

From ageing research into policy

In June 2010, KT-EQUAL hosted a training event for 48 delegates in Westminster exploring how to get ageing research into government policy. The event equipped academics and researchers with a better understanding of policy: how policy is developed and how that process can be influenced. Below the key learning from the event is summarised.

Context

Much research for older people and those with a disability has a close link to Government policy. For some research projects, engaging with policy makers is necessary to enable the outputs of the work to create impact. It's also often necessary to engage with policy to ensure that the research outcomes are relevant to current practice when a project disseminates its findings.

Traditionally most academics and researchers don't engage with policy. Maybe because *"Many researchers do not think through the policy implications of their research"*¹. Researchers seem generally unaware of how policy is developed, or how their research might influence it. However, *"There remains considerable scope to improve the effectiveness of public policy making through use of humanities and social science research"*²; the same is true for research in Science and Engineering.

The aim of this workshop was therefore to explore how policy within the UK parliament is developed, to begin to equip academics with an understanding of how they might influence policy. The intention is to organise other workshops in the future to address policy implementation as well as other parliaments.

Key learning

1. Policy vs research

Policy is not usually evidence led and frequently research evidence is only used selectively to support policy decisions. Indeed, politicians often just want confirmation of their prejudices from research. It is important to try and influence policy makers early, because it is hard to change opinions once they are public.

Ideally, the principle roles for research in policy development should be:

- Identifying issues for policy-makers to consider.
- Providing key contextual information e.g. through commissioned research.
- Providing evidence to support decision-making on policy options already under consideration.
- Evaluating policy and pilots, i.e. should we continue with/roll out policy and if so how can we maximise social benefits and cost effectiveness.

Among the case studies presented during the day, Greg Marsden discussed the policy to give free bus travel for over 60s as an example of a policy not driven by evidence or academia.

The uncertainty that naturally arises from research poses a problem for policy makers. It is also difficult for scientists, however *“it is important not to compromise on uncertainties because otherwise it is likely to rebound”*³.

2. Research planning

Influencing policy needs to be incorporated into research project plans early on, indeed it is best to consider how research can influence practice and policy at the start. Use key influencers on advisory groups and get their advice while developing research projects.

Although influencing work is very rewarding, it requires commitment over time and the patience to building network. If this is done, academics can be in a position to take advantage of chance opportunities. The fact that research and policy works on different timescales can be challenging. Several speakers talked about the need to be resilient and persistent – *“it is not always easy!”*

An understanding of the process of a bill going through parliament is needed, if you want to influence it and track progress. First reading is a formality. At second reading interested parties (MPs/Peers) indicate interest and briefings start to arrive from outside organisations. Detailed scrutiny takes place at Committee stage (and some complex legislation may have a pre-scrutiny stage). There is not so much to do post committee.

3. Dissemination

Communications need to be very different from academic publications. They need to be short, clear and relevant to the reader. Don't hide the message and aim for clarity. For example, *'the message must be given in the first minute to policy advisors'*. For policy makers, it needs to be less than one side of A4 *"Nobody reads the thick reports... They read the front page"*.

Communications should have headlines, short punchy executive summaries with key findings and policy implications and be well targeted at the audience. Use clear and accessible English with no jargon. Simple sentences and tools such as checklists and diagrams where appropriate. When emails are used, a taster should go at the top of the email in the text (not in a linked document). The email must be personalised.

Case studies can capture policy maker's interest. Sujata Ray discussed the use of personal stories of older people to illustrate statistical data on multiple deprivation which added colour and weight to policy debates.

General media (e.g. comment pieces) and trade press can be useful for raising awareness of issues. Blogs should also be considered. Celebrities can be useful for making work visible. Opinion polls can also be useful for generating interest. It can be useful to get an independent journalist to distil message from research.

Identify the key players to address and be proactive in picking up the phone and knocking on doors. Face-to-face communication is best because it better enables you to understand their agenda(s); Jonathan Clifton recommended going to an event such as a seminar and collaring whoever you need to talk to.

Dissemination is most effective when it is timely, has a simple message and when government has resources to respond. Sujata Ray gave an example of how research was used to change the minimum income guarantee for pensioners. Connect with the big societal agendas (e.g. ageing society). ippr often puts dissemination on hold until an appropriate timely hook for the piece can be found.

Other dissemination events by ippr include seminars for 40-50 people, smaller roundtable discussions and learning trips, small briefings for decision makers and public engagement.

Who

Take (or even make) any opportunities to talk about research with those involved in policy.

MPs have a huge number of competing interests – a local constituency angle can be very useful to catch attention. Go to the local constituency surgery and use local media to influence. Do research into interests of MPs and Peers to find out who you might want to influence. Although MPs and Peers are very busy and won't read reports, their researchers and civil servants will, and this can be an effective route for influencing parliamentarians. Civil servants and special advisors to ministers are very important people to influence. Also consider opposition spokespeople.

Lobbying peers is effective but slower because they tend to consider longer term issues. But they are especially useful for EU regulations. It is easier to amend legislation in the Lords.

All party groups can be useful, although they need to be carefully targeted because there are a lot of them and some are more influential than others.

Delegates undertook a power mapping exercise highlighting who had power, how they were connected and how to approach them.

4. Collaboration

Finding common cause with others is useful as multiple voices can be effective in adding weight to arguments. Think Tanks, NGOs, charities and professional institutes are worth exploring as possible allies.

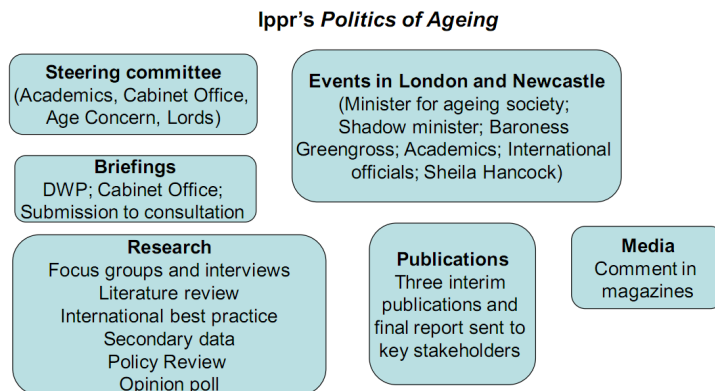
What is a Think Tank?

Jonathan Clifton explained that Think Tanks:

- Identify policy problems and conduct primary and secondary research to better understand them, their key drivers and implications.
- Transform ideas into a policy agenda, research conclusions into practical policies (costed, feasible but radical, tested against public opinion).
- Provide a forum for public debate and discussion.

Think Tanks can act as a bridge between academia and policymakers. Think-tanks influence policy both through research and much pro-active dissemination.

As a case study, Jonathan Clifton examined the ippr's *Politics of Ageing* project, and the figure below shows some of the approaches used and people involved:



Why work with a charity?

Sujata Ray explained that charities can have impact because they

- Are independent and cost-effective
- Are known and trusted by their constituents
- Are not constrained by public (Government) policy
- ...Or fundamentally by the public purse
- Are accountable to their donors (and to the Charity Commission)
- Deliver products, services and research
- Are extremely influential with local, regional and central government
- Have direct communication with their users

5. Routes

Academic routes for influencing include:

- select committee enquiries (submitting evidence);
- all party group enquiries (take evidence from academics);
- joint committee enquiries;
- policy consultations;
- commissioned research;
- departmental briefings;
- practitioner guides which can then inform government advice;
- and joint action research.

Speakers

1. Lessons and Reflections from the Transport Sector

**Greg Marsden, Senior Lecturer in Transport Policy and Strategy,
University of Leeds**

Dr Marsden is a Senior Lecturer in Transport Policy and Strategy at the Institute for Transport Studies at the University of Leeds. He joined Leeds after a two year period as specialist adviser to the UK Parliamentary Transport Select Committee. His research interests relate to transport policy and decision-making processes within local and national government. He won the 2006 Charley V. Wootan award at TRB for the best paper on Policy and Organization. He has experience in working for EU, central, regional and local government clients as well as research councils. His research on ageing focuses on the need to develop more inclusive longer-term transport planning strategies that promote active travel for the growing population of older people.

2 The role of think tanks

Jonathan Clifton, Researcher, Institute for Public Policy Research

Jonathan Clifton is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr). In 2009 he worked on ippr's Politics of Ageing project, including publications such as 'Ageing and well-being in an international context' and 'Getting On: well-being in later life'. Jonathan comments regularly in the media, with recent coverage including The Guardian Comment is Free; Public Finance Magazine and Talk Sport Radio.

3. Ageing and the built environment: making an impact through research

Elizabeth Burton

Elizabeth is Professor of Sustainable Building Design and Wellbeing at the University of Warwick. She is also founder director of the WISE (Wellbeing in Sustainable Environments) research unit. Having qualified as an architect and urban designer, Elizabeth took up a research career, with the aim of developing an evidence base for architectural practice. Her research interests are in the social aspects of sustainability and how the built environment (architecture and urban

design/form) influences people's health and wellbeing and quality of life. She has particular expertise in ageing research, including dementia-friendly design.

4. A Parliamentarian's Perspective

Baroness Greengross

Sally Greengross has been a crossbench (independent) member of the House of Lords since 2000 and chairs three All-Party Parliamentary Groups: Corporate Social Responsibility, Intergenerational Futures: Old & Young Together and Continence Care. She is the Vice Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Dementia and Ageing and Older People, and is Treasurer of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Equalities. In December 2006, she was announced as a Commissioner for the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Baroness Greengross was Director General of Age Concern England from 1987 until 2000. Until 2000, she was joint Chair of the Age Concern Institute of Gerontology at Kings College London, and Secretary General of Eurolink Age.

Baroness Greengross is Chair of the Advisory Groups for the English Longitudinal Study on Ageing (ELSA) and the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA). She is President of the Pensions Policy Institute and Honorary Vice President of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health. She holds honorary doctorates from seven UK universities.

5 Older People and Ageing Society Division

Simon Palmer, Department for Work and Pensions

Simon is the head of analysis for the Older People and Ageing Society Division at the Department for Work and Pensions. He is responsible for building the evidence base around the ageing society and ensuring this feeds through into policy development. Key areas include a suite of evaluation of the measures announced in the strategy document 'Building a Society for All Ages', and understanding performance against Public Service Agreement 17, which aims to foster independence in later life.

6. A third sector user's perspective

Sujata Ray, Research Adviser, Age UK

Sujata has been working for Age UK as research adviser since 2002. She manages a portfolio of commissioned and grant-funded social research across the charity,

focusing on its priorities to influence public policy. Her extensive experience of research includes working within academia, the NHS and, for the past 16 years, in the voluntary sector having come to Age UK from Samaritans. At Age UK she deals with research across a wide range of public policy issues which are relevant to ageing and later life including public services, communities and society, consumer issues and equality.

¹ Brownson *et al.*, 2006, doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2005.10.004

² Punching our weight: the humanities and social sciences in public policy making, British Academy, 2008

³ Jim Norton (www.profjimmorton.com), from British Science Association conference.