

A gestalt shift? Reflections from researchers turned elected representatives on the real-world use of evidence in policymaking

Introduction

For decades, scholars have studied the relationships between evidence and policy, sometimes incorporating ethnographic accounts of evidence use. To our knowledge, these ethnographic accounts primarily encompass reflections from researchers who have direct experiences as or with civil servants, thereby unravelling the complex process of policymaking (see, for example, Maybin 2015 and Stevens 2011). While numerous (former) politicians have documented their experiences in publications and political ethnographic accounts (see, for example, Hagene 2008 and Mulgan 2005), first-hand personal reflections from researchers who have studied evidence use in policy and then transitioned to roles as elected politicians are rare.

This practice paper offers unique insights on evidence use in policy from researchers who, recognising that evidence alone cannot resolve complex policy challenges, have ventured into the political arena and gained direct experience in policymaking. The paper is structured into three parts, with each author sharing personal reflections on evidence use across different levels of government policy. [Author] reflects on her experiences within a district council in England, suggesting that the current funding landscape and the nature of decisions elected members are tasked to make means that robust and transparent governance takes precedence over research evidence. [Author] reflects on his time in a Scottish unitary authority, highlighting institutional challenges to integrating research evidence into the day-to-day business of debate and decision-making for committees within local government. Lastly, [Author] argues, based on her experiences as an elected national member of parliament in the Netherlands, that academics need to actively engage in proposing alternative policy solutions, not just critique existing ones. Together, these insights advocate for a more integrated approach where academic commitment meets practical policy innovation.

View from a district council: A focus on assurances over ‘what works’ style evidence

Preston is a city in the North West of England. The district council is part of a two-tier system of local government and its responsibilities include planning, waste collection, parks and leisure, and housing. The council operates under a leader and cabinet model, where both are held to account through a scrutiny committee made up of opposition leaders and backbench councillors. I was elected to Preston City Council in May 2022 and was bringing to this new political role a perspective on ‘evidence’ heavily shaped by my clinical and academic experiences. I had previously worked as a physiotherapist making use of NICE guidelines, and also in stroke rehabilitation research. More recently, my research has been in the field of public health. While the breadth of policy issues is much wider, the primary ambition of much public health research is to produce generalisable insights about cause and effect, along with evidence of ‘what works’ in terms of *discrete* policy actions and interventions. A central reflection from my time in local government is how infrequently this particular formulation of the ‘what works’ question actually crops up.

One reason for this is the piecemeal nature of local government funding, something that I hadn't fully appreciated prior to serving as an elected representative. Councillors are regularly asked to accept into budgets additional ring-fenced and time limited funding to respond to a range of issues such as homelessness reduction, cost-of-living and household support, and running costs of swimming pools. Larger grants (for example the UK Shared Prosperity Fund) are used to fund initiatives such as tree planting, new CCTV, investing in community infrastructure, commissioning projects with young people, funding cooperative networks to reduce digital exclusion, and many more. From the perspective of an elected member, there is simply not the time nor the capacity to delve into the minutiae of each and every activity to establish just how 'evidence-based' it might be. The evidence that does matter, however, is whether partners have established relationships with the authority, a reputation for doing excellent work with the communities they serve, and a track record of delivering positive impacts despite chronic underfunding. The question I'm asking myself when reading such reports is whether I'm assured that there is a fair allocation of funding across the city and across different social groups, and how the area I represent might benefit.

I also hadn't fully appreciated how, as a new member of council, you arrive *in the middle* of long-term programmes of capital spending. Preston has a number of major projects underway including the development of a £45million council-owned cinema and leisure complex in the city centre. These projects are years in the making and when the scaffolding is up, or spades are in the ground, the time for debating their merits and underpinning 'evidence' has long since passed. The most immediate concerns relate to the day-to-day management and financial implications of any delays. The reports affiliated with these developments are often highly technical and what members most need is to feel assured about the quality of information being provided, that alternative options have been thoroughly investigated, and that governance arrangements continue to be sufficiently robust throughout the development. I've been completely overwhelmed by the breadth and scale of activity that is being delivered by a relatively small authority. In these resource-constrained environments, it's clear to me that policymaking is less about discrete, evaluable interventions, and much more about 'bricolage' (Freeman 2007) and bargaining to leverage financial and symbolic power to ensure all partners are delivering in the best of interests of the city. These insights are however specific to my experience as a backbench councillor and may not hold true for councillors with additional roles and responsibilities, or indeed for council officers themselves.

View from a unitary authority: The challenge of bringing available evidence to the fore

The literature on evidence use within local government has highlighted the poor availability of evidence and funding for local collection of evidence and analysis, but, having spent two years in local government in Edinburgh, it appears to me that the literature neglects another key factor: namely, that local democratic processes don't often facilitate the consideration of evidence, even where it exists.

After 2.5 years as a councillor in Edinburgh, things look different in local government compared to the national Scottish Parliament level where I've previously worked. However, my impression is that this is not because of a lack of evidence *per se* - though the level and quality of evidence

certainly does vary between different areas of policy and individual issues - or because of an active disregard for evidence by councillors and council officials. Rather, there are a range of factors that militate against evidence being considered by elected representatives.

Edinburgh Council, like many UK Local Authorities, is run by committees, most of which are both decision-making and scrutiny bodies. They meet usually monthly or every second month, and have a very high workload: my last committee meeting before writing this piece considered 23 items of business. The substantive parts of each report are not supposed to exceed 2 pages (though extensive appendices of evidence can be provided), speeches are limited to 3-5 minutes and debates to 40 minutes in total. The evidence presented is often limited in terms of qualitative and lived experience evidence, with little consideration of existing academic and other quality research. Unlike the Scottish and UK Parliaments, there is no process for calling academic and other experts to provide evidence. Any group can make deputations to the committee, and when they do, their testimony is often influential and a useful source of lived-experience evidence, which is typically lacking. However, such testimony and evidence are much less frequent compared to parliamentary committees.

This does not necessarily mean the evidence is not available or hasn't been gathered and reviewed at some other point in the policy process in the council. In many cases, there has been extensive and high-quality research, evidence-gathering has been done, but that research is not often fully made known to councillors in the usual committee reports because of the limits noted above. For example, in May 2024, Edinburgh councillors were asked to provide approval for £0.5m of investment in work to help people claim unclaimed social security entitlements. The report on this contained very little detail on the specific measures to be progressed or the evidence base for a relatively large investment that will have significant impact on the council's anti-poverty strategy. However, on discussing this before the meeting with council officials, it became apparent that gathering and analysis of evidence had been considerable but neither elected decision-makers nor the public was privy to this.

Whilst policy decisions presented to councillors by council officers will come as part of a report which will usually have at least some element of analysis of the evidence, this is not the case for decisions brought by councillors themselves. Most decisions will go through a report stage first, and the council officers who write the report will usually use evidence to support the recommendations. However decisions can and sometimes are put to councillors without any prior consideration of the issue nor the evidence on it, and the debate over the motion will be the first time evidence is considered and debated in public. In a similar way that all Edinburgh Council decisions need to come with a statement of the impact on climate change, it should be possible for all proposed decisions, elected member-led as well as officer-led, to be required to state the supporting evidence for the policy being proposed.

In my experience local government does sometimes suffer an evidence deficit for the reasons outlined in the literature. However, there is also a deficit in the sense that the evidence that is available does not always make it into the council chamber or committee rooms because of the way council business works.

View from parliament: The need for academic commitment to alternative policy proposals

As a politician, research consultant and academic I am interested in how to bridge the gap between science, policy and practice in the domain of healthcare and at the interface of health and violence. As an academic, I focus on the relationship between science and policy and the factors that affect when, how and why research (on secure youth care) is used, specifically by political actors. I am an elected city councillor in the tenth largest city in the Netherlands (population of ~190,000 people) and was elected national member of parliament for the Democrats 66 Party in the Netherlands.

As a member of parliament you receive input from a range of actors prior to important debates. What I noticed is that individuals, organisations and lobby groups – in contrast to academics – share information on why the current policies are inaccurate and/or have undesirable effects, how to overcome those effects and they provide alternatives to the current policies. Academics on the other hand primarily focus on the limitations of current policies and hardly ever provide alternatives. That makes sense as academics have confidence in the things being researched, which is often on what (aspects of) current policies are (not) working. The alternatives to the current policies are mostly not grounded in research or based on strong evidence. However, I believe academics are experts in their field and do have opinions on what the alternatives should be.

To illustrate this with an example: as a national member of parliament I had a plenary debate (which is considered one of the 'biggest' debates with large media coverage) on secure youth care. For weeks I had been receiving input from individuals, organisations and lobby groups. Besides that, I had been arranging multiple work visits and initiated several meetings myself (for example with ex-clients and/or their parents, with the inspection, and with the youth care organisations that provided this type of care). One day before the plenary debate I received input from academic scholars. Information that I considered relevant and valuable, although a bit late – because most of the speeches are already written by then. They discussed the limitations of the current policies. However, what struck me the most was the opinion article they published two days after the debate discussing how the alternatives should look like. That was the information that I would have wanted before the debate. Furthermore, I find it striking that it did not come up in my mind that I could also approach academics when preparing for the debate – even for me as someone identifying myself (also) as an academic researcher. It didn't occur to me that academics could also have a view on what the alternative policies should look like or the conditions that should be met when discussing alternatives.

In sum, the information that politicians need is not only reflecting on limitations of current policies but also reflecting on how to improve policies; often academics seem reluctant to commit to alternatives, because these alternatives might not have been tested yet. When the challenges in social policy are so high, I believe academics also have a responsibility to take a step forward, step out of their comfort zone and discuss alternatives to the current policies. Politicians need the input from academics, especially in times when 'facts and research insights'

are constantly questioned in political decision-making. Furthermore, if individuals, organisations, and lobby groups can engage in a timely manner, so too should academics.

Discussion and recommendations

In this practice paper we draw upon our unique experiences both as researchers studying evidence-use in policy, and as elected representatives across different levels of government, to critically reflect upon the ideals of evidence-based policymaking. As researchers, on the outside looking in, it was difficult to fully appreciate the pace and scale of activity within policymaking settings. It is a stark transition to move from an academic context, where there is the luxury of time to interrogate narrow topics in great detail, to a political one where a raft of complex decisions are often being made within single meetings. Importantly, it has been our experience that despite resource constraints, government officials do seek out and consider a breadth of information to inform political decision-making. This experience chimes with academic scholarship that challenges the default assumption that 'evidence' is not used in policymaking, while illustrating the range of sources drawn upon beyond academic research (Oliver, Lorenc, & Innvær, 2014). There are however significant challenges for elected members in undertaking detailed and high-quality scrutiny of the evidence underpinning policy proposals. To overcome these challenges, changes are needed on both sides of the evidence-policy dynamic.

Recommendations for policymakers

Two of the three accounts here suggest that many of the barriers to better use of academic evidence within political decision-making are structural, i.e., they are embedded in the way local government operates. Rather than evidence being unavailable, the Preston and Edinburgh experiences point to fundamental challenges in terms of the often reactive nature of local government decision-making (itself driven by the design of national funding arrangements); overloaded committee agendas where there simply isn't the time to delve into the detail of underpinning evidence and analysis; and longer timeframes over which decisions are being made (e.g., capital spending) that are at odds with academic research. If there is a genuine desire to see greater consideration of research evidence in political decision-making, current structures would need to be redesigned. For example, if more time was given for decisions by restructuring committee agendas and delegating more procedural items, it would then be possible to debate complex policy issues in greater depth. Research evidence could be presented by invited academic and lived-experience experts as standard and ahead of decisions being made, avoiding the situation where evidence or academic insights arrive too late. Changes to the way national funding is allocated, with local government having to rely less on small, discrete, and short-term funding pots is also essential to fostering longer-term, joined-up decisions that make better use of evidence.

Recommendations for academics

Our reflections have also highlighted challenges around the timeliness and availability of *relevant* evidence, a barrier repeatedly highlighted in the literature (Oliver et al. 2014). As a result, academic insights are often underutilised in political debates. This gap largely arises from

a misalignment between the information academics produce and the practical needs of politicians and policymakers. While academic research frequently critiques current policies, it often fails to offer actionable alternatives. It is understandable that academics may have concerns around credibility if advocating for policy proposals that have yet to be evaluated. However, debating the viability of possible alternatives is a central part of the policy process to which academics should be contributing. As such, academics would benefit from guidance on how to influence political processes and identify the right moments to introduce their knowledge. Building relationships and trust between academics and policymakers is important and initiatives such as Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) and the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO), along with policy-engagement teams within universities, provide invaluable support. However, their impacts may ultimately be limited, particularly within local government settings, without the structural changes set out above.

Final thoughts

Academia and policy are undoubtedly very different settings, as is reflected in the extensive commentary on the 'two communities' theory (Caplan 1979). While the role of academics is to focus primarily on theoretical and methodological rigour in generating evidence on discrete issues, legislators are tasked to balance this knowledge with significant political and practical considerations as part of a whole programme of government. However, having had the chance to work in both spaces, it is our sense that there are significant opportunities to influence decision-making through greater integration of research evidence. This requires that researchers develop a much deeper understanding of the actual (rather than the idealised) processes of policymaking, and the day-to-day realities and knowledge requirements of policymakers (both administrative and political). In such settings, where resources are scarce and time is of the essence, decision-makers must navigate a delicate balance between waiting for robust evidence on the effectiveness of policy action, and taking decisions based on the best available information. In conclusion, our reflections point to the need for a paradigm shift that moves beyond traditional divisions between so-called 'knowledge producers' and 'end-users', to see policymaking as an endeavour of collective problem solving, where there is a shared responsibility and trust between all actors.

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