Forum for Change

In Focus:
Building your evidence base

Why is it important?

Although evidence-based policy is not new, it has gained increased prominence under Labour governments since 1997. Based on the often cited mantra of 'what works is what matters', evidence-based policy has underpinned efforts to improve policy-making within government. The drive for this has been a commitment to ensuring public money is being used both efficiently and effectively, and above all, that public policy decisions are having their intended impact and improving people's lives.

Within this context, efforts to influence government and shape public policy have unsurprisingly come under increased pressure to be supported by relevant and reliable evidence. Effective campaigning and influencing by the voluntary and community sector must therefore itself be evidence-based.

Voluntary and community organisations have unique access to knowledge about their beneficiaries, the communities in which they work and the services they provide. This includes knowledge about the following:

- The impact of a particular policy on individuals, communities or groups
- Beneficiaries' views about a particular issue
- Beneficiaries' experiences of a public service
- Evaluations of their own services (some of which are publicly funded)
- Increased demand for particular services or demand for new types of support, eg debt advice
- New or increasing problems within a community, eg crime, racism, unemployment.

These forms of knowledge all comprise valuable evidence with which to develop campaigns and influence policy.

Voluntary and community organisations can use this knowledge – or evidence – in a number of ways throughout the policy process:

- **To inspire** – to generate support for an issue or action; raise new ideas or question old ones; create new ways of framing an issue
- **To inform** – to represent the views of others; share expertise and experience; put forward new approaches
- **To improve** – to add, correct or change policy issues; hold policy makers to account; evaluate and improve own activities; learn from each other.[2]

'In any policy area there is a great deal of critical evidence held in the minds of both front-line staff... and those to whom the policy is directed. Very often they will have a clearer idea than the policy makers about why a situation is as it is and why previous initiatives have failed.'

The Cabinet Office [1]

[1] *The Cabinet Office, 1999, Professional Policy Making For the Twenty First Century*

[2] *ODI, 2005, How Civil Society Organisations Use Evidence to Influence Policy Processes: A literature review*

In Focus: Building your evidence base

What does it involve?

Evidence-based policy can be understood as an approach that helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence at the heart of policy development and implementation.[3]

Evidence itself can take many forms and what constitutes evidence is often widely contested. However, the emphasis within evidence-based policy is on research-based evidence, meaning any systematic effort to increase knowledge.
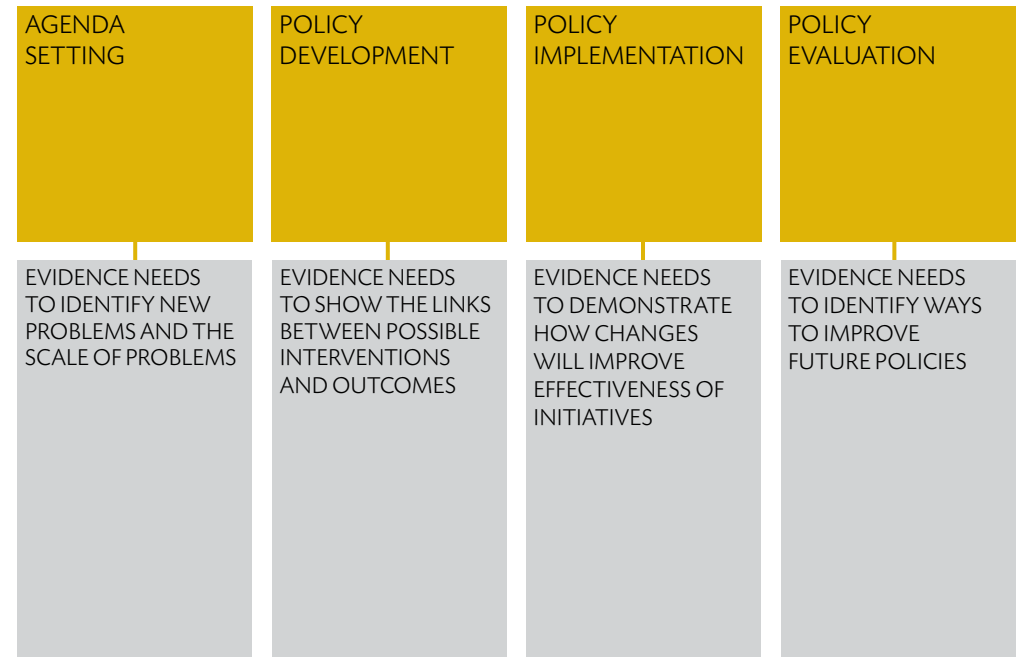
The types of evidence, and indeed the forms of knowledge, generated by research, again vary considerably. Evidence typically comprises a combination of both qualitative and quantitative information, including facts, figures, opinions and analysis.

The relevance and use of evidence within public policy is in part determined by the stage of the policy process. It can be used, for example, to identify the scale and nature of a particular problem, to evaluate the impact of existing policies, to test proposed solutions to a policy issue, or to explore the views and experiences of people affected by the issue. Different types of evidence are therefore required in different contexts.

FACTS
RECORDED IMPACTS ON INDIVIDUALS

PROVEN RESULTS

CHOICES MADE IN RESPONSE TO AN EVENT

OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

WHAT IS EVIDENCE?

FIGURES
CENSUS DATA

POPULATION STATISTICS

FINANCIAL DATA

ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

OPINION
OPINION POLLS

CUSTOMER SURVEYS

FOCUS GROUPS

HORIZON SCANNING

REFERENDA AND ELECTIONS

ANALYSIS
RESEARCH APPRAISALS/ LITERATURE REVIEWS

POLICY EVALUATIONS

Quantitative or 'hard' evidence comprises numerical information that can be readily measured, such as measures of time, prevalence, cost or frequency. **Qualitative** or 'soft' evidence comprises non-numerical information on behaviours, attitudes or beliefs.

FIG.01 Evidence and the policy process [4]

AGENDA SETTING	POLICY DEVELOPMENT	POLICY IMPLEMENTATION	POLICY EVALUATION
EVIDENCE NEEDS TO IDENTIFY NEW PROBLEMS AND THE SCALE OF PROBLEMS	EVIDENCE NEEDS TO SHOW THE LINKS BETWEEN POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS AND OUTCOMES	EVIDENCE NEEDS TO DEMONSTRATE HOW CHANGES WILL IMPROVE EFFECTIVENESS OF INITIATIVES	EVIDENCE NEEDS TO IDENTIFY WAYS TO IMPROVE FUTURE POLICIES

It is equally important to note that different types of evidence are given different weighting by policy makers. Hard evidence, or empirical data, is often given greater validity and favoured over softer, more qualitative forms of evidence. The importance attached to evidence is also affected by the policy issue in question.

The 'state of knowledge' about an issue can range from being well established, where there are strong areas of consensus within the policy community, through to being highly contested or inconclusive, where there is little if any agreement on the validity of the evidence in question. There are also policy fields where the issue or problem is so new that the evidence is either absent or insufficient to guide policy decisions.

FIG.02 States of knowledge [5]

POLICY FIELD	DESCRIPTION	IMPLICATIONS FOR EVIDENCE
Stable policy fields	Theoretical foundations are strong; broad consensus on what works; policy changes focused on incremental improvements	Evidence is focused on filling gaps or refining knowledge
Examples: screening programmes to detect breast cancer; national speed limits to reduce dangerous driving		
Fields in flux	Knowledge base is contested; no consensus on theoretical framework or on diagnosis or solutions	Evidence is conflicting or inconclusive; strength may lie only in evaluating existing policies
Examples: interventions to reduce gun and knife crime; causes of Alzheimer's disease		
Inherently novel	Newness of policy issue means limited knowledge base; fast moving environment; no identified experts	Insufficient evidence base to inform policy; demand for fast-learning approach
Examples: effectiveness of carbon capture and storage; measures to address global financial crisis		

Where do I start?

Embedding an evidence-based approach to your campaigning and policy work involves collecting the right evidence, for the right purpose and using it in the right context.

STAGE 1:
Analysing the external policy context
Analysing the external policy context involves appraising the existing knowledge – or evidence – held about a particular policy issue and assessing the importance it is likely to bear on the policy making process. In essence, it is about finding out what is already 'out there'.

Questions you need to ask include:

- What research or analysis has already been done on this issue?
- Is the research reliable?
- Is the analysis rigorous and impartial?
- Are there areas of strong consensus?
- Are there areas of contested knowledge?
- Are there any gaps in knowledge?
- What research is currently informing policy decisions?

One of the best methods for addressing these questions is to conduct a literature review.

Carrying out a literature review
A literature review is an unbiased and comprehensive overview of research on any given issue. Although a literature review can be structured in many ways, content typically includes the following:

- Introduction of the issue including key terms and definitions as well as subject areas
- Descriptive summary of research into this issue. These may be grouped by themes
- Comparison of research, drawing out similarities and differences
- Analysis and conclusions, including assessments of how research has contributed to policy debates, their individual merits and/or weaknesses.

In reviewing each piece of research, it is helpful to consider the following:

- Who undertook the research and who commissioned it
- When the research was carried out and for what purpose
- What the research methodology comprised
- What the research findings were and what recommendations if any were made.

[5] *Adapted from Mulgan, 2003, Government, Knowledge and the Business of Policy-making*

Appraising the existing research can help you identify who are the key experts and 'players' in the policy field. It can also help you assess whether and how your organisation can add to what is already known. What unique knowledge does your organisation hold about this issue – or have access to – for example?

Analysing the external policy context also involves assessing what factors other than evidence are likely to influence the policy process. Policy-making is never wholly evidence-based as it is subject to a range of other influences, ranging from the beliefs and values of policy makers through to practical considerations, such as time and resources. It is important at this stage to consider what other factors are likely to influence the policy process and what weighting will consequently be given to evidence.

STAGE 2:
Clarifying your objectives
The next stage involves clarifying what stages of the policy process you want to influence and/or the specific policy changes you are seeking. For example:

- Do you want to bring a new issue onto the public policy agenda?
- Do you want to challenge the existing knowledge held about a particular issue or problem?
- Do you want to assess whether a particular policy intervention does or does not work?
- Do you want to fill specific gaps in knowledge about a particular issue?
- Or do you want to re-affirm or refine what the existing evidence tells us about a particular policy problem?

What you want to do will determine what types of evidence you need and what role the evidence will have in the policy process.

At this stage, you will need to identify whether there is already sufficient existing evidence – either internal or external to your organisation – to help meet your objectives, or whether you will need to obtain 'new' evidence.

ROLE OF EVIDENCE

IDENTIFYING A PROBLEM	QUALIFYING A PROBLEM	PROPOSING A SOLUTION	EVALUATING A SOLUTION

Evidence-based policy making or policy-based evidence making?
In the same way that governments are open to criticism for carefully selecting evidence to fit their pre-determined policy agenda, so too can those that are trying to influence them. When setting your objectives, think through the underlying assumptions or hypotheses on which they are based. In evaluating a particular service, for example, have you already decided what you want the evaluation to tell you? If you cherry-pick or tailor the evidence to fit your pre-conceived views and policy positions, you run the risk of undermining the credibility of your work. If those you are trying to influence do not think you are providing reliable and objective evidence, you will have little impact.

STAGE 3:
Collecting and collating your evidence
What you do at this stage depends entirely on whether you intend to work with existing evidence or whether you wish to generate and collect new evidence. If the former, it is likely you will be focusing on secondary (i.e. desk-based) research; if the latter, it is likely you will be either conducting or commissioning primary research.

Overview of research methods
Desk-based, secondary research

- LITERATURE REVIEWS – an objective overview and analysis of existing research on a given issue
- ANALYSIS OF EXISTING DATA SETS – may include internal case information or externally produced data sets e.g. census results, the British Crime Survey, Labour Force Survey, etc.

Primary research

- FOCUS GROUPS – facilitated group discussions of between 6 and 10 people
- SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES – may be conducted online, by post or face-to-face. Comprise a series of set questions
- INTERVIEWS – may be structured (with set questions) or semi-structured (loose set of subject areas for discussion).

In thinking about how to go about collecting your evidence it is important to consider the following:

- THE TYPES OF EVIDENCE YOU REQUIRE – facts, figures, analysis or opinions (or a combination of these)
- SOURCES OF EVIDENCE – are they internal or external to your organisation?
- SAMPLE SIZE – if you are commissioning a survey or holding interviews, how many respondents or participants will provide you with credible and sufficient information?
- BUDGET – what resources do you have available?
- TIME – how much time do you have? Are there externally imposed restrictions?
- OUTPUTS – what do you intend to do with the research findings?
- EXPERTISE – do you have sufficient expertise within your organisation to collect the evidence? Will you need to commission an external research provider?

Primary research often requires extensive time and resources, not to mention relevant expertise. It is therefore important to think carefully before going down this route and in particular, identify a clear need and rationale.

TIP: If there are other organisations that you think would value the evidence you are collecting why not work in collaboration? This can be an effective way of sharing time, resources and expertise. It can also help to maximise the impact of your research. Potential partners might include other voluntary and community organisations or research-based organisations such as think tanks or academic institutes.

STAGE 4:
Communicating your evidence

How you communicate your evidence depends largely on who you are communicating it to and for what purpose. It will not only need to be accessible and understandable to your target audiences, it will also need to capture the attention and imagination of those you seek to directly influence.

You can communicate evidence in a multitude of ways:

- Research reports
- Briefings and factsheets
- Case studies
- Consultation responses
- Written or oral submissions to a Select Committee or Public Inquiry
- Letters to MPs or Government Ministers
- Press releases
- Articles in magazines or newsletters
- Radio or TV interviews
- Conference speeches
- Public meetings or seminars
- Short films or podcasts

It is important to identify as many ways to communicate your evidence, in as many formats, and as many times as possible. Lengthy, verbose reports should not be your default option. However, if you do produce a report, ensure you also have an executive summary or abstract.

If you are collecting the evidence as part of a campaign, think about how you will share the evidence with your supporters and activists. Also consider what resources they will need to use the evidence themselves.

TIP: Always make sure you can distil your evidence into three key messages. If you were stuck in a lift with a key decision-maker, for instance, would you be able to communicate your findings and recommendations in less than a minute?

Consider how to involve service users, beneficiaries or other key stakeholders in communicating your evidence. Hearing from people directly affected by an issue in person, for example, can be much more powerful and compelling than reading about them in a report.[6]

TIP: It is as important to establish the validity of the evidence and your organisation's authority on the subject as it is to communicate the findings themselves. When communicating your evidence, therefore, always explain the methods you used to obtain the evidence as well as outline your organisation's expertise or experience of the particular issue.

What next?

Whilst evidence-based policy marks a clear shift from purely ideologically-driven policy making, it is certainly not an apolitical process. Not only are there a whole host of other factors that determine what and how policy decisions are made, there are also biases about what types of evidence are seen as valuable and important. Effective campaigning and policy work therefore is as much about understanding and taking into account the wider political context as it is having quality, robust evidence.

'Policymaking is neither objective nor neutral; it is an inherently political process.'

Overseas Development Institute [7]

Practical measures for putting tools and approaches into practice
If you have five minutes...

- Join the **Evidence-based Policy discussion group** on the Forum for Change website where you can post questions and swap practical tips with other members
- Keep up to date with the latest government funded research by signing up to the **Government Social Research bulletin**
- Read the other In Focus guides in the series, including *Analysing the external environment* and *Commissioning Research*

If you have 2-3 hours...

- Undertake an internal audit of the types of knowledge and evidence you generate within your own organisation. Assess whether you could improve how you collect and manage this information, as well as how you use it within your policy and campaigning work.

- Carry out a review of external individuals and organisations that have expertise on the policy issues you are working on. What can you learn from the work they have already done? How might you work or collaborate with them?

If you have one day...

- Produce internal guidelines for collecting and using evidence within your campaigning and policy work. Ensure, for example, that the planning stages any campaign or policy activity includes an appraisal of the existing evidence. Also consider how you might work with other organisations to strengthen your evidence base.

[7] *ODI, 2006, A Toolkit for Progressive Policymakers in Developing Countries*

Further reading

Toolkits and guides

Using Evidence: how research can inform public services
Published by the Policy Press, 2007

A Toolkit for Progressive Policymakers in Developing Countries
Published by ODI, 2006

Further reading

Professional Policy Making for the Twenty First Century
Published by the Strategic Policy Making Team, Cabinet Office, 1999

Government, Knowledge and the Business of Policy-making
Lecture delivered by Geoff Mulgan at the Facing the Future Conference in Canberra, 2003

Is Evidence-based Government Possible?
Lecture delivered by Phil Davies at the 4th Annual Campbell Collaboration Colloquium, 2004

How Civil Society Organisations Use Evidence to Influence Policy Processes: a literature review
Published by ODI, 2005

Supporting Local Information and Research: understanding demand and improving capacity
Published by the Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009

Online resources

Evidence-based policy sites:

The Evidence Network
www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/sspp/inter disciplinary/evidence

Evidence-based Policy in Development Network
www.ebpdn.org

ODI
www.odi.org.uk/RAPID

Research sites:

Government Social Research Unit
www.gsr.gov.uk

ESRC Society Today
www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre

UK National Statistics
www.statistics.gov.uk

National Audit Office
www.nao.org.uk

Policy Library
www.policylibrary.com

Voluntary Sector Studies Network
www.vssn.org.uk

Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations
www.cochrane.org
www.campbellcollaboration.org

About Campaigning Effectiveness, NCVO

Campaigning Effectiveness, **NCVO** supports and empowers people and organisations to change their world through campaigning and influencing policy. We bring together experience and expertise and drive excellence in campaigning and policy work across civil society by providing support, knowledge, tools and resources. For further information about our work go to www.ncvo-vol.org.uk campaigningeffectiveness

About Forum for Change
The Forum for Change is a network for people influencing policy and campaigning for change across the voluntary and community sector. Membership is free and open to everyone. To join or for further information go to www.forumforchange.org.uk or email forumforchange@ncvo-vol.org.uk

About In Focus
In Focus guide are produced for Forum for Change members as part of the Policy Skills Development Programme. They accompany the Getting You Started factsheet series and In Practice case study series, all of which can be found at: www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/campaigningeffectiveness/resources