



# Analysis for policy: evidence-based policy in practice

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# Analysis for policy: evidence-based policy in practice

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# Summary

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This report presents findings from an investigation into the use of evidence-based policy in practice. It is based on interviews and discussion groups with policy makers from 10 Whitehall departments and the devolved administrations of the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly Government. In total, 42 policy makers, in a range of middle management and senior civil service positions, took part.

It was conducted to gauge the extent to which the use of robust, research evidence is embedded within day-to-day policy making and policy delivery, and to understand the reasons why effective use of evidence in government decision making continues to present such a challenge. It provides a snapshot of current practices within government departments.

Evidence-based policy making has been the subject of a series of government initiatives. This report seeks to move forward the debate; to identify remaining barriers to the effective use of research and analysis and to make practical suggestions for how these might be addressed.

## What is evidence-based policy making?

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The study examined the almost ubiquitous phrase ‘evidence-based policy making’ to uncover what policy makers – who are supposedly implementing it – understand by the term and how they actually use evidence in their day-to-day work.

As could be expected, there was a broad understanding of evidence-based policy making amongst most of those interviewed: evidence was seen to be able to provide the rationale for an initial policy direction; an understanding of the nature and extent of the problem; suggestions for possible solutions; an insight into the likely impacts in the future; and motivation for adjustments to a policy or the way it is to be implemented. However, this was contrasted with the reality of policy making/delivery, which was described as messy and unpredictable. Importantly, there was a clear understanding that evidence is just one factor to be taken into consideration alongside other factors such as the political imperative and response to media and world events.

Evidence was used to help improve understanding of an issue, influence policy thinking and assist in the communication and defence of decisions. Ways in which it could be used mapped onto the different stages of the policy process: at the creation of the policy; in its development; in its implementation; and in its defence/justification. Importantly, robust evidence was seen to give Ministers and officials confidence in their decisions and an ability to defend these decisions.

Those who reported not practicing ‘evidence based policy making’ did so because they questioned its ability to point to clear, unambiguous conclusions and therefore its value, or else questioned whether true ‘evidence-based policy’ was possible in reality. This finding clearly points towards the need for analysts and policy makers work closer together to ensure that needs/outputs/outcomes are agreed and clearly understood from the outset.

## What is evidence?

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A critical aspect of policy makers' understanding of evidence-based policy is what they consider to be 'evidence'.

Most of the officials interviewed were familiar with a range of sources and types of evidence – qualitative, quantitative, economic, surveys, public opinion, anecdote – but were less clear on a more detailed understanding of the relative merits and explanatory power of different techniques. Most were more confident in describing the types of data that could strengthen policy advice than they were at articulating the best methods of generating such data and whether commonly used techniques could or could not deliver what was required. They tended to focus on the 'end product', rather than how the information was either collected or analysed. Equally, as could be expected from non-analysts, the complexity and variety of different techniques were not well understood with specific techniques, such as social experiments and systematic reviews, being even less well understood.

The interviews demonstrated a clear need for policy officials to better understand the relative merits of different types of evidence, and for analysts to better understand the needs of, and demands on, policy makers to better provide customer-sensitive services.

## How to best use evidence?

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The report clearly identified the things that facilitate the use of evidence and things that impede it. The main factors associated with 'useful' evidence that can lead to better policy making were:

- *Timing of the analysis:* the policy process was described as reactive and requiring immediate action, resulting in little time to wait for or consider analytical support. Many commented on the usefulness of existing evidence, or ongoing, long-term data collection as this was often valuable evidence that could be harnessed quickly. Real-time feedback throughout any piece of analysis was considered crucial to constantly feed into policy development.
- *Resources:* resource availability, in terms of research budgets and policy and analytical staff capacity, was a key influence in the production and use of evidence in policy. The inevitable tension between resources and demands means prioritisation and flexibility are essential.
- *Quality of the evidence:* most accepted that there was a trade-off to be made between quality and timeliness; giving 'good enough' evidence that is robust enough to be defensible and withstand challenges but that is also timely and so fit in with the policy timetable.
- *Availability of the required evidence:* in the absence of available evidence officials can either wait for it or progress without it. Those working in politically sensitive areas or involving substantial investment were most commonly the ones not willing to take the risk of progressing without an evidence base.
- *The presentation of the evidence:* many policy makers commented on the difficulty of drawing out relevant information from some published work and called on

analysts to make their findings easily accessible in terms of format, language and length.

- *The focus of reports and other forms of evidence:* the officials interviewed were keen for analytical findings to relate directly to their area of interest. They were also keen for analytical findings to be contextualised with existing work in the field so that the sum of knowledge and the new evidence's contribution to that knowledge could be understood.
- *Trustworthiness of available evidence:* many of the issues around the use of evidence came down to whether it was trustworthy or not: was it from a credible source? (departmental analysts were seen as particularly trustworthy); does the researcher have any obvious bias? what quality assurance processes were undertaken? is there a consensus in the research evidence? and does the evidence chime with the opinions of officials themselves?

### Learning

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Learning points are summarised at the end of each section of the report. Learning falls on different people: senior management; those responsible for frontline policy development and delivery; and all government analysts. The policy makers interviewed recommended that policy makers needed to better understand analysis to enable them to use research evidence most effectively. In turn, they considered that analysts would benefit from a stronger awareness of the specific policies they were supporting and the day-to-day pressures and process on those developing and delivering policy.

This report attempts to gauge the extent to which the use of robust, research evidence is now embedded within day-to-day policy making and to understand the reasons why effective use of evidence in government decision making presents such a challenge. It provides a snapshot of current practices within government departments. Importantly, it seeks to move forward the debate about evidence-based policy and delivery in the light of experience; to identify remaining barriers to the effective use of research and analysis and to make practical suggestions for how these might be addressed.

## Background

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There is a long tradition of evidence-based and evidence-informed policy within the UK. The need within the civil service to make better use of specialists and their skills and knowledge has also been long recognised. In 1968, for example, Lord Fulton wrote:

*“...many scientists and members of other specialist classes get neither the full responsibilities and corresponding authority, nor the opportunities they ought to have... In the new Civil Service a wider and more important role must be opened up for specialists trained and equipped for it.”*

*“...administrators will have much better appreciation and understanding of research, of its scope and limitations, its methods, its evaluation...”*

Fulton Report (1968)

Since 1997, there has been an even greater focus, with a number of publications and initiatives stressing the need for effective evidence-based policy. This began with the ‘Modernising Government’ agenda, set out in the 1999 White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999a). This recognised the need for policy making to be more responsive to citizens’ demands; forward looking; evidence-based; properly evaluated and based on ‘best practice’. It also called for ‘higher quality evidence’ to be used in policy making and for policy to be more ‘joined-up’ across government departments and agencies. The need for policy making to be more ‘information aged’ was also recognised.

At about the same time, and building on the thinking in the Modernising Government White Paper, the Cabinet Office published ‘Professional Policy Making for the 21st Century’ (Cabinet Office, 1999b). This identified nine core competencies, sometimes referred to as the ‘nine principles’ of good policy making. These were that professional policy making should be:

1. forward looking
2. outward looking
3. innovative and creative
4. using evidence

5. inclusive
6. joined-up
7. evaluated
8. reviewed
9. based on 'what works'.

Throughout 'Professional Policy Making for the 21st Century', there is a strong emphasis that policy making should be based on evidence of what works and that the civil service must improve departments' capacity to make best use of evidence. To enable this to happen, the report called on departments to 'improve the accessibility of the evidence available to policy makers'.

This paper in turn was followed up by a review of policy analysis and modelling in government entitled, 'Adding It Up' (Cabinet Office, 2000). 'Adding It Up' defined analysis and modelling as, "the examination and interpretation of data and other information, both qualitative and quantitative, to provide insights to improve the formulation of policy and the delivery of services" (p.8). The report identified a number of weaknesses in the capacity of the civil service to provide sound and robust analysis to support policy making, as well as a lack of joined-up and cross-cutting policy making and analysis. It called for 'a fundamental change in the culture of policy making' that would involve 'good analysis', 'better planning to match policy needs and analytical provision' and the 'spreading of best practice across departments and professions'. There was also a call for better leadership from Ministers and senior officials, training for policy makers in analysis and more openness from both analysts and policy makers.

More recently, the 'Professional Skills for Government' initiative<sup>1</sup> has been developed as a key part of the government's delivery and reform agenda to ensure the whole of the civil service has the right mix of skills and expertise to enable department or agencies to deliver effective services. Within this framework of skills and experiences necessary for any civil servant to do their job well are four core skills, one of which is 'analysis and use of evidence'. Under this core skill, policy makers are expected to:

- anticipate and secure appropriate evidence
- test for deliverability of policy/practice – and evaluate
- use evidence to challenge decision making
- identify ways to improve policy/practice
- champion a variety of tools to collect/use evidence
- ensure use of evidence is consistent with wider government requirements
- work in partnership with a wide range of experts/analysts.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://psg.civilservice.gov.uk/>

In response to these various initiatives espousing the need for policy to be more evidence-based and analytical, the Government Social Research Unit (GSRU)<sup>2</sup> conducted a study to investigate what policy makers understand by evidence-based policy making; how they go about using research and analysis; and how evidence-based policy is working in practice. The study also attempted to gauge the extent to which the use of robust research evidence is now embedded within day-to-day policy making, and to understand what the remaining challenges are to the effective use of research in government decision making.

This report sets out the findings from this work, and identifies key learning points, highlighting good practice in evidence-based policy making and the reasons why some policy makers think it can lead to better policy making. In addition, some of the continuing impediments to effective evidence-based policy making are detailed, along with suggestions of ways to improve practice and processes to overcome these obstacles.

Throughout the report, reference is made to ‘analysts’ and ‘analysis’. This term is used broadly to refer to all those working to provide analytical evidence for policy, including social researchers; operational researchers; economists; scientists, statisticians.

## The project

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This report presents findings from work conducted by researchers in GSRU between April and July 2005. It is based on interviews and discussion groups with policy makers from 10 Whitehall departments and two devolved administrations (the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly Government). In total, 42 policy makers, in a range of middle management and senior civil service positions, took part.

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<sup>2</sup> GSRU provides strategic leadership to the Government Social Research community and supports it in delivering an effective service. It has a broad role in promoting the use of evidence in strategy, policy and delivery and leads on strategic social research issues and standards for social research in government. It also works in close collaboration with the other analytical heads of profession, to ensure joined-up analytical support to policy making and delivery. More information can be found on [www.gsr.gov.uk](http://www.gsr.gov.uk).

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## Evidence-based policy making

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*“I understand that if you’re making evidence-based policy you will be trying to define the nature of the problem that you’re trying to solve, find out what is known about that issue, what works, what information we may have...”*

*“Policy based on rational interpretation and real facts other than just mere whim.”<sup>3</sup>*

### The issue

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Evidence-based policy making is a ubiquitous term commonly used in government decision making processes and, as discussed in the introduction, the subject of a series of government initiatives, but what does it mean in practice to those supposedly implementing it? How does it influence policy maker’s day-to-day work? This section reports the understanding and current practices of the policy makers interviewed.

### What is evidence-based policy?

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As could be expected from a term with such common currency amongst Ministers and civil servants, many of the policy makers interviewed could clearly articulate a formal definition of ‘evidence-based policy making’. Evidence can provide the rationale for an initial policy direction; it can set out the nature and extent of the problem, suggest possible solutions, look to the likely impacts in the future, and evidence from piloting and evaluation can provide motivation for adjustments to a policy or the way it is to be implemented.

This is not to say that most policy develops in such a linear way from first identifying the evidence, balancing the options and then developing and evaluating the resulting policy. As set out by the Chief Government Social Researcher, the idea of ‘evidence-inspired’ policy making might be more appropriate (Duncan, 2005). Amongst those interviewed, there was a clear distinction between the theory or ideal behind evidence-based policy and the realities of making policy in the real world.

*“...but that is very much an ideal, that’s very much a theory, which is sometimes overturned by events.”*

The reality of policy making was described as messy and unpredictable, rarely progressing in a linear fashion. Evidence was clearly just one factor which policy makers took into consideration when developing or implementing policy. Other factors and real-world events and crises all exerted an influence to a greater or lesser degree depending on the policy. Most importantly, the timing of most policies rarely allowed for a linear and methodical evaluation of the evidence.

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes used throughout this report were obtained during the interviews for this study.

Evidence-based policy making, therefore, was not seen as something that is conducted in isolation. Although most of the policy makers were obviously uncomfortable with the idea of policy made ‘on the hoof’ in response to some pressing need to respond to an issue or on the basis of anecdote or media pressure, they acknowledged that a purely evidence-based approach was rarely possible. Indeed such a literal interpretation of the term was considered undesirable by most of those interviewed. Few policy makers (or analysts) would propose that policy be developed based only on research evidence. Doing so was seen to stifle innovation and encourage an overly risk averse approach and conflict with the reality that good policy making will always involve using all the tools available, of which evidence is just one, again chiming with the views expressed elsewhere (Duncan, 2005). Evidence, however, was seen by more than one official to provide the ‘solid grounding’ from which to develop and defend a policy.

## What non-research factors also influence policy?

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A range of influences and outside factors were seen as important – in policy development, implementation and in advising Ministers – and could generate significant influence on the nature of a policy and the time pressures on policy decisions.

### Political influences

Ministers are ultimately responsible for policy decisions, and were seen to exert significant influence over the use or non-use of evidence. Some Ministers were reported to routinely ask for evidence from their officials, others were less keen, resulting in officials’ appeals to wait for the evidence base, or citing of contradictory evidence, being perceived as being difficult or obstructive.

Existing political commitment, such as manifesto commitments, were obviously also key influences on Ministers’ priorities. Officials speculated on the evidence, or lack of evidence, behind such commitments and highlighted the need for the best possible evidence to be widely available to inform the wider policy debate. It was acknowledged by some of those interviewed that although manifesto commitments will dictate the policy direction and priorities, they are rarely specific, and evidence can form a key part in how to implement these policies.

Even where policies were not set out in manifesto commitments, officials were aware that political acceptability was important for Ministers. They had to consider whether the proposed policy was in keeping with broader principles and ideology and whether party members, MPs and other Ministers were likely to support it.

More generally, many of those interviewed described the time pressures exerted by the political cycle on the use of research evidence.<sup>4</sup> This cycle was seen to often lead to a greater focus on short-term measures and quick responses, rather than longer-term strategies that allowed for the development of a robust evidence-base to support it. A change of government could also mean adjustments to policy priorities and policy direction: longer-term policy strategies did not always survive a change of administration.

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<sup>4</sup> Several of the interviews and discussion groups were conducted during the run-up to the 2005 General Election. This may have increased the salience of the political cycle for those interviewed.

*“Well, obviously there is a political context to almost everything that we do. Ministers want to be seen to be taking action and sometimes any action is better than no action ... There are often political commitments that lead you in directions that the evidence doesn’t necessarily strongly support.”*

### Stakeholders

A range of stakeholders including Non-Government Organisations, charities, academics, think tanks, delivery partners and agencies, lobby or pressure groups, business organisations, Ministers’ constituents and the general public were recognised as having an influence on policy decisions. Each policy area had its own set of stakeholder groups, who could hold conflicting views.

Officials recognised that some stakeholders presented views informed by sound evidence and this could make an important contribution to policy deliberation. Other stakeholder organisations, however, were less dependent on robust evidence. Officials were alert to the potential bias or partiality of evidence provided by lobby groups and they pointed to the importance of placing such stakeholder evidence in a wider context and being able to counter their evidence with more independent analysis if necessary.

Even groups who represented very specific interests, however, could be influential in the decision-making process if they were well organised, presented their case well, were clear what their potential bias was and crucially, if they had media support. Importantly, some groups and individuals were seen to have strong influence with some Ministers and special advisors, providing the Minister with advice that was not necessarily evidence-based.

### Public and media influences

Officials also reported public opinion as a key influence on Ministers’ thinking. This was often channelled via constituency surgeries or the media, particularly in response to “real world” events or crises, and the influence of the media in shaping public perceptions was emphasised. However, several policy makers made the point that awareness of public perceptions was just as essential as ‘hard’ evidence in securing support for policies.

The media was seen to be able to provide a potentially valuable source of external scrutiny, though it was also acknowledged that it could distort debate and examples were given of incidents where the views of pressure groups or influential individuals had been presented uncritically in the press. Media attention, sometimes through aggressive media campaigns by some lobby groups, was seen to be able to raise the profile of an issue and create pressure on Ministers to respond, regardless of the evidence base.

The officials who were interviewed occasionally described the role of “real world” events or crises in raising the profile of an issue, either by identifying a new problem or by changing public perceptions around an existing problem. Such events, along with the resultant media coverage and polarising of public opinion, could then exert pressure on Ministers to identify a policy response, shifting the prominence of the issue within the department.

## Is evidence used in policy making?

There were mixed views about the use of evidence in policy making and what the reality of evidence-based policy was.

### Reasons for using evidence

When evidence was used effectively, the policy makers interviewed identified a number of potential advantages, including helping Ministers and the general public understand the issue; helping identify the most appropriate policy direction and influence policy thinking; and giving Ministers and policy makers the necessary tools to communicate and defend their policy decisions. Crucially, reliable evidence was seen to be able to give policy makers and Ministers confidence in their policy decisions and confidence to defend these decisions in parliament and to the media. Policies based on evidence were seen as more likely to be better informed, more effective and less expensive than they otherwise might have been. Strong evidence could help secure resources for a policy, and account for how public money was spent, it could also inform risk assessment and programme management and help to avoid policy failure.

Views on structural incentives, such as performance targets, Spending Reviews and Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs), were mixed. Evidence on performance targets was seen as generally useful, but some were sceptical about whether this encouraged a rounded use of evidence or not. Some thought that the Spending Review process could act as a catalyst for reviewing the evidence on policy impacts or the costing of new policy options, but other considered that there were risks that the “bidding” process steered officials to focus on evidence that supported their case, rather than looking at evidence as a whole. RIAs could also incentivise officials to use evidence: the requirement to assess the costs and benefits of new policy proposals encouraged them to identify likely impacts on stakeholder groups, including what the unintended effects might be. However again, there was some scepticism about how far judgements were made about the quality of evidence and how far RIAs actually influenced behaviour.

Other incentives mentioned included:

- the requirement to monitor European funding
- ‘rural proofing’ of policies
- departmental requirements for cost benefit analysis
- Treasury Green Book principles (Treasury, 2003)
- the Office of Science and Innovation (OSI)’s requirement for Departmental Evidence and Innovation Strategies
- departmental scrutiny by the National Audit Office (NAO)
- advances in information technology that have increased evidence available to policy makers
- the increased use of pilots and evaluations of policies

- an increased openness within Government, resulting in better relationships with stakeholder groups and stronger links with academics.

### Reasons for not using evidence

A number of those interviewed questioned both the value and limits of evidence. Some questioned the reality of 'evidence-based policy', and saw the term as rhetorical device, rarely pointing to a policy recommendation in a clear, unambiguous way. An unfocused and contradictory evidence base with a lack of clarity about its robustness and therefore its defensibility was seen to complicate the decision-making process, rather than aid it.

Of those who voiced scepticism about evidence-based policy, there were two main groups: those who believed in evidence-based policy as an idea, but something that was rarely possible in reality, and others who questioned the value of the concept of evidence-based policy, querying, "is evidence always king?". These officials had not been convinced of the utility of evidence-based policy, either through being supplied with weak, irrelevant or inconclusive evidence in the past or through witnessing the dominance of political motivators over evidence.

### How do policy makers use evidence?

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*"Evidence-based policy, to me, is two sides. One is the evidence of actually the need to do something and the other side is the evidence of this being the appropriate solution."*

As discussed above, evidence, in itself, rarely provides policy options or leads directly to policy decisions. All available information, pressures and resources have to be weighed up and a balanced response developed, a skill summed up by the term 'judgement' or 'pragmatism' by some of the officials interviewed. Judgement was seen as an essential policy skill, especially where time was short and Ministers expected clear, concise advice on policy options. As could be expected, different policy makers relied on their own judgement to differing degrees, with some emphasising the superiority of judgement, whereas others feeling 'out of control' without an evidence base.

In terms of using evidence, policy makers highlighted a number of different uses of evidence; different evidence being useful in different contexts and at different times in the policy process. Much has been written about the different types of evidence-based policy, most influentially by Carole Weiss (1979). The Treasury's Green Book (2003) points to the six-stages of the policy cycle in the ROAMEF model: Rationale, Objectives; Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation, Feedback. Both the understanding of the stages of the policy cycle in the ROAMEF model and the types of evidence use identified by Weiss can be seen in the key uses of evidence identified by the officials interviewed.

### Creating policy (Rationale stage)

Referred to by Weiss as the 'knowledge-driven model', one of the fundamental uses evidence can be put to is to identify a need for action in some policy area. Evidence collected on an ongoing basis can identify the need for either further research to investigate the causes of these trends, or else motivate a policy response. However, although officials mentioned

this, few could give an example of this happening in practice, often feeling ‘in the middle of the process’ of policy making, and so very rarely in a position to take the time to objectively evaluate the situation and from there develop an evidence-based policy.

*“before considering advice to Ministers on any aspect of policy you should, as a matter of course, reach for whatever evidence is available that might make you decide in favour of a particular course of action...”*

It was evident that some policy makers were less keen on analysts conducting non-commissioned exploratory work, as it might create a need for action in an area that had not been foreseen or budgeted for.

Evidence can also gradually accumulate in an area, building up to a conclusive picture over time, referred to by Weiss as the ‘enlightenment model’. This was often seen to happen when there was no particular drive to create policy on a certain issue, or there had been a number of evaluated initiatives, both within and outside government, all building towards a robust evidence base. One official also indicated that in non-priority areas, policy decisions were only implemented once there was unequivocal theory or evidence on the subject.

### **Developing policy (Objective/Appraisal)**

Once a policy area has been identified, evidence can help officials understand the issues and develop a focused, efficient policy response. Officials commented that, when policies were being developed, they were often looking for evidence to shape their thinking, rather than dictate the policy direction. Insight from evidence was seen to give a more detailed understanding of the situation, which in turn could help shape the direction of policy in ways that were not evident prior to the research being collected. Evidence in such cases could be used to decide the most appropriate response to an issue, or else to persuade Ministers that a revision of policy was needed. This was a more common use of evidence than at the creation stage amongst the policy makers interviewed.

### **Implementing policy (Monitoring and Evaluation)**

Evidence was also used to aid the implementation of policies. Regardless of the evidence-base for the policy creation, evidence was seen to be useful in helping understand how best to shape the policy and how best to implement it. Piloting was mentioned as one of the best ways of achieving this to ensure a more successful, focused and cost-effective roll out of a policy.

The officials mentioned the collection of monitoring data – either through collecting management information or by surveying those piloting the policy. They also acknowledged the importance of gathering evidence from delivery agencies and frontline workers when shaping or evaluating policy interventions. They were clear that without the active support and cooperation of these groups, policies could fail.

### **Defending and justifying a policy decision**

Where there were pressures from the media or stakeholders, for example, research evidence was seen to be useful in playing a role in ameliorating or defending a policy. Weiss referred

to this as the ‘political model’. Having a robust, balanced evidence base was seen as one of the strongest ways to rebut criticism or counter misinformation. For example, one official described how adopting an evidence-based approach had helped to change the tone of public debate on a controversial policy area and bring a variety of stakeholders on board. Another talked about challenging stakeholders to supply robust evidence for a proposed scheme, and setting up a group chaired by a stakeholder to consider this evidence.

In circumstances where there was a strong pressure to produce an immediate policy response to an issue, evidence was seen as one way of moderating that pressure; by presenting the issue in the context of a broader balance of evidence, it was seen as easier to make or not make the expected policy response.

*“What my experience of evidence base is in policymaking is having enough scientific or modelling – not necessarily scientific, it could be predictive research as well – to back up your policy so it stands up to some fairly serious scrutiny out there.”*

There was some discussion of using a less robust and more selective evidence base in support or defence of a policy. Policy decisions, whether evidence based or not, were seen to benefit from supporting evidence and there were examples of policy makers searching for such supporting evidence, rather than a comprehensive picture. This use of evidence was explained by again emphasising the role of ‘judgement’ in decision making and by citing time pressures. When the need for evidence was to help defend a policy or to support the communication of it, that is the evidence that was sought. However, even for this use, there was an awareness of the need to be aware of the broader evidence base so that potential criticisms could be anticipated.

### **As a way of taking action on an issue**

Weiss (1979) referred to the ‘tactical’ use of evidence, when calls for action on a subject were responded to by conducting research into the issue. Only one of the policy makers interviewed reported this use of evidence gathering to deflect criticism and take the heat off an issue, some others thought of the collection of evidence on an issue a genuinely practical policy response.

*“part of the policy recommendation has been to commission some research to answer the questions that current evidence doesn’t give us answers to.”*

## **What examples are there of evidence-based policy making?**

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All the policy makers interviewed were asked for examples of the effective use of evidence in policy making. All were able to give some examples, where evidence either helped form a policy, shape the implementation of a policy or was used to help persuade an initially resistant stakeholder group of the need for the policy and change the nature of the debate.

An accompanying publication – ‘Good Examples of Evidence-based Policy’ – has followed up some of these good examples and examines the features of effective evidence-based policy.

*“...we did a series of pilots which last over several years, which had the right kinds of controls with them, which tested out a number of options. Though there was some breaking down of the process, largely we didn’t move to national implementation until we were clear what we thought the best option would be. As a result of that, we believe that what we’ve got is an option which is going to be effective but, in fact, significantly less expensive than it might have been if we’d gone with the first thoughts that we had about it.”*

### Learning

A literal interpretation of the term ‘evidence-based policy making’ as something that will happen in isolation is inappropriate. Good policy making will use evidence alongside other factors such as the political imperative and response to media and world events. What is more important is thinking through how these, potentially conflicting, motivators can dovetail and provide the best possible policy response to an issue.

It is obviously essential for policy makers to be aware of all the potential influences in an area, and the validity of the evidence behind claims made by stakeholders, lobby groups, the media and the public. Analysts can play a role in collating and quality assuring the available evidence. Analysts can also play a role in ‘consensus building’; developing an agreed interpretation of the evidence when it does not all point in the one direction. Adverse influences – such as unsupported pressure from media and lobby groups – can be countered by the effective use of robust evidence.

There needs to be better informed public debate, which would in turn ensure better informed policy decisions and political commitments. To do this, government analysts need to be better knowledge brokers, feeding evidence into government policy and into the wider political debate.

To this end, it is essential that policy makers and analysts work together to ensure there is a shared understanding from the start of any evidence-gathering or policy exercise: what outputs are needed, for what purposes, when?

The limitations of the evidence being collected, and the decisions that will be able to be made on the back of it need to be communicated clearly and early on to policy makers to ensure there is a shared understanding and expectations are managed.

There are a number of ways of using evidence, which would benefit different stages of the policy making and policy delivery process. Educating policy makers as to the best type of evidence and the best use of that evidence would be beneficial.

Evidence can and is used to defend and support policy decisions. Ensuring there is a complete and robust evidence base at hand for this task would be beneficial, and policy makers and analysts should work together to this end.

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## What is evidence?

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*“Firstly, raw data, I mean statistical evidence ... numbers of trends, and all that kind of thing. Secondly, evaluation evidence, where we’ve built in evaluation into policies from the beginning with a structured methodology and both qualitative and quantitative outcomes. Thirdly, academic research.”*

### The issue

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A critical aspect of policy makers’ understanding of evidence-based policy is what they consider to be ‘evidence’. Technical developments and new approaches mean that the range of resources available is becoming ever more complex. To inform this issue we explored policy officials’ level of knowledge of available techniques and their relative merits.

### Types of evidence used

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Most of the officials interviewed were familiar with a range of sources of evidence, but were less clear on a more detailed understanding of the relative merits and explanatory power of different techniques. Policy makers were more confident in describing the types of data that could strengthen policy advice than they were at articulating the best methods of generating such data and whether commonly used techniques could or could not deliver what was required. They tended to focus on the ‘end product’, rather than how the information was either collected or analysed. Equally, as could be expected from non-analysts, the complexity and variety of different techniques were not well understood.

### Quantitative/statistical evidence

The officials interviewed were aware of the need for evidence that could give a broad overview of the numbers relating to a policy area. These figures were seen to paint a picture in numbers, giving the proportions of the population an issue affected and the trends over time. Such evidence was seen as particularly important at the policy development/rationale stage, to understand the broad area in which the policy was being developed.

*“I suppose the first port-of-call is our statistical or economic advice department – what numbers do we have on this?”*

### Economic evidence

Economic evidence was valued by many of the officials interviewed, aided by a familiarity with this type of work through, for example, the Regulatory Impact Assessment process and the Treasury’s Green Book (2003). This familiarity led some to state that they were more confident using this type of evidence than other types, with one claiming it was, ‘more reliable and more ... objective’ than other forms of evidence. Policy makers were

keen to stress the need for policies that were cost effective and presented value for money since budget constraints ruled out policy solutions that were effective but unaffordable. Economic evaluation was seen to be one of the key ways of finding out whether a certain policy would be worthwhile or not.

Interestingly, very few of the policy makers interviewed made the connection between economic evaluation and other forms of evaluation, specifically those traditionally conducted by social researchers and statisticians, which give evidence about whether and how a policy works, beyond the fiscal. Equally, the contribution of good quality social research and statistical data to inform economic analysis was rarely fully understood.

### **Surveys, attitudinal and behavioural evidence**

Policy makers also valued attitudinal and behavioural data. Insights into ‘consumer’ awareness and data on perceptions and attitudes were considered helpful in understanding why people act in a certain way. Data on frontline practitioners and end users were judged to be particularly important in providing ‘on the ground’ feedback on policy impact and early feedback on unforeseen or unintended consequences of policy. Surprisingly, given the amount of such data collected in the course of policy evaluations, some policy makers considered behavioural and attitudinal data rarely available and expressed a desire for more of it. This comment may indicate real gaps in the data or could suggest flaws in communication of what is available.

Surveys were seen as the most common way of achieving such data, and were widely mentioned as useful in helping strengthen policy advice.

### **Qualitative evidence**

Qualitative data were recognised and valued by some of the officials as complimentary to quantitative data sources. Qualitative data could provide insights unavailable through purely quantitative work.

*“I think it is often also very useful to back that up with some qualitative research, to try and get a feel for why something has had the impact that the quantitative evidence is telling you that it has had. ... quantitative evidence tells you that something has happened, but it doesn’t necessarily tell you what particular bits of the programme are the things that have had the greatest impact.”*

Policy makers referred to the value of evidence about people’s perceptions and attitudes towards policies and information from service deliverers and clients on why a policy intervention did or did not work and which aspects of the delivery process are important.

### **Anecdotal evidence**

Related to the use of qualitative data, officials also talked about the use of ‘anecdotal’ evidence in their work, although how this was understood to differ from robust qualitative work was not always clear. They spoke about drawing on such things as ‘real life stories’, ‘fingers in the wind’, ‘local’ and ‘bottom-up’ evidence. For some, anecdote might include verbatim quotations from robust qualitative research, but with some of those interviewed

there seemed to be little understanding of the difference between that and a single incident brought to the policy maker's attention by one local practitioner.

In defence of using anecdote, the officials interviewed presented the following reasons: they felt that experiential evidence, particularly from front-line workers, could illustrate and help policy makers understand how policies had been received locally; there was also a strong belief that anecdotal evidence was helpful in presenting policies to Ministers and to the wider public; it served to contextualise and humanise statistical evidence and provided a "real-world" element that people could relate to, in comparison to the more inaccessible scientific or technical evidence. All these reasons could equally be applied to robust qualitative evidence. There is evidently a need to ensure officials understand the difference between good quality qualitative data that gives insight and illustrates an issue, and anecdote which might only represent the most vociferous or extreme views held.

*"I think there is a role for anecdote, anecdotal evidence in terms of presenting policy. I think they're very useful for summing up something which may have a good evidence base. I don't think you should base your policy on a bunch of anecdotes, but I think that there is a role for anecdotes in sort of presenting things to Ministers and helping them to understand that it's helpful for them; they can sell it onwards."*

### Scientific evidence

Scientific evidence was also mentioned a good deal, especially in certain departments/areas of work. Often this was seen as even more crucial in both developing policy and defending it, as the scientific community had to be persuaded as to the efficacy of the policy.

*"... If we try and move anywhere without having the scientific basis to do so we get fleeced in the House."*

### International evidence

A number of officials recognised the value of international evidence in providing both new policy ideas and good practice examples. They acknowledged that policy makers abroad were frequently facing similar problems, and might have more monitoring and evaluation data on tackling a particular problem. They also noted that Ministers were often interested in learning from overseas experience. They did, however, raise concerns about the transferability of this sort of evidence, especially where delivery systems in one country, for example, were significantly different from those in the UK. The need to test the feasibility and applicability of international evidence was recognised by some interviewees.

*"It's using evidence from a wide range of sources because we're not the only people struggling with the same problem even if it is coming at it from different angles. And throughout all of this as well we've relied on the international as well as UK evidence to support what we're doing as well"*

### Social experiments/controlled trials

Social experiments or controlled trials have long been used in medical and social research and can provide some of the most precise and robust indicators of the impacts of policy

interventions. However, such methods can only be an effective tool for policy development if their distinctive contribution is well understood, by policy makers and analysts alike.

The officials interviewed revealed a considerable range of knowledge and understanding about experimental research evidence. At one extreme, there were policy makers with a very clear understanding of the method and who demonstrated knowledge of the robustness and reliability of such a design and the confidence that can be attributed to the results.

*“It is the only really reliable way of testing whether or not something works in relation to the two different groups.”*

In contrast, other policy makers either had no knowledge or understanding of the technique, or expressed negative opinions or experiences about its contribution to policy making. These concerns related to the complexities of implementing social experiments, ‘cultural’ resistance amongst their colleagues and to Ministerial objections to equally deserving people being treated differently by ‘the system’. In order for these methods to be more widely accepted and used, thereby improving the quality of the evidence base in the UK, there remains a need to ensure officials have adequate information including of successful implementation and use of such techniques.

### **Systematic reviews/meta-analysis**

Systematic reviews are designed to uncover all of the available evidence on a particular subject, be it published or unpublished, critically appraise each study for quality and then present only the quality evidence or, with meta-analysis, combine the quality data from a number of studies into a cumulative measure of evidence. Because of the potential value of such techniques in providing policy makers with a balanced view of the best available, unbiased evidence, the officials interviewed were asked specifically what they knew about these approaches. Unsurprisingly given the relative rarity of their use in government, few policy makers had heard of systematic reviews or meta-analyses, what either of these types of evidence could offer, or what they entailed.

Of those officials who were aware of systematic reviews, they raised concerns about timescales involved in these methods and hence their utility for policy making, although a number of policy makers seemed quite interested in systematic reviews when the approach was explained to them. This suggests that analysts need to put more effort into explaining the potential utility of systematic reviews and continue refining the review process to address time concerns.

### **Consultations**

Consultation was another source of evidence identified by the officials in this study; almost without exception, they believed that engagement with stakeholders, customers, clients and citizens provided a very important source of information. Indeed such consultation is mentioned in most models of good policy making (Cabinet Office, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2001). However, their responses did raise questions about the methods that are regularly used for consultation by departments, and of the quality of the evidence that is gathered from such exercises.

The officials identified having used a variety of approaches, some involving in-house and external analysts, others being conducted solely by the policy officials. There were some examples of consultations forming part of a larger evidence gathering exercise, with the larger exercise giving a more robust overview though the use of surveys, research and economic input. However, there were also a number of examples of consultation as a stand-alone exercise, without any additional data collection.

Some officials seemed content with simple consultations without a larger accompanying evidence-gathering exercise. Others were aware that current practices may not be yielding robust and/or representative evidence. Some officials directly pointed to the bias that is likely to present in consultation exercise responses, stating that, consultations are, 'one way of getting a lot of evidence in. Whether that is quality evidence or not is another matter'.

### Learning

Unless analysts put more resources into 'bringing alive' research outputs, policy makers will continue to place too much value on anecdotal evidence. Policy makers need be made aware of the risks involved in the use of anecdote, and the superiority of good case studies/exemplars. Analysts need to recognise the power of 'real life examples' and build this into their research strategies.

As part of the Professional Skills for Government 'Analysis and Use of Evidence' competency, policy experts should be offered training on the relative merits of different methods, and what can be expected from each. This would enable them to act as 'intelligent customers' for analytical work and be sufficiently aware to ensure that the technique used delivers the required outputs.

Equally, analysts should be encouraged to develop their understanding of the policy process, so that can provide customer-sensitive services.

Analysts should put more resources into explaining to policy colleagues what various analytical techniques can offer. This will be supported by current work by GSRU GES, GSS and GORS to detail what is common and what is different across the analytical professions, and how they can be usefully combined.

At the outset of business planning and priority setting exercises, departments should consider existing evidence; evidence gaps; and what is known to work in the area. This information can then be used to inform whether any additional work is required, and the most appropriate techniques to be used.

An effective knowledge transfer and knowledge management system is needed across government, which can harness the evidence from across different departments and different areas of interest, allowing a better understanding and joining-up of the range of related work that is ongoing or has been completed.

Attempts to refine the systematic review process to address time concerns should continue. For example, ongoing work in GSRU to develop 'Rapid Evidence Assessments', a modification of systematic reviews using similar rigorous techniques but in a much shorter timeframe, should continue.

# 4

## Effective use of evidence

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*“...it’s got to be closely linked to the policy process or else it won’t be noticed and used...”*

### The issue

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So far this report has detailed what policy makers understand by ‘evidence-based policy’ and their understanding of different types of evidence. This chapter details the reality of implementing evidence-based policy; in practice there are things that facilitate the use of evidence and things that impede it. Only by understanding these issues can we ensure more effective evidence-based policy making and thereby better policy.

### Better policy making

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In the interviews the main factors associated with ‘useful’ evidence that can lead to better policy making were:

- timing of the analysis
- resources
- quality of the evidence
- availability of the required evidence
- the presentation of the evidence
- the focus of reports and other forms of evidence
- trustworthiness of available evidence.

These factors focus more on the practical everyday issues associated with practising evidence-based policy. Though there is some overlap with the more systemic issues identified in ‘Adding It Up’ in 2000, this focused on the lack of demand for, and inadequate supply of, good analysis:

- external pressures constrain the scope for analysis
- the political timetable does not match the analytical timetable
- a reluctance to collect and analyse data for fear of unwelcome results
- a lack of demand for fundamental and comparative analysis
- a lack of overview of the bigger picture

- lack of long-term planning
- lack of cost-cutting work.

There are many similarities between the two sets of identified factors; differences are probably accounted for by the focus on the day-to-day experiences of the policy makers interviewed for this study. Some of the issues identified in 2000 remained a problem, particularly with respect to co-ordinating analysis and policy.

### Timing

There was a great deal of discussion about the time constraints associated with policy making. Much of policy making was described as reactive, requiring immediate action and resulting in little if any time for analytical support. Once tasked with driving forward a particular issue, policy makers commented on an urgency that did not facilitate the collection or utilisation of evidence; time was considered a 'luxury' by more than one. The analytical support used in such circumstances was typically from evidence already collected and available. Many commented on the usefulness of ongoing, long-term data collection for this reason, and of analysts working alongside them and being able to quickly summarise the available evidence.

The policy timetable and the analytical timetable were seen as difficult to co-ordinate. Although many appreciated that a high quality piece of work might need considerable time, they observed that the findings often came too late to influence policy. Thus, even amongst policymakers who understood the necessity of long-term studies, there was a call for real-time feedback to constantly feed into the policy process, and for analytical work to be designed and conducted in collaboration with policymakers to ensure that it delivers useful findings throughout the development of the policy.

All responses in this area seemed to point to the policy makers' rather narrow conceptualisation of the potential contribution of analysts. Beyond collecting and analysing data, analysts can assist in the policy process by using their analytical skills to inform any necessary assumptions, challenge other assumptions and ensure evidence will become available as the policy progresses. There also seemed to be a tendency to underplay the potential cost of getting things wrong and the role of evidence and analysis in mitigating this cost. Evidence can aid the risk management process, and reduce the likelihood of costly policy mistakes.

### Resources

Related to timing is the broader issue of resources. Resource availability – in terms of research budgets and both policy and analytical staff capacity – was seen to affect the production of evidence and the implementation of policies based on evidence. Without adequate money, staff or time, it was not possible to conduct the analytical work necessary to support policy. Inevitably, there were often fewer resources than demands, and so prioritisation of resources within and across departments was commonly acknowledged.

Some officials mentioned their capacity in terms of getting on top of the evidence base; demands on their time could lead to all but the most relevant and accessible analytical reports being left unread. Equally, some officials saw the time pressures on analysts to be problematic, with some analysts perceived as wedded to pre-agreed yearly or even

3-yearly research programmes, with little capacity for ad-hoc work at short notice. The working partnerships between analysts and policy officials were seen to be able to hamper or support the effective use of analysis.

## Quality

There was a general understanding of what constituted quality analysis amongst those interviewed. Along with mentioning specific methodologies as 'quality', the officials also looked for consensus between different independent reports from what they considered credible sources. The work from lobby groups and those with a commercial interest in the policy outcomes were treated with a lot more caution than other sources. Quality was thought to be assured by good quality commissioning processes, good management of the research and peer review of the findings.

In terms of making better policy, it was accepted by most of those interviewed that there was a trade-off to be made between quality and timeliness of analytical work. Some policymakers were clear which they thought was more important, whereas others accepted that some balance between the two has to be made, resulting in them accepting both 'good-enough' and 'quick enough' evidence. Evidence that takes too long to produce will not be in time to be useful, but evidence that is not of sufficient quality can be dangerous/misleading. This was seen by some to mirror the tension between analysts and policymakers, with the analysts wanting to ensure robust, high quality results, and the policymaker needing results within very tight timeframes.

Ultimately, what policy makers were looking for was timely evidence that was robust enough to be defensible and withstand challenges made to the policy decisions. Research that could not stand up to such scrutiny was seen as of little use in terms of evidence-based policy.

## Availability of evidence

Although there was a general acknowledgement of the potential benefits of evidence-based policy, it was judged not always possible to achieve. Some evidence was simply not available at the time required, was inconclusive, failed to answer the right questions, or was out of date. In the absence of evidence, the officials either waited until the evidence was available or progressed without it. Those who waited for the evidence often worked in contentious areas, and required evidence for their policy to stand up to scrutiny and criticism. Others were working in areas that required substantial, long-term investment, and were not willing to proceed without evidence on the most effective use of resources. There was also some concern about Freedom of Information requests, which could potentially uncover the lack of robust evidence underpinning evidence-based policies.

Those willing to proceed without evidence, most commonly cited the other pressures on them: time, political pressure, world events. There was also the problem of resources and simply not being able to research everything. There were some things that were considered too difficult to obtain evidence on, and so 'educated judgements' were used in its place. However, the initial trawl for existing evidence often fed into future research strategies, which could feed into later stages of policy development and implementation.

The inherent risks of non-evidence-based policies were a concern for some: such policies could be poorly designed, or need to be amended when evidence did become available. Some stressed the risks involved in proceeding without an evidence base; the larger and more controversial a programme, the greater the risk involved. Such risks needed to be identified, signed off and managed.

*“... What you then have to do is to make sure that you’re being clear to Ministers the degree of risk involved and say that in an ideal world we would like to, but clearly you want something to happen a bit faster. We’ll do it faster but you need to understand that then it’s risky.”*

### Presenting the evidence

Related to the availability of the evidence are issues about accessibility. One problem was finding out whether evidence existed or not; another was drawing out relevant information from published work.

Several officials said that they found it difficult to establish exactly what research had been undertaken within their own departments and what evidence was available more widely. They often did not know who to contact and they also felt that departmental websites were not particularly helpful in locating available evidence. Getting information on research that had been commissioned by other government departments was even more problematic and there did not seem to be effective systems in place to help policy makers to identify what research and analysis had been done across Whitehall and beyond on a particular issue.

The way findings were pulled together and presented was also considered crucial. Policy officials judged that evidence was sometimes unfocused and/or unhelpful. Analytical reports were often not designed with a policy making, or Ministerial, audience in mind; they were too long, lacked summary statements or were written in an academic, jargon-laden language. Whilst officials recognised that complex issues should not be glossed over, they were looking for a more user-friendly, concise presentation in order to be able to extract key messages. This was not to say that the inevitable caveats should be omitted, but that simply the caveats should not drown out the message. Lobby and pressure groups were identified as often being much more skilled in this type of communication than government analysts or those contracted to conduct analysis and present their findings to departments.

Two solutions were proposed: to ensure all those writing for government present findings in a clear, accessible and short way, written in collaboration with policy makers and focusing on their needs. Internal analysts or contracted communication experts should develop skills in taking all the available evidence and drawing out the salient points in a summary – effectively to act as a ‘knowledge broker’. Reports were seen as just one way of presenting information, and the policymakers interviewed encouraged analysts to think more creatively about how to present information. Some commented on meetings/presentations and slides as more effective ways of communicating the work; others asked for more visual information, even photographs as ways of communicating the message.

*“... I will always try and read the summary but not always the rest, and I rely effectively on others – I’m just being completely candid here – to filter it and make use of it in the advice that I might then see in a more integrated form later.”*

## Focus of the evidence

Most of the officials interviewed considered it crucially important that any evidence provided to them related to their area of work, and specifically to the area of policy they were currently working on. Work that did not relate directly was unlikely to be read and one interviewee commented that he considered most of the analytical work produced by his department 'irrelevant'. To give a better sense of the balance of evidence, several officials also said that it would be helpful if reports contextualized the findings by setting out how they related to what was already known in the field.

There was no consensus on whether research reports should draw out the policy implications of the findings or not. However, it was generally accepted that the analyst authors were likely to have a valuable input on this matter, and their understanding of the policy implications could either be presented in the report or discussed with the policy lead and fed into the submission for the work. Nonetheless, there was strong support for the policy relevance to be clearer, which would increase the likelihood of research reports actually being read and used.

*"... You've [the analytical expert] been researching this area for ten years, have you got any ideas? It can be quite irritating sometimes when somebody then just shrugs their shoulders and says. 'that's not my job, I'm just an analyst'. You think, 'yes, take your analysis a bit further and give us some ideas about if these are all the problems what might some of the solutions be?"*

## Trustworthiness

Ultimately, many of the issues around timing and quality came down to whether the policy makers interviewed trusted the evidence they were presented with. Evidence that is not trusted will inevitably not be used to form or direct policy. The key features of a trustworthy source of evidence related to many of the points already raised: the credibility of the source; bias of the researchers; the quality assurance mechanisms that had been used and whether there was a consensus on the research evidence.

Two other factors were seen as particularly important. The first was the opinion of the internal analysts within the policy makers' department. Some officials reported trusting these analysts as experts in their field who were able to judge the quality of the work and give assurances on the quality of the work. The second factor was the judgement of the policy makers themselves. If the findings sounded reasonable and fitted with the policy maker's understanding of the world, they were more likely to trust, and therefore use, it. However, such an approach does leave these officials open to the risk of discounting new, unexpected and potentially valuable insights.

## Influencing decisions

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There are evidently a number of potential impediments to the effective use of evidence in the decision making process. Even once evidence has been gathered, quality assured and the policy implications drawn out, the officials made it clear that policy making is something that is conducted by both policy makers and Ministers. Evidence is presented to the Minister; it is up to Ministers themselves how they chose to use it and the advice

provided by officials. It is rare for evidence in isolation to point in a specific policy direction, but rather it can inform thinking on a subject.

There was some discussion about what to do when the evidence base conflicted with existing policy direction or Ministerial commitment. In some cases Ministers were persuaded by such evidence; in other cases the importance of existing commitments and pressures took precedence. However, a number of officials responded robustly to such situations, feeling that their responsibility was to develop the evidence-base as best they could and provide the most informed advice possible to Ministers. The Minister, in turn, was ultimately responsible for the decision, and if s/he wanted to make a political decision based on some factor other than research evidence, then the official had done as much as they could (provided that they had presented the risks appropriately).

### Structural issues

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As recommended in 'Adding It Up' (2000), it was clear from the interviews that management, and senior management in particular, are important in fostering a culture of evidence-based policy making/delivery. Ministers were seen to play an important role in encouraging the use or non-use of evidence within their department. High-level commitment created both expectations about the working relations between policy makers and analysts and an organisational will to both resource and encourage evidence gathering. Some officials reported a 'top-down' message of encouragement and empowerment for an evidence-based approach, while others perceived that senior commitment to using evidence was less strong. One example of senior commitment cited was organisational changes to integrate analysts into the whole process of policy and delivery, though more commonly it was referred to more vaguely as 'general encouragement'.

### Barriers to a culture of evidence use

Although there were a number of good examples, discussed more fully in the 'Good Examples' companion report (Campbell et al, in press), five years on from 'Adding It Up', there was evidence that several aspects of civil service culture and practice remained as barriers to the effective use of evidence in policy making. "Silo working" was mentioned by many who felt that policy makers still tended to look at evidence from a narrow, departmental perspective; the sharing of evidence between departments and even between different directorates within the same department was sometimes poor. This was reported to be an issue for researchers and policy makers alike.

Officials also identified some analysts who saw themselves as sitting outside the policy process, which sometimes created a tension between policy experts and policy analysts. More generally, some policy makers identified a reluctance among analysts to share research across departments before it was in the public domain.

### Facilitators to a culture of evidence use

These interviews happened at a time when there has been a good deal of structural change within departments, with many traditionally centralised analytical functions becoming 'bedded out' into or 'co-located' besides policy divisions. Officials described a range of

different models, from locating individual analysts within a policy team, to the bedding out of analytical units within policy directorates (see Campbell, 2006 for a discussion of the structure of analytical support within departments). Regardless of the model described, the officials interviewed were virtually unanimous in their support for these moves, although it is important to note that no empirical evaluation on the effectiveness of structural change has been conducted to date. The benefits of ‘bedding out’ were seen to be:

- team members were able to develop a better appreciation of each other’s perspectives and skills
- earlier involvement of analysts in policy development and strategy formation
- analytical colleagues being more aware of the various pressures involved in policy making, and more proactive in identifying, and answering, the evidence needs of policy colleagues
- policy makers becoming more likely to think instinctively about research, and to ask routine questions about the evidence base
- analysts and policy makers having shared goals.

Although officials did acknowledge a number of potential risks associated with co-location (although they did not feel that these had materialised to any significant degree at the time of the interviews):

- there was a danger that having too close an engagement with the policy process could erode the professional integrity and standards of analytical specialists
- bedding out could deplete a department’s core research function, resulting in the capacity for analysts to follow up important, longer term research independently of immediate policy concerns being compromised.

## Learning

Timetabling of policy in relation to research is a perennial issue. Joint horizon scanning for emerging issues by analytical and policy colleagues, and effective monitoring of existing data can ensure that timely evidence can be made available on key themes at relatively short notice. Setting longer-term joint analytical and policy goals can also aid the collection of appropriate and robust evidence.

In addition, departmental analysts need to be able to effectively search and gather existing evidence on a subject – knowledge management – in a relatively short time to feed into the policy making timetable, perhaps by using techniques such as Rapid Evidence Assessments. The relevance of the evidence to a particular policy must be made explicit.

As recommended in the previous chapter, analysts should also be able to harness evidence about proposed, ongoing and completed studies from across government to ensure a joined-up evidence base across government and the most appropriate, timely response to any issue.

Analysts must be clear about their role as knowledge brokers and knowledge translators and communicate with policy makers clearly in a way that is directly relevant.

Close communication between policy makers to clarify evidence needs, timetables, outputs, outcomes and what will be considered 'good enough' is essential to ensure relevant analysis will be available and will deliver what is needed when it is needed. This should be seen as an ongoing task, not just one to be undertaken at the start of a project.

Evidence from analytical work should be made available throughout the process, providing policy makers with emerging evidence with caveats when it can inform a decision, rather than delaying till work is completed but decisions have already been made. Building ongoing reporting into all analytical work should form part of all analysts training and continuous professional development.

Ministerial buy-in for analytical work, especially long-term analytical work is important to help ensure appropriate use is made of the work.

It is essential that all evidence comes in an easily digestible form, with short summaries and succinct descriptions of the findings written specifically for the intended audience. Reports should be written in a clear and accessible way, with no unnecessary jargon or academic language. Thought should be given to the most effective way of communicating with key audiences; it might be via presentations/video/booklet etc. Analytical reports for policy makers should contextualise the findings, setting out what is already known in the field to give a better balance of the evidence.

Thought should be given to improving the quality of public debate when disseminating findings and making data available. Equally, work on improving the understanding of the components of good quality analytical work and the relative merits of different types of technique would be beneficial to improve the quality of public debate.

Analysts must be aware of the faith that can be put in them by their policy colleagues and ensure they confidently evaluate the quality and robustness of the evidence they present. Again, training could support this.

As discussed in 'Adding It Up', training for both policy makers and analysts is important. If the 'analysis and use of evidence' core competency in PSG is to be properly embedded it needs to be supported by effective training. Policy makers should develop an awareness of the analytical resources available to them and an understanding of how and when they can be most effectively used. Analysts need to be equipped with skills to fully engage in the policy process, so that they are able to provide clear and timely research-based advice, particularly where evidence is incomplete or inconclusive. They need to be able to communicate the risks of using such data in decision making and to be confident engaging in the creative aspects of policy development.

All policy development should be risk managed and evidence should play a key role in this. Evidence can help inform the assessment of the risk and the likelihood of it occurring. Conversely, absence of robust evidence to inform decision making can heighten the risk of policy failure.

# 5

## Conclusion and learning points

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Government initiatives which have addressed effective policy making and the effective use of evidence have clearly made a difference to the thinking of many policy makers, with evidence-based policy a term that can be clearly understood and articulated. This is not to say it is a new thing; some policy makers stated that the terminology and insistence on being able to demonstrate that the policy was evidence-based was the only new thing; finding out all that is known on a subject before moving forward is something that was always a feature of good policy making.

Despite the numerous initiatives in this area, there remained mixed views on the practicality and utility of evidence-based policy, and work on why and how evidence can improve policy making continues to be necessary. Examples were given of evidence feeding into the policy making process in a number of ways; helping conceive the idea; developing and implementing it, and defending and justifying it. The 'Good Examples' (Campbell et al, in press) study to be published to complement this current report looks into the factors associated with the effective use of evidence in policy in more detail.

### Taking things forward

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The 'Adding It Up' report in 2000 looked at the part evidence can play in more effective policy making and explored the barriers to rigorous analysis being routinely demanded and delivered. It demanded:

- leadership from Ministers and senior officials
- openness for analysts and policy makers
- better planning to match policy needs and analytical provision
- spreading best practice across departments and professions
- innovative solutions to recruit and retain the best people.

Examples of all these issues were given in the current research, for example strong support for analysis at the most senior level, but it was also clear that not all the issues had been resolved in all departments. This suggests that more needs to be done to continue ensuring that the best quality evidence is fed into policy making and delivery.

There are a number of initiatives now in place to tackle impediments to better policy making:

- The Professional Skills for Government (PSG) agenda<sup>5</sup> has 'Analysis and Use of Evidence' as one of its 4 core skills for all civil servants (there are 2 additional core skills for those in the senior civil service), and is establishing a series of training sessions to ensure all are able to demonstrate this skill.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://psg.civilservice.gov.uk/content.asp?id=1>

- As part of the development of the PSG agenda, there is now a Head of Profession for Policy Making, Sir Brian Bender. Sir Brian Bender has been working with policy champions from across government to promote improvements in line with the policy delivery framework in PSG.
- The Co-ordinating Research and Analysis Group (CRAG) has been merged with the Permanent Secretary Management Group (PSMG)'s Strategy Sub-Group. This new Strategy Sub-Group was established to ensure that decisions about long-term strategic policy are co-ordinated with strategic analysis and analytical priorities and resources in government are effectively coordinated and targeted, both between different analytical groups and between departments.
- There are now strong leaders in place for all the analytical disciplines: a National Statistician, Chief Social Researcher, Chief Government Economist, Chief Operational Researcher. They all lead their profession in government, and are working together, through the Strategy Sub-Group, and on a day-to-day basis, to ensure that their work is joined-up. They are supported within departments by Heads of Profession for each discipline, and there is soon to be a champion in Analysis and Use of Evidence within each department.

Continuous learning is of critical importance; all those involved in policy making and delivery, be they policy officials or analysts, need to continue striving towards better integrating their different skills and perspectives. Learning when and when not to use analytical support, and what can and cannot be answered through analysis is a crucial part of this.

### Continuing learning

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Learning points have been summarised at the end of each section, but the learning falls on different people: senior management; those responsible for frontline policy and delivery; and all government analysts. Policy makers were asked at the end of each interview or discussion group what they thought the most important things for both policy makers and analysts to learn and do to ensure better and more joined-up analysis and policy.

#### Policy makers' skills

- they did not know enough about the research process to enable them to use research evidence with confidence
- 'a little knowledge was a dangerous thing'; knowing what they could do for themselves and when to ask for help was a skill in itself
- that they did not need to acquire detailed specialist skills themselves; instead, many identified a need for policy makers to be given a broader overview of approaches to evidence gathering, analysis, available resources and skills in working with analysts
- a better understanding of the potential role of evidence in policy development and delivery, particularly in the early stages

- a better understanding of the analytic resources available both within and beyond the department and how to access and use them
- direct involvement in the specification and steering of research projects to ensure that the research would answer the questions they needed answering when they needed them answered.

This very much reflects the core skills of 'Analysis and Use of Evidence' in the PSG initiative.

### **Analysts' skills**

- analysts would benefit from a more detailed knowledge of specific policies, especially those outside their immediate field, and of the broader political context of their work
- they would also benefit from a stronger awareness of the political pressures on policy makers, and the different elements of policy the making and delivery process, including new legislation
- the provision of evidence expert advice on the reliability of research reports and statistics was valued
- as was knowledge brokering by identifying external research evidence and making it more accessible to policy makers
- analysts were also thought to provide a useful link to external expertise.

Again these views support the broad thrust of the PSG initiative and many of the findings highlighted in this report.

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