Engaging with policymakers: Top tips and relevant resources

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Background

This resource has been produced following a public engagement conversation held at the University of Bath on 20 April 2016 that explored how to engage policymakers with research. As such, thanks are due to the panel at the event who shared their ideas and experiences – Professor Julie Barnett (Department of Psychology); Dr Hannah Durrant (Institute of Policy Research); Dr Cassie Phoenix (Department for Health); and Dr Emma Rich (Department for Health). Thanks to attendees at the event who also shared their ideas and experiences.

This resource is not meant to be definitive but rather, to provide a 'starter-for-ten' for those researchers looking to engage with policymakers. It includes a variety of relevant links, resources and contacts and it addresses some common challenges of engaging with policymakers.

Engaging policymakers – Top tips

Involving policymakers in the research process

- Policymakers can of course be commissioners of research and as with all contract research, you should ensure that you are comfortable with the research questions that you are being asked to address and that you are able to discern ways that the research could add to theoretical debates. If your research has been commissioned, be prepared to justify to policymakers both your research approach and research methods

- Policymakers can be involved right at the start of the research lifecycle helping to inform research ideas and research methods. Their involvement in the likes of project advisory boards are one means to achieve such engagement, ensuring that research becomes a collaborative process. Do make sure though that such boards do not stymie critical voices that may be heard through the research process

- As in any collaboration, it is important to take time to build trust, to ensure that you are having (challenging) conversations about the research rather than presenting diktats

Communicating your research to policymakers

- Tailor the presentation of your research to the interests of the policymakers; a good starting point is to make sure that the title of your research is designed to capture their attention

- Policy briefs – these are means to showcase your research, raising its profile and providing an effective vehicle for research impact. A good brief communicates the findings and policy implications of research to policymakers clearly and concisely. The University's Institute for Policy Research has developed a [guide to writing policy briefs](#)

- Be creative in how you disseminate your research. Key findings booklets that, like policy briefs, capture core messages and practical policy implications arising from your research are a good idea as are case studies that tell a relevant story (policymakers enjoy the richness of qualitative research). Arts exhibits, films, drama performances or any other medium that capture, or involve, relevant stakeholders from your research can help to raise its profile with policymakers. Clear visuals and gripping narratives will make your research more noticeable, accessible and powerful

- Ensure that if your research or its communication involves vulnerable populations that you have considered ethical issues – e.g. confidentiality and issues of policy-participant conflict

- Plug into existing forums to highlight your research such as:

    (a) [Public Policy Exchange Events](#) held at Westminster
    (b) Government summits
    (c) Opportunities to contribute to [select committees](#)
    (d) [UK Parliament Week](#)
    (e) [SET for Britain](#) (an annual poster competition for early career STEM researchers)

Understanding the policy terrain

- Ensure that you understand the policy context of what you are researching. Who's involved? What tensions and dynamics exist between which stakeholders? How might you situate your research within the policy debate? Being attuned to such issues will help ensure that your research contributes in the best way possible to live debates

- Timing is important. By keeping attuned to the policy terrain, you will note opportunities to present your research. For example: when a particular topic that your research can speak to becomes newsworthy; when a challenge has arisen in the policy field that your research might address; when a policy area is under review and so on. Be proactive in sourcing opportunities to engage rather than expecting them to fall into your lap

It's not just about research 'push'

Our default may be to 'push' our research evidence onto policymakers in the expectation that they will receive it with open arms. But as with any piece of public engagement, it is important to take account of the needs of the public with which you are engaging, designing interventions accordingly.

As such, Langer et al (2016 – cf. 'The Science of Using Science' in *Useful links and resources* section) suggest that any intervention designed to encourage decision makers to use research evidence should take into account:

(a) The **capability** of the decision maker to use evidence (i.e. their psychological and physical capacity to engage in the use of research evidence)

(b) The **motivation** of the decision maker to use evidence (i.e. their emotional and logical brain processes that stimulate their evidence use behaviour)

(c) The **opportunity** of the decision maker to use evidence (i.e. the factors outside of the individual that make their evidence use behaviour possible)

Policy and organisational contexts will also bring to bear on the capability, motivation, and opportunity for policymakers to use research evidence so being familiar with these is important.

Don't ignore the local

When you first look to engage policymakers, it can be tempting to target those at the national or international level but they can be tricky to reach. Don't neglect the local; you might find local policy reviews to which you can contribute.

Engaging local policymakers and influencing local decision making can be invaluable. Such policymakers can act as great champions for your research and the accumulation of small change might lead to bigger things.

Don't forget to think about impact

Policy impact is clearly one form of impact of importance to the Research Excellence Framework; there are many examples of policy impact from the REF2014 exercise. When you are undertaking research with policymakers or when you are delivering interventions designed to encourage their use of research evidence, you should ensure that you are capturing any resultant impact.

Impact from this type of engagement could include, but is not limited to:

- Giving written or oral evidence to select committees or to local government equivalents
- Responding to government consultations and being cited in resultant reports
- Joining a relevant All-Party Parliamentary Group, cross-party groups that put on events and networking opportunities for Members and academics
- Feeding into the work of the libraries in the Commons and the Lords, helping to produce briefing papers on pieces of legislation going through the House and substantive debates
- Taking part in the Royal Society's Pairing Scheme, where policymakers and researchers are given the chance to experience each other's worlds

The University's Research & Innovation Services team have produced a Planning for Impact Toolkit that might be of use when considering how to capture evidence of impact from your engagement. A good starting point is to ask the policymakers that you have engaged with where they think they would be *without* your research. Capturing an 'alternative history' in this way can help others to elicit the impact of your research on them.

In addition, the Economic and Social Research Council have developed their own Impact Toolkit, with resources to help researchers embed public engagement in their work.

Finally, the University's Public Engagement Unit has sourced a range of toolkits, guides and other resources to help you think through impact.

Don't forget your role in the process!

The type of researcher you are affects how you engage. Your values, beliefs, disciplinary background, and specific engagement skills all impact your engagement.

Reflect on this. Are there certain types of engagement that you are more skilled in? Do you prefer networking or disseminating? Are you an effective facilitator?

Engaging policymakers – Some common challenges

Policymakers are busy people!

This means that you need to plan interventions with them well in advance rather than expecting them to be available at short notice. You may need to be as flexible as you can to secure their involvement with your research, being willing to go to them and / or utilising technology to ease their involvement.

Engagement costs money

If you are applying to the Research Councils for a grant, make sure that you cost the activity that you list in your *Pathways to Impact* statement. If you are looking for your research to have non-academic impact, you need to invest money from your grant to achieve this.

As a starting point, Research & Innovation Services' Planning for Impact Toolkit contains rough costings for a wide variety of activities.

Policymakers move on

As with any role, policymakers will move on. You may find that someone you have developed a good relationship with moves to a role which is no longer relevant to your area of research.

There is only so much you can do about this but it might be a good idea to ensure that you develop links with 'gatekeeping' departments in organisations – for example, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology in the Houses of Parliament.

Useful links and resources

Useful departments / organisations

The University's Institute for Policy Research aims to bridge the worlds of research, policy and professional practice to address some of the major local, national and global policy challenges we face.

The University's Public Engagement Unit supports researchers to engage non-academics with their research through a range of funding, professional development, and practical opportunities.

The Alliance for Useful Evidence champions the use of evidence in social policy and practice

The Houses of Parliament has a Universities Programme that, amongst other things, arranges workshops for academics.

The Wellcome Trust has developed a range of case studies, top tips, and training to support getting research into policy.

Useful reports / readings

How does the UK Parliament and academia interact? (a leaflet produced by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology) - http://www.parliament.uk/documents/post/Research-impact-handout.pdf

The Science of Using Science: Researching the Use of Research Evidence in Decision-Making (a report by the Social Science Research Unit at University College London) - http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=3504

From the London School of Economics' Impact Blog, see:

- **Getting research into policy: the role of think tanks and other mediators** (Professor Judy Sebba, University of Sussex) - http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/03/07/getting-research-into-policy-the-role-of-think-tanks-and-other-mediators/

- **What do policymakers want from researchers? Blogs, elevator pitches and good old-fashioned press mentions** (Duncan Green, Oxfam GB) - http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/03/11/what-do-policymakers-want/

- **Getting smarter about engaging with Parliament: Embrace digital, think interdisciplinary and plan for serendipity** (Jennifer Jeffes, Durham University) - http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/11/12/getting-smarter-about-engaging-with-parliament-embrace-digital-think-interdisciplinary-and-plan-for-serendipity/

- **Policy impact and online attention: Tracking the path from research to public policy on the social web** (Stacy Konkiel, @altmetric) - http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/02/02/tracking-the-path-from-research-to-public-policy-on-the-social-web/