

**Working Paper Number 7**

**LONGITUDINAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH  
APPROACHES IN EVALUATION STUDIES**

# **Longitudinal qualitative research approaches in evaluation studies**

**A study carried out on behalf of the Department for Work and  
Pensions**

**By**

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## **INTRODUCTION - LONGITUDINAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACHES TO POLICY EVALUATION**

Longitudinal approaches are well established in social research. Quantitative panel or cohort studies are commonly used when measuring change over time, whether in attitudes, behaviours or experiences and when looking at causal links. Similarly, longitudinal qualitative approaches have been used extensively in the fields of sociological research, ethnography and social history to explore individuals' changing life experiences and life course patterns. Constructionist approaches to social research such as discourse analysis have used longitudinal methods to look at how people construct concepts and views of the social world and how these change over time (Coupland & Nussbaum, 1993).

Despite this, longitudinal qualitative methods have been slow to permeate social research work in government departments, which might be seen as surprising given the scale of government social research activity. Government is of course a major user and commissioner of social research, which is one of a range of influences on the formulation and appraisal of policy. Most larger government departments have specialist research branches staffed by people with research training who commission and interpret research to inform the policy making process. The initiative behind many existing sources of longitudinal qualitative data however has often come from outside government ranks. It is only fairly recently that research practitioners and managers have begun to recognise the role which longitudinal qualitative research can play in the evaluation of policies, programmes and interventions. This may be linked to slow recognition and awareness of the role that qualitative research can play in providing evidence. Whilst there has of course been considerable growth in the use of qualitative methods in social policy over the last few decades, its potential is still under utilised (Rist, 1998). Some commentators argue that there still remains a prejudice in favour of quantitative studies which are perceived to be more scientific because they involve 'hard numbers' (Hakim, 2000).

Awareness of the contribution which longitudinal qualitative research can make to policy making is overdue. Much of what policy makers need to know cannot be learnt from quantitative evidence. Qualitative research can offer policymakers information about decision making, experiences and behaviour grounded in the experiences and world view of those likely to be affected by a policy decision. Moreover, the dynamism of the social world points to the need for dynamic methods of enquiry (Leisering & Walker 1998). People's perspectives are not fixed and are liable to change for a multitude of reasons. Consequently, research methods with potential to capture this fluidity may be more illuminating than other approaches. These circumstances create a unique role for longitudinal qualitative research which can provide rich information on people's perspectives and how and why these are perceived to have changed over time.

This paper will examine the use of longitudinal components in qualitative policy evaluation research. Recent developments in government, such as the interest in

'evidence based' policy and practice<sup>1</sup>, have increased the profile of the use of research in policy making. This has created a drive to increase awareness as to what constitutes 'quality' in research and to utilise this knowledge in the generation of good quality research evidence to enable policy makers to make informed decisions. This paper forms part of a series commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to provide information on the methodological issues in research which contribute to this objective.

This paper focuses on the specific role that longitudinal qualitative research can play in addressing the range of research questions that arise in developing and assessing policy. It has three objectives. First, to explore the value of longitudinal components to increase understanding of the delivery, impact and durability of outcomes from interventions. Second, to discuss the methodological issues associated with longitudinal qualitative research; and finally, to explore the implications of using these approaches for the costs, time scales and conduct of evaluation studies in government social research.

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<sup>1</sup> The Modernising Government White paper (March 1999, p 17) says '*we will improve our use of evidence and research so that we understand better the problems we are trying to address*'.

## SECTION 1 USING LONGITUDINAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN EVALUATION STUDIES

In this section we review the role of longitudinal qualitative research and the objectives involved in using this approach for social policy evaluation. In order to understand the role of qualitative research in policy evaluation, we also touch upon issues relating to quantitative research approaches. An overview of the range of research approaches available when people seek to evaluate government schemes, measures or policies can be found in an accompanying publication in this series (Purdon, S. et al, 2001).

### 1.1 Key philosophical issues in qualitative research

As with all qualitative research, there is no accepted single way of doing longitudinal qualitative research. How researchers conduct qualitative research depends upon on a range of factors including: beliefs about the social world and what can be known about it (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (epistemology) as well as more practical factors such as the purpose and goals of the research, the audience and funders.

A key ontological question which has implications for approaches to social research is whether or not social reality exists independently of human conceptions and interpretations. The school of **positivism** which was influential in many social science disciplines in the twentieth century is relevant here. Positivism holds that there is an external reality which exists independently of people's beliefs which can be investigated in terms of invariant laws in the same way we study the natural world. Positivist research aims to follow the principles of natural scientific research and formulate and test hypotheses with a view to making inferences about causal connections between social phenomena or facts (Jupp & Norris, 1993). Positivism along with other schools of thought, such as **realism**, draw a distinction between the way the world is and the meaning and interpretation held by individuals.

The dominance of these ideas in social research and other disciplines such as sociology, psychology and history have been repeatedly challenged. In particular, during the 1960's and 1970's there were fundamental changes in perspectives on the way that social meanings are constructed. Post-modern scholarship and sociological theory provided a major challenge to the ascendancy of positivism. Concepts such as **post-structuralism**, **deconstruction** and **symbolic interactionism** argue that there are no fixed meanings located in accounts or documents but that meanings or perspectives are a product of social, cultural and historical factors. It is argued that realities are multiple and fluid rather than a more or less direct reflection of a world of objectively defined facts. Similarly, **idealism** asserts that reality is only knowable through the human mind and socially constructed meanings. These ideas challenge the idea that a researcher can hope to capture the social world of another, or give an authoritative account of research findings because there are no fixed realities.

These philosophical positions have resulted in a range of different approaches to the conduct of qualitative research. For example, discourse analysis, which emerged from the **critical tradition** of sociology, emphasises what speech or writing tells us about the mechanisms by which power is exercised. Discourse is seen as being essentially social and that words and their meanings depend on where they are used, by whom and to whom. It is argued that knowledge and discourses must be analysed at different points in time and in history. Central concepts used in research on homelessness can be used to illustrate this. Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1992) contend that 'homelessness' and inadequate housing are cultural concepts that only make sense in a particular community at a given period of time. For example, in a society where the vast majority of people live nomadic lifestyles, then the community standard of adequate housing might be very different from a society where home ownership is the norm (Chamberlain, 2001).

The philosophical position underpinning applied qualitative social policy research falls somewhere between these various positions. Government social research is based upon the assumption that people's own interpretation of their experiences is of value in the study of a particular social issue. Researchers conducting government qualitative research generally collect people's own accounts of their experiences and their explanations and reasons for why they made certain decisions or behaved in a certain way. This is based on the belief that there is a 'reality' *for them* which can be captured at a certain point in time. This approach differs from positivism in the significant emphasis placed upon individual interpretation. The critical importance of respondents' own interpretations of the relevant research issues is highlighted and it is accepted that their different vantage points will yield different types of understanding and views. Qualitative research seeks to identify, map and explore the multiple perspectives held by individuals and groups within their social setting and does not seek to identify a single 'truth' or to chart the general message or dominant pattern. Nevertheless, in the evaluation of government policy there is huge value in exploring individuals' perspectives on their experiences or attitudes which can yield reliable evidence for policy-makers. Careful steps in sampling, data collection and analysis can help to ensure that qualitative research can validly assist evidence based policy-making<sup>2</sup>.

Accepting that diverse perspectives exist does not necessarily negate the idea of an external reality which can be captured. Rather this concept of an external reality is qualified by recognition that there is no one way of looking at the world. The implications for social research are that we can enhance understanding by exploring and conveying a full picture of this diverse and multi-faceted reality. This can be done by exploring a range of perspectives and through recognising that perspectives are not fixed and liable to change. This is in line with the emphasis placed by social constructionists on the essential 'fluidity' of perspectives. It is exactly this premise which leads us to highlight the value of longitudinal qualitative research. If it is recognised that there is no one reality which can be captured and that all perspectives are a product of time and place, then closer understanding must surely be gained by a research method which seeks to capture and explain this change.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the place of qualitative research within the policy environment please see Snape, D in Lewis, J. and Ritchie, J. Eds. (2002 in press). Sage: London



## 1.2 Defining longitudinal qualitative research

Defining a component of a research programme as longitudinal is open to wide interpretation. Longitudinal research has been used to describe such diverse approaches to data collection as quantitative panel studies and oral and life history. This section explores the key features of longitudinal approaches to data collection and analysis and explores the distinctive contribution that longitudinal qualitative approaches can make to policy evaluations.

### 1.2.1 Key characteristics of longitudinal approaches to social research

Longitudinal approaches to social research share the common characteristic of involving the collection of data over a 'long' period of time, although as Hakim notes: "...what is considered a long period of observation depends upon the subject matter and context, and the issues addressed" (Hakim, 1987). So, for example, a study such as *Thirty Families* (Ritchie, 1985) which set out to explore the effects of unemployment on living standards in thirty families had a duration of five years, with families being visited by researchers on two occasions. In contrast, studies exploring the nature of family formation across generations may have longer time spans across twenty or thirty years. A classic example of a longer term longitudinal study is the social history documentary *7 Up* conducted by Michael Apted, which followed the life stories of fourteen children who were interviewed at ages 7, 14, 21, 28, 35 and 42 (Apted, 1999). As will be demonstrated later, evaluations of social policy interventions usually have considerably shorter life spans because of their different objectives and policy imperatives.

Longitudinal research, whether its focus is applied policy or social history, has certain key characteristics. Principally longitudinal research will always involve the collection and analysis of data on more than one occasion over a specified time period. *Ruspini* (1999) defines the common characteristics as being where:

- data are collected for each item or variable for two or more distinct periods
- the subjects or cases analysed are the same or broadly comparable
- the analysis involves some comparison of data between or among periods.

It is important to note that with longitudinal research earlier interviews always form an integral part of the research. Longitudinal research, both quantitative and qualitative, involves not just simply returning to previous respondents to ask another series of questions but re-addressing the original research questions at an appropriate time.

Data collection about a given period of time can be *retrospective* (asking participants to reflect back upon their experiences and attitudes) or *contemporary* (that is collecting data at different times about the current situation). The contemporary longitudinal study involves repeat *follow-ups* of a single sample, panel or cohort and is the favoured approach. Although retrospective data collection is an important part of any study, longitudinal research usually focuses on short-term retrospection because of the deterioration of reliability and validity when asking respondents to reflect back over long time scales. For example, in social policy research, the collection of employment histories can be complicated, particularly where people have

experienced spells of unemployment or inactivity and/or have had a large number of short-term spells in work. Once the research seeks to go further back than the recent past there may be recall problems or post-event rationalisation. This can be lessened to an extent in qualitative longitudinal work where researchers are able to ask probing and clarifying questions to establish detailed accounts.

Where interest is in substantial time spans, such as life-histories, then retrospective studies are usually the only approach to be adopted. However, the life history approach can only be considered truly longitudinal when the researcher re-visits the same participant at regular points in their life to collect data, such as in Apted's study. The more conventional approach to oral history, which involves participants reflecting back across their life-course, does not fit the model of longitudinal research, which involves comparing data collected from different time periods.

The chief goal of longitudinal methods is to explore change (relating to the unit of enquiry, at an individual or case study level) over time. The type of change explored will of course vary according to the approach and purpose of the research. For example, sociological research traditions such as discourse analysis seek to explore changes in the language people use and in linguistic styles. In government social research, however, the type of change studied is in relation to life circumstances, personal attitudes or experiences. Depending upon the methodological approach chosen longitudinal research seeks to *describe, measure, explain* or to *examine the implications* of changes over time. For this reason, in government social research, longitudinal approaches hold great potential for understanding the processes and causes of change which may occur over the course of a policy implementation, programme delivery or other forms of intervention. Within this context the nature of the change being explored will differ depending on whether you are seeking to explore change on an individual basis (i.e. how has this one person's experience of an initiative changed?) or procedural basis (i.e. in what way has the delivery of this policy been altered/or refined?).

### **1.2.2 Differences between qualitative and quantitative longitudinal study designs**

Quantitative and qualitative longitudinal studies differ in their objectives, although in combination they can provide powerfully complementary data. Quantitative studies tend to seek **to measure** the extent of change and document the nature of transitions, whether that relates to changes in circumstances (for example, in employment status) or changes in attitudes (for example in party political affiliation).

In contrast, longitudinal qualitative research is used to gain a deeper level of understanding about **how** and **why** change occurs rather than to measure the extent to which it happens or identify the prevalence of the factors that affect it (within specific populations).

In government social research, longitudinal qualitative studies seek to provide a deeper understanding of the factors accounting for change and of how and why the attitudes, behaviours or the status of sample members have changed or remained static. While qualitative studies cannot provide statistical measures of change or

impact, they can provide detailed information about the causes and consequences of change over time. The following example demonstrates a recent qualitative study which employed a longitudinal approach to explore change over time amongst a cohort of young people participating in the New Deal for Young People.

**Example 1: Illustrating differences between qualitative and quantitative longitudinal approaches: New Deal for Young People**

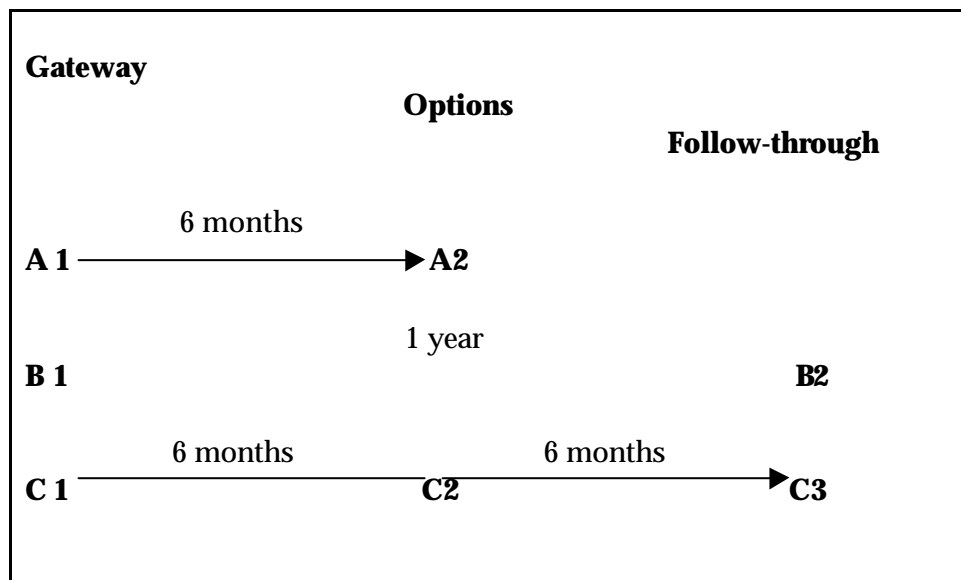
In a recent series of six studies for the then Employment Service the *National Centre* evaluated the New Deal for Young People (18-24 years). These studies involved young people being interviewed on up to three occasions. The qualitative longitudinal elements were designed to gauge the longer term impacts of participation in the programme and to explore changes in processes and delivery of the programme. It was believed that a single snapshot view of young people's experiences whilst on the programme could lead to a distorted or uneven perspective of a programme which can last up to eighteen months and which aims to have real long term consequences for participants' employability. It would be impossible for a snapshot approach to provide clear evidence about causal links and how impacts of the programme evolve over time. For example, perspectives of the programme collected after participants had completed NDYP might be affected by the eventual outcome of their involvement, whilst views collected at an earlier stage would not provide evidence relating to outcomes and impacts.

The research sought to interview people at three stages which roughly equated to the three phases of the programme: Gateway, Options and Follow-through. Gateway offers clients a Personal Adviser (PA) who can provide an individualised service, giving advice, information and support, such as help with job-search, careers advice and preparation for the Options stage. Each of the four Options available: Full-time Education and Training (FTET), Subsidised Employment, Environment Task Force (ETF) and Voluntary Sector include an element of education or training. The Options last for six months. Depending upon the Option chosen participants receive a payment of £15 per week in addition to their benefit or receive a wage. If, on completion of an Option, the client has yet to find employment they transfer onto Follow-through at which point they are provided with one-to-one employment advice and guidance from their PA.

The research was conducted at three stages in different Pathfinder areas (pre-national roll-out pilot areas chosen to test and refine the programme) and repeated in new areas once the programme was rolled out nationally. Six separate pieces of research were carried out at each of the stages involving a new sample of young people. However, in five of the six studies additional longitudinal interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of previous respondents.

The diagram below shows how the longitudinal sample was designed:

**Diagram 1: Evaluating New Deal for Young People longitudinally**



**(Key:** 1-3 reflect the points at which each sample – A, B and C - were interviewed)

The longitudinal qualitative components were broadly scheduled to coincide with the three stages of the programme (Gateway, Options and Follow-through) and with new cross-sectional studies of participants. However, the expectation was that the time schedule for the research would allow the research teams to draw upon differing experiences amongst the longitudinal sample. For example, whilst some would remain on the programme when interviewed for a second or third time others would have left, for a variety of reasons. This meant the studies would be able to explore the following objectives set out for the longitudinal component:

- to describe, and explain, patterns of movement through the New Deal programme, including the mapping of the routes taken by leavers into work or other destinations
- to explore factors accounting for early departure from the programme
- to identify changes in attitudes towards the initiative, and factors accounting for any change
- to describe and explain changes in young people's employability, and the factors accounting for their movement towards, or away from, entry to the labour market.

The evaluation programme for New Deal for Young People also incorporated a national quantitative survey of entrants to New Deal (Bryson et al, 2000). The survey also had a longitudinal element with participants being followed-up six months after their initial entry to the programme. It is interesting to compare the objectives of this longitudinal component to those outlined above for the qualitative elements. The survey sought to do the following at Stage one: to provide statistical measurements of entrants' attitudes to paid work, job search patterns, New Deal experiences and perceptions of New Deal. This stage then acted as a 'benchmark' against which

researchers could **measure change** in attitudes, perceptions and experiences. In particular wave two of the study sought to focus on the **measurable impact** of New Deal on entrants' job prospects, employability and labour market experiences. In contrast, it was hoped that the qualitative studies could provide greater depth of understanding of the processes that participants encountered, answering such questions as *'what works well?'* and *'why?'*. An illustrative example is the case of Helen, a 17 year old participant in the New Deal for Young People programme. Helen joined the programme with a mixture of personal difficulties which had remained unresolved from her departure from compulsory education with no formal qualifications. As shown below, Helen's experiences of the programme were mainly positive, nevertheless she left the programme before completion. Sensitive and lengthy probing during qualitative interviews revealed a level of personal complications during her time on the programme which affected her experiences of NDYP and which would not have been immediately apparent through standard quantitative survey measures. The richness and depth of data produced during the course of a qualitative interview allowed the complexity of issues to be explored in detail. This included showing the intricate pattern of Helen's life at the time she was on the programme, for example, by mapping the fluid pattern of her positive and negative reactions to the scheme and the factors underlying these emotions.

**Case study: Helen**

Helen took a place on the New Deal for Young People in 1998 aged 17. Her first interview, in October of that year established that she had been homeless for two years, mixing with a *'bad crowd'* and taking drugs. She was suffering from depression, had low confidence and little motivation to work. She had limited work experience and no qualifications. However, two weeks into joining NDYP she had been given help with her accommodation situation and offered counseling to support her through her depression. Although she was unclear about her employment aims, she had begun to have conversations about potential job and training opportunities with her Personal Adviser. She was extremely positive about joining the programme and that she was being offered help. For the first time since leaving school she said she *'felt she was getting somewhere'*.

Researchers returned to see Helen six months later, timed to coincide with her movement onto the Options stage of the programme. By this time she had begun an outdoor pursuits training course. Her confidence and skills had increased immensely and she was pleased to report that she had gained qualifications in outdoor pursuits. In fact, she had felt so positive that she had decided she wanted a career working in outdoor pursuits.

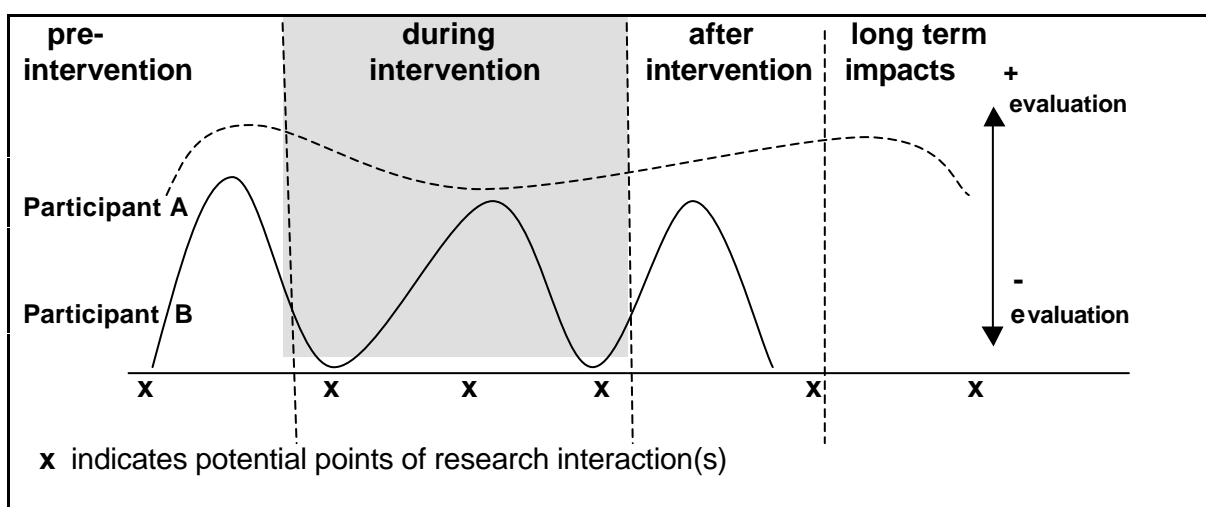
A further six months on she was contacted to participate in the final stage of the study. By this time Helen had left the course without completing it. Her reasons for leaving were concerned with her partner's departure from the course. During the course of the third interview it was established that she had left the programme not long after her last research interview. Her partner had been asked to leave the course and she had decided to leave with him, a decision she regretted. She moved to the south of England with her partner. He began to use drugs again and she experienced another episode of depression. Her housing situation had become unstable and she had diminished confidence. Despite the problems she had faced in the intervening months Helen had made several important decisions since her departure from NDYP. She left her partner and moved back to her family home where she had found a part time job cleaning. She was still committed to pursuing a career in outdoor pursuits and intended to start voluntary work at a local outdoor pursuits centre, to build up her experience and references. Her personal confidence

had diminished but overall she felt that her time on NDYP had helped her to value her own skills and boost her confidence in the future.

Even the most skilfully designed quantitative questionnaire would have been unable to elicit the complex mix of factors which led to Helen leaving the NDYP programme. This example demonstrates the clear advantages of employing qualitative methods when the policy interest lies not in measuring outcomes but understanding why certain individuals or groups of individuals experience different outcomes. In this case, a longitudinal quantitative approach would have presented a crude measure of the success of the programme. For example, had Helen's progress through the programme been gauged at her final interview in quantitative terms then she would have been categorised as a 'non-completer' who left the programme for negative reasons. However, qualitative approaches illustrated that despite leaving the programme early there were demonstrable positive outcomes from her participation in the programme such as increased self-esteem and greater definition to her career goals.

Diagrammatically, it is possible to reflect Helen's, and other participants', experiences (and evaluations) throughout the programme as shown below. The wavy lines reflect different individuals' positive or negative responses and experiences of, for instance, the development of jobsearch or basic skills. As can be seen a single interview with participant B shortly after joining the programme would provide a snapshot of their current feelings about progress with their jobsearch skills. Whilst valuable, a single interview would fail to pick up the turbulent nature of their experiences which clearly changed over the course of their programme experiences. The value of longitudinal qualitative research is in being able to map such peaks and troughs, and most importantly, to provide explanations for such changes. These explanations may or may not be found to directly result from the intervention. For example, in Helen's case peaks and troughs were often explained by changes in her personal life. In contrast, participant A described relatively smooth and unchanged progress with their jobsearch skills during the programme. Although less dramatic changes occurred in this instance, explanations of why the experience was smoother for this participant would provide equally useful evidence for programme implementers and policy makers.

Diagram 2 – Exploring changes over time



### 1.2.3 Overview of longitudinal qualitative approaches in applied social research

Qualitative approaches to longitudinal studies vary greatly. The key approaches can be summarised as follows:

- cohort studies
- panel studies
- case studies
- life history studies
- documentary analysis

**Longitudinal cohort**, or contemporary, studies involve interviewing the same respondents on repeat occasions to establish changes over time. The New Deal for Young People example given above is an illustration of such an approach. Similarly, a current evaluation for DfES looking at the effectiveness of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in encouraging participation, retention and achievement in post-compulsory education amongst 16-18 year olds employs a longitudinal component which is re-visiting a cohort of young people a year after their first interview to establish the long-term impact of the EMA on their participation in, and attitudes towards, post-compulsory education.

**Longitudinal panel studies** also involve interviewing the same group of respondents on repeat occasions, but they are unusual in qualitative research. In quantitative studies a representative panel is drawn initially. Thereafter the researchers usually take steps to ensure that the sample remains representative, for example by keeping in close contact with respondents or by refreshing the panel at later waves of fieldwork. However, because qualitative research uses purposive, rather than representative, sampling there is no value to be gained from ensuring statistical representativeness over time. Instead, longitudinal qualitative samples constantly seek to ensure diversity within the sample. The nature of this diversity will change at each point in a longitudinal sample (for example, at a second or third stage of a longitudinal study seeking to explore programme outcomes a research

team might add dimensions to their sampling criteria, such as whether participants had or had not found work, whether they were back in education etc.).

**Longitudinal case studies** involve the repeated investigation of the experiences, attitudes or behaviours of a number of actors involved in a common phenomenon. For example, a longitudinal approach might be employed when investigating the experiences and life courses of teenage parents. The initial study would involve key actors, for instance the parents themselves and others who have been significant in the choices and decisions they have made, whether in relation to parenting, education or work. Follow-up studies would return to these key actors to explore changes in circumstances, experiences and attitudes over time and to identify the factors underpinning change. Repeated investigations from the perspectives of multiple actors provide a rich and detailed insight into changes over time. See for example, the work conducted to evaluate the **ONE** policy<sup>3</sup>.

**Life or oral history approaches** explore changes over time in one or more respondents' lives through the use of retrospective questioning on one occasion or contemporary questioning on more than one occasion. Whilst the first format is not strictly a longitudinal approach, as questioning occurs only once, it does require participants to consider multiple experiences in their lives rather than to focus on a single episode or experience.

Apted's work is a key example of using longitudinal life histories to track changes in peoples' lives, although this approach has been used by many sociologists to track social and personal change. In applied social research, life history approaches can be used to examine the changing impact of government policies on individuals' lives. For example a life history study might seek to explore the impact of the changing nature of government policy towards single parents on the lives of a sample of single parents. Although this approach shares similar characteristics to that of the longitudinal cohort study model the time spans involved in life/oral history approaches tend to be greater making this approach distinct.

**Document analysis.** Longitudinal approaches are also widely used in the analysis of documentary materials. For example, researchers have explored the changing nature of medical documentation, welfare reports and newspaper coverage. As documentary sources are static this is the one form of longitudinal research which can wholly comprise of retrospective analysis where a researcher might be seeking to explore, for example, the changing representation of women in media reports over time. Although the analysis may take place at a single fixed point in time this type of study can be termed as longitudinal because it seeks to compare documentary evidence from more than one time period. Although unusual in government social policy research, this approach coupled with discourse or content analysis is frequently used by those working in academic research to explore social change over time.

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<sup>3</sup> Kelleher, J., Youll, P., Nelson, A., Hadjivassiliou, K., Lyons, C., Hills, J. (2002) *Delivering a work-focused service: final findings from ONE case studies and staff research*, DWP Research Report No. 166, Leeds: CDS



It is apparent then, that longitudinal qualitative approaches to social research can, and do, incorporate a wide range of different research strategies. The following sections focus on the role of longitudinal qualitative research in evaluation studies. From the outset it is important to note that evaluations themselves differ in focus and can employ a range of the approaches outlined above. Evaluations can focus either on outcomes, that is the impact of a particular policy or programme, or on process, that is the way in which policies or programmes are delivered (Bryson et al. 2001). However, most evaluations will seek to explore both the outcomes, or impacts, of an intervention and the process by which that intervention is delivered. Qualitative longitudinal components can add value to both elements of evaluation programmes.

### **1.3 The use of longitudinal qualitative research in process and outcome policy evaluation studies**

Within government social research, evaluation studies play a vital role. Evaluative research is concerned with issues surrounding how well a policy works, a question that is central to much policy related investigation. In particular, evaluation studies make a crucial contribution to the provision of evidence for policy makers about the effectiveness of a policy in meeting its objectives and what further action is needed. This is reflected in the high profile given to evaluation research in current attempts to foster a culture of evidence based policy. The modernising government White paper (March 1999) states *'we will ensure that all policies and programmes are clearly specified and evaluated, and the lessons of success and failure are communicated and acted upon'*.

The insights that longitudinal qualitative evaluation research can offer those evaluating policies are of great value. The speed of social change is a distinguishing feature of modernity which has clear implications for the complexity of policy making. Understanding societal change is a key requirement of those involved in the formulation and evaluation of social policy. The effects and impacts of policies are seldom universally disruptive or beneficial and are subject to change. Policy makers must attempt to predict which interventions are most advantageous whilst foreseeing any unintended or indirect consequences in order to act early enough to protect and support any who may be detrimentally affected. (Leisering & Walker 1998). This dynamism and speed of social change creates a unique role for longitudinal qualitative research because it offers the potential to capture and explain this.

#### **1.3.1 Why employ qualitative longitudinal approaches in policy evaluation studies?**

The decision whether to use qualitative or quantitative longitudinal evaluation methods does, of course, depend on the objectives of the research. Whilst both methods are equally valuable in longitudinal evaluations, they provide very different types of research evidence. In a process evaluation, a quantitative approach can provide information on the prevalence of specific delivery issues or provide the basis for assessments such as cost benefit analysis. A qualitative approach can explore how a policy or programme is delivered and the full range of reasons that underpin any problems or delivery issues. Similarly, in outcome evaluations qualitative and

quantitative approaches each provide very different types of evidence. If the aim is to measure the impacts of a policy, for example, by measuring how many of those participating in a training programme have moved into work, then a quantitative approach would be appropriate. However, if the objective is to increase understanding as to why and how people had moved into work or remained on the programme then a qualitative approach would be most suitable. Whilst quantitative research might be able to provide some indication of the reasons for different exit routes out of a programme - for example, figures giving the number of participants entering full-time work, part-time work or self-employment provide some insight into the ways in which people are moving into employment - it is unable to provide a detailed understanding of the mechanisms through which a programme works to create these types of outcome.

### **1.3.2 *The role of longitudinal qualitative research in process evaluation***

#### ***What is process evaluation?***

A 'process evaluation' involves identifying and exploring issues relating to the delivery and implementation of interventions, services, or programmes. The delivery of a new policy or initiative may involve creating new posts or organisations and developing new operations, systems and procedures to put this intervention, programme or service into practice. It may not be possible to predict and foresee areas of potential difficulty that may arise when first implementing a new programme or service. Process evaluation provides information on all of these areas. It can describe how smoothly implementation has gone, how consistently provisions are being delivered or put into practice and explore staff perceptions of problems, obstacles and suggestions for improvement. Longitudinal process evaluation identifies changes over time in these features of the delivery, practice and organisational management of polices.

#### ***When longitudinal process evaluation might be used***

A longitudinal approach can be considered in any process evaluation where the experiences of those involved in implementing the policy are likely to change during the course of the evaluation. This might be because the introduction of a new policy is shortly to be followed by a series of enhancements or pilot features. Detailed information on early delivery issues and how these are affected by these later changes would be provided by longitudinal research. This might provide understanding as to how later additions ameliorate implementation and generate clear messages about what works. If a solely cross-sectional study had been conducted in these circumstances, either when a policy was first introduced, or when changes are implemented, then a significant amount of potentially important information would be unknown. For example, detail relating to what specifically was being delivered at these two stages and precisely how later additions caused change and if this change was related to any external factors other than the later enhancements. It is particularly important, in this form of evaluation research to consider including staff views at different stages in the development of a policy or during the design of structures or processes needed for a policy's delivery.

Whilst successive cross-sectional studies can also provide information on changes in delivery and why these have occurred, this data is less robust than that provided by longitudinal research. As discussed earlier, questions about reliability are raised as the length of time over which people are asked to reflect retrospectively increases. The advantage of returning to the same (rather than new) respondents is that the researcher has an accurate record of earlier views and is not dependent on the respondent's ability to perceive change. Through familiarity with the previous account, during the interview the researcher can recognise variations in circumstances or views that have occurred and use these as a basis for questions which identify and explore inconsistency or change.

This type of evaluation is often used by government departments during the pilot phase of policies or programmes. It can provide early information on how a policy or programme is working and can offer insights into the need for adjustment or fine-tuning in order to meet policy objectives. This can generate clear messages regarding best practice in terms of delivery. For example, a process evaluation might highlight specific problems, which can then be addressed before the national roll out of the policy or programme. It is also often used during the early stages of implementing national policies to highlight any issues relating to delivery which can then be responded to by later enhancements. Equally, a process evaluation, conducted longitudinally, can help to explain the factors which underlie why a policy may or may not have succeeded.

Examples of the types of questions that process evaluation in government programmes might be seeking to answer are given below:

- through what mechanisms does the delivery or payment of the Education Maintenance Allowance affect participation, retention and achievement in post-compulsory education?
- what are the ways in which the private and voluntary sectors best add value to the delivery of ONE?
- how is the Earnings Top-up (ETU) implemented in each pilot area ? how is the process of local labour market adjudication implemented by different Jobcentre Plus offices?
- why is the take up of training programmes offered in some regions under NDYP so low?
- how does the employer subsidy motivate employers to offer jobs to long-term unemployed people?

## **Example 2 - Illustrating the use of longitudinal qualitative research in a process evaluation: Earnings Top-up**

The Department of Social Security (now Department for Work and Pensions) introduced Earnings Top-up (ETU) on a pilot basis for four years from October 1996. ETU was an income-related, in-work benefit or wage subsidy for single people and couples without dependent children on low incomes. It aimed to encourage these groups to take up work or stay in work of 16 hours a week or more. Longitudinal qualitative research was conducted between 1996 and 1999 to explore changes in staff attitudes towards the ETU pilot. What were then Benefits Agency and Employment Service staff involved in implementing the Earnings Top-up benefit were interviewed three times (an initial and two follow up group discussions were conducted). The group discussions explored staff views about ETU and its impacts, tracking variations over time, between areas and identifying the perspectives of central and local staff with different positions and responsibilities. The longitudinal element to this research provided information about how and why attitudes and behaviour in relation to the implementation of ETU changed over the life of the pilot. For example, this provided insights into the reasons underpinning variations in take-up of the benefit. The research highlighted that during the early part of the pilot, local knowledge of ETU was far greater in urban areas; but that this changed over the course of the pilot. By the third round of the research staff in all areas reported that knowledge of the benefit was widespread among claimants and that ETU had become part of the ordinary currency of their offices.

### **1.3.3 The role of longitudinal qualitative research in outcome evaluation**

Outcome evaluations provide valuable information about the full range of effects or impacts of interventions, programmes or services. This is often focused on participants or service users, but can also include non users and service providers such as administrative and managerial staff and external contractors.

A longitudinal approach provides information about changes over time in the effects of the policy, programme or service under evaluation. The impacts of these interventions or processes are rarely static and are subject to change. A longitudinal research design is the most illuminating method by which to explore this change. Whilst a cross-sectional research study will only capture the effects of a policy at a specific juncture, longitudinal research can shed light on the factors which cause these to change over time. For example a longitudinal study of outcomes can provide information on:

- the nature, dynamics and drivers of changes over time in attitudes, decision making and behaviours
- details of both short and long term impacts of a policy and how these change over time

- factors influencing whether outcomes are sustained
- factors which can cause the erosion of early positive outcomes (such as leaving employment or education obtained through a programme or intervention) or reversal of early negative outcomes (moving into work or education at a later date)
- details of the different impacts resulting from different stages of intervention
- reflective perspectives among different subgroups.

Information of this type is particularly important to policy makers. For example, details of the factors that can cause positive outcomes to be eroded or diminished are invaluable in assisting policy makers to develop further interventions to prevent or minimise the erosion of positive change. Similarly if the long and short-term outcomes of a policy are different in some way, then information on both of these is of obvious use in attempts to assess the overall efficacy of a policy.

### **Example 3 - illustrating the use of longitudinal qualitative research in an outcome evaluation: New Deal for Long Term Unemployed**

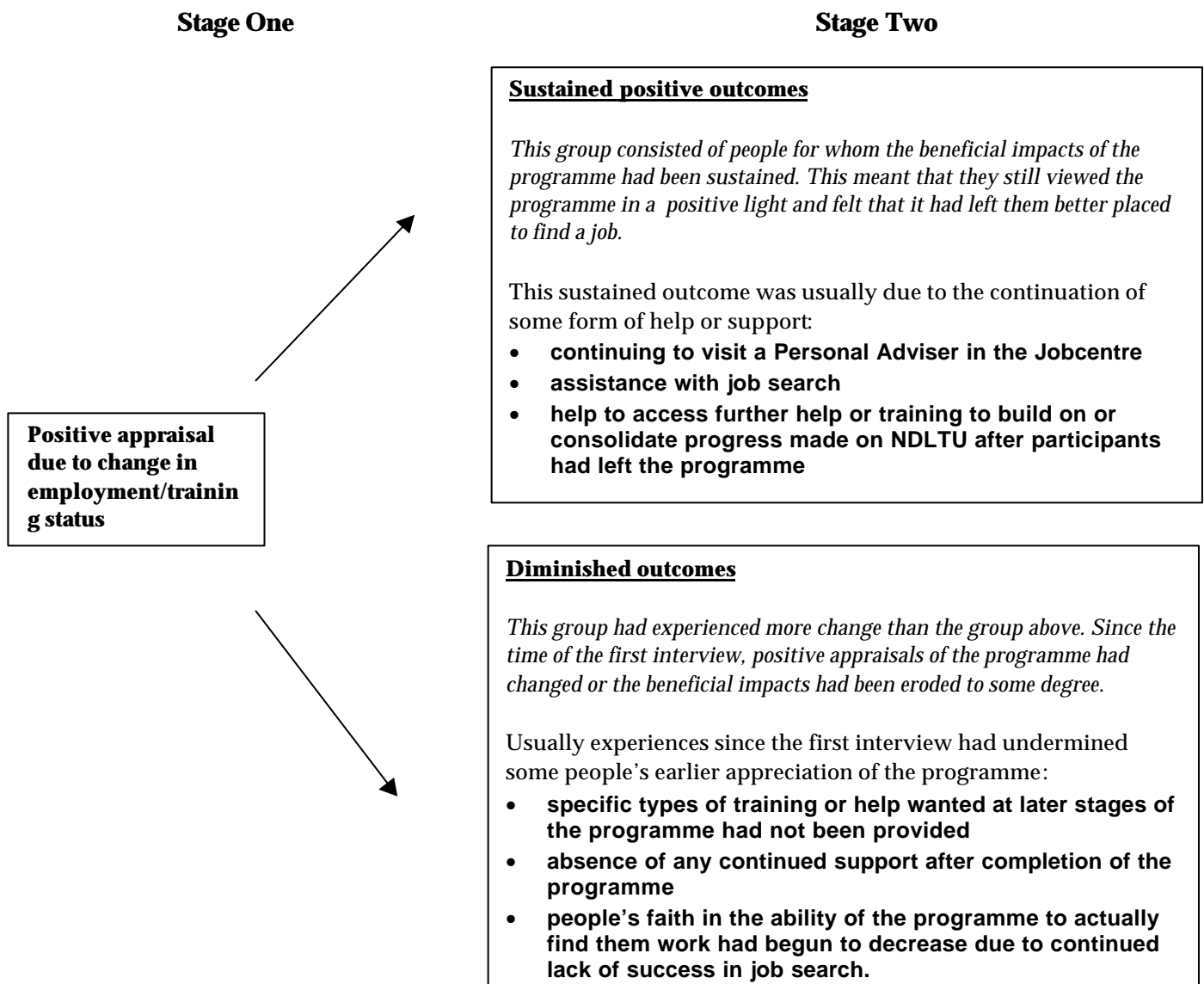
Employment related programmes such as the New Deal programmes provide a good example of research that requires detailed information on both long and short-term outcomes and impacts. NDLTU is a programme run by Jobcentre Plus (and previously by the Employment Service) and by organisations from the private and voluntary sector, designed to help people aged over 25 to return to the labour market. The qualitative evaluation of the programme was in two stages. An initial phase in May-June 1999 involved 90 in-depth interviews with participants in the early stages of NDLTU. This was followed by a second wave of fieldwork nine months later after the introduction of a series of enhancements to the programme. This included 40 interviews with participants from stage one and a new sample. One of the objectives of the second stage of the qualitative NDLTU evaluation was to explore how and why participants' views about the programme and the impacts of participation in the programme had changed. During analysis of the data collected at the first stage of the research it became clear that there were some broad groups or typologies into which participants fell depending on the impacts of the programme and their attitudes to this. For instance:

- **positive appraisal due to intermediary outcomes at stage one**  
 'Intermediary outcomes' was used to indicate a situation where a participant had experienced some positive benefits from participation in the programme which were expected to assist them in finding work. These included improved and more focused jobsearch, increased confidence and self esteem, new skills, a short period of work experience or new ideas about the types of work they wanted to do

- **positive appraisal due to change in employment/training status at stage one**  
People who entered employment, education or training as result of the programme.
- **negative appraisal due to lack of impact at stage one**

Due to its longitudinal qualitative design, the second stage of the research was able to show how, over time, the views and circumstances of participants in each of these groups could move in a number of different directions. For example, the first group with initial intermediary outcomes, fell into a further two groups by the time of their second interview: those for whom both the positive impact and appraisals of the programme had sustained and those for whom these had diminished in some way. The reasons underpinning the different directions taken by participants' experiences are summarised below:

**Diagram 3: NDLTU Changes in outcome and appraisals over time**



#### **1.3.4 *Assessing when qualitative longitudinal approaches are appropriate for evaluations***

The judgement that needs to be made when deciding whether a study requires a longitudinal approach is how important information on change is to the research question and what type of information on change is required. Clearly, if this information is a primary focus of a study then a longitudinal approach should be considered. As outlined above, longitudinal research is useful for those studies that require information on change either in terms of delivery or the dynamics of individual lives.

For example, a longitudinal approach may be worth considering in the evaluation of a policy anticipated to have both long and short-term outcomes if specific information about the details and explanations for both types of outcome are required. If the understanding and measurement of change is not a concern either because causal factors are already known or because causal relationships are not the focus of the research then cross-sectional data and analysis may be sufficient. Generally, all policy impacts and outcomes are affected by the way in which the policy is delivered, and longitudinal qualitative research is invaluable in providing evidence relating to the way in which staff are delivering policies and how participants or the target population are receiving new innovations.

If, for example, a single change in benefit claim procedures is expected to have a significant impact within a short time span but is not expected to continue to affect the lives of the target population in the longer term, then longitudinal approaches might be considered inappropriate. However, in other circumstances where interventions are expected to evolve over time, or to have long and short-term impacts, then it will be highly appropriate to use a longitudinal approach.

This is not to imply that information about both long and short-term outcomes cannot be collected in retrospective studies. However information is less reliable and can be problematic. Retrospective studies are somewhat limited because the researcher must necessarily reconstruct the past in a simplified manner and, above all because of the memory lapses, or distortions, that interviewees are subject to when remembering past events (Mingione, 1999). If change is to be measured over a relatively short time (weeks or months) then a retrospective design may be appropriate, because the problems of recall are less likely in such a short time span.

The uniqueness of a qualitative longitudinal approach lies in its ability to explore in great detail the impact, or lack of impact, of an intervention within the complex context of individuals' lives. The ability to probe and explore experiences of interventions at different stages mean it is possible to identify factors integral to, and outside of, policy interventions which can influence their success or failure. As the example of Helen on NDYP demonstrated, personal experiences and factors external to the delivery of a policy can affect its impact on individuals. Only qualitative research is able to explore to sufficient depth the context within which policies are received enabling researchers to untangle the complex web of factors which can impact upon programme or intervention delivery and outcomes. Helen's experience of the programme was a positive story, she was able to appraise her time on NDYP as leading to significant changes in her personal confidence and skill levels. However, without qualitative research, her experiences may have been measured as

negative. Therefore, when making assessments about how appropriate longitudinal qualitative approaches might be for a policy evaluation it is important that researchers and research managers consider how important it will be to understand the personal circumstances which can affect how a policy intervention is received.



## **SECTION 2            METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING LONGITUDINAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Establishing an appropriate research design for a longitudinal component of an evaluation is critical to its eventual ability to add value to the broader evaluation strategy. Hakim notes that a major failing in much longitudinal research is *'the failure to design the study before it gets under way'* (Hakim, 1987). It can be attractive to add longitudinal components to an evaluation design without fully establishing the purpose of those additional components, or to ask researchers to mine the longitudinal dataset for research questions which were not originally specified.

This section explores the types of questions researchers and research managers need to address when considering longitudinal additions to evaluation programmes. Inevitably many of these issues apply equally to all longitudinal research whether qualitative or quantitative in design; below we cover these but also explore the design issues which are specific to longitudinal qualitative research.

### **2.1 Design considerations**

The chief considerations facing those designing longitudinal approaches are:

- *what are the objectives of longitudinal elements?*
- *who is it appropriate to sample for longitudinal elements?*
- *what time frame is appropriate to achieve the evaluation objectives?*

The following sections address these three questions.

#### **2.1.1 Identifying appropriate research objectives for longitudinal components**

Establishing the objectives of a longitudinal element within a research programme is essential to its eventual value within the context of the overall evaluation.

Longitudinal components should always demonstrate a capacity to add value to existing cross-sectional elements. For example, in the New Deal for Young People research strategy there was a commitment to exploring how, and why, young people's experiences of the programme changed over time. This was important both to understand the impact of different models of programme delivery and to explain why the programme exhibited greater effectiveness for some groups than others. If the research had only aimed to map the current delivery of the programme or the attitudes of participants to the programme then longitudinal elements would have been redundant.

The design of the longitudinal components required the research team to think about additional objectives for those studies. The box below shows the objectives for the cross-sectional research with participants on the Options stage of the programme:

#### **New Deal for Young People Pathfinder Options**

##### Research Objectives

- to obtain views about the concept and delivery of Options
- to provide information about participants' experiences of the Options stage
- to identify any problems in the way New Deal Options are working for individuals
- to explore the impact of Options on individuals' job search strategies, job readiness, employment outcomes and choices about future options
- to gauge participants' awareness and understanding of New Deal for Young People.

In contrast, the following illustrates the additional objectives of the longitudinal component of the research:

#### **New Deal for Young People Pathfinder Options**

##### **Additional objectives for longitudinal interviews:**

*For all the participants obtain an update on details such as age, housing arrangements etc.*

- *this has importance as all qualitative samples should be selected on a purposive basis. Respondents' characteristics need to be updated as these will provide a basis on which to select individuals to take part in future fieldwork waves if these are planned. Also participants' details need to be updated as any changes in the sample profile need to be monitored and recorded.*

Gain an understanding of the following:

- the **main events** that have happened subsequent to the last interview
- any changes in **vocational route**, such as the type or nature of employment
- factors accounting for changes and whether they are related to New Deal or not
- any changes in **views and attitudes** about New Deal. Are respondents more or less positive/negative about New Deal, and why?
- the **impact of New Deal** - any outcomes that have resulted from New Deal and durability of these outcomes? (E.g. at a last interview a participant may have gained positive work experience from an option, but if they have been unemployed for six months after finishing the Option they may no longer regard this as a positive outcome.)

This demonstrates how the longitudinal components differed in their objectives to cross-sectional elements and in doing so provided additional value to the evaluation strategy. However, as Section 2.2 will discuss, it is equally important to consider the analytical requirements to ensure that the longitudinal data is used to best advantage.

Researchers and managers need to consider carefully requests for longitudinal samples to be used for multiple purposes. Examples of this might include: ‘*mining*’ an existing dataset to explore questions of current policy interest outside of the original objectives which might otherwise have to be examined through new cross-sectional studies (for example, returning to a dataset of participants to look specifically at issues of childcare which were not formally the focus of the study), or exploring a dataset to uncover the experiences of specific groups (for example, homeless young people within the sample) not originally thought to be key groups for the purpose of purposive sampling.

As with cross-sectional data, longitudinal data can be used very profitably to explore objectives beyond the scope of the original intent. For instance, a recent report for the, then, Employment Service presented findings from a re-analysis of the New Deal for Young People dataset, including the longitudinal dataset. This explored issues of relevance to specific groups of participants, such as homeless and ethnic minority participants. The report provided new insights into the experiences of groups of young people with specific needs or vulnerabilities. However, the original objectives of the study should always be re-visited, and it is not always possible to answer new research questions with an existing dataset. In particular, with qualitative research, where the strength of the data relies upon the skills of the interviewer in following up initial themes through careful probing, re-mining of data-sets might prove more difficult if new issues lie beyond the scope of original questions. For example, a study exploring the experiences of lone parents in seeking work with a specific government policy may reveal the importance of a number of other broader policy issues (such as the provision of local childcare, family support etc.) to the success of the policy in question. However, unless these issues have been probed in depth during the interview the validity of findings relating to these themes will be undermined.

As a general principle, those deciding upon research design should always be able to demonstrate the added value of longitudinal elements to the research strategy. Section 3 will consider the implications the introduction of longitudinal elements will have for evaluation costs, time scales and reporting. These implications suggest that considerable thought should be given before introducing such elements.

Many questions about the efficacy of using longitudinal components in evaluation rest upon the nature of the policy or programme being evaluated. Longitudinal designs will be most useful when:

- the policy or programme is likely to be developed or refined during the course of the evaluation and changing procedural or delivery patterns need to be explored;  
*or:*
- where there is a clear need to document client/customer/recipient movements through a particular policy or programme.

### **2.1.2 Identifying appropriate samples**

As with any cross-sectional study, consideration needs to be given to the people on whom the longitudinal work should focus. Programmes or interventions invariably involve a range of different actors. Principally these are:

- the *target population* for the intervention: for example programme participants
- *those delivering the intervention*: for example Jobcentre Plus staff, training providers etc.
- *those responsible for strategic implementation*: for example regional managers of a policy
- *secondary or 'wider' groups of people affected by the intervention*: for example, where an information campaign seeks to encourage patients to use their GP rather than the local emergency ward as a first port of call, then the emergency ward is a secondary recipient of any effects from the intervention.

Decisions about whom to include will invariably entail answering questions about the nature of change likely to be experienced by that population and, in government research, how important these are in the overall evaluation of the policy. For instance, the target population would generally be seen as a primary candidate for longitudinal research. As the chief recipients of a policy initiative they would be expected to exhibit some change as the result of an intervention, and the fact that some within that group may not is an equally appropriate focus for longitudinal research. The nature of the policy initiative itself will also need to be considered. Many interventions establish a simple change to procedures which are not expected to evolve or change over time and therefore would be inappropriate subjects for longitudinal research.

Equally, it would seem inappropriate to focus longitudinal research on those delivering interventions where the intervention is fixed and regulated but highly appropriate in cases where those delivering the policy are expected to have differing experiences over time as new procedures evolve or the policy intent becomes more clearly focused. For example, longitudinal research with participants of the Education Maintenance Allowance Extensions scheme (for DfES) demonstrated how initial definitions of vulnerable students (i.e. those who had unstable accommodation or were teenage parents) were too narrow and that broader categories of 'vulnerability' should be used to ensure that the Extension flexibilities (such as the ability to study part-time, or at out-reach colleges) were made available to all students in need of them in the pilot areas.

### **2.1.3 Selecting appropriate time frames**

*When should the sample first be contacted? and what are appropriate time frames for later approaches?* These are questions which need to be considered at the outset of a longitudinal study, whether it be qualitative or quantitative. There is no simple answer because each study will vary depending upon the objectives of the longitudinal component. Is the study seeking to explore changing experiences, for example participants' views and experiences of a programme, or to explore changes relating to outcomes? Time frames will also be determined by the duration of the

intervention being evaluated or by other considerations such as expected longer term impacts. This is why longitudinal studies used in an evaluative context will tend to have shorter time spans than those used in less applied settings. The additional time imperative imposed by the need for timely information to inform policy development also often precludes longer term studies.

Nevertheless, the temporal shape of longitudinal components will be important in relation to their eventual benefit to the evaluation strategy. Different designs will have varying appearances. The following diagram illustrates the varying ways in which longitudinal studies can differ in their design by showing the points at which researchers might chose to approach a sample:

**Diagram 4 – Varying longitudinal designs**

Type	Pre-intervention	During intervention	After intervention	Longer term components – to explore longer term impacts
<b>A</b> Pre-, during and post-intervention design	X —————	X —————	X —————	X
<b>B</b> More than one contact during intervention	X —————	X — X —	X —————	X
<b>C</b> No pre-intervention research necessary		X —————	X —————	X

**Notes:**

1. **X indicates potential points of research interaction(s)**
2. **Type B: the number of research interactions during intervention is determined by the length, scale and type of intervention**

*Pre-intervention contacts* with a sample are useful where the study seeks to establish the behaviour or attitudes of a sample prior to an intervention. For example, where a health education intervention sought to change attitudes towards smoking then it may be useful to establish the attitudes, and behaviour, of the sample prior to the intervention. Approaching a sample at this stage is most likely to be of benefit where the study is seeking to evaluate the impact of an intervention on attitudes or beliefs by providing a comparative dataset against which to compare any changes discovered later. In these situations it would be difficult to uncover what the original beliefs of the sample were post-intervention without the significant likelihood that findings were being affected by post-event rationalisation. Pre-intervention contacts are needed less where the intervention is seeking to improve skills or circumstances (for example a re-training labour market programme) where participants or recipients would easily be able to retrospectively describe their situation prior to the

intervention. Indeed, administrative data is often available to corroborate these accounts. Still, early contact with such samples might provide a useful opportunity to explore expectations of the programme or intervention although potential participants may have difficulty in discussing what is to them a hypothetical chain of events or experiences.

The value of contacting a sample *during the intervention* is clear in that such timing provides participants with the chance to assess their current experiences and suffers little from retrospective bias. Programme evaluations are clear candidates for this type of design. They are however, least, if at all, useful when the intervention is a one-off event with a short duration. For example, it would be difficult to capture a sample if the intervention involved being given a leaflet or verbal advice on a single occasion.

The extent to which samples should be contacted *post-intervention* is very much dependent on the nature of the intervention and the expectations of the policy in relation to long-term change. It may not always be possible to determine when a sample should be contacted at the outset of an evaluation programme. In these cases it would be appropriate to use a screening exercise to update sample information. In other cases where the duration of the policy intervention is not fixed, or where the duration of longer term effects cannot be identified, then studies will require an element of flexibility in design in order to ensure that the sample is contacted at appropriate time periods. In addition, the use of management or administrative data (for example, the New Deal Evaluation Database) might provide useful clues to determine the outside limits of post-intervention contacts.

#### **2.1.4 Selecting appropriate tools**

The issues associated with the selection of appropriate tools for qualitative longitudinal studies mirror those which are considered in designing cross-sectional qualitative studies. However, additional consideration must be made to the likely impact of employing a specific research tool over the duration of the study.

In summary, the questions to be considered around the choice of research tools are as follows:

- *should the study use depth interviews or group discussions?*
- *is a case study appropriate?*
- *is there a role for other forms of data collection such as documentary analysis or observation?*

As with any qualitative study the choice of tool will depend upon the nature of data the study wishes to collect and the type of research questions which it seeks to answer. Individual interviews are suited to exploring detailed personal experiences of interventions allowing respondents to describe and evaluate their personal experiences of the intervention. Individual interviews are also the most appropriate forum for eliciting personal or sensitive information.

In contrast, group discussions provide a more suitable forum in which to bring together participants/recipients or service providers to discuss, share and compare their experiences of the intervention. The exchanges that occur between respondents can highlight common experiences and views, identify differences within the group, and act as a stimulus to further thought among respondents. They are also a particularly stimulating environment for generating solutions and strategies. However, they are less suitable where the evaluation requires exploration of detailed personal accounts such as employment histories or detailed experiences of service delivery.

Case studies can also be used during longitudinal components of evaluations. Case study research is always conducted amongst *multiple actors* around a specific intervention. It involves the investigation of the circumstances and key issues particular to one individual case by seeking the multiple perspectives of key actors. These perspectives help to build a detailed understanding of the experiences and outcomes in a specific case, where a case can be an individual client/participant; an area; an office etc. Longitudinal case studies might involve repeat depth interviews, paired depths, reconvened group discussions or documentary analysis.

The specific practical issues associated with employing depth interview, reconvened groups and other approaches for longitudinal work are considered in the following section.

## **2.2 Conducting longitudinal qualitative research**

The general principles of good quality qualitative research apply equally to longitudinal studies. However, the conduct of longitudinal research does present particular challenges for the research team which need to be considered in advance. In this section we explore critical points in the process which have additional complications when conducting longitudinal qualitative studies.

### **2.2.1 Sampling and recruitment of longitudinal samples**

#### ***Sampling criteria***

In quantitative longitudinal studies considerable importance is attached to sampling issues because of the dual need to make accurate measures of change and to keep the survey representative of the population of interest, often at each point of data collection. In qualitative longitudinal research statistical representativeness is not required so the approach to sampling can be rather more flexible although it remains critically important to ensure diversity in the achieved sample.

The way in which qualitative longitudinal samples are drawn can vary depending on the type of study and sample size in the first wave of research. Samples are usually either purposively selected from the original qualitative sample, or they simply consist of as many of the original sample as it is possible to recruit for later stages of the research.

It would usually only be possible to purposively select subsequent samples in studies with a large original sample. If a first wave of fieldwork had say, fewer than 50 members then it would probably be necessary to try to recruit the entire original sample. This would be the only way to ensure sufficient numbers in follow-up fieldwork given the likelihood of sample attrition.

A second factor that can influence whether a purposive approach is feasible in the selection of a longitudinal qualitative sample is the level of existing knowledge about the types of change that can be expected to occur after initial interviews. In studies where little is known about the possible changes that may take place in the lives and perceptions of sample members, then it may be most useful to include as many of the original sample as is possible to recruit in subsequent waves. This would help to ensure that all possible shifts in experiences and views are captured in later stages of the research. Conversely, if enough information is felt to be known about how people's experiences may change, then purposive sampling becomes more feasible. So for example, in programme evaluations such as New Deal, statistical evidence exists to indicate the various routes people take when they exit the programme. This information might be usefully applied as sample criteria for later stages of the evaluation. In more exploratory studies such as *Thirty Families* (Ritchie, 1985) which set out to explore how living standards are affected by unemployment, however, the possible changes in people's experiences and attitudes may be less easily anticipated. Inclusion of as many individuals as possible from the original sample may be a more effective way to capture the full extent and range of change that may occur.

Longitudinal qualitative studies use purposive sampling techniques in the same way as they are used in cross-sectional qualitative samples. Purposive sampling is a method that ensures that all the key constituencies known to be of relevance to the scope of enquiry are included. At the beginning or first phase of a longitudinal qualitative study the sampling procedure is the same as that used in qualitative cross-sectional studies. This involves designing a sample to achieve diversity in a number of key variables, for example age, gender, ethnicity, marital status etc. When drawing samples for the second or subsequent waves of fieldwork, however, the process involved in longitudinal work differs from cross-sectional study sampling. A wider range of criteria are used in longitudinal sample selection because it is often useful to include additional criteria based on information from previous analysis. These might be typologies or the full range of possible views on the policy or service under evaluation that was developed in analysis of the first stage of the research. These might need to be included in the longitudinal sample in order to ensure inclusion of all the possible changes that may occur in experiences and views over time.

It is possible that one or more of the desired sampling criteria may be unknown. In outcome evaluations, for example, in employment related programme evaluations the current activity of a sample member is often a useful sampling criterion given that what they are doing (e.g. in work, training, self-employment, voluntary work or unemployed) may well be an impact of the policy being evaluated. In these circumstances the information might need to be collected prior to sample selection. This might be achieved by writing to respondents and asking them to complete and return a short questionnaire detailing what they are currently doing. It is also useful to include a space on this form to allow respondents to provide details of any change



of address, as this will ease the later recruitment process. Contacting respondents by letter rather than telephone to collect this information can be particularly useful as the letter serves also to inform people that follow-up interviews are about to occur. Respondents who fail to return the form might be telephoned to collect this information after a reasonable period of time has elapsed (for example, respondents would normally be given at least two weeks to return this document).

There will be some people whom it is impossible to contact by either of these means or for whom current activity is not known. It is important that the same number of people from this group is included in the sample as for all other activities. The difficulties experienced in contacting people in this group may be an impact of or may affect the impact of the policy under evaluation, which makes it important that the experiences of these people are included in the research. Experiencing benefit sanctions, for example, may have led to a telephone being disconnected, or a claimant being forced to leave an address. If the people who are hardest to contact are those who have been most adversely affected by the policy, or with the most extreme experiences, then their experiences must be included if the research is to document the full range of possible effects, impacts or outcomes of the policy under evaluation.

<b>Example 4: NDLTU sample criteria</b>	
<i>Stage One</i>	<i>Stage Two</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• current activity: stage reached on the programme or destination on leaving</li> <li>• gender</li> <li>• age</li> <li>• ethnicity</li> <li>• region</li> <li>• length of unemployment prior to participation in NDLTU</li> <li>• experience of benefit sanctions under NDLTU</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• current activity: stage reached on the programme or destination on leaving</li> <li>• activity at stage one</li> <li>• appraisal of programme at stage one <i>(Included positive, negative, mixed and neutral/don't know)</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Ensuring diversity across:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• gender</li> <li>• age</li> <li>• ethnicity</li> <li>• region</li> <li>• length of unemployment prior to participation in NDLTU</li> <li>• experience of benefit sanctions under NDLTU</li> </ul>

A longitudinal sample will almost always be smaller than an original study sample, given the difficulty of successfully tracing and recruiting an entire sample. This means it may be difficult to obtain diversity in all of the recruitment criteria. Consequently, it is useful to select a small number of key criteria according to which individuals should be grouped initially. These should reflect the key areas of interest to the study. In the example of NDLTU, for example, this included:

- programme leavers into work & positive at stage one, still in work
- programme leavers into work & positive at stage one, returned to JSA
- programme leavers into work & negative at stage one, returned to JSA

- ongoing participants & positive at stage one, now in work
- ongoing participants & positive at stage one, completed the programme and returned to JSA.

Within each of these groups respondents should be selected on an individual basis in order to ensure as much diversity as possible is obtained among the secondary criteria. This exercise can be time-consuming and require a delicate balancing act in order to achieve the right combinations of different criteria.

### **Contact strategies**

In quantitative longitudinal research, sample attrition can create considerable problems (high rates of attrition mean that the sample fails to remain statistically representative over time). As a consequence enormous efforts are usually made to encourage high response rates at each wave of interviewing. Sample attrition is also a major issue for qualitative longitudinal research particularly as the smaller sample size means the loss of one or two sample members can adversely affect the overall balance of the sample in terms of key sampling criteria. However, due to the intensity of the relationship built up between respondent and researcher at first or second interviews there tends to be less attrition due to refusals for follow-up stages.

Sample attrition can occur for a range of reasons such as refusals, changes of residence or, in extreme cases, the death of the respondent. Some populations are particularly hard to retain for successive interviews. For example, young people are often very mobile and are likely to move to different addresses between fieldwork waves. Other populations such as people on low incomes or benefit claimants may also be difficult to retain due to the difficulties in contacting them. Sometimes the actual policy under evaluation can increase the problems for the retention of sample members. For example, in a study of sanctioned benefit claimants whose telephones are cut off or who are evicted. There are also other groups with whom it is likely to be difficult to remain in contact such as homeless people and drug users.

The impact of sample attrition should be a consideration if longitudinal reconvened groups or case studies are being considered. Designs relying on depth interviews are more able to accommodate sample attrition in longitudinal qualitative research than those using groups or case studies. This is because of the obvious difficulties posed by trying to maintain contact with and recruit an entire group or set of individuals relevant to a particular case. If these methods are favoured then the value of conducting longitudinal work with an incomplete group or set of case study members may be useful to assess.

Devising and applying a number of contact strategies to minimise sample attrition in longitudinal studies is vital to the quality of longitudinal research. The major difficulty presented by attrition is that those who are lost are usually people whose views and experiences are of particular interest and whom it is particularly important to include in the research. A study in Philadelphia, for example, found that the missing subjects were disproportionately non-white, of low socio-economic status, and officially classed as delinquent (Wolfgang et al (1987)). The exclusion of the most vulnerable groups in society has obvious implications for the efficacy of any policy evaluation.

One way to minimise sample attrition and increase the chances that sample members will be traceable at a later period, is to collect 'tracking' information at the end of the initial interview. This involves asking questions about where respondents might be at the point in time when later fieldwork is to be carried out, where they spend most of their time and collecting addresses and telephone numbers. The proliferation of mobile phones in recent years is a helpful development given that they allow researchers to remain in touch with sample members regardless of change of address. Similarly, as will be discussed in the following section, the identification of a 'link person' can help considerably in keeping contact with sample members.

### ***Tracing samples***

A proportion of any longitudinal sample can usually be traced by traditional means. There are a number of different ways of doing this and participants might be contacted by letter or telephone. Initial letters might be sent out to remind respondents of the study and their earlier participation and agreement to complete a later interview. This can then be followed up by a telephone call made by a member of the research team to arrange an appointment.

There will inevitably be a group in the proposed sample who do not have a telephone, or whose telephone number has changed or is no longer in service. This will be known before beginning recruitment in studies where attempts to contact people have been made earlier to assist with sample selection. The importance of attempting to recruit some of this group has been discussed in the previous section. This might be achieved by face-to-face recruitment at the sample members' home. Other strategies involve contacting 'link people' such as parents whose details were given so researchers could trace them. Parents have proved to be a very useful source of help in contacting young people in the work on NDYP and other studies have utilised the help of professionals such as Probation Officers, social workers, key workers, benefit staff, counsellors or friends. Some studies have provided individuals such as counsellors and friends with a 'finders fee' as an incentive to help (Watson et al, 1991).

Longitudinal work has been successfully conducted particularly in the US with study participants after gaps of up to twenty years (Clausen, 1984). Indeed researchers have developed and documented a diverse and innovative range of devices to track down respondents with whom they have lost contact. Methods of tracing respondents after such lengthy periods include using hospital records, telephone directories, internet searches, contacting employers, neighbourhood visits and enlisting the help of local community members (Giele and Elder Jr, 1998). Whilst interesting to recognise these methods of tracing samples, it is important to note that some of them would require thorough consideration to establish whether they risk breaching confidentiality before they could be used in the type of social policy evaluation research discussed in this paper.

When attempting to track down respondents via 'link' people such as family members, care must be taken to ensure confidentiality is maintained. This is particularly important in studies which are focused on sensitive aspects of peoples lives (e.g. drug use, physical or sexual abuse, mental health issues). When obtaining

this tracking information, researchers must check if referees know about the respondent's experience of the particular issues on which the study is focused. If this was ever unclear then care must be taken not to divulge reasons for seeking this person's son, daughter or friend.

It should be noted that the small samples in most qualitative studies means that the methods of tracing can be more intense than is generally possible for quantitative surveys. The latter tend to rely as far as possible on the simpler search methods.

## ***2.2.2 Conducting longitudinal interviews and reconvened groups***

### ***Preparation and conduct***

Longitudinal qualitative interviews require a great deal more preparation than cross-sectional in-depth interviews. This is because an interviewer must familiarise him or herself with the previous interviews prior to a follow up interview. This is usually done by reading the transcript or listening to tapes from previous interviews and making notes on the interview discussion or topic guide of any points that need to be clarified or followed up in a subsequent interview. For example, if an unemployment programme participant was finding a computer course difficult to follow, it might be important to find out in a later interview if that course had been completed. In addition if some points are unclear from an original transcript such as why an unemployed person left a particular job, or how long a person had been out of work, this can be clarified in a subsequent interview.

A similar process would need to be adapted for a re-convened group or longitudinal case studies. However, these may require more preparation as the moderator would need to familiarise themselves with the views of each of the participants. In addition to asking follow-up questions or questions to clarify previous information, the other main difference in the conduct of longitudinal fieldwork, is the need to detect and explore reasons surrounding any change. Whilst conducting longitudinal interviews or reconvened groups researchers must attempt to keep previous views and perspectives in mind to assist them in detecting any change. If some difference in activity, opinion or attitude is noticed then this must be followed by a series of probing questions which generate full details of this change and full explanation as to why it occurred. Researchers must exercise some sensitivity in these circumstances and avoid phrasing questions in ways which could be perceived as challenging or which suggest some inconsistency on the part of the respondent. Instead it may be more fruitful to highlight this seeming change to the respondent and attempt to engage them in the quest to jointly find out the reasons for this development.

### ***Implications for interviews and group dynamics***

There are a number of issues that researchers should bear in mind when conducting longitudinal interviews or reconvened groups. One issue to be aware of when the same researcher conducts longitudinal interviews is the possibility of researchers becoming too involved with sample members. To become too close or overly empathetic raises the risk of accepting uncritically the participant's perspective and

jeopardising the objectivity and credibility of the findings. Although they are not the focus of this paper, a similar difficulty can arise in re-convened groups posed by the increasing familiarity of respondents. Group participants will form relationships that can alter behaviour in the group environment. These relationships could lead either to collusion or hostility between individuals, which in turn could affect responses and contributions to the discussion. Nevertheless, careful analysis of longitudinal data can highlight issues where consensus or conflict have arisen providing useful insights into contentious issues (see following section discussing the analysis of longitudinal data).

More practically, a research team's ability to re-convene groups will depend upon the initial composition and sampling criteria of the group, for example, with staff groups researchers may find that people have moved between offices or out of the area. Similarly, a group of homeless young people may prove difficult to fully re-convene.

The undesirability of researchers disclosing personal details to respondents is a widely accepted principle of research interviewing. However, in some longitudinal studies researchers have felt that over time it becomes increasingly difficult and less desirable for the interviewer to remain completely detached from respondents. It has been argued that whilst important to exercise discretion, researchers revealing information about themselves can increase trust and rapport and facilitate efforts to remain in touch with respondents (Watson et al, 1991).

The likelihood of these bonds developing between researcher and respondent is obviously greater where interviews are conducted by the same researcher. The issue of whether longitudinal interviews should be conducted by the same or a different researcher is an interesting one and rarely covered in existing literature. Overall, there are arguments both for and against the same researcher conducting longitudinal interviews. On one hand using the same researcher can increase the likelihood of respondents agreeing to later interviews as a relationship has been developed with this individual. Interview preparation is also greatly lightened if the same researcher is used as they need only remind themselves of the details of the respondent's experience. However, on the other hand, using the same researcher raises all the issues discussed above relating to becoming too involved with sample members. If a different member of the research team conducts later interviews then this will have implications for the time needed for preparation, and more time may need to be allowed for this.

In addition, using different researchers for follow up interviews can have implications for confidentiality and consent. When first interviewing respondents in a longitudinal study, the research team need to be clear whether later interviews will be conducted by the same or different individuals. If there is a possibility that it may be a different individual who will be doing later interviews then this should be made clear to the respondent at the outset. They should be made aware for example, that the information disclosed in this initial interview will be made available to other members of the research team whom they may meet on later occasions.

Repeated participation in the same study can increase the risk of the behaviour of participants becoming influenced. This can happen in several ways, some

advantageous, and others of more questionable benefit to the research process. Reticent respondents may become more forthcoming as they become accustomed to the interview process. In addition repeated participation may make people think in more detail about their behaviour in relation to the topic about which they are being questioned. However, there is a danger that repeated exposure to the interview experience may result in respondents reciting what they think interviewers want to hear rather than being reflective of their own experience or of their behaviour being changed by what they have discussed during research interviews. Nevertheless awareness of this potential and skilful probing by an interviewer can highlight and avoid such occurrences. Where this does arise the use of flexible questioning can aid researchers in exploring what lies beneath answers and responses to questions.

### **2.2.3 Challenges for data analysis and reporting**

The focus on capturing and explaining change which is central to longitudinal qualitative research necessitates a slightly different approach to analysis in comparison with the analysis of data from a qualitative cross-sectional study. (The same is true of quantitative longitudinal studies, although the analysis methods used will obviously be different.)

Firstly, the questions that researchers need to ask of the data differ from the analysis of cross-sectional data. The main questions that need to be asked of longitudinal data relate to detecting change or shifts in views, however subtle, and explaining this, for example;

- *has any change occurred?*
- *what change has occurred?*
- *how or through what mechanisms has change occurred?*
- *why has change occurred?*

Practically, these questions are answered by considering previous interview data and data collected from the more recent wave of a study simultaneously. The method of analysis used in the Qualitative Research Unit at the National Centre *for* Social Research is 'Framework'. This involves the classification and interpretation of qualitative data within a series of thematic charts. In longitudinal studies, analysis involves adding later accounts to earlier data within a thematic framework. The data from different stages in the study needs to be clearly distinguished and this can be done by using bold, italics or underlining. Other analytical approaches can provide similar routes for the concurrent analysis of longitudinal data. Whichever approach is adopted researchers need to ensure that they are able to explore subsequent accounts, views or experiences alongside those given earlier in the research process.

Placing the accounts provided by respondents at different points in time side by side within the same thematic framework allows these to be easily compared. This facilitates the detection of any changes which might have occurred in views, attitudes and events. So for example, in a study about unemployment the barriers to work described by a respondent at the first stage of the study would appear in the same cell above the barriers cited in subsequent interviews. Comparing the barriers to finding employment cited by the respondent at different points in time, or stages of the programme, provides a way of detecting whether these are felt to have been

reduced. This might suggest that the programme or service under evaluation had succeeded in removing some of the perceived barriers to finding employment for individual sample members. Whilst this in itself might not provide strong enough evidence to conclude that the intervention had removed barriers to work, this may open up possible lines of enquiry to be considered in further analysis of the data.

One particular advantage of conducting longitudinal analysis in this manner is that it allows findings to be linked to earlier data sets at both a thematic and case level. So for example, as well as looking at any new issues that are emerging in later accounts, it is also possible to consider who is raising these new issues and if any groups in the sample experience change in similar ways.

It is vital that researchers are clear what questions they are asking of a longitudinal data set and the reasons for returning to the same respondents. Much of the potential value of conducting longitudinal research is undermined where this does not happen. This is a particular consideration where longitudinal data is being collected alongside cross-sectional data as there is a tendency to analyse both sets of data in the same way. This can prevent the emergence of the unique insights offered by a longitudinal dataset, which should always be analysed by comparison to earlier data sets. This involves considering the different accounts provided by each individual respondent at different stages in the research in turn, in order to identify any changes that appear to have occurred in their views or behaviour or the way they describe these.

Similarly, when longitudinal data is reported alongside cross-sectional data there are issues to be considered relating to how these two data sets are presented. A common approach is to interweave the two sets of data, placing the cross-sectional data alongside information gained from the longitudinal work. This allows discussion of the full range of views about a policy, combined with evidence as to the ways in which these may change over time and what causes this to happen. This can provide full and detailed evidence in response to research questions such as, for example, *“How do JSA claimants view this process?”*

A particular challenge when reporting longitudinal evidence in this way, however, is to ensure sufficient attention is given to documenting and explaining changes over time. It is important to avoid any impression that, for example, the views held by a respondent at wave one (when they had just begun a training programme) and those expressed at wave 2 (12 months later when they had nearly finished this) are views held by different individuals at the same point in time. This may be helped by the inclusion of dedicated chapters in the research report which highlight all the different ways in which views and behaviour can change and the factors underpinning this.

It was noted above that the continuance of repeat contact may affect the nature of data given during longitudinal interviews or re-convened groups. Without any systematic studies of these forms of qualitative research it is impossible to state with certainty the way in which longitudinal approaches affect the nature of data collected. Indeed it is arguable that it could ever be possible to detect root causes for changes in attitudes, behaviours and experiences, given the interactive and dynamic nature of qualitative research. Despite this, concurrent analysis of earlier data

alongside fresh responses allows researchers the opportunity to consider the ways in which views, attitudes and experiences have changed over time. Qualitative approaches should enable researchers to question 'why' an attitude has changed since the last interview, and this highlights the importance of pre-interview preparation. Researchers can also study changes in group dynamics where re-convened groups are a critical part of the study. This might involve looking at critical relationships within the group and how these have evolved, or studying the changing use of language to describe central issues.



## **SECTION 3 THE RESEARCH MANAGERS' PERSPECTIVE**

In this section we consider the research managers' perspective on the implications of including longitudinal qualitative components within evaluation studies. A longitudinal qualitative approach is likely to be selected if the evaluation has an objective of exploring the causes and consequences of change over time. This may, for example, involve looking at developments over time in the delivery of a programme, the way in which it impacts on participants and/or the durability of that impact. Earlier sections of this paper have examined how this element of looking at change may affect various aspects of the study design, including the sample, data collection and analysis. It is also likely to have implications for the way the project is managed and results are disseminated, as well as the cost and timing of the project. These aspects are discussed in this section.

### **3.1 Design implications for research managers**

At DWP and other government departments, research managers usually have a substantial input into the overall design of the research, including the formulation of research questions and sampling. In doing these things in relation to longitudinal qualitative research it is important to achieve a balance between forward-planning and flexibility. Forward-planning is necessary to maximise the value of the longitudinal element of the design. This involves, for example, thinking ahead to the follow-up stages of the research to ensure that the right questions are asked of the right people at the initial stage. Flexibility, on the other hand, maximises the value of the qualitative element and might involve, for example, allowing emerging findings to help shape sample design and/or data collection at the follow-up stages. The weight of this balance between forward-planning and flexibility depends on the aims and subject of the research. These considerations may be fairly complex if the objectives of the evaluation have both short- and long-term elements.

The balance between forward-planning and flexibility comes into play at various stages during the research process. In terms of research questions, forward thinking is required at the design stage to ensure that the right questions are asked at the first round to be followed up at the subsequent round(s). At the same time, flexibility is needed, since as a policy is implemented it is likely that the questions policy decision makers need answered will change over time.

With respect to sampling, in qualitative longitudinal studies participants will, generally, require purposive selection to ensure that various elements of the population are included. A number of issues associated with the longitudinal design may complicate the purposive sampling and may need to be considered.

First, if assessing longer-term impacts is an objective of the research, it may be difficult to pre-judge who will be affected by these and therefore decide which groups need to be purposively selected at the initial stage. So, while forward-planning is required to ensure that a range of different groups of people is included,

flexibility may be required to ensure that groups that develop as the programme progresses can also be included.

Second, if a project is designed to look at the impacts of a programme on people over time, the purposive strategy may be more complex than, say, selecting people on the basis of socio-demographic characteristics, because it is likely to involve some kind of prediction about future behaviour or experience. In the ONE policy qualitative research with clients (see example below), for instance, it was not possible to predict which clients would have further contact with their PAs. This may also be the case in an evaluation that uses, say, a repeat design. With a repeat design, however, there may be more scope for amending the sample design for the second cohort of participants on the basis of the data gathered during the first round.

Third, the people who experience longer-term impacts may not be the same as those who experience the shorter-term impacts, multiplying the number of sub-groups into which participants can be grouped. To take a simplistic example, a programme may have a greater or lesser impact on an individual at the time of the first research interview. For each of those two sub-groups, the programme may have a positive or a negative outcome by the time of the second research interview, giving four sub-groups instead of two. When a range of different impacts is possible, this may generate a large number of sub-groups. This may mean that a bigger sample is needed to cater for all the groups, but it might be difficult to predict at the initial stages who will fall into each of the sub-groups in the longer-term. In the ONE policy qualitative research with clients (see example below), there were five different client groups and four different purposive sampling groups at the first stage of sampling. By the second stage, there were a further two sub-groups: those who had experienced follow-up contact with ONE and those who had not. The original sample size was 106, but a booster sample was still required at the second wave of interviews.

In resolving these design issues, the research manager needs to balance flexibility with forward planning in order to maximise the value of the research in terms of gathering pertinent data from relevant groups.

### **Example 5: Qualitative research with clients in the ONE Evaluation**

As part of the ONE evaluation, qualitative research with clients was commissioned to look at whether and how the policy helped people move towards or into work. The research had two phases. The first was cross-sectional and consisted of a single interview with a sample of clients. The second was longitudinal and had two stages – an initial and a follow-up interview. At the first (cross-sectional) phase, sampling was on the basis of client group, and included a range of age groups, ethnic minority groups and volunteers from the stock of existing benefit claimants.

In the longitudinal phase, participants in the research were first interviewed three months after their first PA meeting to explore whether and how the PA meeting had impacted on their attitudes towards work and claiming benefit and/or jobsearch behaviour. Using data from the earlier phase, the researchers constructed a typology of clients based on distance from the labour market. They used this to design a telephone recruitment questionnaire for a purposive sampling strategy for the second phase. This ensured that a greater range of experiences of the ONE service could be reflected in the findings.

A further objective of the research was to look at longer-term labour market outcomes. Participants in the research were interviewed a second time about six months after the first interview. As well as looking at the longer-term impacts of ONE, policy decision makers were interested in seeing how follow-up contact with the service had affected these impacts. It was therefore important that sufficient numbers of clients in different sub-groups (client groups and at different positions in relation to the labour market) who had experienced follow-up contact with the service were included.

At the time the sample was originally selected (for the first set of research interviews), it was not possible to predict how many participants would come into this category or who they would be. A booster sample of people who had experienced follow-up contact was therefore used at the follow-up round of interviews, but longitudinal data was clearly not available for these participants.

### **3.2 Cost implications**

Longitudinal research designs tend to be more expensive than cross-sectional designs. Apart from the added fieldwork costs of carrying out more than one interview with participants, qualitative longitudinal research, like any longitudinal research, is likely to suffer from a degree of sample attrition (see Section 2.2.1). Measures to combat this, such as increasing the sample size, putting in place keeping-in-touch exercises and investing time and effort in re-contacting participants, will all increase the cost of the research. But effectively designed longitudinal research is still generally far less expensive than commissioning later studies if the original evaluation design has failed to take account of crucial elements of change. The project sponsor needs to judge these considerations in terms of value for money, rather than simply cost.

In increasing the initial sample size, the researcher needs to ensure that the sample includes enough people in any sub-groups to provide adequate data at the follow-up stage(s). This can be relatively simple if it is clear at the start who will comprise

those sub-groups. In evaluations, however, this might not be easy to predict, as the example of the ONE policy evaluation above shows. In that case, a booster sample was used. This option would be cheaper than increasing the initial sample size, but it detracts from the longitudinal element of the study. The researcher must sacrifice either the data relating to the participant's experiences at the time of the first interviews or the ability to gather data that is sure to be free of the participant's retrospective interpretation (or post-hoc/event rationalisation). For the ONE project, the original sample size was big enough to ensure that longitudinal data was available for a large enough group of clients to provide robust findings.

### **3.3 Timing implications**

Longitudinal studies require longer time scales than cross-sectional designs, because they aim to look at change over time. In the case of evaluations, the time scale may be further lengthened if the programme needs to be given time to 'bed-in' before it can be properly evaluated. This can be problematic if policy decision-makers require information from the evaluation on which to base decisions that cannot wait. In government research, project managers need to consider how they can best meet their policy customers' needs. This might mean, for example, arranging for the production of 'early impact' findings. The limitations of these, however, need to be conveyed, including the possibility that limited early impact could be due to early problems in delivery. Another danger of providing early impact findings is that policy customers may be tempted to use them to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the policy; these early impressions can be enduring, even if later research findings contradict them.

Policy makers may be tempted to alter the delivery or design of a policy on the basis of early findings, while the evaluation is still going on. One of the perceived advantages of this may be that the revised policy can be evaluated at no extra cost. However, this strategy may have serious implications for the quality of the longitudinal data. In effect, it would be tantamount to carrying out two separate evaluations. This may be less problematic with qualitative studies, where a quantitative measure of impact is not required. Indeed, the impact of changes in the programme could be a valuable topic for discussion with participants. However, it would be rare for an evaluation to be carried out using qualitative methods in isolation. In any case, the research manager would need to be aware of these issues and ensure that policy customers are too.

In the case of experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation designs, the extended time required to carry out longitudinal research may have ethical implications: how long can you deprive some people of the possible benefits of a programme? These people may also be deprived of the benefits of any other programmes that are being piloted that have similar aims. In practice, these kinds of considerations may limit the longitudinal findings to relatively short time periods (months rather than years).

### **3.4 Checklist of issues for consideration when considering proposals for longitudinal qualitative research**

Much government research is put out to tender. When considering potential contractors' proposals, or when designing research that is to be carried out in-house, it is worth bearing the following sorts of questions in mind:

- How important is it to gather information on the causes and consequences of change? For example, how far is the programme aiming to influence attitudes and behaviours as opposed to status, which may be more effectively measured quantitatively?
- How well does the tenderer understand both the short- and longer-term research objectives? Will the proposed research design effectively address both of these elements?
- What is the tenderer's capacity for keeping the same staff to carry out follow-up interviews? (The importance of this depends on the sensitivity of the research.)
- How is the tenderer proposing to keep in touch with participants and at what cost? How does this contribute to increasing the value for money gained from the research?
- How much effort is the tenderer proposing to put into re-contacting participants for follow-up interviews? Again, what is the balance between additional cost and increased value for money?
- Will the proposed methods of analysis make the most of the longitudinal elements of the data?
- Is the balance between flexibility in design with predicted costs and timetable optimised?



## CONCLUSIONS

Longitudinal approaches are well established in social research. As noted previously, quantitative panel or cohort studies are commonly used when measuring change over time. In contrast, longitudinal qualitative approaches have been used less frequently for applied policy research and it is only recently that research practitioners have begun to recognise the role which longitudinal qualitative research can play in the evaluation of policies, programmes and interventions. As a result, this paper has sought to raise awareness of the contribution which longitudinal qualitative research can make to policy making, specifically the role it can play in providing evidence relating to decision making, experiences and behaviour grounded in the experiences and views of those likely to be affected by a policy decision.

The paper has demonstrated the particular role that longitudinal qualitative research can play in addressing the range of research questions that arise in developing and assessing policy. It has explored the value of longitudinal components to increase understanding of the delivery, impact and durability of outcomes from interventions and assessed the methodological issues associated with longitudinal qualitative research. Finally, it examined the implications of using such approaches for the costs, time scales and conduct of evaluation studies in government social research.

Longitudinal qualitative research approaches share much common ground with quantitative studies conducted over time. Nevertheless, qualitative approaches to longitudinal research are distinctive in that they can provide **a unique insight into the factors underlying the impact, or lack of impact, of an intervention within the complex context of individuals' lives**. Detailed and lengthy questioning mean it is possible for researchers to identify factors integral to, and outside of, policy interventions which can influence their success or failure. Similarly, longitudinal approaches can **provide a detailed map of the factors which occur during the implementation of a policy which affect the experiences of those involved in delivering, planning and receiving the intervention, measure or policy** and which shape the form of later decision-making providing a holistic approach to a process evaluation.

The key characteristic of longitudinal research approaches is the collection and analysis of data on more than one occasion over a specified time period. The format of longitudinal approaches can vary, but they have a number of factors in common:

- data is collected for each item or variable for two or more distinct periods
- the subjects or cases analysed are the same or broadly comparable
- the analysis involves some comparison of data between or among periods.

It is important to note that with longitudinal research earlier interviews always form an integral part of the research. Longitudinal research, both quantitative and qualitative, involves not just simply returning to previous respondents to ask another series of questions but re-addressing the original research questions at an appropriate time.

Longitudinal approaches are commonly used in both quantitative and qualitative evaluation research. Longitudinal qualitative approaches are best used where researchers are seeking to understand why change has occurred (whether in attitudes, experiences or outcomes) or when seeking to map the nature of changing attitudes or circumstances.

When making assessments about how appropriate longitudinal qualitative approaches might be for a policy evaluation, researchers and research managers need to consider how important it will be to understand the personal or organisational circumstances which might affect how a policy intervention is received. For example, experiences of an educational policy like the Education Maintenance Allowance might be affected not just by the policy itself but also by changes in life circumstances such as illness, pregnancy or relationship breakdown.

In process evaluation studies longitudinal qualitative approaches can be used to map and explain how and why programmes, policies or measures change as they are practically applied. For example, these studies can explore how and why staff make decisions about implementation or to chart the development of organisational models of delivery.

In outcome evaluations, which are most commonly undertaken using quantitative approaches that can measure success or failure, longitudinal qualitative approaches can be usefully employed to identify why outcomes differ amongst sub-groups and how circumstances beyond the measure (such as housing situations) might affect or complicate outcomes for individuals and the factors affecting outcomes. Longitudinal qualitative approaches will provide a rich insight into the way in which programme or policy objectives and outcomes need to be viewed within the complex and varied patterns of individuals' lives.

Issues such as timing, sample attrition, and sample composition are common to all longitudinal research, but researchers designing longitudinal qualitative studies need to consider the following issues in addition:

- **Selecting the sample** – ensuring that new purposive criteria will provide an adequate diversity within the population to ensure that all key constituencies are covered at each stage of the research. This will include deciding which actors should be included in the longitudinal sample. For example, do you want to continue to chart staff views and experiences of the policy or only those of the primary recipients? These decisions will need to be grounded in a full understanding of policy implementation, for example, staff perspectives will continue to be important where the implementation or policy is continually evolving in terms of delivery processes.
- **Deciding whether to use group or depth interviews** – the problems associated with re-convening group discussions are multiple, not least because of the difficulties of group dynamics and problems of re-tracing 8-10 participants simultaneously. Despite this, re-convened groups can provide important insights, particularly around implementation issues. Similarly, the feasibility of re-tracing individual participants needs to be considered.



- **Preparation for longitudinal interviews or groups** – unlike questionnaire approaches, where the validity of responses relies on the systematic delivery and recording of responses to standardised questions, the validity of longitudinal qualitative research relies upon the skill of the interviewer or group moderator. Preparation is critical to the success of longitudinal qualitative research where respondents need to be encouraged to reflect upon their experiences over time. The researcher is responsible for identifying changes, whether in attitudes, experiences or behaviour, and then exploring with respondents the factors accounting for change (or indeed the lack of change).
- **Long-term respondent effects** – as is well documented with quantitative research, respondents are known to experience long-term impacts from contributing to qualitative research. Because qualitative interviews, which use a form of probing and questioning not used in survey research, can be seen as more personal by respondents these long-term impacts need to be considered in different ways. For example, would it be more appropriate for the same, or a different researcher to return to the same respondent? Researchers need to consider the cumulative effects, both positive and negative, of repeat research events on participants and researchers.
- **Analytical demands** – in order to use longitudinal qualitative data to its greatest value researchers need to devise analytical processes which allow earlier data to be analysed in contrast to later data. Whilst relatively straightforward in quantitative studies which follow a standardised design the analytical process can be more problematic for qualitative data. In these instances, researchers and research managers will need to consider methods of utilising at least two data sets (one for example from the current study, and one from previous years). If such comparisons are to be valid, the research team will need to use an analytical approach which can both archive analysed data effectively for later use and be flexible enough to allow new data to be analysed alongside longitudinal data within comparable thematic frameworks<sup>4</sup>.

Research managers will also face issues peculiar to longitudinal qualitative research when commissioning and managing such studies. It will be important to achieve a **balance between forward-planning and flexibility** when designing the research, in order to maximise the value of both the longitudinal and qualitative elements of the design. This balance between forward-planning and flexibility needs to be considered in relation to research questions and, in particular, sampling, and requires a thorough understanding of the long- and short-term goals and possible outcomes of the policy.

Choosing a longitudinal design has **cost implications**, but achieving the correct design at the initial stage is likely to be cheaper than commissioning later studies if the original design has failed to take account of crucial elements of change. The

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the issues involved in analysing qualitative data please see: Lewis, J. and Ritchie, J. Eds. (2002, in press) *Qualitative Research Practice* (Sage: London)

merits of choosing a longitudinal qualitative design should be viewed in terms of value for money rather than simply cost.

In terms of **timing**, as with any longitudinal research, it may be necessary to manage policy decision makers' expectations with regard to when robust findings will be available. If decision makers have urgent information requirements it may be necessary to consider whether it might be possible to provide them with some 'early impact' findings, but it is important that policy customers are fully aware of the limitations of these.

In addition to the above, when considering research proposals from tenderers for longitudinal qualitative research it is worth considering issues such as the methods and costs of proposed keeping in touch and re-contacting exercises, in terms of value for money; tenderers' capacity for using the same staff for initial and follow-up interviews and how important this is for the research; and whether the proposed research design and methods of analysis will make the most of the longitudinal data and address both the short- and longer-term research objectives effectively.

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