Understanding the Drivers of High Consumption in support of Decarbonisation

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Overview....

- Rationale & context for a focus on high consumers.

- Project structure.

- Introduction to qualitative study.

- Next steps and intended impact.

Rationale…

- Backdrop of huge (and growing) carbon inequality at all scales.

- In 2010, the 10% most affluent emitted 34% of global Co2, compared to 15% for the 50% on lowest incomes (Hubacek *et al*., 2017)

- This grew to 47% against 7% (Kartha *et al*., 2020).

- High emitters/consumers set social and material aspirations in society.

- High wellbeing does not require high consumption, and a good quality of life is easily achievable with a much lower carbon footprint (Baltruszewicz et al, 2023)

Context

- Sufficiency gives us a vital framework for understanding how much is too much.

- Sufficiency would represent an increase in the standard of living for the majority, but for the high consuming minority this represents a challenging transition that lacks a clear roadmap.

- There is a lack of policy knowledge or appetite for addressing high consumption as it aligns well with neoliberal growth agendas.

- There is an assumption that 'excessive' consumption is selfish and optional.

- There is a strong policy rhetoric around 'levelling up' but very little acknowledgement that this would need a powerful minority to … climb down?

Who are we talking about?

- Those who might be considered to overconsume...

- Not exclusively the super rich

- Those who consume resources beyond what is sufficient for their needs, and some wants (Fawcett and Darby, 2019)

- Contributing disproportionately to environmental degradation through...

- Powering large homes, multiple devices, multiple vehicles, frequent flying, meat rich diets and purchase of many consumer goods.

- <u>Not</u> those trapped into above average consumption by health, location etc.
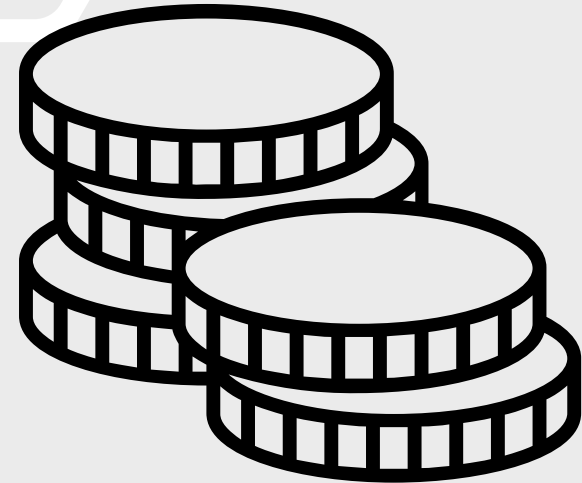
Travel consumption

- Two-thirds of households earning over £50,000 have 2+ vehicles, compared to closer to 15% of those earning less than £25,000.

- Problematic because multiple vehicle households travel on average more per person (8508 miles) than those with one vehicle (5866 miles).

- The frequency of flying also increases with income.

Number of household cars or light vans in the UK (including landrover, jeep, minibus etc) by income

Less than £25,000

£25,000 to £49,999

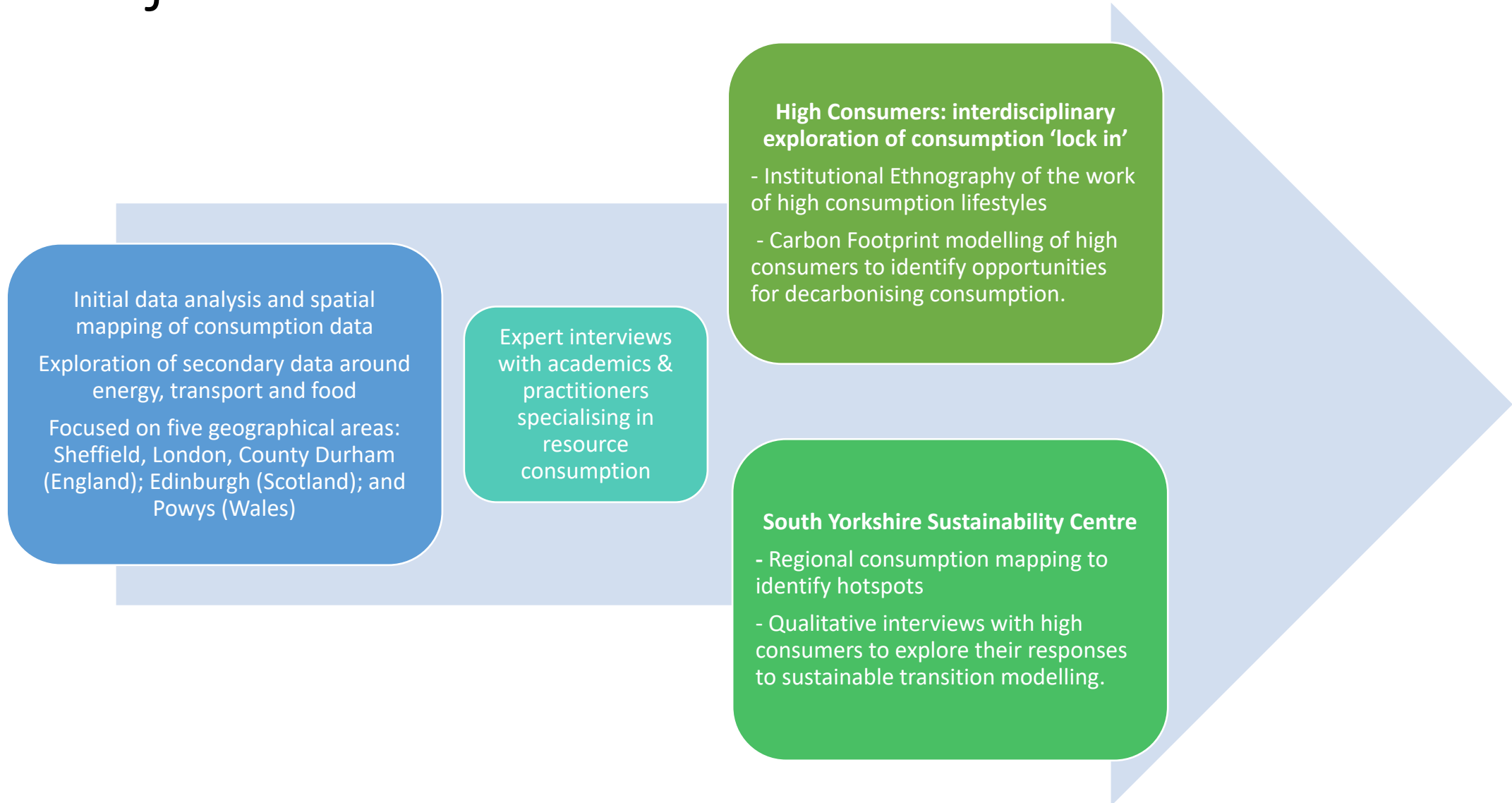£50,000 and over

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Key questions...

We avoid normative judgement and instead ask...

- What motivates consumption and limits engagement with consumption reduction?

- How do high consumers feel about the need to reduce consumption for the wider good?

- Why is it so hard to consume less? Even if you see the need.

- Even if the dominant norm became low consumption, how easy/costly (emotional, social, cultural) would it be to achieve for high consumers?

- Are there opportunities to decouple consumption from carbon

- What are the most effective responses and intervention points?

Project Structure

Initial data analysis and spatial mapping of consumption data

Exploration of secondary data around energy, transport and food

Focused on five geographical areas: Sheffield, London, County Durham (England); Edinburgh (Scotland); and Powys (Wales)

Expert interviews with academics & practitioners specialising in resource consumption

High Consumers: interdisciplinary exploration of consumption 'lock in'

- Institutional Ethnography of the work of high consumption lifestyles

- Carbon Footprint modelling of high consumers to identify opportunities for decarbonising consumption.

South Yorkshire Sustainability Centre

- Regional consumption mapping to identify hotspots

- Qualitative interviews with high consumers to explore their responses to sustainable transition modelling.

Sampling and access

- High-income high consumers are being framed as a 'hard to reach' group, because many existing mechanisms do not reach them (such as financial incentives)

- We seek to understand more about the socio-cultural structures that motivate consumption and limit engagement with consumption reduction.

Key Challenges:

- Access to high-income consumers

- Gaining the trust of participants so that they feel able to discuss their consumption without feeling vulnerable or **judged**.

- Analysing barriers to change in order to identify potential opportunities for change.

Institutional Ethnography

- Institutional Ethnography (IE) is a qualitative research approach developed by Canadian Sociologist Dorothy Smith that is used to explore and understand working practices (Smith, 2005).

- 'work' here is defined as anything that is deliberate and routinised and has been applied to paid work but also the work of mothers supporting their children through school or of managing a chronic medical condition.

- Classifying high-consumer lifestyles as a form of work does two important things; it allows researchers to take a non-judgemental stance, and it starts to shift the framing of these lifestyles away from them being aspirational and desirable.

- Research methods will include 'work' shadowing, observation, semi-structured interviews and content analysis.

- IE has never been utilised in combination with approaches like carbon modelling, this is an innovative use of two radically different research approaches to tackle a critical problem.

Research approach

- Recruit research participants through organisations and societies

- Researchers will spend time with participants in their homes, discussing domestic consumption in situ. This could include a consumption survey designed by carbon modellers.

- Research participants suggest other people to interview (snowballing)

- For analytical purposes we will attempt to map these working practices as complex 'systems' in order to understand how different factors intersect and where interventions may be most effective.

- This is a process that has been used to good effect when looking for intervention points to improve public health outcomes.
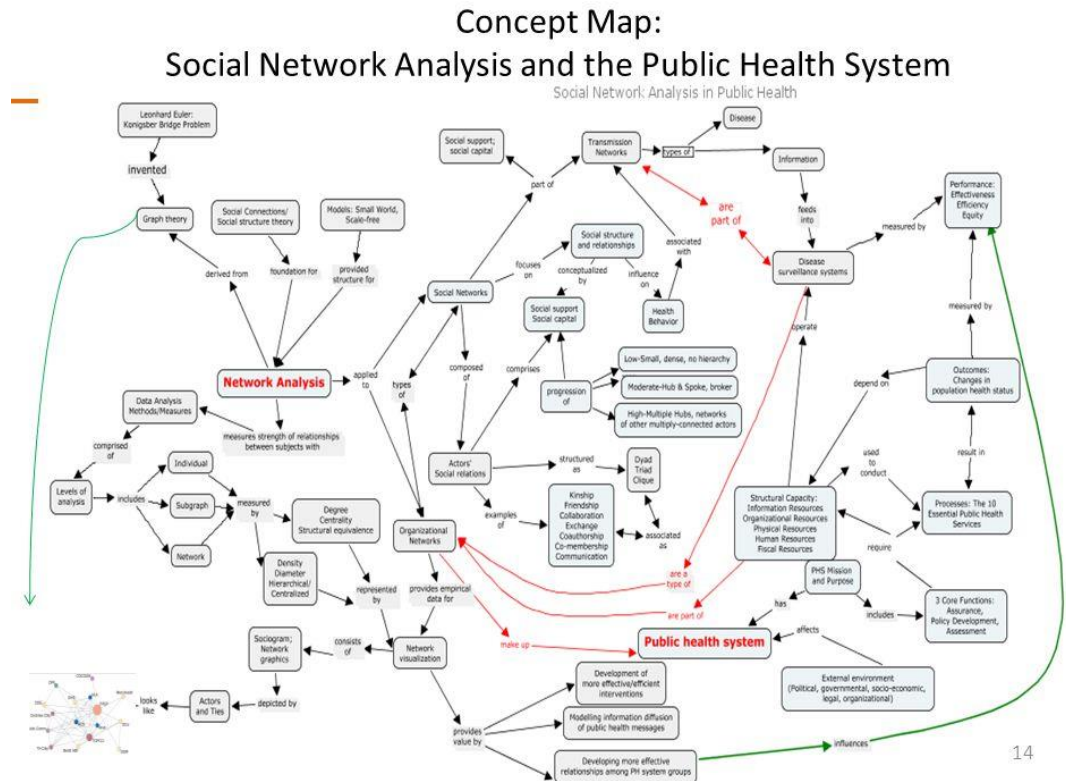
An example of a complex social system map from Pepper, C. Social Network Analysis in Public Health Systems: A Conceptual Analysis https://slideplayer.com/slide/10753565/

Conclusions/next steps

- Deep qualitative exploration (UK) of the lived experience of high consumption.

- Unpicking drivers, challenges and the practical and emotional work of living beyond planetary limits.

- Gaining an understanding of how high consumers see themselves in the transition to a low carbon future.

- Developing a more nuanced way of modelling the impact of high consumption lifestyles and potential gains from consumption reduction or restructuring.

Research impact.

- Strategies for decarbonising consumption.
- Better understanding of the carbon impacts of high consumers groups.
- Intervention points to disrupt high consumption patterns that generate high carbon-footprints.
- Developing a novel methodological approach to understanding consumption impacts and opportunities.

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