school age education; higher education; health; social care; physical safety and security; homelessness / complex needs; and social mobility. Across these areas, the programme analysed policies, spending and outcomes, focusing in particular on the period of the three Conservative Governments in power between May 2015 and the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, and putting these in the context of the preceding decades. One of the important over-arching conclusions was that 2015-2020 was a period of stalling social progress: across a range of important indicators, previous improving trends slowed down, stopped or went into reverse, and some inequalities widened.

We were keen to ensure that our findings reached beyond academia, and beyond 'the usual suspects', and for the purposes of the public engagement exercise chose to focus on this key finding. Based on evaluation of our previous knowledge exchange and dissemination activities, we considered that we had relatively effective means of engaging with other academics and the research community, and with policymakers (politicians and civil servants at different levels of government, as well as senior staff in public bodies and service providers). We had had some success also with intermediaries in the policy process (such as journalists, think tanks, and advocacy groups), but felt we could do more to make our insights available in a way that would be easy for them to pick up and re-use. Where we were less confident, was in extending our reach with the general public, other than via mainstream media. We judged this to be particularly important in an era (pre-pandemic) where it was (perhaps wrongly) believed that public trust in experts was low, and evidence had been used and abused by those wishing to influence public debate about important social issues, including, for example, child poverty.

We realised early on that taking engagement seriously and building trust involves listening as well as talking. We enlisted the help of Sense about Science, a charity that works to empower the public to use and scrutinise evidence and to encourage experts to communicate effectively with the public. They describe their approach as 'public led, expert fed'. Together with Sense about Science, we devised a programme of events and activities that would facilitate two-way communication with members of the general public about some of the key findings from the SPDO programme, with a view to developing, testing and refining our public-facing outputs.

Our aims, therefore, for the public engagement exercise were to enhance the reach of the SPDO findings, to build our own capacity to engage effectively with a wider public, to learn from the reactions we get from this engagement, and to share any insights gained with others in the research community.

The public engagement exercise was one element in a broader knowledge exchange and impact strategy, that included many other activities and outputs and aimed to reach a range of audiences, for example, work with data visualisation specialists at the BBC, with a graphic designer on an infographic, and a film maker on short films; a public seminar series and major launch event; written and in-person briefings, both general and bespoke for particular organisations and opinion-leaders; and a series of expert workshops with tailored follow-up.

Collaboration with Sense about Science

After intensive discussion between the research team and Sense about Science about the intended audiences and purpose of the public engagement exercise, we developed some preliminary stimulus material, which is described further below. For the first phase, Sense about Science recruited and convened participants for two 2-hour online, small group workshops, in October 2020: the first with 6 members of the public with no known professional interest in the topic (for example, a dog walker and an under-15s football coach), and the second with 9 members of the public whose occupations brought them into contact with some of the social policy issues we were talking about (for example, a homelessness support worker, a youth worker, and a trade union official). Participants were given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the stimulus materials ahead of the workshop but also given time within the workshop to read and reflect on them. Sense about Science facilitated a discussion, eliciting participants' reactions to the ideas, graphics and text, both in relation to the substance and in relation to how the findings were presented. At least two members of Sense about Science and at least two members of the research team attended each workshop.

Sense about Science reviewed and wrote a detailed report on the insights generated from the phase one workshops and these were discussed with the research team. CASE then revised the stimulus materials in accordance with the feedback from Sense about Science and the phase one workshop participants, ready for use in the second round of workshops, which took place in January 2021. One workshop comprised 5 members of the public with no known professional interest (for example, a chef and a hypnotherapist), and the other workshop comprised 6 members of the public whose occupations brought them into contact with social policy, this time including, for example, a HealthWatch officer, a National Lottery Community Fund manager, and a member of the Metropolitan Police with responsibility for engagement with schools. These workshops followed a similar format to the first round, and included members of Sense about Science and CASE researchers. Sense about Science reviewed the phase two workshops and gave detailed feedback to CASE, in a written report, and we met for a final instructive review meeting.

The specific reactions and comments to the stimulus material we presented have informed the subsequent development of public-facing outputs from the project, including our infographic and short films. What follows in the rest of this note are the more general lessons we feel we have learned from this engagement, which will be of value to us in future projects and, we hope, to others in the research community.

Thirteen lessons learned

1. Identify where on the spectrum of public engagement you are intending to be

'Public engagement' is itself a contested term and is employed with different meaning in different contexts. At one end of the spectrum, a fully participatory research approach implies facilitating the community itself (however defined) to identify what needs to be researched and the researchers then supporting it to do so and to implement any recommendations that arise.

Some distance in from that end of the spectrum lies 'co-production', in which the research team and a group of service users or other stakeholders in the policy being researched, work together to produce one or more outputs. Here the research agenda is usually set by the research team, although it may be modified by the service users in the process of co-producing the output.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is traditional dissemination, whereby the researchers have already produced their findings in a final form, and

they are seeking to communicate these findings to a wider, public, audience.

Knowledge exchange with the public sits some distance in from the 'dissemination' end of the spectrum. In this mode, the intention is to establish which aspects of the research that has been done are of most relevance and interest to the wider public, and then to understand how those findings can be explained engagingly and clearly. This involves a degree of flexibility over not only format but also content on the part of the researchers; it requires the researchers to 'listen' as well as to 'speak' to the general public.

When embarking on a public engagement exercise, it is important to be clear and to have agreement within the research team and with other stakeholders about what kind of engagement is intended, to avoid giving false expectations to members of the public who you do engage, and because the strategy for engagement will vary greatly depending on what position is adopted. In the remainder of this note, we consider public engagement in the form of knowledge exchange with the general public.

2. Select the focus and shape the narrative

Researchers need to identify which parts of the research programme have the potential to be of interest to a wider public. This is particularly challenging for a programme as rich and diverse as SPDO, covering as it does ten areas of social policy, across public spending, policies and outcomes, with attention to multiple dimensions of inequality. The challenge can be understood as having two parts. The first is to 'see the wood for the trees': identifying a set of findings that link together to create a strong, coherent narrative. There are likely to be several candidates. The second part of the challenge is to select from among these candidate narratives and supporting findings those which have a good chance of connecting with the intended audience, and being of use to them. In this exercise, after extensive discussion with Sense about Science and among the research team, we decided to focus on the story of stalling social progress: positive trends in a range of outcomes that slowed down or ceased in the years prior to the pandemic, and the evidence of some inequalities widening. We illustrated this central narrative with a menu of specific findings on child poverty, health inequalities, and violent crime, and put these to the test with the participants in our workshops.

Members of the team who have worked on particular policy areas or parts of the analysis are passionate about those findings and have an acute awareness of the complexity involved and of the nuance that is required to interpret the evidence. This expertise needs to be captured and presented

in a way that is engaging, clear and non-technical, and strikes the right balance between simplicity and detail.

We learned that participants expected the headers, graphs and text to tell a clear and coherent story. They were quick to spot gaps and inconsistencies, and to add their own questions about how far the general point made might be too simplistic.

3. Different approaches are needed to engage members of the general public who have different levels of interest

(i) people who are not actively interested in our topic. Our task is to gain their attention. One way to do that is to have some form of hook visible while scrolling social media which would immediately draw a person in (see also Lesson 5 below).

(ii) people who have a general interest in our topic as citizens but who are non-specialist and may be sceptical. Our task is to give them confidence in the trustworthiness of our evidence and that engaging with it will be worth their while. (See Lessons 4 and 6 below).

(iii) people who are interested and may potentially use the evidence, in their work or other activities. Our task is to provide them with the evidence in a form that is readily comprehensible, with sufficient but not overwhelming detail. (See Lessons 7 and 10 below).

4. Make the evidence as relevant as possible to the interests of the audience

The first step towards making the evidence as relevant as possible to the interests of the audience is to understand what their interests actually are – this means listening to them. Although the workshops we conducted were not a representative sample of the population in a statistical sense, they did enable us to hear directly from a diverse set of people which, if any, of the areas of our research they were interested in and what aspects, what motivated their interest, how they might be looking for material if they were and how they would use it, if at all.

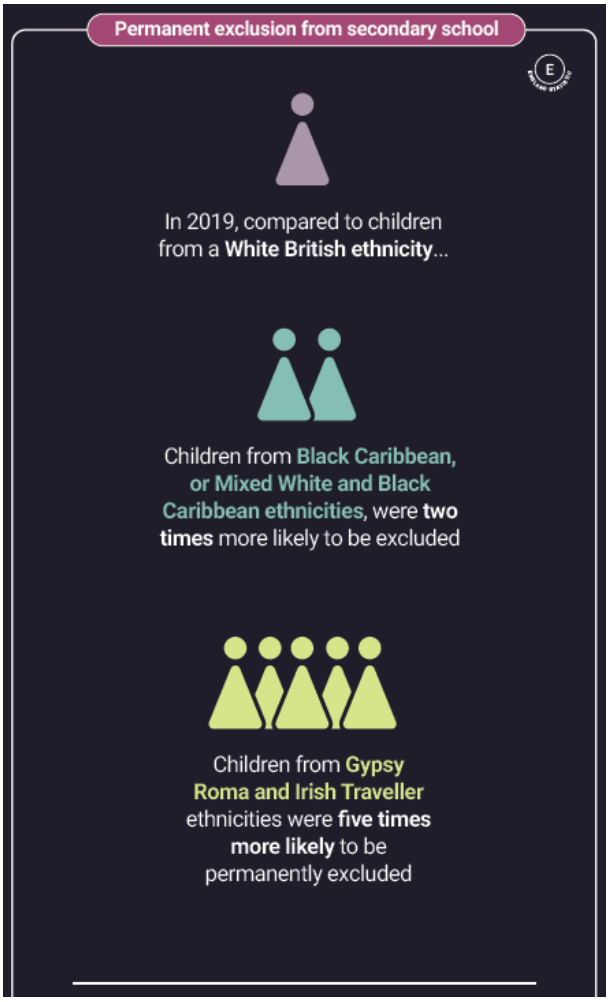
The second step, then, is to try to find an entry point that engages those interests, including through relating the findings to people's daily lives and/or a current issue in the news. Specific examples of general concepts can help: 'social progress, for example, ensuring there are fewer children growing up in poverty'.

One challenge for us is that some participants wanted more localised information, whereas most of our evidence is derived from national sources which cannot be readily disaggregated below regional level. In addition,

and understandably, Scottish and Welsh participants felt that findings that were based on data for England had limited relevance for them.

There is also an appetite for explanations for the trends or patterns that are presented, which can be difficult to fulfil. For example, for some participants in our workshops, it was not enough to know that the gap in life expectancy between women living in the most and least deprived areas was growing, they wanted to know why, and in the absence of an explanation in the stimulus materials, they began to speculate themselves: "*I want to know why there's a difference: eating habits? Health lifestyle? Or something more structural?".* Another drew on his own family history. The research evidence on the reasons for changes in health inequalities is extensive, complex and contested; summarising this in an infographic would be very challenging. However a compromise might be to provide pointers or links to that more detailed evidence, so as to engage and respond to the participants' desire for more explanation.

5. Short means 3 seconds



To catch the attention of members of the public who have no prior interest in our topic, we need an extremely short (3 to 30 seconds) and visual presentation, which could be static, animated or audio-visual, for use in social media. It is helpful if this can be linked to a current news story. Free school meals and Marcus Rashford were mentioned by workshop participants as a story with great relevance for child poverty; they thought a link to this campaign would be eye catching.

Extreme brevity of this kind is very uncomfortable for most academics, who are accustomed to communicating in blocks of time measured in hours rather than seconds! However, we found that *as an entry point*, it is sometimes possible to represent a finding or idea visually and simply, without distorting the underlying evidence. The example alongside about exclusions from secondary school is from the infographic we later developed.

6. Provide signifiers of trustworthiness

It is important to explain who has produced the evidence – in this instance, who CASE are - and what sources have been used. This suspicion of where the figures came from and how they were collected often came up in specific questions around how the material was presented and with what underlying purpose or spin. For example, in relation to crime figures, participants pursued the distinction between crimes that people experienced and those which were reported; and in relation to life expectancy, participants queried why they were being shown the statistics for women but not for men.

Part of signalling trustworthiness is making information about definitions available if people want it. However to avoid clutter, these definitions need not necessarily be on the 'front page' – as explained in Lesson 10 below, they can be in a layer behind the first, visual, impression but accessible from it.

Missing information – for example, data points omitted in a graph of trends – can make people suspicious (one participant commented: "you feel you aren't being told the whole picture"). Where possible an explanation should be given for why data are missing. It was also evident that participants neither liked nor understood dotted lines or lines with gaps (intended to indicate a change in definition, a new period, or missing data) which just looked like obfuscation or vagueness.

7. Address controversies head on

For non-specialists with a general interest, it is important in establishing trust and credibility to address controversies head-on rather than ignoring them and hoping they won't be evident. Our workshop participants were generally astute and suspicious about all they were being shown and quick to call 'foul'. For example, starting with a brief explanation such as, 'There are many ways to define poverty. One widely-used measure that reflects current living standards is...', is less likely to prompt a sceptical reaction than simply presenting a trend in relative poverty rates.

Another example in the workshops was crime statistics. Participants were aware that definitions of crime and the way that crimes are recorded can change over time and this meant that doubts surfaced in their minds when presented with a chart that purported to show a long-term decline in violent crime up to 2015, followed by a no significant change in the period 2015-2019. One participant commented, *"It does depend on how you define these things".* Others discussed the difference between crime that is experienced and crime that is reported and questioned how this would show up in the statistics. In fact, the series presented in the stimulus material

was based on a series using a consistent definition over time from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, a source which does include crimes experienced but not reported to the police. In the second iteration of our materials, we included these explanations below the chart, and that seemed to reassure participants. However some people seeing these for the first time were still not wholly satisfied: they doubted the effectiveness of the Crime Survey sampling, ("*A certain demographic of the country has never been asked"*), and others wanted to know what proportion of the crimes were reported to the police.

8. Images are powerful and potentially problematic

Photographs and stylised illustrations can be visually striking, help to break up chunks of text and draw readers in. However participants in the workshops often had strongly differing reactions to the same image. For example, we used pictures of a tower block and a large detached Victorian house to illustrate the contrast between people living in the most deprived and least deprived ten per cent of neighbourhoods in England. One participant thought it was unclear because "*you might live in a flat but own it*", whilst for another the tower block conveyed a "*presumption about the type of housing and class*" and thought it was stigmatising.

Images of people are even more difficult because a person necessarily has specific characteristics - a gender, age, ethnicity, body shape and style of dress, for example – and care needs to be taken to avoid re-enforcing stereotypes.

9. Testing of text and visual materials is invaluable

For all audiences, testing of text and visual materials is invaluable. Some terms we were doubtful about, such as 'social progress', turned out to be widely and intuitively understood. They thought it meant better schools, hospitals, housing, jobs, pensions and benefits, but also mentioned more general themes such as living standards, economic prosperity, life chances and social exclusion. Other terms that we had not realised would raise difficulties, such as 'service providers', seemed to some people to be jargonistic ("*corporate nonsense-speak"*) and designed to be obscure.

Terms with fairly clear intuitive and shared senses, such as levels of neighourhood deprivation, were in some cases obscured by using terms that were accurate but too technical (for example 'in the top decile group of local areas as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation'). The challenge here is to find a way to quickly indicate neighbourhoods with poor quality housing and services, and with higher concentrations of people with low incomes, without attaching stigma or stereotypes due to the terms used.

We worked and re-worked the text, especially in the narrative headers for graphics, to avoid technical terms and reduce wordiness. For example, we went from using the term 'decile' to '10 per cent' to 'tenth'. Paragraphs of text were split up into shorter sections and bullet points.

Generally graphs and figures needed to be intuitively and immediately clear, and these were preferred to tables ("*without that visual line, trying to work that one out is quite complicated"* reported one participant). Bar charts can work, though stacked bars are problematic. Uncluttered line graphs and 'pop outs' to give a more detailed picture of a particular part of a longer trend could be useful.

Some ideas are more difficult to communicate than others. For example, a line going up and a clear bit of text ("women living in the most affluent areas are living longer") is fine, but the really interesting finding is that the *rate of improvement* in life expectancy has slowed down, especially for women living in the most deprived areas. "Stalling improvements and widening inequality in life expectancy" is too complex to be immediately understood. Instead this idea could be broken down into steps: 'The number of years someone could expect to live was improving for everyone in the first decade of the 21st century. It is still improving for girls born in the most affluent areas, although not as rapidly as it used to be. And it has gone down for girls born in the most deprived areas. That means that the gap has widened between how long a girl born in a more and less deprived area can expect to live.' Not all of this can be captured in a single, simple graph, so a decision has to be made about which step (or steps) to illustrate, and which to leave for the text to explain.

Links and hover text, in the context of digital publishing and interactive social media, were suggested as user-friendly and clear, and under the control of the users.

10. Layers of engagement

Digital publishing has key advantages in meeting a range of needs, because information can be layered: a short and eye-catching entry point, with click-through to text-based narrative and graphics, with hover-text explanations of key terms, and hyperlinks to sources and further information, including the underlying academic reports and summaries.

The same basic approach can be employed with other formats, for example using a clearly labelled and linked sequence of documents. Within a single document, the headline can be 'unpacked' in stages, each stage giving greater depth and detail, so that the reader can stop at whichever stage meets their needs.

11. Public engagement requires a lot of academic input

It is an attractive idea that academics hand over their research outputs to the public engagement and data visualisation specialists to transform them into attractive public-facing materials but that is unfortunately an illusion. In practice, the iteration of materials between the academics and the specialists is essential in order to retain accuracy and meaning, whilst promoting clarity. This is time-consuming for both parties, as they seek to include the necessary nuance as unobtrusively as possible, so as to avoid undermining the power of the key message. This negotiation between the big picture and underlying detail is unavoidable. Short-cuts in this phase risk undermining the credibility and trustworthiness of the final outputs.

It is also very valuable for the academics to be involved in face-to-face interaction with members of the general public in the testing phase: it helps to orientate the academics to the intended audiences for the final outputs, not only for the particular exercise in hand but also for future public engagement, and is therefore an important form of capacity-building. Researchers involved in the SPDO public engagement exercise found it motivating as well as enlightening. In some cases, they were struck by the sophistication of the questions asked by the participants.

In the light of this experience, we conclude that time for academics to participate in public engagement needs to be built into project planning and resourcing, and that this is separate from other forms of knowledge exchange and dissemination.

12. Public engagement requires support with specialist skills

Data visualisation: researchers are skilled analysts and may have strong visual skills too – but they may not! Partnering with data visualisation specialists helps to come up with creative alternative ways of representing the results, and to improve the clarity of the graphical presentation. We benefitted from the advice of the BBC Data and Visual Journalism team, working through several iterations of some of our key charts.

Graphic design: developing an effective infographic requires all of the preceding 11 steps and considerations, and then some more. It needs specialist graphic design (we worked with LSE's Design Unit), and lots of discussion to maximise the visual content and minimise the text content, whilst still ensuring that the key messages are communicated, and distortions are not introduced. Care needs to be taken to avoid re-enforcing stereotypes when using simple visual representations, whilst still communicating the key findings. More abstract icons may help.

Video: there is a significant difference in quality between a do-it-yourself video recorded on a webcam and a video made by a professional filmmaker. Equipment, lighting, editing, and the ability to combine voice, sound, footage, graphics and animation make a significant difference to the appeal of the final product. We worked with an independent film-maker.

Animation: filming and creating animations are distinct skill sets. Animating graphics is time-consuming but can be effective and help to communicate more complex ideas by introducing one element at a time, whilst the voice over explains what it means.

Web-publishing: publishing on the web should ideally be about more than uploading a pdf. Documents that are accessible in a range of formats, have appropriate embedded links, and an attractive front end are more likely to be read.

13. Evidence is potentially useful in a surprisingly wide range of contexts

We should not underestimate the range of uses to which our kind of evidence may be put. Examples from our workshop participants included:

- induction and training materials for working with young people
- providing the context for practical guidelines for working with vulnerable groups such as the homeless
- understanding the challenges that clients, or pupils, may be facing
- providing the wider context for data collected from local service users
- A-level sociology and key stage 4 citizenship education teaching materials
- responding to requests for information directed to a librarian
- bargaining over employment terms and conditions
- making the case for grant funding (a charity and a quango)
- making decisions about which local initiatives to fund
- identifying long-term trends to compare to when evaluating specific (local) interventions
- identifying groups or areas which are experiencing deprivation, to enable them to use this evidence when pushing for policy change
- as background for a community campaign, such as that spearheaded by Marcus Rashford
- briefing and speech-writing for local and national politicians.

Participants commented, for example, "*It's fundamental information for anyone in the community*", and "*Having it there and having it clear would be a very good start*".

For many of these purposes, the text and visuals needed to be readily quotable, and to have links to sources and further information.

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For further information about the *Social Policies and Distributional Outcomes* research programme, and to access our research papers, data and charts, please see the SPDO website CASE - Research - Social policies and distributional outcomes in a changing Britain (lse.ac.uk).