

<b>Institution: Institute of Education</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 25</b>
<b>Title of case study: Rapid response reports: a quick but rigorous service for policy-makers</b>
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)

Rapid response reports, commissioned from the IOE's Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) by the Departments for Education and Health specifically to inform policy-making, have helped to determine the financial and practical support for disadvantaged families and children in England for more than a decade. This important series of reports has achieved impact not only by producing robust findings that government departments can rely on but by building relationships of trust and mutual understanding between national policy-makers and researchers.

<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)
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**The approach:** In 2000, TCRU began pioneering a new way for academic research groups to work with government, led by Professor June Statham. The approach allowed politicians and civil servants to have quick access to evidence that could inform decision-making, and to scientifically rigorous scoping work to inform new policy directions. It also provided a single point of contact giving government access to a wide pool of relevant research knowledge. The rapid response reports have drawn on TCRU's wealth of research into support for children and families (e.g. research references **R1** & **R2**), but have also benefited from researchers' individual expertise. Working closely with policy-makers has made it possible to negotiate the best way of addressing their immediate needs for evidence, and to agree what would be feasible within often tight time frames. Other factors supporting this way of working were:

- Sensitivity to constraints facing policy-makers, including short timescales to respond to ministerial requests;
- Flexibility in response to unexpected policy developments.

**Breadth of work:** TCRU has completed nearly 50 rapid response projects since 2003. Their themes overwhelmingly relate to child and family welfare, and encompass issues such as adoption, foster care, family justice, child protection, childcare, children's rights, children with disabilities, mental health and Black and ethnic minority children. The work typically comprises small-scale studies (including, for example, literature reviews, secondary data analysis or costing exercises), as well as scoping exercises, that bring together evidence in a new field, and feasibility studies to test the ground before the roll-out of large-scale research or development work. It also encompasses more direct input to policy debate and development – including, for example, analysis to inform ministerial briefings and the development of national guidance and guidelines. This case study focuses on the underpinning concept and methodology of these reports as well as a small selection of high impact rapid response studies published since 2008.

**Illustrative rapid response reports:**

***Family breakdown:*** The high quality evidence analysed for this 2009 Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) review (**R3**) helped to dispel some myths about single-parent families and challenged the assumption that family breakdown is always harmful for children. The evidence showed that family functioning, rather than family type, made a difference and that family breakdown is a process, not a one-off event. The review built its authority on a large body of work by Professor Marjorie Smith.

***Methods:*** This report drew primarily on review-level evidence; key texts were supplemented by others identified through targeted searches of bibliographic databases and the Internet.

***National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP):*** This 2011 evaluation of the delivery of the NCMP (**R4**) showed that the programme had provided much-needed evidence on the scale of the childhood obesity problem and had allowed targets to be set to address it. The report pointed to areas for improvement and suggested how the NCMP could be adapted in response to new structures proposed for public health services.

***Methods:*** This report was based on document analysis, interviews with key stakeholders and an online survey of professionals across England.

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

**Health of looked-after children:** This study (R5) provided an evidence base to help DCSF and the Department of Health (DH) revise national health guidance on looked-after children. It investigated the gap between guideline requirements and existing practice, and identified good practice.

**Methods:** This report included interviews with key stakeholders and an overview of research and statistics.

**3. References to the research** (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1: Smith, M. (2004) Parental mental health: disruptions to parenting and outcomes for children, *Child and Family Social Work*, 9(3) 3-11.
- R2: Statham, J. (2004) Effective services to support children in special circumstances, *Child Care, Health and Development*, 30(6) 589-598.
- R3: Mooney, A., Oliver, C. & Smith, M. (2009) *Impact of family breakdown on children's well-being: evidence review*, DCSF-RR113.
- R4: Statham, J., Mooney, A., Boddy, J. & Cage, M. (2011) *Taking stock: a rapid review of the National Child Measurement Programme*, Report to the DH, London: TCRU.
- R5: Mooney A., Statham J., Monck, E. & Chambers, H. (2009) *Promoting the health of looked after children - A study to inform revision of the 2002 guidance*, DCSF-RR125.

**Funding:** TCRU received funding from DCSF and DH to carry out programmes of policy-relevant research. Between 2006 and 2010, some 20% (nearly £300,000 a year) of the budget was allocated to rapid response work. Since 2010, TCRU has continued rapid response work through the DfE-funded Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (see section 4). Grant holder: Ann Phoenix.

**Indicators of Quality:**

IQ1: As part of a scientific review of TCRU's work in 2004, an independent peer reviewer said the responsive studies "display a rigour in the methodology and clarity in the presentation. The work needed to complete these short pieces of work should not be underestimated. This makes the achievements in the responsive mode in terms of quality and quantity outstanding".

(S1)

IQ2: The great majority of rapid response reports, including the three examples cited (R3, R4 and R5) were independently assessed by at least one academic reviewer in addition to policy reviewers.

**4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

**Principal beneficiaries and dates of impact:** Politicians and civil servants and, by corollary, children in England, especially those with health, social and/or economic disadvantages. Impact occurred throughout the REF period, but 2011-12 was a high point, as the influential 'family breakdown' research fed into a string of policies.

**Reach and significance:** TCRU's rapid response reports have informed government policy on health, families and children for more than a decade. The range of areas covered is extensive. Examples include a scoping study on FE students' mental health and wellbeing; a literature review on improving access to psychological therapies for children and young people, and a briefing paper on international perspectives on social work. As the evidence below shows, the reports have had considerable 'instrumental' impact<sup>1</sup> (influencing the development of policy or practice) and 'conceptual' impact (enhancing understanding or informing debates).

**The rapid response programme as a whole:**

What distinguishes rapid response work from other policy-relevant research is the ability to provide high quality information at relative speed (from two weeks to several months) and the relationships of collaboration and trust built up with government officials – an important impact in itself. The rapid response programme has helped to change attitudes among policy-makers, raising expectations about the value of research in policy-making and encouraging 'joined-up' education and health research agendas (many studies have brought together policy-makers in joint advisory groups). Richard Bartholomew, chief research officer at the DfE (see impact source S2), said the responsive mode's speed and quality enabled his Department to commission "very urgent pieces of original research to inform live policy debates", overcoming the major problem of the "very

<sup>1</sup> Using Evidence: How Research can Inform Public Services (Nutley, S., Walter, I., Davis, H. 2007)

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

different speeds of the policy and the research cycles". Statham's intellectual leadership and understanding of how to relate research to policy questions underpinned the mode's success, he said, adding that it was so popular with policy colleagues that "we have often had to turn down some requests because of overload". The relationship between the reports' authors and government makes the process of conveying findings to the policy-makers who most need to hear them much less haphazard. For example, in 2008 Professor Smith was asked to speak about the findings on family breakdown to a policy seminar attended by 60 representatives of the DCSF, Home Office, Treasury, Ministry of Justice, DH and Department for Work and Pensions.

**Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre:** By 2009, when the IOE won a £2m DfE contract to establish the Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (CWRC) in collaboration with the Universities of Loughborough and Kent (January 2010-March 2014), the value to government of rapid response reports was firmly established. The specification of all the new Policy Research Programme centres commissioned by the Departments for Education and Health required that a substantial proportion of the budget be allocated to providing this facility. The CWRC itself can be seen as an 'impact' of the earlier work. It carries out rapid response studies, and its expertise in methodology as well as subject matter enables it to provide evidence to underpin government-commissioned reviews and to do joint work with DfE analysts. The CWRC provided evidence for the Bailey Review on commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood, which (as Richard Bartholomew confirms) formed the basis for recommendations on how the retailing and entertainment sectors could work with government and parents to reduce the risks to children (**S2**). It also conducted an international evidence review that helped policy-makers develop the role of the Children's Commissioner for England by providing clear examples of models used in other countries which could be adapted (**S2**).

**Illustrative study: Family breakdown and children's wellbeing:**

This TCRU report has helped support arguments for fairer taxation of single-parent families and policies aimed at promoting better relationships within families before and after breakdowns occur. It concluded that policies which focus on supporting mothers' mental health, facilitating cooperative parenting and communication, encouraging good parent-child relationships, and reducing financial hardship can help to maximise positive child outcomes following parental separation. These findings have proved very influential. Even before publication, the report heavily informed a 2008 Cabinet Office Strategy Unit/DCSF paper, *Families in Britain: an evidence paper*. It was subsequently cited in a number of government publications and had a direct impact on several important policy decisions. For example, the government – using TCRU's evidence about the importance of relationship quality and stability – committed £30m over four years to provide relationship support for couples, £20m over three years to help separated and separating parents to work together in the best interests of their child and £10m on legal aid for family mediation (**S3**, pp15-18). The TCRU study is also cited in the:

- Equality and Human Rights Commission's Parliamentary briefing on the Equality Bill, 2010 (supporting non-discriminatory taxation of single-parent families) (**S4**).
- DWP's 2011 impact assessment of proposals on child maintenance.
- Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission's Delivery Plan 2011/12 (the findings are used to argue that parents should be encouraged to make family-based arrangements for children before resorting to the courts).
- Social Security Advisory Committee's response to the coalition Government's 2010 consultation paper, *Tackling Child Poverty and Improving Life Chances*. (The Committee pointed to the finding that children thrive in families characterised by consistent care.)
- DfE's *Families in the Foundation Years* (2012), which set out the government's vision for early healthcare and education (**S5**, section on Encouraging Independence).

The study attracted extensive press coverage and links to the report can now be found on the websites of organisations such as Gingerbread, One Plus One (**S10**), Against Violence and Abuse, and the Centre for Social Justice. Through its impact on policy-making, this research brought potential benefit for all children and families experiencing relationship breakdown.

**Illustrative study: Review of the Delivery of the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP):**

TCRU conducted two studies on the NCMP. The first, a 2009 rapid response study of how height and weight measurements were being fed back to parents, identified concerns about the potential to stigmatise overweight children. It led to changes being made to the DH templates for feedback letters. These changes have improved the information received by all parents. The

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

2011 review of the national delivery of the programme was built on the earlier study. It took stock of progress and challenges since the NCMP's launch in 2005, and reflected on how it could be improved. DH officials later praised the report's "quality and timeliness" and confirmed that the DH was already taking action to address some of the delivery issues highlighted (**S6**). Key recommendations that influenced the 2012-13 national guidance for local providers of the programme (**S7**) included those on the need for further explanation and debate about NCMP's purpose. This reflected concerns that professionals had raised with the researchers that the NCMP was changing from a monitoring to a screening programme. The guidance also echoed the TCRU report's conclusion that local authorities and the general public needed to be made more aware of the programme. Through its impact on the feedback letters and guidelines, this study brought potential benefit to all families with primary children in Reception and Year 6.

**Illustrative study: Promoting the Health of Looked-after Children:** Commissioned by the DH to inform statutory guidance in 2009, this IOE report was published alongside that guidance on the DCSF's Healthy Care Programme website (it is now on the National Children's Bureau website, along with an NCB briefing on corporate parenting citing the study [**S8**], and in the national archives [**S9**]). Recommendations arising from the study's fieldwork were incorporated into the statutory guidance. An example at a strategic level was the importance of Joint Strategic Needs Assessments taking into account the health requirements of looked-after children, and at an operational level the need for better communication when a child is placed with carers outside their local authority. Through its impact on the government guidance this research brought potential benefit to all looked-after children.

<b>5. Sources to corroborate the impact<sup>2</sup></b> (indicative maximum of 10 references)
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- S1: Comments from TCRU Scientific Report peer reviewer (2004) (hard copy available)
- S2: Testimonial from Richard Bartholomew, Chief Research Officer, DfE (available).
- S3: DWP (2012), *Social Justice: Transforming Lives* <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-justice-transforming-lives.pdf>
- S4: Equality and Human Rights Commission Parliamentary briefing on Equality Bill (Lords committee stage) January 11, 2010. <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/legal-and-policy/equality-act/equality-bill-parliamentary-briefings/>
- S5: DH and DfE (2011) *Families in the Foundation Years Evidence Pack* [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/177034/DFE-00214-2011.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/177034/DFE-00214-2011.pdf)
- S6: Letter and email from DH welcoming child measurement review (2011, on request).
- S7: *NCMP: Operational guidance for the 2012/13 school year* [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/146720/dh\\_133677.pdf.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/146720/dh_133677.pdf.pdf)
- S8: National Children's Bureau briefing on corporate parenting [http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/967560/corp\\_parenting2\\_health\\_of\\_looked\\_after\\_children\\_topic\\_briefing.pdf](http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/967560/corp_parenting2_health_of_looked_after_children_topic_briefing.pdf)
- S9: Statutory guidance on promoting the health and well-being of looked-after children: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/Healthanddisabilities/Page1/DCSF-01071-2009>
- S10: Coleman, L. and Glenn, F. (2012, One Plus One), *When Couples Part* <http://www.oneplusone.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/WHEN-COUPLES-PART-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> All web links accessed 11/11/13