

‘PULLING RATHER THAN PUSHING’: A DEMAND-LED APPROACH TO EVIDENCE MOBILISATION

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Introduction

The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) generates evidence that is designed to help improve both national policy and local practice. Based in Cardiff University and core funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Welsh Government, the WCPP was established in 2017 to build on the success of the Public Policy Institute for Wales, which was created four years earlier to provide Welsh Government ministers with authoritative independent evidence (Bristow et al. 2015). The WCPP continues to work with ministers but also provides evidence for local government, the health service and other public bodies. And rather than producing evidence and then 'pushing' it out to policy makers, it starts by working closely with them to identify their priorities and then generates, synthesises and mobilises evidence that addresses these issues.

The WCPP's demand-led approach is designed to increase the chances that policy makers get evidence that is relevant and timely and therefore act on it. This way of mobilising evidence is informed by the 'two communities' concept which makes the oversimplified, but nevertheless useful, observation that 'social scientists and policy makers live in separate worlds with different and often conflicting values, different reward systems, and different languages' (Caplin 1997: 459). There are heroic individuals who manage to straddle both worlds, but they are exceptions. Most policy makers work to much shorter timescales than researchers and they prize practical, politically expedient answers to 'real world' problems. By contrast, academics are rewarded for publishing theory-driven research, which can take years to produce and rarely offers straightforward answers (Oliver et al. 2014). As a result,

even if policy makers are aware of evidence that is being generated in universities, they struggle to penetrate the journal paywalls it is published behind and the academic jargon it is couched in, and are unlikely to find that it offers clear-cut ‘actionable recommendations’.

In recent years, researchers in the UK have been encouraged to pay more attention to the practical implications and potential applications of their research. The UK’s Research Excellence Framework, which rates each universities’ research output and allocates funding accordingly, now gives credit for impact beyond academia, and research councils ask grant recipients to specify the commercial and/or public policy benefits of their work. However, because policy making is not a linear, rational or uncontested process, and evidence is just one of many competing influences on policy decisions (Ingold and Monaghan 2016; Cairney 2016), it is rare to have a clear line of sight between research and policy.

The WCPP addresses this challenge by focusing on five main activities (see Figure 1):

- **Identifying** policymakers’ evidence needs and mobilising evidence to meet them.
- **Convening** activities that bring policy makers and experts together to analyse and apply evidence.
- **Communicating** evidence in user-friendly formats.
- **Advancing** understanding of what works in evidence mobilisation.
- **Advocating** for evidence use.

Figure 1: WCPP activities

Identify	Convene	Communicate	Advance	Advocate
• We work with ministers, officials and public service leaders to identify their evidence needs. • We identify leading policy experts who can meet evidence needs. • We identify and work with policy makers, practitioners and academic networks to mobilise evidence. • We monitor policy developments so we can anticipate future evidence needs.	• We act as a bridge between evidence producers and policy makers/practitioners. • We work with policy experts to synthesise the best available evidence. • We support policy makers and practitioners to access and apply the evidence. • We bring experts and policy makers together to discuss how to apply the evidence in Wales.	• We communicate evidence that supports better policy making and public services. • We publish evidence reviews, reports and policy briefings . • We disseminate evidence through events, blogs, and social media. • We share evidence in user-friendly formats that can speak to a broad audience.	• We conduct research on how evidence can inform policy and practice. • We evaluate how our work makes a difference so we can keep improving what we do. • We study how other evidence centres work. • We disseminate what we learn through academic networks and journals.	• We promote evidence use by showing how it can support policy makers and practitioners. • We enable researchers to engage with policy makers and practitioners. • We encourage policy makers and practitioners to use evidence. • We sponsor Research Apprenticeships and PhD placements to build future capacity.

Source: Wales Centre for Public Policy (2020)

This chapter describes the way in which the WCPP goes about these activities, explores the factors that have contributed to its success, and discusses the challenges it has

encountered.

Identifying evidence needs

The WCPP identifies evidence needs through analysis of policy documents, monitoring policy developments and debates, horizon scanning and dialogue with government ministers, civil servants and public service leaders. Some of our work is undertaken in response to requests from policy makers. Some is initiated by us in light of our reading of policy priorities and then tested out with potential evidence users. In both cases, one of the keys to success is understanding the policy imperatives that lie behind policy makers' evidence needs. Although they may not express it in quite this way, we have found that policy makers are typically interested in one of four key questions:

- 'Is there a problem?' - Policy makers often need evidence to enable them understand the nature of a problem and assess whether it demands action from them. They are interested in what the issues are, the scale or prevalence of the problem, whether it is getting worse, and who is affected by it.
- 'What can I do about it?' – Where policy makers are already committed to addressing an issue, they often want to know what has worked elsewhere and whether it could be effective in their own locality/region/country.
- 'What will happen if...?' - A third type of question seeks evidence about the likely impact of an intervention that policy makers are already actively considering. In this case they want to know will it work, who will benefit, will anyone lose out, and what the risks are.
- 'How do I...?' - Where policy makers have already decided on a course of action, they may ask for evidence to inform policy implementation. Questions include who needs to be involved, what resources are required, and what obstacles will have to be addressed.

Open and direct dialogue with policy makers is key to differentiating between these different types of evidence needs. Letting us in on their thinking requires trust on the part of policy makers, but it helps to ensure that our work addresses the issues they are most concerned about. As an example, we were asked by a minister for evidence on how to

increase the number of credit unions in Wales. Discussion with him revealed that he saw this as a way to reduce low-income households' reliance on 'pay-day loans' (a form of high interest, short-term, unsecured credit designed to be repaid within a month). A rapid review of the evidence and a series of discussions with experts suggested to us that expanding credit unions would not achieve the desired result. So, with the minister's agreement, we commissioned research to understand why households use pay-day loans and identify interventions that could provide better alternatives. Realising that the policy question was "What can I do about X?", rather than "How do I do Y?", enabled us to avoid conducting research that would have amounted to 'digging in the wrong place' and probably resulted in a policy that wouldn't have tackled the underlying problem.

In addition to ensuring that we understand policy makers' evidence needs, we also test whether we are best placed to address it. Occasionally we have found that a question posed by policy makers can be answered by referring them to existing reports. As noted above, it is difficult for ministers and officials to keep abreast of research undertaken in universities. They may also be unaware of work being undertaken in another part of government or by their predecessors. For example, when a minister asked us for evidence to help develop a food strategy we found that an earlier expert report commissioned by one of her predecessors provided all the answers they needed. In such cases, evidence intermediaries provide a kind of 'external hard drive' that retains information lost from the organizational memory as politicians and officials rotate to new roles.

Sometimes we conclude that there are others (including other What Works Centres) who are better placed than us to meet an evidence need and rather than take on the work ourselves, we broker links between them and the policy makers. For example, in the case of pay-day loans described above, we worked with a research council to initiate research that was undertaken by a team of researchers from an independent research organisation who interviewed low-income households to discover why they preferred this forms of lending over borrowing from credit unions and what other alternative forms of credit they would find more attractive.

Our demand-led approach helps to secure ownership of our work but raises important issues about how to maintain our independence. The topics that we work on are dictated, directly or indirectly, by policy makers' needs. However, our findings and recommendations

are always based firmly on the best available evidence. Reports are peer reviewed by academics. A publications protocol, agreed with the Welsh Government, ensures that ministers cannot amend, delay or veto reports that they find inconvenient or uncomfortable. And all outputs are published on our website so that the evidence is freely available for all political parties, scrutiny committees and other policy actors, and can be scrutinised by researchers to ensure its reliability and robustness.

These arrangements require bravery on the part of policy makers, but they know that safeguarding and demonstrating our independence is important to our ability to work with world-leading experts, many of whom would not be prepared to collaborate with us if they believed that they might be subject to political pressure. Funding provided by the Economic and Social Research Council has been an important signal of our commitment to providing authoritative independent evidence, as has the fact that we are based in a university. However, the politics of evidence use are never easy to navigate, and evidence centres like ours need to be politically aware whilst remaining scrupulously non-partisan. Our work produces evidence which can be unpalatable for policy makers, and some of our reports have been used by opposition parties to attack government policies, particularly in the run up to elections. When this happens, it is important that policy makers stand by their commitment to our independence. And for our part we need to be prepared to accept that while the evidence we produce will be heard it won't always be heeded because policy decisions are influenced by a host of other factors. Researchers with strongly held views backed by robust evidence sometimes find this difficult to accept. But we are careful to avoid conflating communicating evidence with campaigning for policies because we understand that blurring the line between these activities would erode the trust that policy makers have in our impartiality which is in turn key to our effectiveness as evidence intermediaries.

Convening evidence

The WCPP is currently the only member of the UK's What Works network with a specific geographical focus - our work can cover any policy area that is devolved to the Welsh

Parliament (including health, social care, education, housing, local government, agriculture, and some key aspects of environmental policy, the economy and skills). It is unrealistic to expect to develop in-house expertise across such a broad range of topics, so much of our work is undertaken in collaboration with experts, including other What Works Centres, universities and independent researchers from across the UK and internationally. Drawing on data and insights which these experts have already generated enables us to respond much more rapidly to policy makers' needs than studies which involve gathering new primary data (see WCPP 2019). But our reliance on existing evidence makes it important that we identify and work with the best available experts in a field, and it also has implications for our approach to evidence standards.

The question of what counts as evidence is an important one and different evidence intermediaries have different answers to it. We have adopted a pragmatic approach which accepts that the type of evidence we need to provide varies depending on the type of question that we are addressing. The answer to 'Is there a problem?' requires data about Wales. The answer to 'What can I do about it?' is likely to call on evidence about interventions in other countries. 'How do I...?' questions probably require input from practitioners. Our reliance on existing evidence means that there are some questions we can't answer, and others where we can only provide partial answers. However, our view is that some evidence is better than no evidence, so long as we give clear advice about its limitations. Policy makers are, of course, used to dealing with uncertainty and we have found that they don't necessarily expect or need clear-cut answers, and in cases where the evidence is incomplete, contested or of variable quality, roundtables have proved a valuable way to enable policy makers and experts to work through the issues about which there is disagreement or uncertainty.

Once we are confident that we understand the evidence need and have the skills needed to address it, we usually conduct a rapid review. We use a range of conventional search engines complemented by one-to-one discussions with academic experts in the field. We focus on social science research and include both academic and 'grey' literature. Sometimes we commission experts to produce reviews, sometimes we produce them in-house. All reviews are then peer reviewed to ensure that the evidence is reliable and is being interpreted correctly. In addition we may bring together experts and policy makers to

assess whether the evidence is applicable to Wales. This is important because policy makers need to understand the extent to which interventions will work in their own context. Roundtables provide a 'safe space' for open discussion about this and we adopt the 'Chatham House rule' which stipulates that whilst participants may use information from one of these discussions, they will not reveal the identity or affiliation of the source. Bringing together a range of experts and policy makers in this way means that we can draw on insights from a variety of disciplines and on experience from a range of countries. It also enables us to address different dimensions of complex policy challenges where no individual expert has all of the evidence that is needed. Some experts are surprisingly reticent about engaging directly with policy makers in this way, and we work closely with them in advance to ensure that they understand the evidence need, the Welsh policy context and why their expertise is relevant.

We have found that policy makers have a real appetite for learning from elsewhere. As noted above, context matters and there are some important differences in the political culture, values and priorities between different parts of the UK. However, they face similar societal and economic challenges and have shared legal frameworks and administrative traditions. Evidence centres funded by Whitehall departments are inevitably focused primarily on the needs of policy makers and practitioners in England so we act as a 'bridge' helping other What Works Centres and evidence producers to spot when their work is relevant to Wales and introducing them to policy makers who we know will benefit from it.

Communicating evidence

Presenting evidence in a concise and accessible way is key to gaining policy makers' attention and interest and therefore influencing their behaviours and decisions. Even experienced academics with a track record of policy engagement sometimes want to include descriptions of their research methods and long list of caveats to their conclusions, and some find it difficult to shed academic 'jargon'. Because of this, we provide detailed guidance about length, language, style and format. We also invest a lot of time in editing draft reports to ensure that what we present to policy makers is as accessible, clear and concise as possible. We use graphic designers to produce attractive formats and communicate evidence through range of media including reports, policy briefings, social

media, commentaries and podcasts, our own on-line and in-person events, and contributions to conferences organised by others. We run ‘lunch and learn’ sessions in the Welsh Government’s offices, which are advertised on its staff intranet and open to all civil servants. And have found that one of the best ways to reach practitioners is to offer presentations, panel discussions and workshops at events convened by their own professional bodies or representative organisations. ‘Piggy-backing’ on events that feature ministers or other ‘big name’ speakers has also proved to be an effective mode of dissemination.

We know that communicating evidence through reports and presentations is rarely sufficient to influence national policy decisions or local practice and we have experimented with a variety of forms of engagement. Roundtables are one means of achieving this. In addition some ministers value in-person briefings which give them the chance to ask questions that go beyond and behind what is presented in a written report/briefing. We have also cultivated strong links with professional networks (such as the All Wales Heads of Children’s Services Group) and representative organisations (including the Welsh NHS Confederation, Welsh Local Government, and Wales Council for Voluntary Action). They have both shaped our understanding of their evidence needs and been key users of our work on topics such as how to improve outcomes for children and young people in local authority care and ways to reduce loneliness and social isolation.

Advancing understanding of evidence use

The WCPP is unusual in having a small team of researchers whose primary role is to evaluate our ways of working and our impact. They do this combing the academic literature for lessons which can inform our practice, conducting structured reflection sessions on each project that we complete, and interviewing a sample of the intended evidence users. Their findings inform our day-to-day practice and longer-term strategy and are shared through academic papers and conference presentations in the hope that they provide useful insights for other evidence intermediaries. The team has, for example, analysed the benefits of integrated data for local policy making (Durrant et al. 2018) and conducted an assessment of how knowledge brokering can support evidence-based policy (McKillop and Downe 2022). It is currently working on papers on local knowledge mobilization, the practices

employed by evidence intermediaries, and activities of university-based policy engagement teams.

Because we know that the ways in which we communicate evidence must be attuned to the capacity and capability in the civil service, local government and other public services, we also conduct research on policy making and implementation in Wales (Connell et al. 2019; Connell et al. 2021; Nesom and McKillop 2021). This work recognises that an intervention which has worked well elsewhere may be a non-starter if Wales lacks the organisational culture, finances, collaborative capacity and accountability mechanisms that led to its success elsewhere. But conversely, the small, relatively tight-knit policy community in Wales may be able to make a success of initiatives that have languished in other settings because of what List et al. (2019) call the 'scale-up problem'.

Advocating for evidence use

The WCPP seeks to demonstrate through its own work that evidence can and does make a useful contribution to policy decisions. Policy makers often have mixed experiences of working with researchers and may initially be sceptical about our ability to deliver timely, balanced evidence which addresses real world challenges.

Some of our work has failed to meet their expectations. For example, a former minister started a briefing session that we arranged with a leading expert on enterprise zones by dropping his report on the table and declaring 'Well, there's nothing in here that we can use' (although we and our expert succeeded in changing their mind by the end of our half hour meeting). In another case, an evidence review that we conducted on physical punishment of children did not provide the unequivocal empirical evidence to support for outlawing smacking which ministers had anticipated and was quietly shelved by the government (though not by a lobby group that was campaigning vociferously against the proposed ban).

However, there are numerous other examples where ministers and/or public service leaders have reported that our work has had a significant impact on policy decisions. The First Minister has stated that 'The work of the Wales Centre for Public Policy greatly strengthens our policy-making in Wales. It gives us high-quality independent evidence to challenge

current assumptions and improve our decisions’ (WCPP 2019), and we frequently receive unsolicited letters from ministers thanking us for reports and explaining how they have informed policy decisions. Some examples of work that has had tangible impacts on policy include:

- Our modelling of the impact of free child care (WCPP 2016), which led the Welsh Government to rethink a commitment to provide a universal offer and to target support on working parents instead.
- Work on preventing youth homelessness (WCPP 2018), which the Minister for Housing and Regeneration told the Welsh Parliament informed her decision to introduce a £4.8 million innovation fund to develop housing and support options
- Analysis of the economic impact of Brexit (WCPP 2021), which the Director responsible for European Transition reported showed the ‘huge impact which the WCPP has made on the creation of what has been an almost entirely new – and strategically vital – policy agenda’; and
- Work we conducted on using behavioural science to increase waste recycling (Webb 2018), which the First Minister said ‘made a valuable contribution to helping the Welsh Government and its partners understand how to increase recycling rates among residents’.

These and numerous other examples have raised awareness among politicians, civil servants and public service leaders of the potential value to them of research evidence, which in turn helps to fuel future demand for it.

We also invest in a range of ways in building capacity and capability in the research community to produce policy relevant research. The experts who we work with gain valuable experience of policy relevant research in Wales, and in some cases the links that we broker for them with policy makers lead to them being commissioned directly by ministers to provide further analysis or advice. We also fund a Research Apprenticeship scheme and PhD placements which give early career researchers opportunities to work as part of our team for three months to a year and gain hands-on experience of mobilising evidence to meet policy makers’ needs.

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