

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

SEMINAR SERIES



What counts as 'evidence'? The complexities of providing evidence to inform public policy

Dr. Sally Shortall, Queen's University Belfast s.shortall@qub.ac.uk

1. What is evidence-based policy?

There is nothing new about the idea that policy and practice should be informed by the best available evidence. Nonetheless, the current high profile emphasis on using evidence-based policies can be traced back to the Blair administrations of 1997 and 2001. Reforming and modernising the machinery of government was a central part of their agenda and this emphasised a commitment to evidence-based policy. The *Modernising Government White Paper* (Cabinet Office, 1999) stated that government policy must be evidence-based, properly evaluated and based on best practice. The Economic and Social Council established a Centre for Evidence-Based Policy and Practice in 2001. Evidence-based policy was defined as an approach that helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes, and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation.

The drive for evidence based policy started earlier with medicine. The Cochrane Collaboration formed in the early 1990s, is dedicated to ensuring that patients, doctors and researchers have access to unbiased information about the effectiveness of healthcare interventions, across the world. It aims to provide this information through 'systematic reviews'. A systematic review is a literature review focused on a research question that tries to identify, appraise, select and synthesize all high quality research evidence relevant to that question.

In theory this idea of evidence-based policy sounds logical and commendable. Who could possibly be *against* the idea of evidence-based policy? However when we start to unpack the idea of evidence-based policy, it becomes much more complex very quickly. In its simplest form, it presumes there is an absolute truth out there, and when we find it, there is a straight path from that truth to making the best policy. This briefing paper considers the complexities of the policy making process, the complexities of 'evidence', and suggests some ways that the link between evidence and policy might be enhanced.

1.1 The complexities of the policy making process

The text book approach to decision making presumes that there are distinct and logical stages through which the policy-making process progresses. These are problem identification, consideration of available options, informed by an evidence-base provided by objective experts, consultation, decision-making and finally implementation. This suggests that policy making is a rational process, value-free and the personal beliefs of policy makers and other actors are irrelevant. The reality is very different.

Policy making occurs in a context of values, ideology and political beliefs. Political ideology is a key driver of policy making and it is the basis on which political parties are elected. It is the foundation of democratic societies, and there can be a tension between sound empirical evidence and values, ideology and beliefs.

There is also the fact that ministers are elected representatives and one of their objectives is to be re-elected. How palatable policies are with the electorate is an important factor determining what policies are developed, regardless of sound evidence. Take for example the relationship between increased numbers of police and reduced crime. There is no evidence to suggest that there is a relationship, but public perception is that increased police presence reduces crime, so it is tantamount to political suicide for a politician to reduce or advocate reduction of the number of police officersⁱ.

All policy making is constrained by available and often declining resources. This means that judgements need to be made about policy priorities, and the cost-effectiveness of different policies and programmes. This introduces the experience, expertise and judgement of civil servants. The expertise of civil servants is crucial to the development of policy. Civil servants

will have experience of what has worked in the past and the most palatable way to interpret evidence to design policy.

Within the civil service, civil servants move between policy areas. In other words, people are promoted to and make sideways moves to different policy areas. Civil servants are not specialists on a particular topic as such, they are promoted on the basis of their competence in understanding how the civil service functions and their competence to solve problems within it and design policy.

It is also the case that the membership of Assembly Committees changes over time. MLAs are often required to sit on a number of Assembly committees, not all of which will be dealing with subjects within their primary areas of interest. Similarly committee clerks rotate committee assignments, and appointment is not based on specialist subject knowledge but competence to clerk an Assembly committee.

In other words, civil servants, Assembly Clerks and Members of the Legislative Assembly cannot be expected to have specialist knowledge of the background to specific policies, although Members, civil servants and Assembly officials can develop such expertise over time. However, traditional views of pressing policy priorities tend to be inherited. Accepted ideas of priorities become embedded in organisations over time, and policy priorities are presumed and not necessarily based on evidence. Policy priorities that become embedded tend to be ones that are favourable with the public, stakeholder groups and politicians, and there may be no appetite for evidence that threatens a system that currently works well.

The policy making process is shaped by power struggles between different interest and lobby groups trying to influence policy. Well mobilised lobby groups can be far more effective in shaping policy directions than robust evidence.

The reality of the policy making process is that it is extremely complex and involves a range of different people with different agendas. Evidence is one component in that process. It makes far more sense to speak of evidence-informed policy rather than evidence-based policy.

1.2 The complexities of evidence

There are many sources of evidence and knowledge that might inform policy. These include academic research, government statistics, government evaluations of existing policy initiatives, engagement and consultation with stakeholders, lobby groups, the general public, the experience and judgement of civil servants, and the views and reports of Assembly Committees.

The reality is that not only might each of these sources of evidence contradict each other, but they are contradictory within each category. Academic scientific evidence is often disputed and inconclusive. Take for example research on genetically modified crops, climate change or whether badgers spread tuberculosis. Disputes such as these do not mean the research is unsound, but how science is constructed and understood is often a matter of interpretation. Of course, research evidence can be flawed and unsound. Research evidence is not necessarily neutral, depending on how it was funded and the ideological stance of the researchers. Nor is evidence necessarily generated to inform policy.

Partly linked to some public disputes between scientists and the questioning by the public of scientific 'truth' claims, has come a growing demand for, and commitment to, greater public participation in scientific decision making and policy formulationⁱⁱ. Moving beyond technical expertise to include experiential expertise is seen to enhance political legitimacy. Stakeholders contribute essential expert and experiential knowledge about complex policies and programmes. These groups often have detailed knowledge of how policies roll out in practice and can contribute in-depth knowledge of their different impact in particular situations. In order to understand public policy, engagement with those who formulate the policy, who carry it out, and who experience its effects, becomes a crucial component of adequate explanation. However, stakeholders are often interest groups and present partial or biased evidence to advance their position.

1.3 Difficulties that arise

Over the last two decades a number of structures have been established to advise government on policy, including think tanks, research advisory panels, special academic advisors and commissioned research. Much of this has been very useful and effective. It has also highlighted problems that arise in attempts at knowledge exchange.

The first obvious difficulty from a policy perspective is where to start. Contrary to the idea that we do not have sufficient evidence, we have a glut of evidence for many policy questions, and much of it is inconclusive and contradictory. How do policy makers judge the value of one type of research evidence against another? How do you balance differences between research evidence and the evidence provided by stakeholders and lobby groups?

For academics, their research is not necessarily motivated by a desire to inform policy and trying to use research conducted for a different purpose in policy formation can prove difficult. Many academics are interested in, and committed to understanding *how* policy priorities come to be the chosen ones, and what power struggles they represent.

Another issue is that evidence changes over time. Research findings can revise accepted beliefs; take for example, whether it is better for babies to sleep on their backs. Similarly the social context within which policy is formulated changes.

2. Moving forward

While recent attempts to generate evidence-based policies have demonstrated the complexities of such an endeavor, they have also generated better and more effective policies. When this has happened, it leads to a positive, open relationship between evidence providers and policy makers. Next we examine what we have learnt about how to ensure best practice.

2.1 Some examples of best practice from a policy perspective:

- Be clear about the policy question for which you require evidence. Do you want evidence to help identify future policy priorities? Or do you want evidence to help you better deliver an existing policy but the delivery of that policy is not itself in question?
- What type of evidence do you want? Do you want a systematic review of existing evidence? Do you want new research? Do you want a range of evidence, including consultations, and stakeholder focus groups? Do you only want the latter?
- Be very clear about your time frame and what you want in a given time. Do you want a short 'rapid response'?

- Be very clear about the way in which you want evidence presented. It is best to provide a template, specifying for example, the maximum length of the document, whether you want a short summary, the use of bullet points, recommendations or a number of scenarios.
- Because the majority of civil servants are not subject specialists it is best to embed academic expertise into the policy making process through including academics on stakeholder groups, research management boards and in the general infrastructure of the civil service. That way a certain expertise is maintained and developed, even though civil servants may move throughout the civil service.
- What formal mechanisms might help us enhance this relationship? How can we make sure we have enabling structures that allow policy makers to identify the academic expertise they need quickly, and academics to provide evidence within the time frame needed by policy makers? One possibility is to provide the Executive/ Assembly/ government departments with a register of our expertise which allows them identify the expertise they need quickly. A first step could be to formally organize this register around the key policy areas within the Programme for Government which would facilitate the identification of relevant academics/ consultants within each policy area and a means of accessing them quickly through the establishment of a set daily rate, and where possible avoiding any delays associated with protracted procurement processes. Such a register could be regularly advertised, updated and expanded to encompass a wider range of expertise outside the narrow priorities identified in the current Programme for Government.

2.2 Some examples of best practice from an academic perspective:

- It is crucial to make research findings accessible to a non-academic audience.
- Academics need to be aware of the tensions within policy formation. Research evidence is only one component in the process and much of the evidence provided may not be used for political or financial reasons.
- The competent civil servant is not necessarily a subject specialist and this should be borne in mind when delivering evidence.

- Many people outside the university hold the view that academics are locked in ‘ivory towers’ and do not engage with the real worldⁱⁱⁱ Academics must disseminate and communicate their work widely and to different audiences, and ensure the needs of their audiences are met. Routinely provide a one page summary of ongoing research to relevant policy makers.

3. Conclusions

It is a positive environment in which to develop relationships between policy makers and academics in Northern Ireland. With a solid devolved government and Assembly, there is an increasing appetite to ensure policy is evidence-informed as far as possible. Academics are keen to demonstrate that their research has use-value and is useable. The key in moving forward is to develop open structures and to find a space to develop and foster relationships. Hopefully this seminar series will be the first step in such a direction.

Biography: Dr. Sally Shortall is a Reader in Sociology in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social work. Her areas of interest include agriculture, rural development, farm families, the role of women on farms, community development, social inclusion, and evidence-based policy. She has acted or is currently acting in an advisory capacity to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Northern Ireland, Defra, The Food Standards Agency, The Scottish Government, The European Parliament, The European Commission and the FAO. She has just been appointed an advisor to the OECD on urban-rural inter-linkages.

ⁱ Monaghan, M. (2009) The complexity of evidence: reflections on research utilisation in a heavily politicised policy area *Social Policy & Society* 9:1 pp. 1-12

ⁱⁱ Martin, B. And E. Richards (1995) Scientific knowledge, controversy, and public decision-making. Pp. 506-526 in Jasanoff, S., Markle, G., Peterson, C., and T. Pinch (eds.) *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* Newbury Park, CA: Sage

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2004/nov/16/highereducation.careers>