ACADEMY of SOCIAL SCIENCES

Social sciences in the region, for the region:

the Midlands

This report showcases exemplars from a number of Midlands-based universities, demonstrating the innovative, collaborative and multi-disciplinary ways in which the social sciences are working to bring substantial regional impacts at scale in the Midlands. The projects draw on the work of a number of universities and other partners, to whom we are grateful for their help in developing this report.

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University

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The Academy's Campaign for Social Science demonstrates how social science improves public policy, society and all our lives. It highlights the value of applied social science research and advocates for its greater use in decision-making and government.

To contact us, please email:
media@acss.org.uk for media enquiries
office@acss.org.uk for general enquiries
Or call +44 (0) 300 303 3513

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Foreword

This is an inspiring and timely collection of case studies from the Midlands Universities, demonstrating the power of collaborative research between social science and other fields in driving economic growth in their region, local businesses and the labour force.

Universities have always had an important role as part of local economies, alongside the wider significance of their research outputs. Universities are often one of the largest regional employers; they also provide facilities to local communities. And many of the civic responsibilities of universities find a natural home in their social science faculty.

This collection goes further, showing what can be achieved by collaborations between research facilities within and outside universities, regional government, and businesses. It draws from the breadth of universities in the Midlands and underlines the benefits to be gained from when universities work together with other sectors, at a time when competitive pressures for university research are exceptionally high.

It is also a timely reminder that social science research plays a vital and complementary role to STEM research in fostering economic development. The UK Government has set reversing the country's decades-long economic stagnation at the top of its agenda, and research in social science is central to that goal.

The UK and devolved governments see universities as key drivers of economic development; and UKRI has recently launched its new funding for Local Innovation Partnerships to enhance multi-sectoral collaboration, attract investment from the private sector, and add £700m to local economies.

In May 2024 we challenged the social science executive leaders in the Midlands to show their collaborative impact. In this collection, we are delighted to see the response to that challenge.

Dr Rita Gardner CBE FAcSS
Chief Executive
Academy of Social Sciences

Stian Westlake FAcSS
Executive Chair
Economic and Social Research Council (UKRI)

Introduction

The Midlands

The Midlands, a former industrial heartland with associated innovation and skills, faces a series of socio-economic challenges. The region has the UK's second largest city and an overall population of more than 11 million (according to the latest data from 2022). It creates £289 billion Gross Value Added (GVA) which accounted for more than 14% of the total UK GVA in 2022. The Midlands region also houses three of the ten most deprived councils in England (Birmingham, Sandwell and Nottingham)[1]; it has the most ethnically diverse population in the UK outside of London; and its unemployment rates are above average and earnings below median rates for the UK. The region is home to more than 20 of the UK's universities.

The West Midlands has been one of the UK Government's 'trailblazer' regions for fast-tracking greater devolution within England, having had its own combined authority and elected mayor since 2017. This has led to additional powers and funding for this area but has not been without its challenges for the Midlands region as a whole, with complex public sector governance arrangements post-devolution and an uneven introduction of combined authorities.

This report comes at a time when social, economic, health, place-based, and skills and education issues are among the most pressing in nations and regions across the UK, and when regional development is at the heart of UK Government policy. It focuses on the role of Midlands universities as powerhouses of ideas, research and innovation that seek to inform, identify and help to address some of the most pressing challenges in their region. In short, universities bringing their expertise to bear **in their region, for their region**. The cited exemplars highlight, in particular, how opportunities for growth in the Midlands region can be capitalised upon whilst responding to long standing challenges.

The report draws on the strong history of regional collaboration among Midlands universities and institutions in the context of the Midlands Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP). Other existing collaborations between Midlands' institutions include the Midlands Engine Observatory, Midlands Innovation, Midlands Enterprise Universities and Midlands Mindforge.

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[1] Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018 to 2021) - English indices of deprivation 2019 (2019)

Demographics of the Midlands region

Table 1: Demographics of the Midlands region (Sources various compiled by Alice Pugh, City-REDI, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham)

Gross Value Added (GVA): 2022 data

West Midlands GVA:
£160.4bn
(7th largest International Territorial Level (ITL) region out of 12)

East Midlands GVA:
£128.8bn
(9th largest ITL region)

All England GVA:
£1940.3bn

All UK GVA:
£2246.1bn

Business: 2024 data

Midlands region as a whole:
398,165 businesses; 99.56% are SMEs (396,430 businesses)

East Midlands (ITL):
182,030 businesses (45.7% of the total Midlands business count); 99.56% are SMEs

West Midlands (ITL):
216,135 businesses (54.3% of total Midlands business count); 99.56% are SMEs

All England:
2,368,350 businesses
99.58% are SMEs

All UK:
2,724,770 businesses
99.59% are SMEs

Earnings: 2024 data

Midlands region as a whole:
median annual earnings of £34,931[2].
7.7% below the:

All England:
median annual earnings of £37,617.

All UK:
median annual earnings of £37,430, 6.7% larger than the Midlands median.

Unemployment: 2023 data

Midlands region as a whole:
unemployment rate 4.1%

West Midlands:
unemployment rate of 4.5%

East Midlands:
unemployment rate of 3.7%

All England:
unemployment rate of 3.8%[3].

All UK:
unemployment rate of 3.8%

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[2] Nomis - Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (2024)
[3] Nomis - Annual population survey (2024)

Age demographic (2024):

Ages 0-15:
Midlands as a whole:
18.8% (2.1m people)
All England: 18.5%[4] .
All UK: 18.3%

Ages 16-64:
Midlands as a whole:
61.9% (6.9m people)
All England: 62.9%
All UK: 62.8%

Age 65+:
Midlands as a whole:
19.3% (2.1m people)
All England: 18.7%
All UK: 18.9%

West Midlands has the youngest population of the nine England regions.

Ethnicity demographic (2021 Census Data):

Midlands:
21.9% of the population is BAME

East Midlands (ITL):
14.3% of the population is BAME

West Midlands (ITL):
23% of the population is BAME, outside of London this region has the largest BAME population

All England and Wales:
18.3% of the population is BAME

Wider UK context

Universities in the UK play a vital role in their nations and regions over and above their well-known national and international contributions to education and skills, and research and innovation. They have long been anchor institutions in regional contexts, supporting social mobility, driving economic growth, and fostering the unique culture of their local communities. They serve the many students, from all backgrounds, who wish to study locally and live at home; they are typically among the largest employers in any region, drawing on a wide range of skills to service their activities and facilities; and they substantially contribute to informing local public policy relating to society, economy, places, communities, family, education, health and welfare.

Recognition of universities' regional civic mission role was boosted by the work of the Civic Universities Network and movement, which led to the development of civic agreements which strengthened relationships between universities, government and industries. Now, the importance of universities as key drivers of regional economic growth and innovation sits at the heart of the current UK Government's research and development and industrial strategy agendas and is widely recognised by the governments of the devolved nations and by the growing number of regional combined authorities and mayoralties across England.

Further recognition of the value placed on university research to benefit a region lies in the recent announcement of a new strand of UKRI funding for Local Innovation Partnerships, which will support research collaborations between university researchers, local authorities and local businesses. The partnerships will seek to attract additional investment from the private sector, and to add £700 million of value to local economies.

[4] ONS - Estimates of the population for England and Wales (2024)

It will also build on successful previous UKRI initiatives including:

- The Strength in Places Fund, which has helped create thousands of jobs in sectors like semiconductors, advanced ceramics and media.
- Innovation Accelerators in the Glasgow City Region, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, which support fast-growing industry clusters.
- Local Policy Innovation Partnerships, which bring together the public sector, local businesses and local communities to drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth and reduce regional disparities.

The report

This report showcases exemplars from a number of Midlands-based universities, with a specific focus on the social science disciplines. The exemplars are deeply applied, focused on solutions and understanding changing regional contexts. They demonstrate the innovative, collaborative and multi-disciplinary ways in which the social sciences are working to bring substantial regional impacts at scale.

The triggers for this report are twofold. First, the UK Government's mission-led and place-based agenda, which will need to draw on multi-disciplinary expertise in the social sciences and in other sectors at both national and regional levels. Secondly, the recent UKRI drive towards regional collaboration, partly itself driven by the UK Government's agenda.

The applied research exemplars selected for this report each meet four criteria:

- It is applied research in the region, and primarily for the region, carried out by Midlands-based universities and with clear regional impacts and beneficiaries.
- The work is deeply collaborative across universities and between universities and regional government, business and, in some cases, communities.
- UKRI/ESRC is one of the main funding partners in each project, among other funding agencies.
- The universities are all members of the ESRC (UKRI) Midlands Graduate School, Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP).

The case studies in this report represent a very small sample of the total applied and regionally collaborative and impactful research in the social sciences undertaken in the Midlands' universities. This spans a much wider scope than the exemplars chosen for this report, which deliberately centre on economic growth and productivity, and on health, wellbeing and inclusivity of workers.

To be able to demonstrate the impact of the work, most of the applied research highlighted was undertaken between 2020 and 2023, thus some of it draws from the Covid-19 pandemic, but all are underpinned by a clear understanding of the demographics and challenges of the region (Table 1).

This report has been led by the Midlands region Pro Vice-Chancellor Social Sciences Group, which comprises the leaders in institutions responsible for the social sciences in their university. They led the call for cases and selected the exemplars from a longlist of highly eligible projects, reflecting a mix of disciplines, methodological approaches, challenge areas, and a diverse group of researchers. The examples that follow not

only reinforce the economic, social and cultural anchor role that universities play in the Midlands, but demonstrate the value of, and greater potential for, regional collaboration between social science faculties and schools, universities, and other institutional key players in regional government, industry and the third sector.

The Midlands PVC-Social Sciences Group at the time of writing this report (October 2024)
L to R: Prof Teela Sanders FAcSS (University of Leicester), Prof James Hayton (University of Warwick), Prof Zoe Radnor FAcSS (Aston University), Prof Nick Vaughan-Williams FAcSS (University of Birmingham), Prof Tim Jay (University of Nottingham), Prof Rachel Granger (De Montfort University) and Prof Elizabeth Peel (Loughborough University)

1. Boosting productivity from below: addressing the productivity challenges of microbusinesses

The challenge

Microbusinesses are a vital part of our economy, contributing an estimated £55 billion in turnover, yet they are often overlooked in policy. The West Midlands is home to a diverse entrepreneurial community, with many microbusinesses owned by ethnic minority entrepreneurs. However, these businesses often face significant barriers to growth and productivity, including limited access to resources, support networks, and tailored business advice.

The research

The Productivity from Below (PfB) Project, based at the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME) at Aston University, aimed to address these challenges by bridging the gap between academia, policy, and grassroots action. The project's overarching objective was to develop evidence-based, productivity-boosting interventions to support microbusinesses and promote inclusive economic growth in the region.

Unique in its approach, the PfB Project academic team collaborated with four practitioner partners to work hand-in-hand with local businesses in the West Midlands to identify the challenges they face in the retail, catering and creative sectors. In this way, the project team were able to gain an understanding of what

Summary
Research conducted by social scientists, in collaboration with practitioner partners and local businesses in the West Midlands, has led to several programmes to help ethnic minority owned microbusinesses receive the support and policy recognition they need to overcome barriers to growth, increasing prosperity for the region.

Lead researcher(s) & institution(s)
Professor Monder Ram FAcSS, Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME), Aston University

Project duration
2019 to 2022

Funding
£800,000 (ESRC)

Key partners
Enterprise Research Centre (ERC), City-REDI, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, ACH (Ashley Community Housing), Citizens UK (CUK), Punch Records, and the Bangladeshi Network

productivity means for ethnic minority-owned microbusinesses and their specific support needs, leading to the development of customised business support programmes.

As a result of this insight, the PfB Project successfully developed three initiatives, each worth £1 million, to provide better business support, enhance productivity, and foster the development of inclusive support systems. These initiatives are Pathways to Enterprising Futures (PEF), Migrant Business Support (MBS), and the Migrant Integration through Locally Designed Experiences (MILE) project.

The PfB Project also played a crucial role during the Covid-19 pandemic through supporting Bangladeshi caterers to implement social media strategies to boost takeaway sales; and by supporting the Farm to Fork Food Resilience conference, hosted by CREME, which was co-designed by Bangladeshi business owners, public agencies, and research organisations, to raise awareness of the challenges facing the curry house trade.

In addition, the PfB Project also established The P Word, a peer support and leadership development programme for creative businesses. This programme provided commercial guidance to creative entrepreneurs and was featured in two documentaries, Black New Street and SHE (See Her Empowered). CREME also launched the Business Leaders Group as part of PfB to support local retailers and community groups in improving business practices. This initiative was recognised by NESTA as an exemplar of grassroots innovation.

The impact

Through the key interventions that were introduced as a result of the research, the PfB Project has had a significant impact on various stakeholder groups in the West Midlands, including ethnic minority microbusiness owners in the retail, catering, and creative sectors, refugee and migrant entrepreneurs, women entrepreneurs, and local communities. The project won the ESRC 2021 Impact Prize Award for Outstanding Business and Enterprise Impact. The PfB project was also Highly Commended in the 2025 Financial Times Responsible Business Education Awards.

> *"I am pleased to report that ACH have secured £1 million in funding to deliver personalised business support to new and existing businesses, via an online platform, open to 500 non-EU migrants in Bristol and the West Midlands. This project has been a direct outcome of our collaboration with CREME as it utilised the principles adopted for PfB in the design."*
>
> Richard Thickpenny, Chief Innovation Officer, Ashley Community Housing

The PEF initiative supported over 600 individuals, including refugees, migrants, and the long-term unemployed, by providing bespoke workshops, one-on-one guidance, and online peer networks. The MBS project provided business support to 500 migrant-owned businesses, with 157 developing into fully operational enterprises, and the MILE project focused on promoting migrant integration across Europe.

To ensure the sustainability of support for microbusinesses, CREME secured an additional £400,000 in funding to support four PhD students, helping to build future capacity for practitioners in the region. The findings and recommendations of the PfB Project have also influenced the West Midlands Combined Authority's business support provision, ensuring that the needs of ethnic minority microbusinesses are better addressed. Following the release of CREME's report, Time to Change (TTC): A Blueprint for Advancing the UK's Ethnic Minority Businesses (EMBs), which is based on the core findings of the PfB project, former West Midlands Mayor Andy Street announced £250,000 investment in 'community hubs' as a response to its recommendations. His successor, Mayor Richard Parker, has also endorsed the report and is committed to working with CREME on the implementation of the recommendations.

The significance of the social sciences to this work

The Productivity from Below Project illustrates the significance of social science research in addressing regional economic challenges and promoting inclusive growth. The project's success in improving business practices, boosting productivity, and creating more inclusive support systems showcases how the social sciences can drive tangible economic and social change in the region. Whilst the project's focus on fostering partnerships, building future capacity, and reshaping business support provision highlights the importance of community-driven, inclusive approaches to economic development.

Looking to the future

Building on the success of the PfB Project, CREME aims to further advance the contribution of ethnic minority businesses (EMBs) to the UK economy, using their report, Time to Change (TTC): A Blueprint for Advancing the UK's Ethnic Minority Businesses (EMBs), as a foundational aspect of this work. This report will be launched with regional ecosystem leaders across the UK, as well as partnerships with UK Finance, the Federation of Small Businesses, Business in the Community, Innovate UK, and Be the Business.

2. Shaping policy to help city regions grow: the WMREDI story

The challenge

Regional policymakers who are responsible for local industrial strategies often have difficult decisions to make when allocating limited resources to improve public services, the wellbeing of citizens and productivity. And they often lack the information and analysis to help identify the investments which are going to make the biggest difference to the people living in their region. Universities are a major source of the skills and knowledge required to promote economic growth and citizen wellbeing, but there is often no bridge through which to communicate this research from academics to policymakers.

The research

The West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute (WMREDI) was born out of a place-based collaboration between the City-Region Economic Development Institute (City-REDI) based at the University of Birmingham and multiple regional stakeholders, including the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), GBS Chamber of Commerce, numerous borough councils and other regional universities. WMREDI was led by the Directors of City-REDI with funding from Research England being matched by funding from the University of Birmingham and regional stakeholders. Designed as

Summary

Social science research, as part of a huge collaborative effort between universities, local authorities and public bodies in the West Midlands region, has led to multi-million-pound investments boosting the regional economy in the face of challenges including Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lead researcher(s) & institution(s)
Professor Anne Green FAcSS and Professor Rebecca Riley, both City-REDI, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham

Project duration
September 2019 to September 2024

Funding
£4.9m (Research England) and £8.9m University of Birmingham and partner funding

Key partners
Local authorities in the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) area, Midlands Engine, Economic Intelligence Unit

a source of research, contextual data analytics and trends, and intelligence, WMREDI aimed to inform and guide policy choices for regional and local policymakers by providing evidence-led analysis of the various challenges and issues facing the West Midlands.

This research and analysis has been widespread. At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, WMREDI commenced production of the West Midlands Economic Impact Monitor, providing information and intelligence for policymakers, analysts and the general public across the region. Initially produced weekly, 120 Economic Monitors updated readers on the effects of the shocks as they unfolded in real time, as well as making available the latest national and international research as it emerged.

WMREDI also supported the development of various data analytics and toolkits, across a wide range of subjects including a Civic Index, a Homelessness Prediction Tool, the MIT Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Programme and on Public R&D in the West Midlands.

In addition, WMREDI invested in the Socio-Economic Impact Model (SEIM-UK), a powerful tool for evaluating changes in the national or regional economy. It provides a highly detailed picture of economic circumstances, revealing the inter-relationships between industrial sectors, UK nations and regions, foreign trade flow and an increasing array of household characteristics. This has been used to measure the impact of the 2022 Commonwealth Games, local authority financial crises and the contribution of the BBC to the West Midlands.

WMREDI work also informed and supported new networks and projects including the Civic University Network, the University Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) and the economic impact strand of the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA). Drawing on WMREDI experience and its recognised good practice, City-REDI hosts the UKRI-funded Local Policy Innovation Partnership Strategic Coordination Hub (The LPIP Hub), which seeks to address nationwide issues through local partnerships.

As a result of these various strands of research and projects, and more, WMREDI became a regional centre of expertise in business cases, and worked across partners to support the development of bids, monitoring and evaluation.

The impact
WMREDI work influenced and shaped investment in many of the West Midlands region's devolution deals and how they are implemented. This included a deeper devolution deal of more than £1.5bn and the £2bn Midlands Rail Hub investment. Research from WMREDI also helped secure £65m of funding for the regional Skills Deal, based on the Regional Skills Plan evidence development, and £50m for digital infrastructure through utilising research supporting the needs of the professional and business services sectors. WMREDI helped partners win over £80m through providing business case project support and contributed to the substantial redesign of the £1m West Midlands Innovation Fund to stress the importance of business innovation to the local economy. WMREDI staff also helped reshape consideration of "place" in the HM Treasury's Green Book which is the national guidance for business cases. This has helped to ensure that all government funding is assessed for place impacts.

> *"Your analysis has improved our understanding of the region's distinctive exposure to different kinds of risks and therefore enabled a more effective response to the disruptive effects of Brexit and Covid-19. City-REDI analysis, particularly the 'West Midlands Weekly Economic Monitor', has tracked the impact of Covid-19 on the various elements of economy, enabling members of the Economics Impact Group to respond to pressures across the region […] We were able to highlight specific areas of local risk, with evidence and data to support requests made of central government for funding and support schemes for vulnerable sectors and communities."*
>
> Andy Street, former Mayor of the West Midlands

The significance of the social sciences to this work

The WMREDI team was drawn from across the social science disciplines, with expertise in economics, economic geography, skills policy, labour markets, innovation and public sector governance/institutions. This was key to success in collecting and analysing socio-economic data to support regional and national stakeholders across all of the various research projects undertaken. In addition, this expertise supported the development of a new model of collaboration in the region which levered a further £4m of funding from partners and regional stakeholders alongside Research England and the University of Birmingham funding. WMREDI also worked to build staff members' experience in collaborative, place-focused research, appraisal, monitoring and evaluation which has continued beyond the funding period, and hosted over 30 paid student interns, who have taken their experiences forward in employment with local partners, national government, think tanks and consultancies.

Looking to the future

The learnings from WMREDI suggest that places need long-term infrastructure in order for collaborative partnerships, which create knowledge exchange, to inform and lead policy thinking – and react to it. They also need aligned partners from the university, public and business communities at the highest levels. Despite funding for the WMREDI project coming to an end, City-REDI, the core research institution behind WMREDI, remains proactive and responsive to policy, funder, and partner needs in the region and beyond, reinforcing the anchor role that universities play as a source of skills and knowledge for successful regional growth. It continues to advocate for research and innovation that enhances connections across the research and innovation ecosystem and delivers economic, social and cultural benefits to all citizens.

3. Mind the productivity gap: reaching prosperity through inclusive growth in the West Midlands

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

The challenge

The productivity gap between different parts of the UK is significantly higher than international standards. In 2019, labour productivity in the West Midlands was 11% below the UK average, and 33% lower than London. This productivity gap can be explained by a range of factors including a shortage of skills, local industry structures, levels of investment and management practices, and additional shocks to the economic system, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, only add further to this problem. This was particularly highlighted in the West Midlands region as, following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, of the ten hardest hit districts in the UK, four were in Warwickshire. Addressing this productivity puzzle requires policymakers to understand what interventions will remove barriers, unblock growth and boost productivity.

The research

Research led by Warwick Business School and the Warwick Manufacturing Group at the University of Warwick, in collaboration with City-REDI at the University of Birmingham, sought to understand the drivers of productivity and performance in the West Midlands by examining the factors that constrain firm innovation and productivity throughout the region. The research particularly focused on the role of skills shortages,

Summary
Social science researchers, in collaboration with regional stakeholders, identified factors contributing to the West Midlands productivity gap and informed interventions to boost productivity and grow the regional economy.

Lead researcher(s) & institution(s)
Professor Nigel Driffield FAcSS, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick

Project duration
October 2018 to June 2022

Funding
£1.8m (ESRC, West Midlands Combined Authority)

Key partners
Loughborough University, University of Birmingham, University of Warwick, West Midlands Growth Company, Midlands Engine, West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), three Local Enterprise Partnerships, Jaguar Land Rover, Aston Martin, CBI, Chambers of Commerce, TUC and Unite

> *"This [research] has been very important to enable the WMCA to identify plans and priorities to grow its regional economy."*
>
> Steven Heales, Innovation Policy Manager, WMCA

the importance of supply chains and the impacts of foreign direct investment (FDI).

At its heart, the project took a collaborative approach to working with regional stakeholders, including the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), the Midlands Engine, three Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and private sector firms including Jaguar Land Rover and Aston Martin. This aligned with several local initiatives taking place such as the West Midlands Combined Authority's Productivity and Skills Commission – and the subsequent development of a Local Industrial Strategy – which led to the region's plan for growth.

The research led to an enhanced understanding of how different activities either underpin, through exporting or attracting investment, or support regional growth. From this, Local Enterprise Partnerships were able to deliver relevant interventions, for example on inward investment, support for supply chains, and on skills and business support, all of which were better coordinated as part of the region's Plan for Growth. A Covid-19 recovery plan was also developed for the region, which linked together skills interventions, business support, and internationalisation strategy. As a result, the project was designated a key Covid-recovery project by ESRC.

> *"The research was fundamental to the formation of the Reset Strategy Framework."*
>
> Sarah Windrum for the Coventry & Warwickshire LEP (now the Growth Hub)

The impact
The project had a set of multi-layered stakeholders, ranging from Midlands Engine, the West Midlands Combined Authority, and unitary and county authorities. The greater understanding of the productivity challenge locally informed not only the West Midlands Productivity and Skills Commission (of which Professor Driffield was the deputy chair) but also fed into the Covid-19 recovery strategies that were adopted locally. As a result, the research has had a range of influence with the findings contributing to various policy and business-related discussions at the local, regional and national level including:

- Providing advice to the West Midlands Growth Company on how to become more effective in their inward investment operations.
- Contributing to World Economic Forum guidance on outward foreign direct investment to support firm development and maximise sustainable development.
- Influencing training of practitioners at various scales on a range of topics including building productivity through supply chain resilience and inward investment.
- Supporting the OECD evidence base on the success of the Coventry and Warwickshire region.

- Contributing to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's (now the Department for Business and Trade) paper on supply chain resilience.
- Supporting policymakers, as part of local enterprise partnerships, to understand the links between sectors as part of the West Midlands region's response to Covid-19.

> *"We were particularly interested in your work with the CBI, and how inward investment is linked to productivity growth in our key sectors. We work in collaboration with partners from right across our region and national government [...] Increasing prosperity in our region is a goal that we all share and I'm glad to have you as a partner in this ambition."*
>
> Delma Dwight, Director of The Economic Intelligence Unit and Director of Midlands Engine Observatory

The significance of the social sciences to this work

The project brought together the skills and insights from many social science disciplines including labour market analysis, international business, economics, operations research, decision sciences, human resources, innovation and entrepreneurship, among others. This was central to the project's success in understanding that skills policy, inward investment, and supply chain support do not exist in isolation from each other, and stakeholders benefitted from the expertise provided by the project team in shaping this understanding. The collaborative approach taken by the project, especially towards inward investment has enabled the relationships between stakeholders to be strengthened and the project team remains involved in benchmarking the region's performance and in further developing the sector-based approach established.

Looking to the future

Professor Nigel Driffield is working in collaboration with the WMCA, Warwick District Council, and Coventry City Council on the potential for a gigafactory to be built in Coventry. This project could attract £2.5 billion in investment and create around 6,000 new jobs. Professor Driffield also joined the Board of the Coventry and Warwickshire LEP (now Growth Hub), as economic advisor, and the Advisory Board of the Midlands Engine Observatory, giving him opportunities to continue the dissemination of project findings and collaborate with stakeholders on future initiatives. For example, he has recently advised the Central Business District of Birmingham in terms of the post-pandemic strategy. He is also on the board of the Investment Zone for the West Midlands, focusing on the value proposition for advanced manufacturing investment, skills and jobs in the region.

4. Understanding the regional impact of Covid-19 through tracking the economy

The challenge

In the UK, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic was followed swiftly by the imposition of local lockdowns, limiting people's movements, retail business opening and hospitality sector activity. This was implemented at the local authority level using a "tier" system and, very quickly, the attention of the UK Government turned to understanding how this lockdown policy was affecting economic and social activity locally.

The research

In mid-2020, policymakers in the Treasury were seeking data and analysis to understand the effects of the lockdowns. Supported by a UKRI Covid-19 Rapid Response Grant, a research team led by Professor John Gatherwood at the University of Nottingham, along with Professor Neil Stewart at the University of Warwick, developed a set of partnerships with different data providers which enabled them to analyse and dashboard a range of geo-granular data, sourced from debit card spending transactions, mobile phone locations and credit files, to provide a picture of economic and social activity in real time. This became known as tracktheeconomy.ac.uk.

Working at the pace of a start-up business, the team created data assets and technology solutions which could be

Summary
Social science research developed a data dashboard showing economic and social activity in real time, enabling local, regional and national policymakers to use data-led insights to inform better decision-making and help drive growth across the country, both during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lead researcher(s) & institution(s)
Professor John Gathergood, University of Nottingham
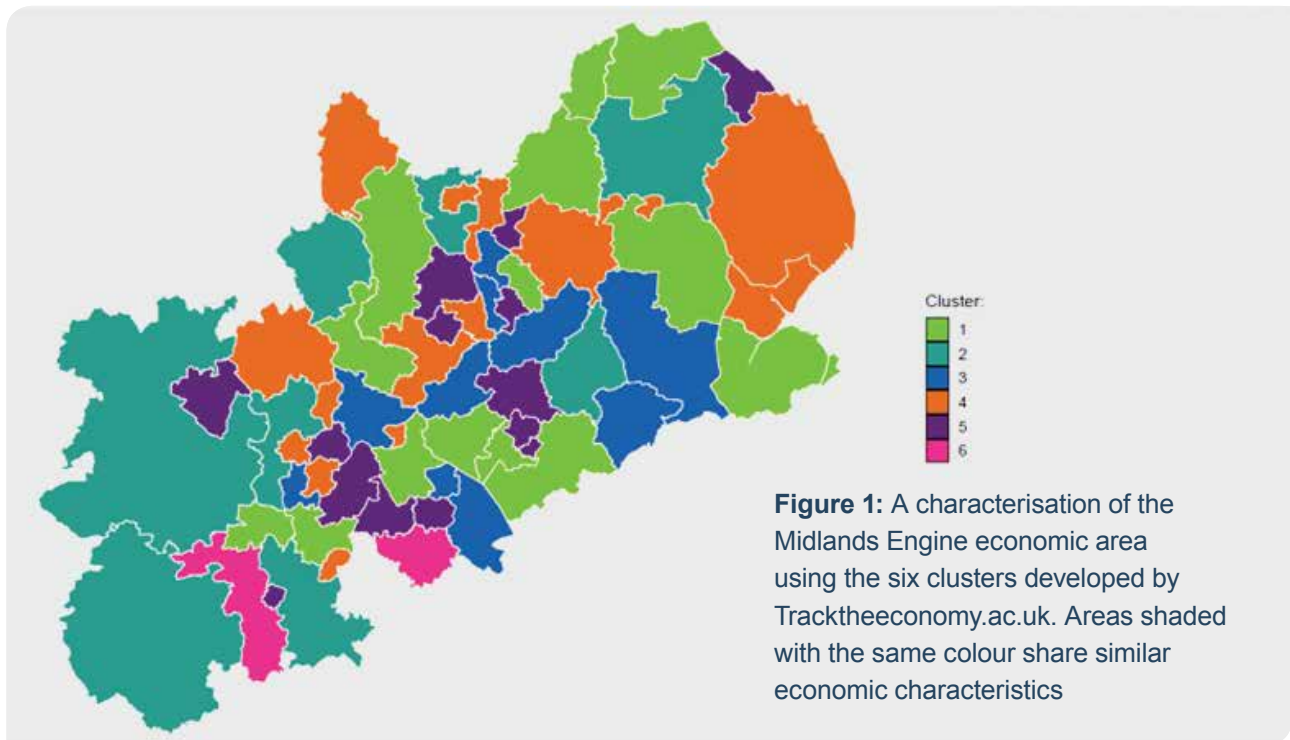
Project duration
June 2020 to July 2022

Funding
£358,361 (UKRI, ESRC)

Key partners
University of Warwick, Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, Economics Statistics Centre of Excellence, Experian UK PLC, Fable Data, Geospatial Commission, Huq Industries, KPMG, Mastercard, Office for National Statistics

Figure 1: A characterisation of the Midlands Engine economic area using the six clusters developed by Tracktheeconomy.ac.uk. Areas shaded with the same colour share similar economic characteristics

used to analyse the changing patterns in people's movement, spending, consumer and business financial resilience, and the spread of the virus. Tracktheeconomy.ac.uk provided a real-time dashboard of this economic and social activity from the local authority level up to the national level and allowed users to interrogate patterns in variables, track patterns within a local authority over time and allowed comparison between local authorities. The dashboard was made available to staff at His Majesty's Treasury and the Bank of England, who could then follow up with deeper dive questions of interest for the team to analyse.

As a result, a series of research pieces were published alongside the dashboard which explored specific issues of interest, such as the displacement of consumer spending across local authorities, the effects of reduced mobility on online vs in-person spending, and the enduring effects of working from home on the economic and social life of the population.

The impact

Through this project, the research team made lasting connections with UK Government teams who were seeking to develop new assets and tools to analyse data at the granular level. This has evolved into relationships with the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), and other government bodies, who now procure and analyse population movement data of the type used in the tracktheeconomy.ac.uk project.

Following the pandemic, the emergence of levelling up as a policy concern came into sharper focus with policymakers wanting to gain a deeper understanding of geographic inequalities across the UK. With the depth of data and insight available from the tracktheeconomy.ac.uk dashboard, the team developed a new set of insights and analysis relating to levelling up, once again filling a data vacuum. The team began looking at newer data sources and conducted various analyses, including re-analysing the funding disbursements under the Shared Prosperity Fund and Levelling Up Fund, and examining

the economic coherence of regional economic partnerships, such as the Midlands Engine. This provided specific insights on the economic make-up of the region, in particular the Midlands Engine Economic Area, and highlighted that distinct geographies within the region share similar characteristics (Figure 1). This work provided essential insight for local authorities seeking to collaborate on joint initiatives and was used to support funding bids to various levelling up schemes. The data and insights continue to be used by local economic actors in forecasting and planning regional economic development.

The significance of the social sciences to this work

The innovative, adaptable approach taken by the team to analysing and displaying real-time, geolocational data to meet the needs of local, regional and national policymakers during the Covid-19 pandemic was central to the project's success, providing a core piece of data intelligence infrastructure. Social science methods and insights were crucial to this work, which provides a lens for economic, political and sociological interpretation of the underlying data sources. In particular, theories and narratives of local economic geographies and their evolution over time are crucial for understanding the complex picture of regional political and economic geographies. The evidence-led insights from the team of social scientists have resulted in an ongoing, useful tool which provides regional and local policymakers with fine grained, up-to-date information about their local economies, enabling them to inform better decision making and help drive growth more evenly across the country.

Looking to the future

The project team are now working with the Office for National Statistics to integrate the data sources and analytical methods from the tracktheeconomy.ac.uk dashboard into the ONS suite of experimental sub-national statistics, with the ambition of this approach to analysing local data becoming the norm for UK statistics. The team continues to produce regular briefings for policymakers at the national and regional level, including for the recently formed East Midlands Combined County Authority.

5. Enhancing return-to-work processes in the Midlands region

Loughborough University

The challenge

Poor mental health is one of the most rapidly growing causes of long-term sickness absence and costs the UK approximately £8 billion annually for employers, healthcare and wider society. Managing workers on long-term sick leave and supporting their return to work (RTW) falls on the shoulders of employers with the responsibility given to line managers. Recommendations from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) indicate that organisations should develop policies and procedures that promote health and wellbeing and a sustainable RTW. Yet information, especially evidence-based resources, regarding specific actions of how to achieve this is limited.

The research

In response to the NICE recommendations and lack of return-to-work interventions, Professor Fehmidah Munir and her team, at Loughborough University, developed a return-to-work toolkit called PROWORK (Promoting a Sustainable Return to Work) and piloted this with businesses and organisations in the Midlands. The PROWORK toolkit aims to support workers on long-term sick leave and their managers in their return to work, when used alongside existing sickness absence and return-to-work processes, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Summary

Social scientists developed a new toolkit to support workers on long term sick leave, and their managers, in their return to work, helping to fill a gap in the resources available in promoting health, wellbeing and sustainable return-to-work processes for businesses in the Midlands.

Lead researcher(s) & institution(s)

Professor Fehmidah Munir, Loughborough University

Project duration

March 2020 to March 2024

Funding

£603,000 (Midlands Engine and Department for Work and Pensions)

Key partners

Coventry University, University of Birmingham, University of Nottingham, University of Warwick, Affinity Health at Work, Mind (mental health charity)

What the toolkits look like

Step 1
Initial sickness absence

Step 2
Preparing for return to work

Step 3
Support back at work

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is designed for the key person who is responsible for supporting the employee on sick leave and who will be managing their return back to work.

This could be:

- An employer
- Line manager
- Human resource advisor
- Occupational health advisor

This toolkit will help you support the employee from a mental wellbeing or mental fitness focus. For example, your employee might be on sick leave because:

- They have been experiencing stress, anxiety, panic or depression, or
- They are physically unwell, but may also be experiencing stress, anxiety, panic or depression. It is common for people who are unwell physically, to also experience poor mental wellbeing.

Returning to work is not easy for many employees and most need help on returning, whether it is back to their work site or back to homeworking.

Mental health and wellbeing support are vital for a good return to work. Because it is common for people who are unwell physically to also experience poor mental health, this toolkit is designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of all types of employees on sick leave, as part of the return to work process. You can find more information about mental health and wellbeing from ACAS here.

How to use this toolkit

The toolkit is to be used to support the return of an employee who been on sick leave for 8 or more days. It has three main steps:

Step 1 Managing initial sick leave

Step 2 Preparing for employee return to work, and

Step 3 Managing the employee back at work.

Each step uses a **person-centric approach** in the actions it asks you to take. This means that the actions you take show the employee that you care, are trying to understand their situation and will support them back into work.

Who is this Toolkit for?

This toolkit supports your mental wellbeing (keeping your brain and emotional health in good shape) whilst on long term sick leave and also when you return to work.

You might be on sick leave for a number of different reasons:

- You may be off work because you might have been experiencing low mental wellbeing or more specifically stress, anxiety, panic or depression, or
- You may be off work for another reason, but also feel low, stressed, anxious, or depressed. It is common for people who are unwell physically, to also experience low mental wellbeing. In fact, mental health problems affect **ONE IN SIX** workers each year.

How to use this toolkit

The toolkit has three main steps that support you during your sick leave and when returning to work:

Step 1 Initial sick leave

Step 2 Preparing to return to work

Step 3 Back at work

The toolkit will help you to:

- Discover ways to support your wellbeing whilst on sick leave.
- Find ways to move forward using simple tasks you can do on your own, or with the help of friends or family.
- Maintain a healthy relationship with your workplace during your sick leave and when you return.

▶ This toolkit also has links to its activities and to useful websites to support you whilst on sick leave.

A workplace coach is available to help you use this toolkit. They will contact you soon, to help you make a start. Throughout the toolkit this picture of two talking heads shows there are some coaching notes for you to think about.

Developing a return to work action plan

There are two important steps that can help you prepare for returning to work:

Phase 1: Do your prep work.

Phase 2: Do your groundwork.

Phase 1: Do your prep work

Before you discuss your return to work plan, you may want to find out about your workplace's return to work process. This can help you feel in control.

☐ Check workplace intranet or company handbook

☐ Speak to your key contact at work for information about the company's return to work process

☐ If you are returning to your place of work, check with your workplace how they have made it safe for you to return because of COVID-19. Government information about what your workplace should be doing can be found here

▶ Other places you can find information about return to work plans are:

Health and Safety Executive

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service

Citizens Advice

After doing your prep work note any questions and concerns here and think about who you could talk to about these. By working through what's on your mind it can help break things down and help you feel better about them.

Phase 2: Do your groundwork

Sometimes, your line manager or employer may not know all the details of what you do in your job. It is important that you prepare for your return to work so you can discuss with your employer any changes you may need when you return (e.g. start times, more frequent breaks). Your employer will be able to consider what would be helpful for you alongside what they're able to do.

▶ Click here to see a list of possible work adjustments that could be useful.

More detail on other work adjustments can be found by clicking on the links in the bubbles below

Workplace strategies for mental health

Rethink

Adjustments for other health conditions

Mind

> *"Our policy at the moment is not fit for purpose, it's a very lengthy policy… I want a more concise policy that supports me in terms of I'm doing the right actions, I want to do the right actions to support my employee. But I need very clear, concise information as to how to do that. And I think that is why we're really excited about it incorporating aspects of the toolkit into the sickness policy to give them that clear guidance with the aim that we will then see accountability for our managers in terms of this process."*
>
> Food services, large organisation

The PROWORK toolkit was tested in a study involving nine organisations from the Midlands, including 42 workers on long-term sick leave (≥ 15 days) and 39 managers. The results indicated that those individuals who were part of the intervention group using the toolkit had a lower median number of sick leave days compared to the control group, and that symptoms of depression and anxiety were significantly lower among those using the toolkit.

Following this, the project team conducted interviews with various businesses in the Midlands to understand their sickness management policies. The findings highlighted significant differences in the training and support provided to managers and workers regarding return-to-work processes, underscoring the need for standardised support and training to manage long-term sick leave effectively.

> *"The toolkit was good to go to reflect and just look at it. And when I was feeling anxious or things like that, I could just relate to it. I think the whole toolkit at every stage actually seeing in black and white in front of me. Made you stop and think and pause and reflect on that stage that I was going through."*
>
> Employee

The impact
The trial of the PROWORK toolkit was conducted in businesses collectively employing over 11,500 workers. Following the trial period, eleven businesses implemented the toolkit into their sick leave and return-to-work policies, with a further 31 organisations who participated in the research showing intention to use the toolkit in their policies. The reasons for embedding the toolkit included educating managers, improving understanding of mental wellbeing, and creating a transparent and collaborative return-to-work process.

The PROWORK toolkit bridges a gap in current return-to-work interventions which predominantly focus on the individual worker rather than taking a whole systems approach.

> *"You know you got an action plan that you can look at. So that it gives you a lot of information…The toolkit was one place to come to where it was all really clear... it just made me think a lot more. A lot more about her wellbeing rather than just: 'well, thank goodness, she's back.'"*
>
> Manager

The toolkit was found to improve communication between workers and managers and provided support that was previously lacking. As a result, the businesses that integrated the toolkit reported strengthened policies and practices.

Based on the success of PROWORK, the research team received funding from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) to test a similar toolkit called IGLOo which built on PROWORK to include senior leaders and key stakeholders, with its focus being on the sustainability of work. This trial was run in South Yorkshire and the Humber involving nine further organisations. Both the PROWORK and IGLOo toolkits were presented to and shared with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

"We've amended our return-to-work stuff so that the managers have more involvement so it's not just HR dealing with it. We've implemented a toolkit that you know goes through the different stages and we've basically replicated what you sent us and tied it into our own policy so that like I say the manager does a bit of hand holding as well as HR."

Education, small business

The significance of the social sciences to this work

The social sciences were central to this study, illustrating their importance in understanding and developing return-to-work interventions by targeting the complex interplay of individual, organisational and societal factors that influence the experience and length of sick leave, and subsequent return-to-work outcomes. The PROWORK toolkit and its implementation strategy provides a structured multi-level approach for employers, managers and workers to managing long-term sick leave, improving wellbeing, and productivity. This project has gone a long way in addressing the lack of council-led services in the region, highlighting the need for such interventions to support businesses and enhance working relationships.

Looking to the future

Building on the success of the PROWORK toolkit, the team is planning to develop a guidance tool for human resources management and small employers to assess and improve their sick leave and return-to-work policies. A similar study to that which took place in the Midlands is also planned for the South Yorkshire region.

6. Using real-time insights to support the VCSE sector beyond the pandemic

Nottingham Trent University

The challenge

The voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector plays an important role in delivering public services and place-based solutions for the communities in which they are based, contributing to the economy and fostering belonging in their local areas. There are an estimated 250,000 VCSE organisations in the UK, with an estimated 4,000 of these located in the Black Country and 13,300 operating across Solihull and Warwickshire. The first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020 had significant impacts on the sector, with losses projected at £4.3 billion (DCMS, 2020). In the wake of lockdowns, health concerns, rising demand, and uncertainty much of the sector's operations were reshaped and meeting the needs of their communities against this backdrop proved challenging.

The research

To address this, the Respond, Reset, Recover Project was launched to capture real-time insights into the sector's experiences, both regionally and nationally, in order to provide valuable data for policymakers and practitioners to inform their decision-making.

The project collected a range of data including a monthly barometer tracking finances, operations, staffing and thematic issues in the sector; a panel survey involving 412 organisations to explore

Summary
Social science research used innovative data collection methods to capture real-time insights into the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, providing valuable evidence for policymakers to inform their decision-making to support the sector.

Lead researcher(s) & institution(s)
Professor Daniel King, Nottingham Trent University

Project duration
June 2020 to December 2021

Funding
£324,000 (ESRC)

Key partners
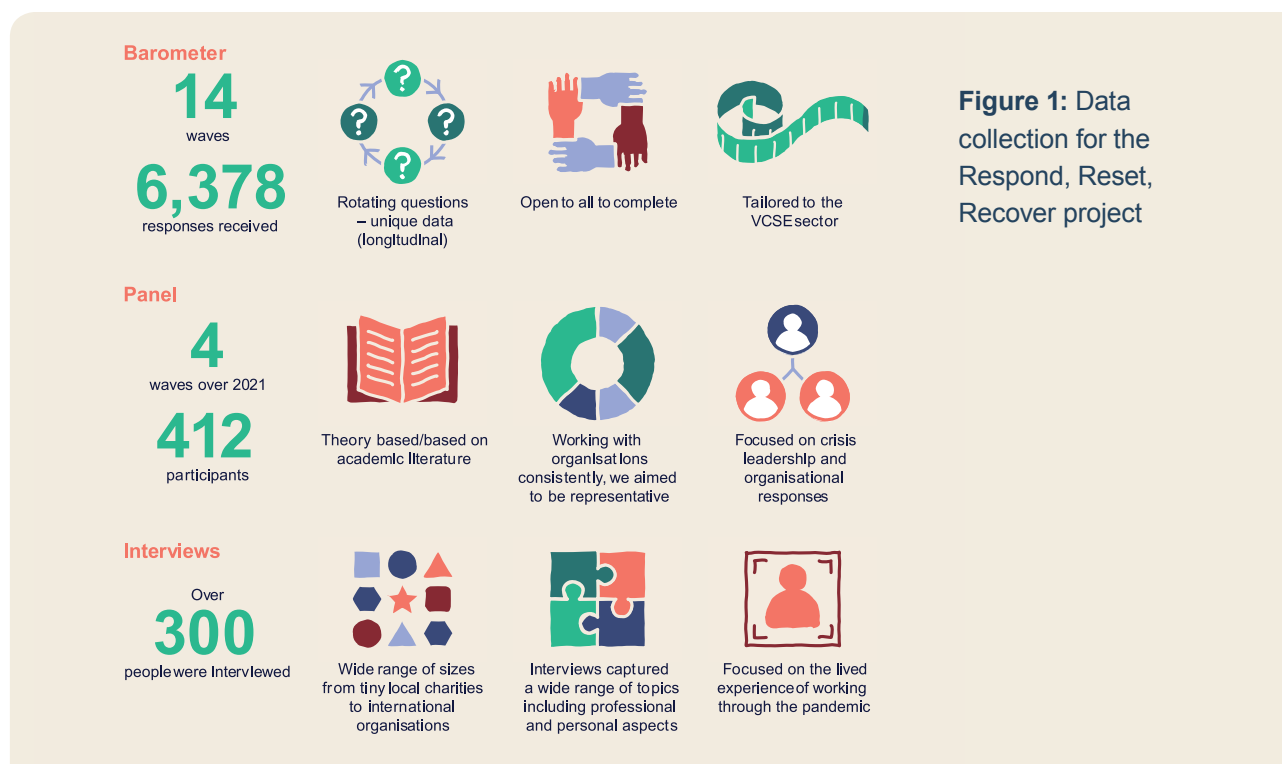Sheffield Hallam University and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

Barometer
14 waves
6,378 responses received

Rotating questions – unique data (longitudinal)

Open to all to complete

Tailored to the VCSE sector

Panel
4 waves over 2021
412 participants

Theory based/based on academic literature

Working with organisations consistently, we aimed to be representative

Focused on crisis leadership and organisational responses

Interviews
Over **300** people were interviewed

Wide range of sizes from tiny local charities to international organisations

Interviews captured a wide range of topics including professional and personal aspects

Focused on the lived experience of working through the pandemic

Figure 1: Data collection for the Respond, Reset, Recover project

crisis leadership; and over 300 interviews with a range of organisations and infrastructure bodies working in the field. These datasets provided a clear and consistent picture of the challenges the sector was facing, as well as the impacts on the sector and the lessons learned from how different organisations responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The project team produced 13 monthly reports which focused on a variety of topics such as staff and volunteer wellbeing, volunteering, equity and inclusion, sector finances, and the sectors relationships with local authorities. These were generated within a week of data collection and were complemented by an interactive dashboard which allowed users to filter data by size, location, and purpose, with regional insights being able to be compared with the national picture.

The impact

The research had wide-reaching impacts, providing real-time and accessible data to researchers, policymakers and decision-makers to help them understand what was happening in the VCSE sector during the pandemic and respond to the challenges posed. Many local and national VCSE organisations also used the reports to help shape their

"During the Covid crisis we were in considerable dialogue with public sector colleagues at local and regional level, highlighting the incredible flexibility of the voluntary sector's response. This prompted a local state of the sector survey. Using the reports and dashboard from the Respond, Reset, Recover Project allowed us to contextualise our local data against regional and national information, which was helpful to those public sector discussions."

Jules Sebelin, CEO, Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service

understanding on how the sector as a whole had responded to the pandemic, enabling them to better campaign for or allocate resources. Whilst the interactive dashboard enabled decision-makers working in local government, both in the Midlands and across the UK, to drill down into the data to understand how the impact of the pandemic varied across organisational size, geography or purpose and feed this into decisions being made to support the sector.

This project identified some key challenges in the VCSE sector, primarily a lack of data on the sector, and what data there was being extremely fragmented, making it difficult for the sector to communicate its needs to policymakers and funders. With local authority funding facing increasing pressure, developing a stronger, data driven voice for the sector which highlighted local and regional disparities became more paramount.

Nottingham Trent University built on the work of the Respond, Reset, Recover Project to establish the VCSE Data and Insights National Observatory to consolidate sector data and support informed decision-making. The Observatory runs a Quarterly Barometer survey co-produced with 14 national organisations, which provides critical insights, including the effects of the cost-of-living crisis on the sector. The findings have influenced the Department for Culture, Media and Sport presentations to the Treasury, resulting in a £100m allocation for the charity sector in England in the 2023 Spring Budget.

The significance of the social sciences to this work

The ability to work at speed, responding to sector needs and providing evidence to inform policymakers and practitioners was central to this project. The rapid turn-around between the research and publication of the research findings meant that the results were available to be used as a way of responding to the changing nature of the pandemic and resulted in the research team building relationships with VCSE organisations and policymakers at regional and national levels. Social science was key to the innovative methods used to bring together three data collection techniques to capture what was happening in the national sector and feed these insights to decision-makers. Data democratisation and open data research principals were key to this project, and this was recognised by the Nottingham Trent University Open Research Awards.

Looking to the future

The VCSE Data and Insights National Observatory continues to build on the work of the Respond, Reset, Recover Project, developing tools to improve VCSE data collection to inform key local decision-makers such as local authorities, funders, and Integrated Care Boards. In partnership with Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care Board the
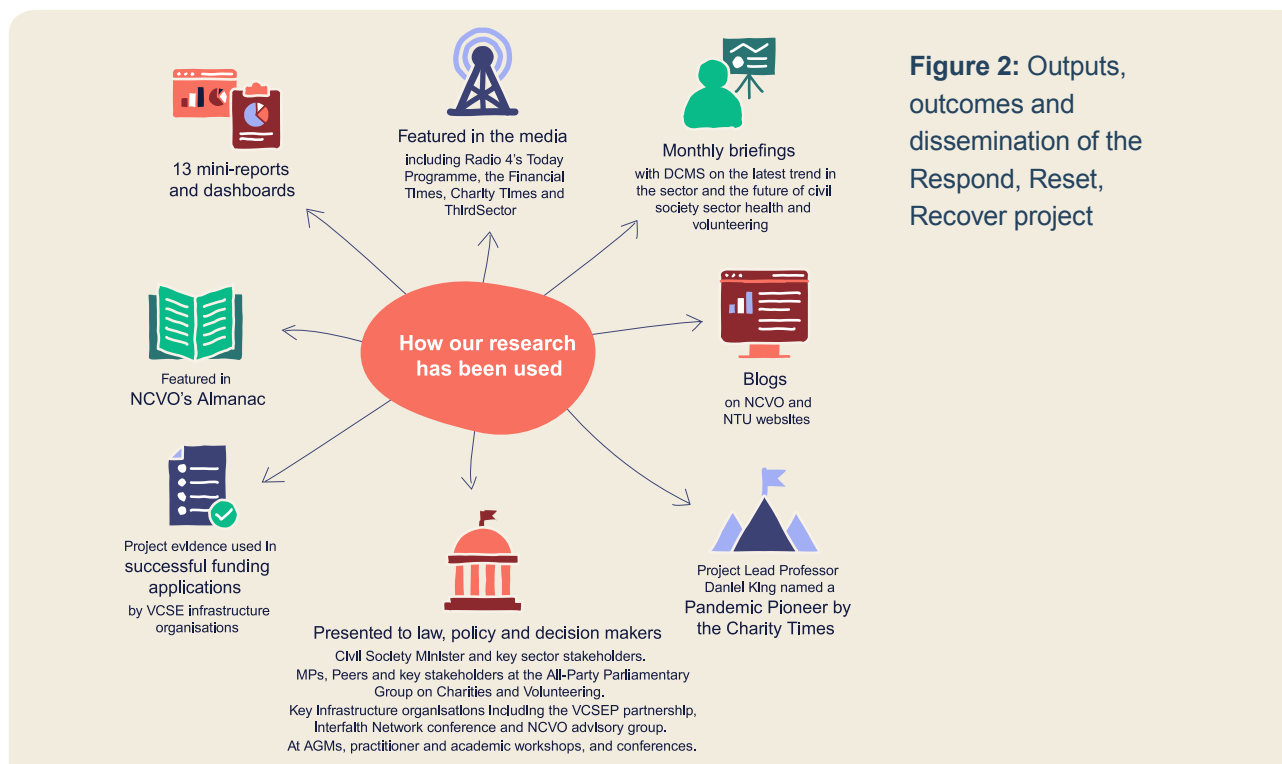
Figure 2: Outputs, outcomes and dissemination of the Respond, Reset, Recover project

team are developing an interactive dashboard which connects researchers with under-researched VCSE communities. Further research has also been awarded funding from the Economic and Social Research Council to examine the feasibility of a data infrastructure for social science research that draws on and strengthens data practices across the VCSE sector and amplifies its voice in social science research and beyond.

7. Making air travel inclusive for all by meeting the accessibility needs of disabled passengers

The challenge

In 2023/2024, 4.45 million special assistance requests were received at UK airports, a 21% increase over 2022/2023 figures (CAA, 2024). These requests can be related to some or all aspects of the air travel journey, including access to and exit from airport terminal buildings and their facilities, navigating within said terminals, access to digital systems and self-service kiosks; and access to, and exit from, aircraft and other mobile assets. Currently, special assistance services are the responsibility of the airport operator, not the airline the passenger is travelling with, and are free at point of use. Given an ageing population and growing demand for special assistance services by an increasing number of passengers in recent years, understanding current barriers to inclusive, accessible air travel, whether they be regulatory, technical or service dimensions, is vital to ensure the needs of all passengers are met.

The research

Research led by Professor Lucy Budd at De Montfort University (DMU), collaborating with Professor Stephen Ison, Dr Peter Jones (both DMU) and Professor Fern Elsdon-Baker at the University of Birmingham, aimed to inform the development of inclusive air travel accessibility in the UK by exploring the aviation sector's existing accessibility

Summary
Innovative social science research has led to a greater understanding of the accessibility barriers faced by passengers living with a range of disabilities, resulting in recommendations for future policy and practice at Birmingham Airport and beyond in the Midlands and the UK to make travel more accessible and inclusive for all.

Lead researcher(s) & institution(s)
Professor Lucy Budd, De Montfort University

Project duration
2023 to 2024

Funding
£146,219 (ESRC)

Key partners
University of Birmingham, Birmingham Airport, and regional and national disability charities.
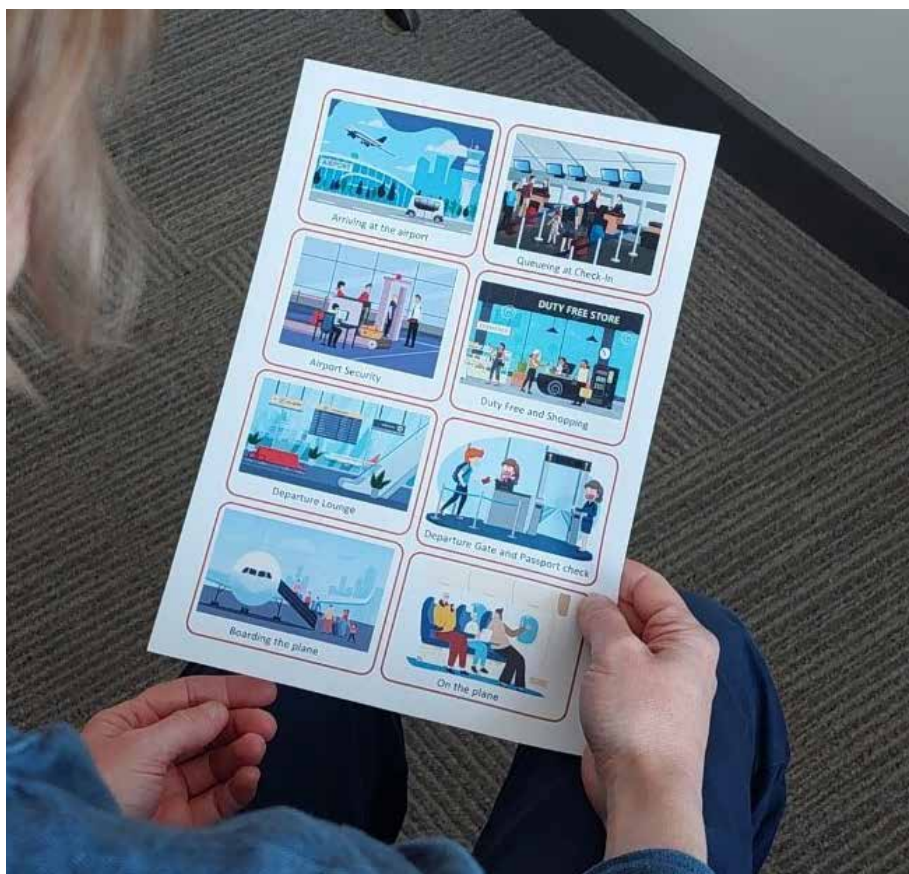
Image: Example of a bespoke visual communication book developed by Dr Peter Jones to enable interview participation by non-verbal interviewees.

challenges and examining how disabled passenger needs may be embedded into the design and introduction of future airports, aircraft and accessibility regulations.

The project team worked in collaboration with Birmingham Airport to understand the travel experiences of people living with a range of different disabilities. The project adopted an innovative methodological approach to allow for participation in interviews by non-verbal participants, and included the development of bespoke visual aids to ensure that participation in the project was as inclusive as possible. The project has provided a foundation for future work in air transport accessibility and helped support a national network of air transport scholars and practitioners.

The impact

In addition to working with industry stakeholder Birmingham Airport, the project team collaborated with a number of Midlands-based disability charities to explore opportunities for engaging disabled users to identify issues they experience while travelling by air and how they might be better addressed in the future to deliver more inclusive and accessible air travel. The project made recommendations for future policy and practice to support accessible and inclusive air transport for disabled travellers. This has extended beyond the Midlands to other parts of the UK, and enabled direct dialogue with other airports, airlines, travel agents, and national regulators. Full details of the findings and recommendations are available in this report.

The significance of the social sciences to the work

The project adopted an empowering methodological approach to give a voice to a community of passengers who are often marginalised when it comes to embedding

transport needs. This work has supported scholars in various fields of social science including disability studies, social policy, human geography, and transport management to further develop applicable research and practice in this area.

This social science research project has put Midlands' universities at the forefront of policy innovation and knowledge exchange in transport accessibility studies, and has opened up dialogue with other UK airports, with the potential for regulatory impact which may, in turn, influence future technology and design.

Looking to the future

Follow-on work is expected with legal and public governance researchers working on the formation and enforcement of disability rights legislation for transport, and with knowledge transfer to aerospace engineers on the inclusive design of new advanced air mobility assets and aircraft.

8. Improving workplace mental health and productivity using longitudinal data

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

The challenge

Workplace mental health is a major socio-economic challenge and a key part of the UK's productivity problem, with Deloitte estimating that the cost to employers of poor mental health is £51bn per year. In 2019, The Midlands Engine commissioned the Mental Health and Productivity Pilot (MHPP) to address this issue in the Midlands region. The MHPP was a collaboration of Midlands universities and other partners, led by Coventry University, which aimed to create a social movement around mental health and wellbeing as a route to better productivity. But baseline data on workplace mental health in the region was lacking.

The research

As part of the MHPP programme, the Enterprise Research Centre (ERC) at the University of Warwick undertook a groundbreaking programme of research to provide evidence on the link between workplace mental health and productivity which could be used to inform the priorities and interventions that would be delivered by the MHPP.

The initial employer survey took place in early 2020 and involved approximately 2,000 Midlands-based businesses, exploring their attitudes and practices to managing employee mental health.

Summary
Groundbreaking social science research surveying 2,000 Midlands-based businesses informed interventions aimed at improving workplace mental health, reaching 800,000 employees in the region.

Lead researcher(s) & institution(s)
Professor Stephen Roper,
Dr Maria Wishart and Dr Vicki Belt,
Enterprise Research Centre (ERC),
Warwick Business School, University of Warwick

Project duration
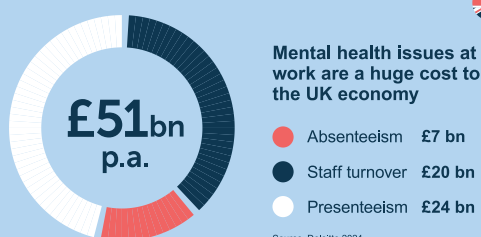November 2019 to September 2025

Funding
£280,000 (Mental Health and Productivity Pilot); £1.7 m (ESRC)

Key partners
University of Nottingham, Mind (mental health charity), Chartered Management Institute, Acas, and the Department for Work and Pensions
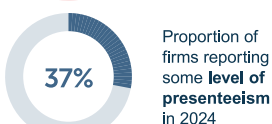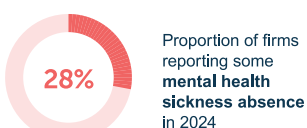
Trends in UK workplace mental health and wellbeing

ERC Enterprise Research Centre

1 The scale of the problem

£51bn p.a.

Mental health issues at work are a huge cost to the UK economy

- Absenteeism £7 bn
- Staff turnover £20 bn
- Presenteeism £24 bn

Source: Deloitte 2024

Left unaddressed, poor staff mental health can cut firm-wide productivity by a quarter

Source: ERC 2020

2 Absence and presenteeism

28% Proportion of firms reporting some **mental health sickness absence** in 2024

37% Proportion of firms reporting some **level of presenteeism** in 2024

47% Proportion of firms with **mental health absence** reporting that at least some of this was long-term in nature

Proportion of firms reporting some level of presenteeism

Year	
2020	33%
2021	17%
2022	21%
2023	37%
2024	37%

0 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40%

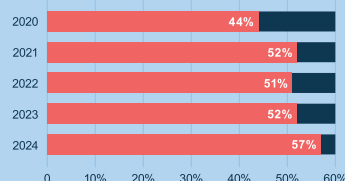There has been a **sustained increase in reported presenteeism** since the pandemic
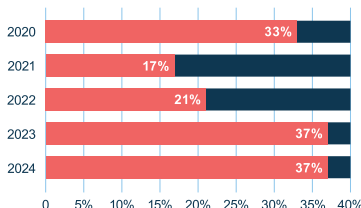
www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk

3 Firm-level actions

There has been a rise in the proportion of firms offering mental health initiatives

Proportion of firms offering mental health initiatives

Year	
2020	44%
2021	52%
2022	51%
2023	52%
2024	57%

0 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60%

But there is **intention-action gap** — in 2024, **77%** stated that they felt firms have responsibility to address mental health issues in the workplace, but only **57%** offered initiatives

Source: ERC 2024

Shortly after the first survey was carried out the Covid-19 pandemic hit radically changing working life for many in the UK. To explore the impacts of the pandemic on workplace mental health and productivity, the ERC secured funding for a second survey in 2021. The insights from both surveys fed into the MHPP's work promoting the importance of mental health and wellbeing to productivity, including using key data as part of a campaign aimed at employers in the region, for example that firms impacted by mental health sickness absence suffered a 25% hit to their productivity.

To build on the insights on this initial work, in April 2022, the ERC were awarded a major research grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to lead a new three-year study to understand how workplace mental health influences productivity, what determines the adoption and implementation of mental health and wellbeing practices in the workplace, and which actions deliver the strongest payoffs to productivity.

Three further surveys have been carried out with businesses in the Midlands in 2022, 2023 and 2024, as well as two surveys in Ireland and Sweden, enabling an international point of comparison. In addition, the team have carried out an employee survey, organisational case studies and interviews with leaders, managers and employees in

Midlands-based workplaces. This work is supported by a range of stakeholders, including the mental health charity Mind, Acas, the Trades Union Congress and the Chartered Management Institute. All of this has created a rich dataset tracking attitudes and practices related to workplace mental health and productivity in the region over the past five years, illustrating the extent of the problems employers face, and highlighting areas most in need of attention.

The latest survey findings show a striking increase in long-term mental health absence and extensive problems with 'presenteeism'. They also show a growth in the proportion of businesses taking action on employee mental health since the pandemic. However, with only 57% of firms in the region currently offering mental health initiatives to their employees, there remains considerable room for improvement, especially amongst the smallest businesses.

The impact

The findings of the initial surveys fed into the design of tested workplace interventions that were delivered by the MHPP in more than 1,130 organisations across the Midlands between 2020-24, reaching 800,000 employees. These interventions included support for organisations to achieve the Mental Health at Work Commitment (developed by the mental health charity Mind), and the Thrive at Work Wellbeing Accreditation Programme, as well as the Managing Minds at Work initiative which involved the development and delivery of a digital training programme supporting line managers to promote better mental health at work through a preventative approach. As a result, a substantial proportion of Midlands employers were able to enhance their confidence and capability in terms of their approaches to workplace mental wellbeing.

As well as influencing the interventions delivered by the MHPP, the team have produced a range of accessible reports and have held several successful events directed at businesses, employees, charities and other organisations supporting mental health in the workplace, as well as policymakers.

The significance of the social sciences to the work

The ERC's research on workplace mental health and productivity shows how social science research, in particular interdisciplinary research, can shed valuable light on major, complex socio-economic problems such as productivity. The research findings powerfully illustrate the extent of mental health issues being faced by businesses in the Midlands, how employers are responding to these, and where there is scope for intervention.

Looking to the future

In 2025 there will be a sixth employers survey, and a final report that will bring together the overall findings and make policy recommendations at regional and national levels. Findings will be fed into the UK Government's Keep Britain Working Review that will report this year. The research has generated a unique, valuable longitudinal dataset that has many possibilities for further research. The team will be seeking funding to maintain an annual survey and to explore new avenues for analysis. In the longer term, it is hoped the insights will be used to guide local action and establish the Midlands as an exemplar region in creating mentally healthy, productive workplaces.

9. Using AI to provide preventative health care to people with disabilities

The challenge

Approximately 1 in 100 people are identified as having a learning disability. Of these, about two-thirds have two or more long-term conditions and their life expectancy is 20 years lower than the UK average. Sometimes, physical health symptoms in these individuals are mistakenly attributed to either a mental health or behavioural problem, or as being an inherent part of the person's intellectual disability. All of this contributes to health inequalities. To address this issue, there needs to be improved coordination of care between health and social services. But a lack of understanding and inability to predict the complex interactions between long term conditions and the care needs of different individuals with different severities of intellectual disability, means it is challenging to provide effective person-centred, holistic care.

The research

Research led by Loughborough University and the University of Leicester, in partnership with the Midlands NHS Trusts, used a multidisciplinary approach, combining the social sciences, computer science and health science, to understand how machine learning techniques can help identify the trajectories of various long-term conditions in those with intellectual disabilities to help develop actionable insights to improve care.

Summary

Interdisciplinary research combining the social sciences, computer science and health science is using AI to inform preventative health care actions for individuals with learning difficulties and chronic health conditions.

Lead researcher(s) & institution(s)

Professor Thomas Jun, Loughborough University, Dr Michelle O'Reilly, University of Leicester and Dr Satheesh Gangadharan, Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust

Project duration

2022 to 2025

Funding

£2,810,206 (NIHR)

Key partners

University of Leicester, University of Nottingham, De Montfort University, Kings College London, Plymouth University, Swansea University, Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust (LPT)

The research team analysed healthcare data on people with learning disabilities from England and Wales to understand which long-term conditions are most likely to occur together, what happens to these conditions over time, and the role that other factors, like lifestyle choices, financial position, and social situations, play in them. The team worked closely with people with learning disabilities, their carers, and the professionals who support them to gain a deeper understanding of how chronic health conditions impact the lives of people with learning disabilities and to inform the recommendations the research advises on appropriate care.

Outcomes from the project, DECODE (Data-driven machinE-learning aided stratification and management of multiple long-term COnditions in adults with intellectual disabilitiEs), included a range of user-friendly visualisations of the outputs of the AI analytics that are meaningful and transparent for professionals and for those with learning disabilities to promote effective care. DECODE cumulated in a World Café event bringing all stakeholders together to explore next steps, pathways to impact, sustainability issues, and the ethical use of AI implementation. During this event, graphic storyboarding artists captured the content as a way of representing what took place.

The impact

Ultimately, the DECODE project aims to create an AI system that healthcare professionals nationally, including those in the Midlands region, can use to support the delivery of preventative health care for people with learning disabilities and who are known to have increased risk of developing chronic health conditions. This interdisciplinary research, blending social and health sciences with informatics shows that Midlands NHS Trusts and universities are paving the way for interdisciplinary solutions to global health problems.

The regional impact was enhanced through a series of workshops that included health organisations, policymakers, experts by experience and other stakeholders to ascertain how to best use the case scenarios, to account for the ethicality of the issue at stake, and to explore the most appropriate contexts in which the AI might be implemented in practice.

The significance of the social sciences to the work

This research illustrates the significance of a social science approach in collaboration with data science and design applications. It demonstrates the importance of sociology, psychology and ethnography in practice by understanding people's experiences of health

and health care, their attitudes to AI in managing their health conditions, and the ethical considerations around using big data. DECODE has important implications for addressing health inequalities at a local and national level as it centres vulnerable people's voices and experiences putting them at the forefront of change. It also highlights the diversity of communication needs regarding health information, and the importance of considering how people consume information in the real world.

Looking to the future

The team are planning to build on the DECODE project further by developing and evaluating the personalised communication tools and the predictive AI element of the research with the intention of introducing this into annual health checks as a clinical trial.

Local lessons and national implications

Local lessons from the Midlands

What this report and the case studies illustrate emphatically is that the Midlands region remains not just a powerhouse of social science expertise and innovation, but that this is driving forward change at both a regional and national level.

The exemplar case studies, all of them focused on bringing about tangible benefits to the world around us on critical issues facing society, share a number of key characteristics that have enabled research to be translated into impact on the ground for the benefit of places, communities, businesses, people and decision makers in the Midlands, and beyond. They are a very small sample of the applied social science research-into-evidence and research-into-practice that is going on in the Midlands' universities.

Furthermore, the case studies also show the vital importance of collaboration with leading organisations from public, private and third sectors **in the region for the region**, with regional governance bodies, local beneficiary communities, and other universities. Often, collaborations are led by the research teams in the universities, as inclusive regional anchor or umbrella institutions, engaging and building bridges across different sectors, disciplines and communities. This is echoed in the new UK Government guidance (Green Book) for developing Local Growth Plans in England which now references the critical importance of involving local businesses, higher education providers and funding bodies such as UKRI.

Appendix A demonstrates the collaboration point by setting out the breadth and depth of collaborators and beneficiaries in just the nine case study projects presented in this report. This list also underlines the time and effort that has gone into building the collaborations for each project. Multiply that by the scale of applied social science research taking place across all the Midlands' universities that is focused on the region, and it represents an enormous network of regional knowledge and impact. It exemplifies too the willingness of universities to work in partnership among themselves in support of the region. Enabling research teams to have the time to build and sustain collaborations is vital given the current pressures on universities.

The case studies also illustrate the importance of sustained, medium to long term collaborations, including those with users, built upon trust and mutual respect. As shown by several of the longer-running projects featured, this is important in sustaining impact beyond the research project cycle, and in keeping knowledge in the hands of those who are best placed to use it.

The research work and case studies also exemplify different types of impact, ranging

from shaping policy through evidence-based data for policymakers, to creating tools and interventions for practitioners and practice that make a real difference to staff, citizens, and communities in the Midlands. In a setting where the Research Excellence Framework continues to shape how research is perceived and rewarded, it is vital that impact is broadly conceived.

The projects we have presented in the case studies are all working to step-up the UK's industrial ambitions and to place the Midlands as part of future thinking. With nearly 400,000 businesses across the Midlands, employment, work-force skills, economic planning and a healthy society are at the heart of how social science can help navigate complex local, regional and national dynamics. Yet these contexts are influenced by global factors, mirroring the strength found in the diversity of our communities with the cultural heritages and diaspora that makes up the Midlands.

Key to future success is that the Midlands' political and civic governance has both the tools and leadership required to build on the region's status as a centre of world-leading social science excellence.

National implications for the UK

As well as showcasing the particular regional strengths of the Midlands specifically, the case studies also demonstrate the more general but fundamental role of the social sciences, working in multidisciplinary ways, to help address economic and social challenges at a regional scale and in contemporary settings. In this report alone, these include regional growth and development, workforce planning, the productivity puzzle, physical and mental health, transport, and inequality in our communities. Some of the cases draw from wider disciplines too, most notably the humanities, health sciences and computer science to create practical solutions.

We believe this is an important strand of a wider theme, of the UK's social sciences delivering tangible real-life impact at local, national and global scales – and providing good value for money in doing so. Our social sciences are an area of genuine competitive strength for the nation, with our social science departments and research being the envy of large parts of the world. UK universities comprise one-fifth of the top 50 social science universities in the world (including three in the top ten)[5].

Alongside these important and well-understood economic, educational and civic roles of our universities, however, we should also sound a note of caution about the current vulnerable state of many universities. Much of the research in this report took place before the current financial challenges hit many UK universities.

Recent data[6] from the Office for Students in England showed that 43% of institutions were forecasting a financial deficit for 2024-25 – a situation which is clearly not sustainable in the long-term. Elsewhere, figures from Universities UK[7] indicate the scale of university course closure, course consolidation and departmental closure in response to financial pressures. Of greater relevance in the context of this report, is that 19% of

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[5] QS University Rankings (2024) "QS World University Rankings by Subject 2024: social sciences & management", QS / Top Universities website.
[6] Office for Students in England (2025) Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England: 2025, OfSE website, 8 May 2025.
[7] Universities UK (2025) "Universities grip financial crisis – but at what cost to the nation?", UUK website, 6 May 2025.

UK universities have reduced investment in research and 79% are considering future reductions. Alongside current plans to tighten visa restrictions on international students[8], and potentially tax international student fee income, all of these factors are contributing towards a 'perfect storm' facing the nation's higher education system. Whilst falling outside the scope of this report, it is an important context for the future of research in the region for the region.

There are some additional challenges specifically for social science research compared to some other parts of the academic sector. Social science is both under-structured and underfunded in a UK context, which makes it harder to get research done at scale, develop and provide evidence bases that are produced with rigour and can be used with confidence, to sustain well established collaborations for long-term benefits, and to attract and keep the scientists who can make breakthroughs to improve society. Addressing these areas is essential if the UK is to sustain and grow the immense benefits of regionally-based research and public sector-academic collaborations, let alone the wider contributions of the UK's social sciences.

As we look to the future and the continuing need to build a strong tier of second cities and regions in England and the devolved nations, knowledge and understanding led by the social sciences **in the region for the region** will continue to play a vital role. Many social science projects place emerging industries and business strategy at the forefront of growth and look to nurture job creation and improve infrastructure to support the UK's growth mission.

It is hoped that this publication is a call to arms for the continuation of social science funding so researchers can be ambitious in ideas and can continue to build diverse teams and the skills base for collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders.

It is also a call for enhanced place-based or regional funding to support the development of effective medium to long term collaborations addressing key issues for each region. We commend UKRI on its growing portfolio of regionally-based research funding, including the recently-announced Local Innovation Partnerships Fund, and hope these can grow over time.

The impact of the case studies presented here demonstrate the power of working together to create evidence, to design interventions and to influence change. These case studies should be seen as exemplars of how diversifying our partners and working across universities, industry, government and communities can provide expertise to help address the emerging trends of today and the challenges of tomorrow.

Recommendations

Several recommendations follow from this report.
- **For the UK Government and UKRI:** To fully harness the social sciences' potential, both in a regional context and more generally, and based on this report and on funding data analysis and contextual changes over the past nine years, the Academy of Social Sciences recommends:
  - Review the adequacy of the R&D funding levels for the social sciences sector, including their involvement in multi-disciplinary, challenge-led research.

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[8] Williams, T. (2025) "Graduate visa should be reduced to 18 months, says White Paper", Times Higher Education website, 12 May 2025.

- Give consideration to specific additional funding of applied social science research in four 'themes' recognising their centrality to delivering on the UK Government's stated policy objectives.
  - Regional scale economic growth in the UK;
  - Education research to foster social mobility and enhance skills;
  - The social aspects of health sciences and wellbeing;
  - Net zero and sustainability.
- Grow new and ongoing UKRI regional funding initiatives, including the new Local Innovation Partnerships Fund, and sustain them for a sufficiently long period to generate lasting outcomes and impacts.
- Retain the UK's involvement in the EU Horizon programme because of the essential research collaborations and economic growth this supports.
- Sustain a sound balance in research funding, covering both 'curiosity led' and applied research together with the ongoing contribution of QR funding to help support this, as curiosity-led research underpins innovation and applications of the future.
- Ensure the REF 2029 process is fully cognisant of, and recognises, the value of excellence in regionally-based research that may have little resonance internationally.

• For the Mayoral Combined Authorities:
- This report serves to illustrate the potential that universities hold, in every UK region, to help build the capabilities of the MCA's, through collaboration; whether in technology, data, analytical skills, practical toolkits, research or innovation.

• For universities:
- This report serves to illustrate the immense benefits that can accrue from universities working together to build regional strengths rather than simply competing.
- Universities themselves need to be part of any solution to finding (or working with the private and third sectors to find) alternative sources of funding which can support applied research to address key regional challenges.
- Enable research teams to have the time to build and sustain regional collaborations under the current pressures faced by many universities.

If these hurdles can be addressed, we believe the UK would release more of the social sciences' potential to contribute to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the nation, and help to understand and address many of the specific challenges we face across individual regions and nations of the UK.

Appendix

Collaborating and beneficiary organisations
Acas (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service)
Affinity Health at Work
Ashley Community Housing
Aston Martin
The Bangladeshi Network
Birmingham Airport
CBI (Confederation of British Industry)
Cerebral Palsy Midlands
Chartered Management Institute
Citizens UK (CUK)
Civil Aviation Authority
Coventry and Warwickshire LEP
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
Department for Culture, Media, and Sport
Department for Transport
Department for Work and Pensions
Economic Intelligence Unit
Economics Statistics Centre of Excellence
Experian UK PLC
Fable Data
Geospatial Commission
Huq Industries
Jaguar Land Rover
KPMG
Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust
Mastercard
Midlands Connect
Midlands Engine
Mind Charity
National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)
Office for National Statistics
Pocklington Trust (a Midlands-based sight loss charity)
Punch Records
Regional Mayors and other leaders
Warwickshire Council
West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) area
West Midlands Chambers of Commerce
West Midlands Growth Company
TUC
Unite