

Call for Understanding Society Research Data Fellowships

Deadline 5pm on 6 December 2023

Understanding Society is one of the largest household panel studies in the world and a major infrastructure investment for UK health and social sciences. By enabling researchers to track individuals over time, the data can be used to assess the causes and consequences of change in individuals' circumstances (such as the birth of a child, marriage, separation, retirement) for themselves and their families (e.g. poverty, income, health, parenting). It also allows researchers and policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of issues such as poverty, unemployment or mental health, by allowing researchers to examine whether conditions are persistent or transitory. The data is also amenable to evaluating policy change as before and after measures are reported at the individual and household level. At the same time, *Understanding Society* provides significant opportunities for methodological research. This has often been focused on formal experiments carried on the Innovation Panel, but there are many opportunities for methodological research on the main survey as a result of changes in design over time (e.g. changing modes due to the pandemic).

The *Understanding Society Fellowship Programme* enables researchers to take time out to focus on research projects based on the Study's data. Funding is available for 12-month Fellowships to undertake a project based on *Understanding Society* data, with additional resource for follow up dissemination and impact generation activities. Practical support will also be available from the Study team, for example, to advise on data and analysis plans and communication and impact strategies. Each fellowship call has a specific theme; previous rounds have included a focus on our biomarker and genetics data, methodological research on representativeness and mixed modes, the creation and analysis of event histories, research focusing on family dynamics, the use of linked administrative data, and policy focused projects. Details of fellowships awarded in previous rounds can be found [here](#).

The December 2023 call focuses on three themes: policy evaluation; linked administrative data; and research making use of the unique value of *Understanding Society*. We will announce the topics of our next call in 2024/25.

Requirements of a fellowship

Specifically in this round of funding we are seeking applications on these themes:

Policy evaluation -

Policy evaluations provide a vital tool to understand whether a policy is working as intended or not, for whom and why. As a multi-topic panel study *Understanding Society* data (including the BHPS) provides a unique opportunity to assess the changes in behaviours and social, economic or health outcomes arising from key policy interventions.

According to the National Audit Office, only 8% of ‘major government projects’ are robustly evaluated, while 64% are not evaluated at all, with the consequence that is not always clear how billions of pounds spent on key policies are making a difference to the lives of citizens. One consequence is that evaluative evidence is under-utilised as a way of strategic learning, driving change and celebrating success.

This call for Policy Evaluation Fellowships is designed to stimulate new and creative applications of *Understanding Society* data for evaluations, building on the current crop of research projects. For example, previous research includes evaluations of [specific benefit changes](#), [smoke free places](#), [impact of Ofsted school reports on parental behaviour](#), [welfare-to-work programme](#), the [health impact of neighbourhood renewal in Northern Ireland](#), the [introduction of the plastic carrier bag charge in Wales](#), and [the impact of auto-enrolment pension participation on mental health](#).

Ideas for policy evaluations could be based on natural experiments or specific policy interventions that have been implemented, utilising comparison across time, comparison between groups or comparison between regions and places (e.g., using matched areas, devolution or gradual geographical rollout of policies). As the same individuals and households are surveyed on a regular basis, the Study can be used to assess pre-intervention baselines and post-intervention effects. With the cross-cutting nature of many social issues, understanding whether particular policy interventions are generating positive spill-over effects or unintended consequences is also valuable.

Research could make use of [linked administrative data](#) where individual data-sets on their own have limitations, e.g., to look at a wider range of outcomes or identify a beneficiary group. Additionally, you can also see how well your idea aligns with a particular government department's [Area of Research Interest](#).

Linked administrative data -

Linking administrative data to the information collected annually on *Understanding Society* participants can provide opportunities for new research by adding in content that cannot be collected (reliably, efficiently or cost-effectively) by the Study – or is otherwise unavailable.

In particular, linked data can provide detail on statuses and outcomes that are not subject to recall biases and that can be contextualised against the longitudinal data the Study already holds on people's related behaviours and attitudes.

We now make available linked administrative datasets in the areas of education (English National Pupil Database, Scottish education records) and environment (vehicle data via the DVLA), and we will release a [further tranche of linked data](#) by the start of these fellowships, including: Nest auto-enrolment pensions

data; credit histories data; and domestic energy consumption (gas/electricity meter reading) data. We also supply the UK Longitudinal Linkage Collaboration with data from our COVID-19 study that has been linked to NHS records and that is available for research purposes where there is a link to Covid or the pandemic policy response.

We would welcome fellowship applications that propose to make novel use of these linked data and that can be promoted to others as a means of demonstrating the value of its use. We would also be keen to field proposals where we do not already hold the external data but where it might be possible to link these data to Understanding Society records at property-level or some other low-level geography. This would need to be a feasible proposition where the data matching could be undertaken early in the fellowship.

Due to their additional sensitivity and disclosure risk, access to almost all of our linked data is via a secure (remote) trusted research environment and accessible to accredited researchers only and usually after a more rigorous application process. Potential fellows will therefore need to hold accreditation, or be eligible to

obtain it, in order to start their fellowship. They will also need to build in time to begin the data access process *before* their fellowship starts.

Exploiting the unique value of the Study -

As a research resource, *Understanding Study* is unique. It is a large-scale, nationally representative, multi-topic longitudinal household survey, collecting data from and on its participants annually. The Study benefits from a large sample size, allowing researchers to examine the lives of important population sub-groups over time, with an Ethnic Minority Boost sample and Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Boost sample increasing the numbers of different ethnic minority and immigrant groups. Data are collected on the whole household, providing the context for individual experiences but also allowing relations between generations, couples and siblings to be explored.

Our participants have also contributed biomarker and genetic data collected via nurse visits. This health and genetic information enables researchers to investigate the links between social and economic circumstances and health.

Taken together, this makes *Understanding Society* a unique resource. Fellowship applications on any topic that can demonstrate that they will make use of at least one of the key features of the Study just listed – or, ideally, a combination of them – are welcomed. There should be a justification provided as to why your proposed research could not be conducted using any other resource.

For all projects the following outputs are required:

- at 6 months, delivery of a clearly-specified set of outputs that indicate that the fellowship is progressing on track – these may be drafts of code/analysis/papers, or be in the form of a short report of activity with a clear plan for the second 6 months of the fellowship;
- and at the end of the fellowship:
 - the syntax you have written for your project which, if appropriate and acknowledging your authorship, would be shared on the Study website and/or used to create new datafiles for the Study;
 - an *Understanding Society* working paper which summarises your methodological approach;
 - an *Understanding Society* blog or podcast summarising your fellowship.

Additionally, of course, we expect that you will submit your research to peer review journals and present it at relevant conferences.

On all topics we particularly welcome projects that also aim to actively promote policy learning, with additional funding potentially available for such activities, including beyond the end date of the fellowship if helpful. Fellowships that wish to pursue policy engagement for their project will be supported by the *Understanding Society* policy and partnership unit

to engage widely with policy makers, including *Understanding Society*'s co-funder group, and work with them to disseminate findings and generate impact.

Fellows will be required to attend three meetings with other fellows and *Understanding Society* team members during their fellowship: a kick-off meeting to meet other fellows in this cohort and to present their plans; a second meeting to share progress updates and receive feedback and support; and a final public workshop at which they will present their findings.

Communication and impact plans will be reviewed and discussed with each fellow at the first fellowship network meeting. To facilitate knowledge sharing among fellows, fellowships under this call should begin in September/October 2024.

Selection Criteria and Eligibility

Applications will be assessed on the basis of their scientific merit and potential to demonstrate the usefulness of the Study as a research resource and/or generate policy impact. Any researcher based in a higher education institution, a research/policy institute or third sector organisation is eligible to apply (except the University of Essex), but people can only have an *Understanding Society* Fellowship once, so previously successful applicants should not apply. We welcome applications from researchers at any career stage. Early career researchers (ECRs, < 3 years post PhD) should identify a mentor in their own institution. Applicants from a third sector organisation should identify a collaborator based in an academic institution, who is able to support their project.

Funding will be provided for the fellow's salary, including NI and pension costs for up to 12 months (full or part time). Where an applicant is from a third sector organisation, we will cover £5000 of the academic collaborator's salary which should cover, at a minimum, meeting the fellow three times during the fellowship, commenting on code produced and data analyses, and providing feedback on a draft paper.

The planned project must be achievable in the timescale of the project, and the application should demonstrate this. As noted above, we would be happy to discuss additional funding/time after the completion of the main fellowship to promote policy impact or create a well-documented shareable data file or user guide.

How do I apply?

People wishing to be considered for a fellowship under this call should apply using the application form by **5pm on 6 December 2023**. You are advised to discuss your ideas with a member of the *Understanding Society* team in advance of submitting your application. Please contact Jack Kneeshaw (kneejw@essex.ac.uk) in the first instance who will put you in touch with the appropriate person to discuss your ideas with you.

Please feel free to seek guidance on the scientific direction of your proposal, data issues, communication and impact plans as well as practical queries. A signed statement of support from your Head of Department (or equivalent) must be included.

The timeline for this Fellowship call is set out below.

Advert	5 July 2023
Closing date (5 months)	6 December 2023
Notify if shortlisted (or not)	End-January 2024
Interviews	February 2024
Notify if successful (or not)	February 2024
Expected start	September/October 2024
Kick-off Fellowship meeting	October 2024
Outputs/deliverables at 6 months	Spring 2025
Work-in-progress workshop	Spring 2025

Finalised outputs/deliverables; end of project event	September 2025
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Application guidelines

1. Details of all researchers involved in the project should be provided. This must include the applicant for the Fellowship. If you are an early career researcher (<3 years post PhD) a mentor from your host institution should also be included on the project and they should write a supporting statement. Note that the mentor will not be funded as part of the Fellowship. If you are from a third sector organisation, an academic collaborator should be included on the project and they should write a supporting statement. The academic collaborator will have £5000 of their salary covered.
2. Please provide a short title for the project. A list of fellows, their project titles and, in time, outputs will be added to the Study website.
3. Please provide an executive summary of no more than 250 words. This should provide an overview of the proposed project including how it will contribute to informing policy, and to social science research.
4. Please outline (max 250 words) how your Fellowship will add value to *Understanding Society* (value added data, methodological understanding, policy engagement, highlighting unique features of the Study etc).
5. Please provide a brief summary of your own expertise in relation to delivering the project and support you may need from your host institution or the *Understanding Society* team.
6. Outline your project plan. You should have a clearly specified research question, methods, analysis and impact and dissemination plans (max 2 sides). You should be clear about the data that you will use, including the size of the analysis sample and whether it is sufficiently powered.

7. Please detail your plans for dissemination, knowledge exchange and for generating impact. You should indicate who your main audiences will be and what activities you will undertake in order to disseminate your findings to them. Any specific costs associated with these activities should be identified, except open access publication which should be covered by your own institution.
8. Please describe your project milestones and the deliverables you will achieve at the end of months 3, 6, 9 and 12. Final payments will only be made upon delivery of the required outputs set out at the top of page 3. If you are proposing additional work beyond your fellowship period to promote impact or develop a shareable datasets please clearly identify relevant additional milestones.
9. Provide an estimate of costs produced by your host HEI finance office. These should include the fellowship salary, NI and pension contribution. Staff costs are funded at 100% but we cannot cover indirects. The Fellowships fund your own salary costs if you have a research-only contract or for those on research and teaching contracts, the salary costs (normally starting at the most junior point of the lecturer scale at the institution concerned) of an individual to undertake the normal duties of the applicant for the duration of the Fellowship. Other costs necessary to complete your fellowship for example, travel, training, conference attendance and knowledge exchange activities should be clearly articulated and justified in the proposal. The fellowship can last up to 12 months, full or part time.

Dissemination and knowledge exchange activities, or additional work to create shareable well documented datasets, can be funded for up to 12 months after the completion of your fellowship. These should be discussed with us in advance of completing your application and separately identified in the application form.

The maximum budget per fellowship is **£70,000** for staff and dissemination related-costs.

10. Please provide a supporting statement from your host organisation. This should be from a senior member of staff. This statement should outline the organisation's

commitment to the project, detailing the resources that will be provided and the support that will be given to Fellows.

11. Please attach a two page CV.

Assessing applications

External peer reviews of the fellowship applications will be undertaken, and shortlisted applicants will be invited to discuss their proposals with the team. The criteria against which applications will be judged are:

- Does the fellowship project have clear aims?
- Does the application clearly demonstrate the scientific benefits of the proposal?
- Is the proposed analysis feasible (e.g., is it sufficiently powered)?
- Are the proposed research methods appropriate to achieve the aims of the fellowship proposal?
- Does the project demonstrate the value of the *Understanding Society* resource?
- Does the project have an appropriate dissemination and knowledge exchange plan?
- Are the milestones and overall project goals realistic and achievable in the timeframe?
- Are the costs justified? Does the project represent value for money?
- For early career researchers and applicants from third sector organisations, is there sufficient support in place for the Fellow?

Please send your completed form together with a 2-page CV to Jack Kneeshaw kneejw@essex.ac.uk by 5pm on 6 December 2023.