

## » Impacting on Policymaking

“I WANT TO SEE MORE SOCIAL RESEARCHERS USE THEIR KNOWLEDGE...TO OFFER INTERPRETATIONS OF WHAT DATA ACTUALLY MEANS FOR POLICY. WHO, AFTER ALL, IS BETTER PLACED?”

(SUE DUNCAN, CHIEF GOVERNMENT SOCIAL RESEARCHER, 2005)

## The ISSUES Project

### WHY?

Although the concepts of *evidence-based policy* and *evidence-informed policy* are not especially new, it is evident that policymaking is more directly informed by research, both commissioned and independent, than ever. The increase in the use of research in policymaking has been ongoing in the UK for the last decade, perhaps initially spurred by a 1999 white paper titled *Modernising Government* and a Cabinet Office report from around the same time (Duncan, 2005; HM Government, 1999; Cabinet Office, 1999). In addition to being a formal imperative in policymaking, it seems that the use of academic research is finding favour with individual politicians; “reliable evidence was seen to be able to give policy makers and Ministers confidence in their policy decisions and confidence to defend these decisions in parliament and to the media” (Campbell et al., 2007). Referral to sound research, then, gives confidence to decision-makers and legitimacy to their decisions.

The increased demand for expert input offers a tremendous opportunity for academics and researchers to make direct contributions towards policymaking. Official guidance demands that government departments, “draw on a sufficiently wide range of the best expert sources, both within and outside government”, yet interviews with policymakers have revealed that departments have struggled to find suitable sources of expert advice (Office of Science and Technology, 2005; Holmes and Clark, 2008). The gap between what policymakers need and what they can quickly obtain provides an opening for researchers to have their work make a genuine impact on society.

Researchers should also bear in mind that much research council funding is increasingly contingent on demonstrating plans for impact. Engagement with policymakers is a viable avenue for achieving this, and a track record of impacting on policy can be a great benefit to securing future research funding.

### HOW?

There are a number of routes towards influencing policymaking, from informal personal communications with relevant individuals to involvement with specialised information organisations. Irrespective of the routes that are pursued, proactivity is key. Government work often demands a rapid supply of information and ministers and aides often have little time to search for information sources, so researchers should push forward their findings as much as is reasonable. ▶



- ▶ Relationships with individual policymakers can be profitable, but effort will be required on the part of the researcher. It is important that relationships are maintained if a researcher wants to establish herself as a priority point of contact on a given subject.

The alternative approach is to get involved in institutionalised information services such as the Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology (POST), the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), and the Members Research Service (MRS) in Wales. There will possibly be local equivalents that may appeal to researchers. There are various ways in which researchers can get involved with these groups; as well as acting as an advisor or an expert on a permanent or ad hoc basis, there are opportunities in the form of internships and research council sponsored fellowships – these sorts of opportunities are normally listed on their website. Researchers may also find that All-Party Groups can present a chance to influence policy; these are groupings of UK government representatives that meet to discuss a particular topic in an informal setting. Researchers can contact the groups' secretariats to find out if there are opportunities to contribute.

Policymakers are normally more closely tuned-in to developments in the media than in academia therefore publicising work in mainstream outlets (and our guidance sheet on using the media may be helpful in achieving this) can bring about links to policymakers (Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health, 2010). At the same time, it is important for researchers to keep abreast of policy trends – evidence will also be more desirable if it can be put in a useful and usable context.

It is also important that researchers manage their own expectations – researchers can help feed into policy decisions but they are not going to dictate them. With this in mind the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) of the UK recommend that researchers present a range of policy options rather than issuing imperatives – this style is likely to be better received (Clayton and Culshaw, 2009). Similarly, researchers need to take responsibility for presenting findings in an accessible, readable, concise style.

### » Stories from SUE

As part of their work on transport and land use, the multi-institutional SOLUTIONS group organised a series of study trips to Freiburg, a town renowned for its exemplar sustainable living systems. This involved bringing together a group of planners and other local authority figures and taking them on a guided tour of Freiburg, highlighting the ideas and practices that have been so effective there. It proved to be an innovative and effective means of engaging with policymakers – it introduced them to the concepts behind SOLUTIONS' work, and presented an example of how sustainable planning could work in practice, while at the same time strengthening relationships between academics and policymakers.

Interviews with participants have suggested that the trips have had a lasting impact on planning in the south of England, most notably at the 'eco-village' project in Cornwall where Freiburg has influenced certain design aspects (Pratt, 2010). As is often the case with government interaction, the impact has been subtle; participants mostly talked about the way in which the trips had changed their way of understanding and thinking about the challenges that they faced. This is typical of engagement with policymakers, inasmuch as researchers have had a significant influence on policymaking without dictating its direction.

## REFERENCES

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## RESOURCES

Dedicated research units for the parliaments of the UK, Scotland and Wales:

Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology (POST): [tinyurl.com/6aogjine](http://tinyurl.com/6aogjine)

The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe): [tinyurl.com/6zwnr9t](http://tinyurl.com/6zwnr9t)

The Members Research Service (MRS): [tinyurl.com/6eqbekl](http://tinyurl.com/6eqbekl)

List of registered All-Party Groups: [tinyurl.com/62frpmf](http://tinyurl.com/62frpmf)

SOLUTIONS research project: [www.suburbansolutions.ac.uk](http://www.suburbansolutions.ac.uk)