



Analysis for Policy: what policy makers want

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Background and Aims



- Increased focus on evidence based policy:
 - Government
 - Academic
- Little is known about the users' perspective:
 - Explore policy makers' understandings & experiences of EBP and evidence

Methods

- Small research team (n=5)
- Interviews and focus groups with 10 Whitehall departments and 2 Devolved Administrations
- Opportunistic purposive sample of policy makers (n=42)
- Between April and July 2005

Interview Topics

- Understanding of evidence based policy
- Other factors in the policy making process
- Types and sources of evidence
- **Barriers and enablers to using evidence**
- Incentives, skills and structures
- Key messages

What do policy makers want?



Research that is:

- Available
- Understandable
- Timely
- Relevant
- High Quality

Available

- Political and time pressures can lead to compromises on the use of evidence in making policy but
- Doesn't necessarily lead to poorer policy, rather, is associated with greater risk and the possibility of subsequent revision
- Pragmatism - using 'best available' or 'good enough' evidence

Available - Solutions

- We can't research everything and not in such short timescales but
- Could speed up mechanisms for dissemination:
 - Interim findings
 - Increase flexibility in government analysts' workloads
 - Improve inter-departmental sharing of data
- Improve research planning and knowledge management
- Involve researchers earlier in the policy process
- Piloting and reviewing existing literature

Understandable

- Linked to availability
 - Physical accessibility
 - Awareness of research
- Importance of presentation
 - Language use
 - Length of reports

Understandable - Solutions



- Provide 1 or 2 page summaries of report and include executive summary
- Write in a clear, focussed, well structured and accessible way
- Consider your audience – 1:3:25 principle*
- Improve dissemination:
 - Tailored
 - Part of contract
 - Alternative methods
- Closer collaboration between researchers, internal analysts and policy makers

Timely

- Urgency can prohibit new data collection
- Duration of research projects
- Lack of internal analysts' flexibility
- Acknowledgement of time-quality trade-off

Timely - Solutions

- Interim findings and ongoing feedback
- Adding in contingency resource to research contracts
- Using analysts' predictive tools to fill urgent gaps
- Piloting of policy initiatives
- 'Bedding out' of analysts into policy teams to aid closer collaboration and increase policy awareness
- Risk assessments
- Other forms of data collection, e.g. long term research, monitoring or Inspections

Relevant

- Key factor in utilisation
- Importance of clarity, focus and message
- Policy implications
- Internal analysts as knowledge translators
- Supportive vs. robust

Relevant - Solutions

- Enhance clarity by putting work into policy context
- Present message clearly, and then caveats
- No consensus between interviewees on need for researchers to identify policy implications of work
- Policy makers must play key role in specification, timing and management of research
- Improve dissemination to promote awareness

High Quality

- Good understanding of research standards
- Importance of source
- Reliance upon internal analytical review
- Trade-off between time and quality – ‘good enough’ evidence

High Quality - Solutions

- Ensure quality at commissioning stage, e.g. via peer review
- Ensure continuing dialogue to monitor progress and access to interim findings
- Ultimately, policy makers want timely evidence which is robust enough to be defensible
- Research that cannot stand up to scrutiny is of little value

Conclusion

- Closer collaboration
- Write clearly
- Consider your audience
- Be flexible and open
- Make it relevant

Implications for policy makers

- Become intelligent users of research
- Be clearer in demands from researchers
- Involve researchers earlier

Current progress & future work



- Draft report completed
- Further interviews planned
- Case studies of effective use of evidence in policy making
- In-depth study of use of social research in several Government departments
- **Register on GSR website for notification of publication**