Communicating evidence to policy makers – what works best?

Contents

Executive summary

Evidence and information can be communicated to policy makers through many different means – from briefing papers to social media – but which of these are most effective in getting their attention? And what features and formats make an information source most useful, from a policy making perspective?

The study 'Communicating evidence to policy makers – what works best?' aimed to develop a best practice guide based on how policy makers actually look for and use evidence-based information. Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered using an online survey and in-depth case studies, both representing a broad cross-section of policy maker roles in the UK. From these, the most frequently-used information sources were identified, alongside common features of 'useful' evidence, and frequent challenges policy makers encounter when searching for relevant information.

Key findings:

- 'Traditional media' and internet searches are dominant information sources for policy makers. Therefore, issuing press releases, publishing articles on websites, and sharing information on social media can all count towards policy engagement.

- Policy makers are typically both highly time-pressured and constantly bombarded with information. This makes it essential that information aimed at policy audiences is concise and easy to read, with the key points upfront and the relevance immediately clear.

- It is worth investing time to ensure information is tailored to policy makers' concerns, rather than simply regurgitating information published for other audiences. Explain upfront or include a cover note to say why the subject is timely and relevant to current policy.

- It is important to be aware that policy makers have to balance many different competing factors. Recommendations should be framed within a realistic assessment of the wider context, including economic, social, and political impacts.

- Accessibility is a major challenge for policy makers seeking evidence-based information. Hiding information behind paywalls and subscriptions will massively reduce the likelihood that it is read.

- Policy makers highly value having the opportunity to speak with experts directly. Proactively including contact details and offering opportunities for engagement can make your work stand out.

- Universities are seen as a credible source of information by policy makers – but they aren't overly visible.

- Targeting information only at MPs (Members of Parliament) and Peers (Members of the House of Lords) can limit your impact. The high demands on these groups limit their capacity to seek out and review evidence for themselves. This makes it critical to engage with the wider networks that feed them information, including Select Committees, Government Department staff, and Parliamentary Research Services.

Introduction

The decisions made by policy makers have a great impact on our societies and daily lives - from funding health and social care, to fighting climate change and planning vital infrastructure. Ideally, new policies and legislation should be informed by the best available evidence and research. But very little is known about the sources policy makers use to find evidence about topical issues.

This poses a challenge for communications professionals working at 'knowledge-broker' organisations, such as universities, research institutes and Thinktanks. When you have information that is relevant to a policy issue, how can this be best communicated to those in positions of influence? A social media strategy? Direct correspondence with MPs? Engaging with Parliamentary services? When time and resources are limited for policy engagement, it may be necessary to focus and be strategic – but which is the most effective option?

Even when evidence reaches the attention of policy makers, key messages can be lost if they are not tailored to the audience's needs. Policy makers typically have excessive demands on their time and attention, so information that does not appear useful risks being discarded. So how should information be presented to avoid this from happening?

This research project sought to develop a 'best practice guide' for communicating evidence to policy makers, based on how policy makers find and use information.

Research aims:

- Establish the main sources policy makers use to access up-to-date evidence on topical issues.

- Outline common features of the information sources favoured by policy makers.

- Identify underused or new opportunities to communicate evidence effectively to policy makers.

Research objectives:

- Design and distribute an online survey, targeting a broad range of policy maker roles and geographical regions. Analyse the survey responses and identify common themes.

- Develop a series of case studies based on one-to-one interviews with policy makers to explore in depth the sources of evidence-based information they use, and what formats are most useful to them.

How can evidence be communicated to policy makers?

There are many different channels through which evidence and information may reach policy makers, which can make it difficult for those planning a policy engagement strategy to know where to focus time and resources. In reality, the most effective method will probably differ depending on the topic, the specific policy audience, Parliamentary timescales, current events, etc. Individual policy makers are also likely to use a range of different sources to find relevant information.[i]

Dedicated Parliamentary research resources include the Libraries of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), and devolved services such as the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) and Senedd Research. In addition, The What Works Network (established in 2013) functions as a group of 13 independent research centres to help policymakers, commissioners, and practitioners to access independently-assessed evidence for decision-making. However, it is not clear whether these resources are highly used by all policy makers. Previous surveys have found, for instance, that between a quarter to a third of MPs are unaware of POST.[i] Consequently, it is likely that policy makers may often rely instead on more familiar and immediate sources when searching for information, such as internet searches, website content, news outlets, and the media. More detailed and focused sources may include industry reports, official statistics, scientific journals, commissioned research, and publications from Thinktanks, NGOs, and campaign groups.

With social media now rivalling traditional news outlets, this is also likely to be a dominant information source for policy makers. For instance, in 2020, almost 90% of MPs had a Twitter/X account and around 82% had a Facebook page.[ii] Many Government Departments and Select Committees have dedicated social media channels, and there is some evidence that Parliamentary attention tracks public discussion of news on social media.[iii] More broadly, key messages may also be communicated to policy makers via sources such as constituent letters, Parliamentary petitions, email newsletters, and informal conversations. Even popular culture can be a means of communicating messages: former Secretary of State for Health, Matt Hancock, for instance, admitted that his policies on the COVID-19 vaccine had been heavily influenced by the film Contagion.[iv]

Nevertheless, information may reach the attention of policy makers but unless it can be readily understood and used in policy processes, it risks going unread and unnoticed. Policy makers typically work in fast-paced environments, are highly time-poor, and are bombarded with information from all directions. In addition, the typically fast turnover of both roles and work projects means that policy makers often lack in-depth expertise on specific subjects.[v, vi, vii] As a result, information sources that are not readily adaptable for policy making processes are unlikely to gain traction.

These challenges, both in making policy makers aware of information and tailoring it to their needs, have caused many to conclude that there is great scope to improve the use of evidence in policy making.[viii, ix] As Davies and Nutley conclude in *What works?: Evidence-based policy and practice in public services*, "It appears to take an extra-ordinary set of circumstances for research to influence policy decisions directly."[x]

This research project aimed to generate quantitative and qualitative data to better understand how policy makers actually look for and use evidence-based information, and how this can be best tailored to meet their needs.

i   POST Research Study: The work and impact of POST. September 2018.

ii Ward, S. and McLoughlin, L., 2020. Turds, traitors and tossers: the abuse of UK MPs via Twitter. The Journal of Legislative Studies, 26(1), pp.47-73.

iii Bollenbacher, J., Loynes, N. and Bryden, J., 2022. Does United Kingdom parliamentary attention follow social media posts?. EPJ Data Science, 11(1), p.51.

iv Matt Hancock's vaccine rollout was inspired by Contagion. By Stuart Heritage. 04.02.2021 The Guardian

v   Research Impact and Legislatures, September 2018. UK Parliament: https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/research-impact-in-legislatures_final-2.pdf

vi The use of evidence in government and parliament. Colm Britchfield and Tom Sasse. Institute for Government, October 2020.

vii How to engage with policy makers: A guide for academics in the arts and humanities. UKRI and Institute for Government.

viii Scientific Advice, Risk and Evidence Based Policy Making. Seventh Report of Session 2005–06 Volume I. House of Commons Science and Technology Committee. October 2006.

ix Black, N. and Donald, A., 2001. Evidence based policy: proceed with care Commentary: research must be taken seriously. Bmj, 323(7307), pp.275-279.

x   Davies, H.T. and Nutley, S.M. eds., 2000. What works?: Evidence-based policy and practice in public services. Policy Press.

Research methods

The online survey was designed using JISC online surveys version 2. The questions included both multiple choice options and those requiring free-text answers. The questions were piloted on a small group of policy makers and refined based on their feedback. The scope of the questions included what information sources policy makers used to find evidence, the features they found most useful, the challenges they faced when searching for/using evidence, and audiences they would like to hear more from.

The survey was stated to be 'open to anyone in a policy-related role in the UK', including Members of Parliament/House of Lords, Government Department staff, Select Committee staff, Members of a devolved legislature, independent Government advisors, local government councillors or policy officers, and civil servants. As an incentive, all participants had the option of entering a prize draw to win one of three £100 shopping vouchers or a donation to a charity of their choice.

The survey was launched on 22 June 2023 and remained open until 14 November 2023. It was publicised via a range of policy-related organisations and partners, including the Oxford Policy Engagement Network (OPEN); the Working for an MP website; The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN); Yorkshire & Humber Policy Engagement & Research Network (Y-PERN); the Parliamentary Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU); and a range of All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs). Contacts at the KEU placed posters on noticeboards across the Parliamentary estate which advertised the survey and contained a link to the online site. Posters were also sent by mail to a range of Government Departments. The survey was also sent by direct email to a broad range of MPs, Lords and Members of Devolved legislatures (including the Senedd and Scottish Parliament).

The survey attracted 132 responses. Of these, the most common groups were Government Department Staff (Central or Devolved) (39%), Select Committee Staff (16%), Local Government Councillor or Policy Officer (16%), and Member of a devolved legislature (8%). The respondents also included Civil Servants (7.6%), researchers for Parliament / MPs (4%) and think tank staff (3%). No MPs or Lords completed the survey, although many sent responses through their offices stating that their time commitments prevented them from doing so.

Case study interviewees were chosen to reflect a broad range of policy maker roles and included a Councillor, a Member of the Scottish Parliament, a Parliamentary researcher for Senedd Cymru, a Director for a Government Department, a Member of the House of Lords, and a policy specialist for the Mayor of London. The participants were interviewed during video conferencing calls lasting between forty minutes and an hour. Case studies were drafted from the transcript of the call and sent to the interviewees to review and approve.

The research project was granted ethical approval by the University of Oxford's Medical Sciences Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (MS IDREC), reference R87393/RE001, in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

Case study: Lord Ralph Lucas, Member of the House of Lords

What is your role and how do you use evidence-based information?

As a Member of the House of Lords, my role is to scrutinise Parliamentary legislation and to support inquiries into topical issues through the Lords Select Committees that I serve on. Consequently, I consult evidence-based information as often as possible. I tend to use the House of Lords Library,[xi] since they have both the time and access to information to put together a useful collection of sources. Typically, this includes research papers and recent policy documents. But that process doesn't take me any further or necessarily lead to a conversation where I can explore the issue in more detail with an expert.

What are your main barriers to accessing good evidence-based information?

Most evidence doesn't give me the synoptic overview about an issue that I need. Typically, it will only present a single study or a specific aspect, or give just one side of the argument. Because I am not an academic, I don't have access to all the research papers and the entire debate on a topic. I can't judge the significance of an individual paper and put it into context. I want to know how it is regarded in the academic community, and whether it aligns with the evidence base as a whole or is an outlier.

Ideally, I would prefer to speak directly to an expert on the subject who can give me that understanding. So, **it is very helpful when evidence sources provide contact details** so you can follow-up with the authors directly.

Another barrier is when evidence is written in language other than plain English. For instance, a great deal of sociological research is written in an academic language I cannot parse, and I have no time to learn it and no one to teach me. So that just gets discarded because it is not useful.

What makes good evidence-based information?

Diagrams that summarise information are useful, but **I need to understand the methods underlying the work, in order to assess the truthfulness, validity, and scope of the research**. The limitations of the work need to be clear. These don't necessarily mean the research is bad, but they can indicate what the next stage should be. For instance, if you are investigating school absences, a study on 100 pupils at one particular school isn't enough to base policy on, although it could suggest something that should be looked at in 100 more schools.

Good evidence also acknowledges the opposing views on the subject, particularly for controversial topics. If you really want to influence policy, you have to appreciate the information environment that the Government will find themselves in and address this upfront. The easiest way to lose an argument with the Government is for them to know something that you don't. You have to remember that research itself isn't policy, and that many other things – such as economics, political acceptability, etc – have to be considered.

What advice would you give to researchers for engaging effectively with policy makers?

My most productive experiences have been the times when I was able to speak directly with the authors behind a piece of research. For instance, I have a good relationship with the Better Hiring Institute[xii] and through them can access a broad range of information and experiences from the sector. This was useful, for instance, when I wanted to understand the potential consequences of stopping online identification checks following the end of the COVID-19 lockdowns.

So, for those wishing to influence policy, it can be very valuable to invest in building trusted relationships with Lords and Civil Servants, whose roles aren't necessarily tied to Parliamentary cycles. My dream would be for a 'drop-in' system, where I could state the information I was looking for and it would then connect me with an expert who would be willing to speak with me. Universities could play a key role as knowledge brokers by offering policy makers opportunities to broaden their understanding. But often, the focus seems to be on presenting research under attention-grabbing headlines rather than dedicating time and space to have more nuanced conversations.

xi   https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/
xii https://www.betterhiringinstitute.co.uk/

Research findings: Where do policy makers get evidence-based information?

The online survey presented a list of different potential sources of evidence-based information and asked participants how often they used these: Nearly always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never, or Don't Know. Participants were also able to suggest other sources of information in a free-text option for 'other.' The survey then asked participants to choose which source they found most useful.

Google / search engine searches were the most common 'go-to' information sources: 79% used Google 'nearly always' or 'often'. Google / search engine searches was also the option which the highest number of participants (23%) selected as being most useful.

Other popular sources were:

- Reports from Thinktanks, NGOs, learned societies, campaign groups: 58% of respondents used these 'nearly always' or 'often', and the second highest proportion of respondents (21%) selected this option as being the most useful.

- Mainstream media / news outlets : 57% used these 'nearly always' or 'often'.

- Parliamentary services, such as the House of Lords / Commons Libraries: 42% used these 'nearly always' or 'often', and the third highest proportion of participants (14%) selected this option as being the most useful.

Other sources tended to be used more infrequently, rather than as the default option:

- Industry publications (e.g. *The Grocer*) (42% used these 'sometimes')

- Consultancies/commissioned research (37% used these 'sometimes')

- Blog posts (32% used these 'sometimes').

For some sources, how frequently they were used varied considerably. In these cases, a similar number of respondents (between 23-34%) used them 'often', 'sometimes' and 'rarely':

- Scientific journals (e.g. *Nature, The Lancet*)

- Websites for research institutes / universities

- Email / written correspondence (for instance, constituent letters)

- In-person meetings with academics / informal briefings.

Some sources were used rarely or not at all:

- What Works Centres (57.3% of respondents never used these)

- LinkedIn contacts and articles (46.7% of respondents never used this)

- YouTube videos (49.6% of respondents never used this)

- Social media (37% of respondents rarely used this; 28% never used this for evidence-based information).

Other sources that respondents listed under the 'other' option included data and internal documents from companies; Office for National Statistics (ONS) datasets, Google Scholar, industry events and conferences, non-scientific academic journals, update emails from organisations, user-focused groups, tailored briefings from civil servants, Party researchers, interactions with experts, podcasts, and local policy teams.

"Google directs me to journals, universities, learned societies etc etc. I don't have to know where a specific piece of evidence is stored."

"Parliamentary services usually provided a synthesis or what is already out there - I would usually look at their material first and then look elsewhere to fill gaps. Their work will provide a strong starting point."

"A google search will give a wide range of sources, the value / validity of which I will then assess myself."

Quotes from respondents for the online survey

Where do policy makers look for evidence-based information?

Legend: ■ Nearly always ■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never ■ Don't know
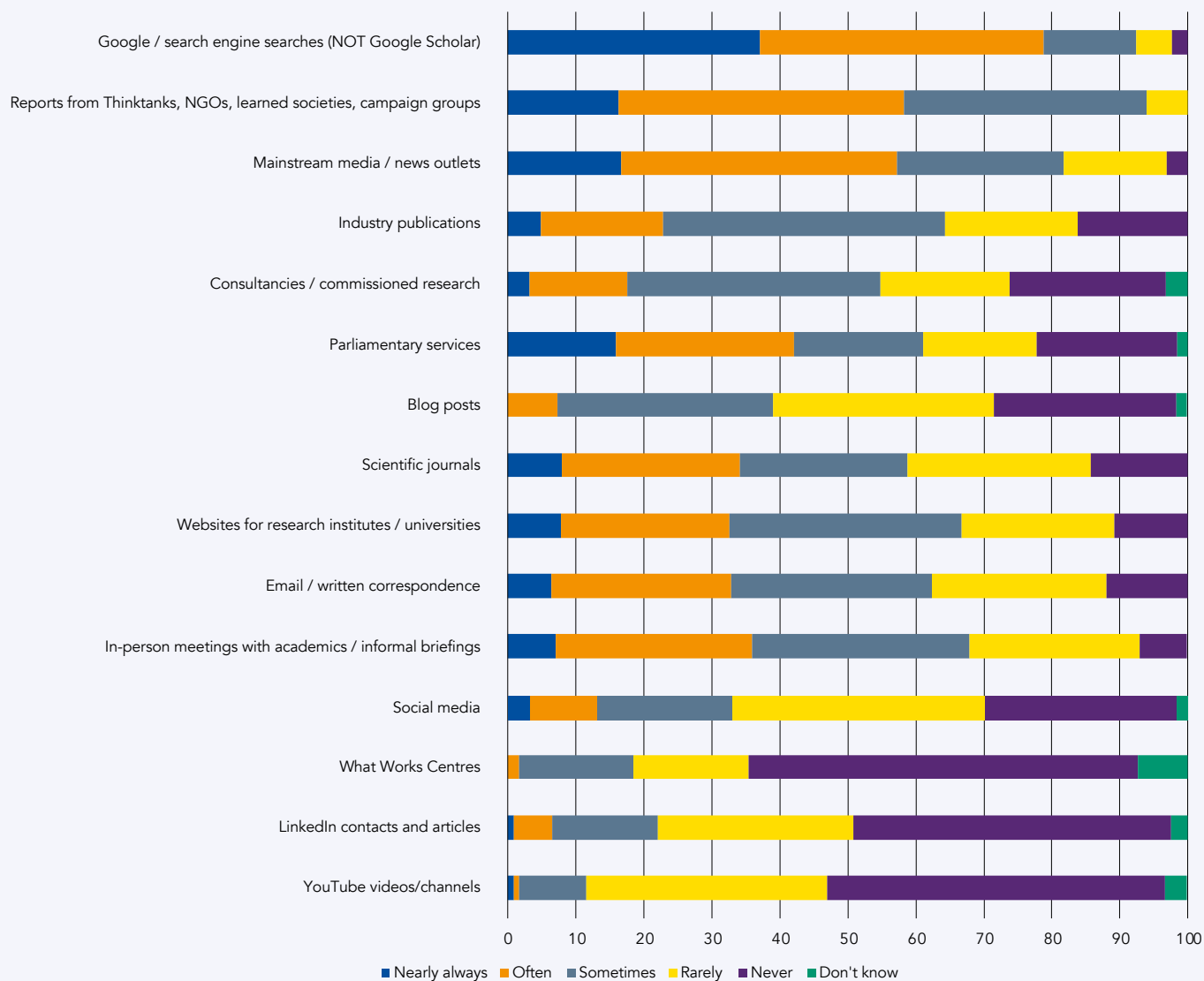
Based on 132 respondents

Case study - Julieta Cuneo, Night-Time Policy Specialist, Mayor of London

What is your role and how do you use evidence-based information?

My role is the Policy & Night Time Strategies lead for the Mayor of London, part of the Greater London Authority (GLA). I work as part of a small team to investigate issues relating to the night economy, shift workers, the nightlife sectors, and businesses that operate at night. This involves engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, for instance local authorities, the pub and nightlife sectors, supermarkets and night-time logistics companies.

There are many misconceptions about the night time sector, so it is crucial that our work is based on the best available evidence. To explore a particular issue, I will consult publications from a broad range of stakeholders, including industry bodies (e.g. UK Hospitality), research institutions (such as UCL's Faculty of the Built Environment), and international organisations, such as Eurocities[xiii] and the European Commission's Regional and Urban Policy Department[xiv]. I also check existing reports from our in-house intelligence unit, and primary data such as Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures.

What are your main barriers to accessing good evidence-based information?

Incomprehensible data. I like to see primary research data for myself but realistically, I cannot spend an entire day or week trying to understand what it shows. So, it is quite frustrating when the data I need is tied up in complicated spreadsheets that are difficult to navigate. Even if the dataset is accompanied by a visualisation or short article, it typically doesn't give the full picture or address my specific questions.

Similarly, **I don't have time to go through complicated sign-up processes and paywalls** to access a specific report or publication. It is a lot of work to do in advance, before I even know if the information will be useful.

Another common frustration is that **many sources will only look at one specific area** and not the bigger picture. For instance, some industry reports state 'Nightlife in London is declining because so many bars and pubs have closed', but non-alcoholic alternatives such as shisha bars have radically increased. So, I have to proactively think what pieces of the puzzle may be missing.

What makes good evidence-based information?

The most important thing is that the information is clear, accessible, and straight to the point, with the main messages upfront and easy to understand at a glance. Executive summaries are a must: three or so bullet points saying what the evidence is about, then the key findings or the most relevant data points. Simple language and short sentences really help with readability, as well as avoiding academic or ambiguous terms such as 'white collar workers' rather than 'highly paid professionals.'

Including the primary sources and references is also very important and something I actively look for. When a claim or statement is made, I always want to know where this has come from. If the primary sources aren't listed, I generally won't use the information. I also like to see upfront and transparent information about the author and who funded the work, so we can evaluate potential biases.

Graphics and charts can make information visually appealing, as long as they are not too complicated. **It is amazing when online reports include interactive features that allow you to play with the data**, for instance focusing the geographical range to a specific London Borough. I really appreciate that.

What advice would you give to researchers for engaging effectively with policy makers?

Don't just publish academic papers, but make the effort to foster relationships with policy makers. This is the most effective way to ensure your work has an impact over the long-term, as you can explain directly why your research is relevant. But this has the caveat that the collaboration should be mutually beneficial, and both sides need to recognise the differences between academia and policy in the ways of working, timescales and priorities. For instance, it can be hard for academics to appreciate how the political agenda can shift suddenly when they come from a more stable world.
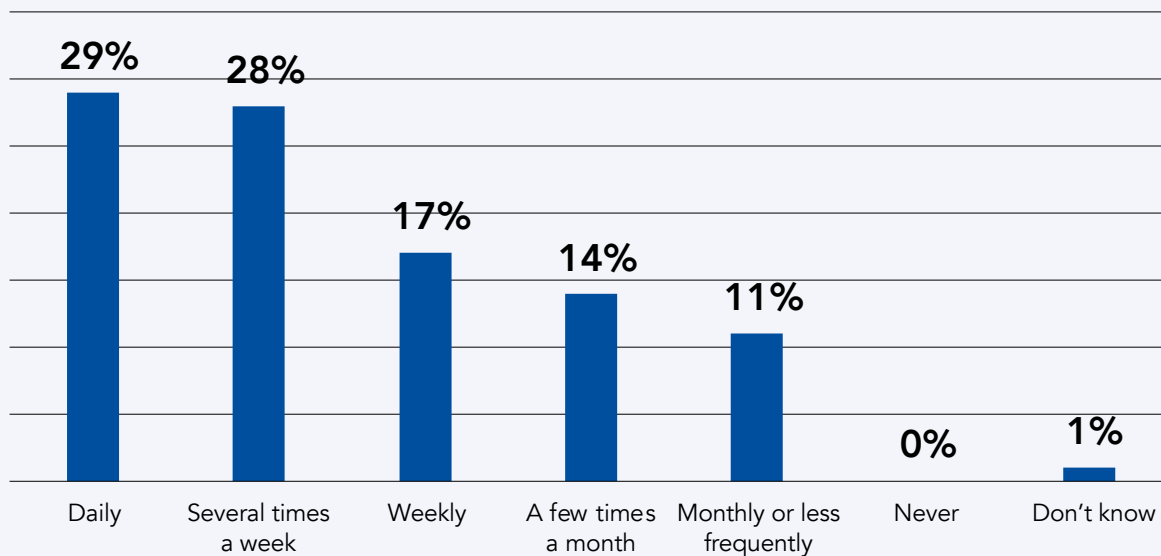
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xiii https://eurocities.eu/

xiv https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/regional-and-urban-policy_en

Communicating evidence to policy makers – what works best?

Research findings: How often do policy makers need to access evidence-based information, and for what reasons?

Most respondents (74%) needed to use evidence-based information at least weekly

How often do you need to access evidence-based information?

Daily	Several times a week	Weekly	A few times a month	Monthly or less frequently	Never	Don't know
29%	28%	17%	14%	11%	0%	1%

Based on 132 respondents

Participants were asked if they used evidence-based information to do the following (participants could select more than one option):

- To learn more about an area of research (selected by 74% of participants)
- To inform a new policy (selected by 74% of participants)
- To evaluate existing policies (selected by 70% of participants)
- To produce briefing papers or research summaries (selected by 69% of participants).

Other reasons that respondents listed under the 'other' option included preparing speeches, to brush up knowledge ahead of a committee or meeting, to evaluate the delivery of projects and programmes, for budget proposals, to inform legal decisions, and to evaluate messages from politically motivated actors.

"To share evidence with other policymakers to inform their work"

"To inform legal decisions"

"For speeches in the Senedd and to raise questions with Ministers or scrutinise decisions"

"To evaluate whether I'm being told the truth by politically motivated actors"

"To evaluate the delivery of projects and programmes, as well as policy"

"To communicate new / existing evidence to other policymakers"

"Prep for speech / brush up knowledge for committee or meeting"

Reasons given by survey respondents for having to access evidence-based information as part of their role.

Research findings: What features of information sources are most important to policy makers?

The percentage of survey respondents who stated that the feature was 'very important' or 'somewhat important':

Credibility/trustworthiness	99%
Timely and relevant	95%
Key statistics	94%
Executive summary	91%
Thoroughness and a range of sources included	89%
Written by an expert	88%
Easy to download/share	83%
Graphs and tables of data	82%

Infographics	43%
Glossary of key terms	40%
Bold colour/visually appealing	33%

Based on 132 survey respondents

Plain language (no jargon)	71%
References and footnotes	71%
Policy recommendations	71%
Brevity	70%
Peer reviewed	63%
Description of research methods	60%
Links to further information	59%
Examples of lived experience	55%

Case study: Sam Lister, Director General for Strategy and Operations at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, DCMS[xv] (previously the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport)

What is your role and how do you use evidence-based information?

I wear multiple hats in my role, which involves overseeing strategy, policy, planning, corporate services, and major projects for the Department. This includes aligning strategies across our 42 public bodies and ensuring taxpayers get maximum value for a range of services.

Accessing evidence-based information is integral to my work, although given the span of my responsibilities I tend to rely on our specialist teams and senior experts. They gather and integrate evidence into our decision-making processes, both in the initial phases of developing ideas to address a policy challenge, and in the ongoing monitoring of the Department's performance.

Much of this information is in-house data and metrics we collect on a continual basis. Our Department also has several senior advisory roles – including our Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Economist – who are linked to a wider network of analytical bodies and academic experts. We are also connected to many sector-specific stakeholder networks, such as the Creative Industries Council, which allows us access to roundtable views on topical issues.

What are your main barriers to accessing good evidence-based information?

My biggest challenge is a lack of time. We are always under pressure to generate solutions quickly, so when I read research it is generally to try and drive a solution. I can be assessing dozens of briefings every day, so it really helps when, in the case of a publication or paper, there is a clear executive summary that can guide me to the things that are worth investing more time in. It is an art and a great skill to distil large quantities of information into the most pertinent points.

Similarly, we never have as much time as we should for horizon-scanning and for strategically thinking about the long-term trends affecting our sector. So, research that assesses the ongoing economic, technological, and societal shifts and how they might impact our work is always incredibly helpful.

What makes good evidence-based information?

It should give me a rounded perspective that conveys the benefits, risks and any contextually relevant aspects concerning the particular issue at play. Sources that suggest innate bias or appear to have been commissioned to confirm a particular point of view won't reassure me that the information was rigorously assessed.

Good evidence is also contextualised and made relevant to citizens, societies and the wider world. It should use consistent measures that have a tangible value to the taxpayer and the public. For instance, discussions about the investment in digital transformation - always a hot topic - often have a bottom line relating to cost per transaction.

Diagrams and infographics are useful for presenting data, but they need to be value-adding and not there for the sake of prettifying the space. So, authors should really think about what they are trying to explain and articulate. Comparisons (for instance, before/after, longitudinal progress, trends) can be particularly useful to visualise the possible effect of interventions in complex processes.

Similarly, **real-life examples and pilot studies can be valuable when deployed well.** Our decision-making processes are often working to a very accelerated time frame. Case studies are very useful in helping to assess the different options and what might work in a particular context, and to bring to life the human impact.

Good sources also consider the questions that the evidence might pose; the questions that a group of experts around a table are bound to ask. If these include 'Did you consider this?' or 'Why is there a gap here?', these should be addressed upfront to sustain my confidence as a reader.

Presentation also matters: first impressions for the audience really count. If the format is clunky and slapdash, with fonts and images all over the place, this can be interpreted as a lack of rigour in the thinking that sits underneath it.

What advice would you give to researchers for engaging effectively with policy makers?

Remember that you have a number of different audiences, and these won't all be specialists. The relevant politicians could have deep expertise or they may only have a cursory knowledge of the area and need to begin from a more basic starting point. The best research communications tell a story – you are trying to take people with you on a journey. It should unpack the problem statement or area of inquiry in a methodical way that makes it easy to access and engaging to read.

Introduce yourself. If an academic has expertise in and a passion for a sector that a Government Department is responsible for, there are bound to be opportunities to link up with our officials, for instance via the DCMS College of Experts.[xvi]

xvi https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/dcms-college-of-experts

Research findings: What are the main challenges that policy makers encounter when searching for and using evidence-based information?

How often do you encounter the following barriers/challenges when accessing evidence-based information?

	Every time or almost every time	At least sometimes
Information lacks policy recommendations or practical suggestions	31%	83%
Information is behind a paywall or requires a subscription to access	31%	98%
Information is advocating and not impartial	27%	90%
Too lengthy/no summary	21%	89%
Source of evidence is not attributed	20%	80%
Information is not relevant to my area of policy	20%	88%
Information is outdated	19%	91%
Language is too technical	14%	68%

Based on 132 survey respondents

Analysis: How can evidence be most effectively communicated to policy makers?

The responses to the multiple-choice survey questions were assessed alongside the free-text answers to questions which included:

- Thinking of the source of evidence-based information you find most useful, what makes it particularly useful?

- Are there any other barriers or challenges you often encounter when accessing evidence-based information?

- Is there anything in particular that you wish more people / organisations would do when producing evidence-based information aimed at policy makers?

- Are there groups you would like to receive more evidence-based information from than you do at present?

In this way common themes were identified, to inform how evidence can be most effectively communicated.

Key findings:

1. **Visibility and traditional media have a role.**

   'Traditional media' and internet searches are dominant information source for policy makers. Therefore, issuing press releases, publishing articles on websites, and providing comments to the media can all count towards policy engagement.

2. **Get to the point – why is it relevant?**

   Policy makers are typically both highly time-pressured and constantly bombarded with information. This makes it essential that information aimed at policy audiences is concise and easy to read, with the key points upfront and the relevance immediately clear.

   'Lack of time' was a common theme when the survey respondents and case study interviewees were asked about the barriers they faced in accessing evidence-

based information. Executive summaries, a clear layout, and informative headings were said to be important to find the essential points quickly.

"As a former academic myself I'm sure there are many good papers around that contain relevant information, but I don't realistically have time to go searching through journals for them."

"I like paragraph numbers, contents pages and subheadings. If I am reading a report, it's in the gaps between meetings, late at night on my tablet or while travelling. I need to be able to skim and get to the bits I am interested in."

"I would like evidence be short, sweet and simple. We trawl through so much each and every single day the simpler the better."

"The problem is organisations bombard councillors with information and I end up just not bothering to look at it."

91% of respondents said that having an executive summary was somewhat or very important

3. **Information for policy makers needs to be tailored to policy makers.**

   It is worth investing time to ensure information is tailored to policy makers' concerns, rather than simply regurgitating information published for other audiences. Explain upfront or include a cover note to say why the subject is timely and relevant to current policy.

   When asked 'What do you wish people would do more of when writing for policy makers?' the most common response was for information to make clear policy recommendations. During the case studies, participants

said that information was frequently sent to them with no explanation as to why it was relevant to their area of policy.

"Put key policy recommendations, tangible recommendations to Government, up-front. Order in terms of priority."

"(Include) direct recommendations to policy not vague statement about how this should inform policy making... Do not finish a policy recommendation or conclusion with 'further research required'… why?… what would the return on investment be versus what we know currently being 'good enough'?"

"Providing a range of recommendations, or low-high ambition variants of recommendations."

"Less jargon and more concrete recommendations."

"Provide examples on how their recommendations can be implemented and do away with the generic sentence such as 'policy makers should do this or that."

"To be more willing to recast or reframe research (not alter it, simply to adjust the accompanying narrative) to better engage the policy maker e.g. talking about renewable energy in terms of reducing bills rather than CO2 reduction."

71% of participants said that 'having policy recommendations' was very or somewhat important

Information being timely/relevant to current policy was very or somewhat important to 95% of respondents

4. **Understand that (your) evidence is just one part of the picture.**

   It is important to be aware that policy makers have to balance many different competing factors. Recommendations should be framed within a realistic assessment of the wider context, including economic, social, and political impacts.

   Many of the survey participants said it was important for information to consider the broad context surrounding an issue, and to be aware of the trade-offs associated with different courses of action. This was also a common theme in the case studies.

   "(I would like to see) more acknowledgements of trade-offs / system effects. It's not hard to work out how to help any one group, the challenge is balancing competing priorities and policy areas. Decision makers have to think about everyone so being realistic about what you're asking for is useful."

   "Understand that scientific evidence and facts are not enough to sway a politician's opinion."

   "(I would like information to be) explicit with examples / recommendations considering fuller picture of what is achievable in the environment."

   Some of the case study participants said they would like individual publications (particularly of new research findings) to explain how they related to the wider evidence base, so they could assess the degree of consensus of the issue.

Case study: A Parliamentary Researcher for Senedd Cymru, the Welsh Parliament

What is your role and how do you use evidence-based information?

Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament) holds the Welsh Government to account. It scrutinises policies and budgets, and passes legislation while representing the interests of the people of Wales. Senedd Research supports this work by collating evidence into briefings and publications that are accessible for Members of the Senedd. We assist the Senedd Committees[xvii] with evidence and support to carry out in-depth inquiries into topical issues as well as scrutinise legislation. For example, this involves collating views from different interest groups and reviewing evidence submissions. We also offer a confidential enquiry service to Members of the Senedd, providing research to support any aspect of their role from constituent enquiries to Plenary debates.

A key part of my role is to consult a wide range of different stakeholders to understand the full breadth of perceptions about an issue. For example, if I was investigating an issue related to animal welfare, I would seek information from various groups, including animal welfare charities, farmers, local authorities and organisations such as the British Veterinary Association.

What are your main barriers to accessing good evidence-based information?

Peer-reviewed research is the gold standard, but Parliamentary Research services don't tend to have access to subscription-based academic journals, so this is often hidden behind a paywall. So, it is very useful if research is also summarised in a publicly-accessible format, such as *The Conversation*.[xviii] I would encourage researchers to consider this for policy impact.

What makes good evidence-based information?

It is important for Members to understand the consensus view and where the weight of public and other stakeholders' opinion lies. So, evidence sources that bring together many different viewpoints are particularly valuable to me. For example, Wales Environment Link[xix] represents a number of different environment-related NGOs, and The Food Policy Alliance Cymru[xx] brings together various organisations working in the Welsh food system.

We normally work to quite short timescales, and the Committee work is particularly time-pressured. So, **useful evidence sources have upfront summaries that concisely capture the key points**. We welcome evidence with a clear structure and a good flow, and informative headings

so you can scan through and see the main messages at a glance. A Committee consultation may receive between 50 and 100 written evidence submissions, so ensuring information is accessible really helps researchers and Members to understand key issues.

The language shouldn't be too wordy or technical, and academic jargon should be kept to a minimum. While Parliamentary researchers are experts in their policy area, they may not have academic expertise in a subject. Similarly avoiding jargon will make writing more accessible to Members.

It is important that the evidence is relevant to the policy in question, particularly if it is a response to a committee consultation on proposed policy or legislation. There should be tangible recommendations, keeping within the scope of the inquiry. For instance, if the consultation concerns proposed new legislation, the submission may suggest how specific parts of it could be improved. Referring directly to the terms of reference for the consultation and numbering paragraphs also helps. However, if there is a point of relevance outside of the terms of reference, there is no need to feel constrained if it is an important consideration.

References or links to the primary evidence should be included, so that it is clear what the conclusions are based on. I also like to check the methodology used: small sample sizes or study bias, for instance, are important to be aware of.

Infographics are definitely useful when they summarise information in an accessible way, and it's useful to include the exact figures for context. Increasingly, we are presenting information to Members in the form of infographics, and we may use a really good infographic directly if it summarises information well (and credit the source). So, it is useful if diagrams are easy to download and share.

What advice would you give to researchers for engaging effectively with policy makers?

My main advice is to become familiar with the style of briefings and reports that policy makers read, as these can be very different to academic writing. Before engaging with Members of the Senedd, for instance, I would suggest reading the Senedd briefing papers published online.[xxi]

Also, don't be afraid to get in touch. **If I had unlimited time and resources, I would engage with more academics directly and hold roundtable discussions**, but it takes time to find and make those contacts. So, it is very useful if academics introduce themselves and their area of expertise, as we can bear it in mind for future work. Our knowledge exchange website[xxii] includes information about how to engage.

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xvii   https://senedd.wales/senedd-business/committees/
xviii https://theconversation.com/uk
xix   https://waleslink.org/

xx   https://www.foodsensewales.org.uk/good-food-advocacy/food-policy-alliance-cymru/
xxi   https://research.senedd.wales/

5. Accessibility is all.

Accessibility is a major challenge for policy makers seeking evidence-based information. Hiding information behind paywalls and subscriptions will massively reduce the likelihood that it is read.

Among the survey participants, accessibility was the most common barrier to finding and using evidence-based information. This included information being hidden behind a paywall, not having access to the data underlying the information, and not knowing how to locate information produced by specific groups. The case study participants highlighted that Parliamentary and local Government services do not typically pay for subscriptions to non-open access journals, meaning that if information was not published elsewhere, they would be unlikely to use it.

Participants recommended that information was made accessible by removing paywalls, including downloadable PDF versions, and republishing academic information on high-profile public platforms (such as *The Conversation*).

"I don't mind paying for a single item, but some sources seem to require a full publication subscription and that is always a stopper, and nothing is paid over."

"The biggest (barrier) … is academic articles being behind a paywall."

83% of participants said that 'information being easy to download and share' was very or somewhat important

Accessibility also extended to the underlying evidence and data. Despite the need for information to be concise (see point 2), many participants said it was important to have the ability to do a 'deep dive' into the primary data if needed. Useful sources of information included links to underlying (open-access) data, references, links to additional sources of information, and details of the methods used.

"I find that industry publications speak to a level of expertise and knowledge that is appropriate for my role. They tend to refer directly to evidence, datasheets, etc., etc. etc., so can provide a useful starting point for further reading."

"(A useful information source) provides a good broad starting point for wider research and usually points to other sources."

"(A useful information source) often provides links to a range of other sources of information that I would not otherwise be aware of."

xxii https://research.senedd.wales/knowledge-exchange/

Case study: Paul Sweeney, Member of the Scottish Parliament

What is your role and how do you use evidence-based information?

I am a Member of the Scottish Parliament for Scottish Labour, representing Glasgow. Within my party, I am the Shadow Minister for Mental Health and Party Spokesperson on Veterans. I also oversee several subsidiary areas, such as dentistry. I use evidence-based information on a daily basis. Often this is provided by the Scottish Parliament Information Service,[xxiii] an in-house research and information service which provides helpful digests on a variety of topics. I also work with my staff to carry out online searches for information, which can include press articles, journal papers, stakeholder reports, and freedom of information requests.

What are your main barriers to accessing good evidence-based information?

The main challenge for me is having to concurrently understand a lot of different topics of a diverse nature, typically in a fast-paced, highly stressful, and time-constrained environment. This makes it critical that communications are timely, easy to understand, and usefully communicating information in the context of something I am actively working on, or a campaign issue coming up in a Parliamentary debate. But I am often sent big, thick reports which don't explain why they are relevant and where they fit into my program of work. These tend to get thrown into a pile without being looked at.

Another common problem for policy makers is information being presented in variable formats, so that it is difficult to make sense of. Ideally, there would be a single visual reference point, such as a dashboard with live metrics relating to performance management of a public service – similar to monitoring dashboards used in manufacturing.

Much of the data I use doesn't address the local context – my primary concern – and is restricted to the national or UK level. Often, I have to resort to undertaking original research myself. As an example, the UK Government refused to consider setting up any overdose prevention facilities in Scotland because there was no evidence they would be socially useful here. So, I helped to set up a pilot study in Glasgow which demonstrated that these can operate successfully in the UK without negative consequences for the community.

What makes good evidence-based information?

Good information is intuitive to read, and not based on long paragraphs of text that are hard to digest. The key headlines and critical points should be presented upfront so you can refer to information quickly, for instance, if I have the paper in my hand during a Parliamentary debate. But it should also be fully referenced so you have the capacity to drill down into the detail if you need to. It can be very helpful when information is provided in a consistent basis, for instance with standard templates.

It is important that correlation is not confused with causation. Just because two things track together, it doesn't necessarily mean they are linked. Evidence sources need to be rigorous in stating when an observed correlation requires further research to demonstrate causation, otherwise this can lead to inaccurate conclusions.

Governments can be very bureaucratic and risk-averse, **so sources that propose a specific policy should be rooted in well-evidenced precedents from other places where the solution is already working**. Clear benchmarking can give Governments a ready means to copy the elements of a solution that work well and adapt it to their context. An example could be the debate on whether advertising alcohol should be restricted to minimise alcohol-related harms. I would want to look at case studies from places in the process of doing this, such as Ireland, to understand the practicalities, benefits, and downsides.

What advice would you give to researchers for engaging effectively with policy makers?

Remember George Bernard Shaw's advice: "The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place." **Don't just send information passively to Parliamentarians to tick a policy engagement box.** Be strategic: ensure that evidence is timely and relevant to the specific policy maker's portfolio of work. Otherwise it is very unlikely to have an impact.

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xxiii https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/research-prepared-for-parliament

6. There is a high demand to engage with experts directly.

Policy makers highly value having the opportunity to speak with experts directly. Proactively including contact details and offering opportunities for engagement can make your work stand out.

When asked what makes an information source particularly useful, a common theme among the survey participants was the ability to contact the authors to ask for further information and clarification. Many also expressed a desire for organisations to provide opportunities to speak directly to academics, such as briefing events and round tables. This was also suggested by the case study participants.

"(Useful sources have the) opportunity to ask questions and clarification."

"(I would like organisations to) produce policy briefings but be open, able and willing to answer policy makers' questions and offer briefings."

"I'd like more offers from experts who want to run roundtables for example so I can sit in and better understand where the experts disagree. I'd like fewer policy papers and more chats."

7. Policy makers are eager to hear more from universities.

Universities are seen as a credible source of information by policy makers – but they aren't overly visible.

The survey participants showed an overwhelming desire to receive more information from universities and academics. Out of 78 responses to the free-text question 'Are there groups you would like to receive more evidence-based information from than you do at present? (for instance, Universities, charities, thinktanks)', 42 said 'Universities'. The next most frequent responses were 'Think tanks' and 'Charities' with 8 responses each. This supports previous evidence that Universities could be engaging more effectively with policy makers.[xxiv,xxv]

"In my experience, Select Committees tend to receive a lot of evidence from charities and thinktanks, but not always from academics and universities, which is a gap."

"More from universities. It's important that academia links up with the practical world and people's lived experiences. Useful to hear proposals coming from academia."

"Universities - their links with parliamentarians are still under-developed. I say this as a former MP, current MSP, with some experience in primary research."

Word cloud generated from survey responses to the question 'Are there groups you would like to receive more evidence-based information from than you do at present?' The size of the word indicates how frequently it was mentioned. Produced with www.freewordcloudgenerator.com

xxiv Kenny, Caroline, et al. The role of research in the UK Parliament. Vol. 1. Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2017.

xxv Walker, L., Pike, L., Chambers, C., Lawrence, N., Wood, M. and Durrant, H., 2019. Understanding and navigating the landscape of evidence-based policy: recommendations for improving academic-policy engagement.

8. Have a broad focus.

Targeting information only at MPs (Members of Parliament) and Peers (Members of the House of Lords) can limit your impact. The high demands on these groups limit their capacity to seek out and review evidence for themselves. This makes it critical to engage with the wider networks that feed them information, including Select Committees, Government Department staff, and Parliamentary Research Services.

No Members of Parliament or Lords completed the survey, despite this being sent to many directly. A few sent responses via their office staff, which stated that their time commitments prevented them from doing so. The senior policy makers interviewed for the case studies emphasised that they had little time to find and review evidence themselves, causing them to rely on their teams to collate information for them.

Consequently, policy engagement should have a broader approach than focusing only on those in senior positions. As some respondents noted, engaging with research staff and policy officers can be highly effective:

"An important link in the chain here is the role of evidence specialists within the civil service- as policy leads they are usually our first port of call to filter policy-relevant research for us."

"(I would like to see organisations) engage proactively with policy makers' research staff. MPs usually tell their researchers the information they want and leave it to the researcher to decide the sources within certain parameters. Engage with the research staff and they are more likely to use you as a source."

Parliamentary services, particularly the Libraries of the House of Commons and House of Lords, can also be important entry points.

42% of participants used Parliamentary services 'often' or 'nearly always' when searching for evidence-based information.

Putting it all together: Summary of top tips for communicating evidence to policy makers.

1 Executive summaries are a must. Remember, policy makers are highly time-pressed.

2 State the policy relevance upfront – why is your information important and timely?

3 Include the wider context of evidence, and acknowledge social, economic, and political factors.

4 Use metrics that have a direct relevance to citizens lives - these will concern policy makers more than academic units.

5 Keep it brief and easy-to-follow, with informative headings. Consider standardised templates to encourage a clear structure and brevity.

6 Case studies can be powerful arguments for proposed policies.

7 Provide contact details and the opportunity to engage with the authors directly.

8 Make it fully accessible – no paywalls, subscriptions, or required registrations.

9 Credibility and trustworthiness count. If your position is as an impartial, academic expert make this clear.

10 Provide links to any underlying data and research methods. If possible, make it easy to interact with the data, to tailor it to specific regions or constituencies.

11 Visibility counts: communicating evidence through the media, online content, and providing comments to the media can all help to reach policy makers' attention.

12 Don't just focus on senior policy makers – communicate to a wider audience, including Select Committees, Government Departments, and Parliamentary Research Services.

Case study: Tim Bearder, Councillor for Oxfordshire County Council and South Oxfordshire District Council

What is your role and how do you use evidence-based information?

I am a Cabinet Member for adult social care for Oxfordshire County Council and a South Oxford District Councillor for the ward of Forest Hill and Holton. I am constantly developing policy on both Councils, analysing the work of the Council offices, and representing the interests of the individuals in the wards I represent. All of this requires very detailed evidence-based analysis.

Most of the evidence I assess comes from the Council Offices, who compile reports with recommended actions. These are based on peer-reviewed literature, national statistics (e.g. ONS data), and metrics we measure ourselves. We rely on these reports being impartial, but there is always the chance that they have been skewed slightly to influence your opinion. I also have to be proactive and scrutinise these reports carefully, and think of what evidence may be missing.

Sometimes, we commission external organisations to undertake analyses for us. I also try to keep up with new developments in my areas of responsibility, for instance via trade journals and papers published by The County Councils Network.[xxvi]

What are your main barriers to accessing good evidence-based information?

The key issue is not having enough time; I always have such a huge volume of reports to read and information to take in, there is very limited time to explore additional sources beyond Council-provided information. So, **it is critical that information is well-presented and concise**, with a clear and honest summary that highlights the main issues covered.

Primary data are very important for my role, but I often find it difficult to work out key messages because **data are not provided in a way that is standardised**. For instance, a central aim of the Local Transport Plan is to reduce the number of car trips, but many information sources only provide data on journey miles.

What makes good evidence-based information?

A clear impact assessment which outlines the ramifications of a proposed change (or of doing nothing), across as broad a spectrum as possible. For example, if the evidence concerns a proposal to build a new road, I am interested not only in how traffic in the surrounding area will be affected, but also elsewhere in the county.

Impartiality is very important, and the use of credible sources. It is reassuring if the work has been reviewed by a reputable external organisation, such as the Environment Agency.

Statistics and numerical data that are well-explained and put into wider context. For instance, it is useless to set targets if there are no baseline figures that you can measure progress against. Similarly, if ambulance waiting times in Oxfordshire reduce by 20%, you need the national picture to understand if this is the result of a policy we introduced, or if it would have occurred anyway.

If the evidence is recommending that we introduce a specific policy, **it should be tailored to our local context, or provide a case study** so that we can assess how an idea might work here. As an example, when Oxfordshire Council proposed to introduce 20 mph zones across Oxford City centre, we assessed a case study from Wales. The clear benefits (such as traffic accidents reducing by a third) had a large influence on the proposal being passed.

What advice would you give to researchers for engaging effectively with policy makers?

Our work always benefits when we can engage with academics. For instance, we worked with the University of Oxford's Environmental Change Institute to develop the Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire, PAZCO, Report. But we could do much more; as a Council, we have a great deal of in-house data but very little is publicly available for external experts to analyse. So, **it would be very beneficial for researchers to approach us and let us know their areas of expertise**, so that we can look for opportunities to collaborate, and have more of a two-way flow of information.

Nevertheless, **academics need to appreciate that it is never a straightforward case of basing policy purely on research evidence:** there is always compromise. As an example, car-free developments would clearly help us to meet our Net Zero targets, but developers refuse to support these because they believe they are impossible to sell.

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xxvi https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/

Acknowledgements

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