

About the guiding principles

This document presents a set of guiding principles for researchers and research commissioners - or 'evidence generators' - on how to generate (create) and translate (communicate and disseminate) evidence effectively. They have been designed to be most relevant to those working in the field of healthy sustainable diet shift, but are also relevant to those working in food systems more broadly.

The Guiding Principles have been developed to encourage and support evidence users - policymakers and practitioners in public sector and industry - to adopt and implement evidence on healthy sustainable diets by helping evidence generators to get the right evidence to the right users, in the most effective way possible. More specifically, this document aims to support evidence generators to:

- understand the evidence needs and preferences of users, including food policymakers and practitioners
- create evidence and communicate it effectively to food policymakers and practitioners
- bridge the gap between evidence generation and evidence use in policy and practice for healthy sustainable diets

These Guiding Principles were developed for the Food Standards Agency's Optimising Evidence-Use for Diet Shift Project. The project scope and methods are detailed in Appendix A.

The objective of the project was to understand how evidence on what works to shift people towards healthy sustainable diets can be better translated for, and adopted by, the wide range of food policymakers and on-the-ground practitioners who have a role in influencing diets.

Practitioners include a diverse network of on-the-ground actors, such as food businesses, from large retailers and manufacturers to small cafes; professional practitioners, such as health practitioners like dietitians and nutritionists to caterers and public sector provisioners; and third sector practitioners, such as charities and other community groups. Table 4, in the Appendix, provides some further detail on the range of actors with a role in influencing diet shift, and who can adopt or implement evidence to support healthy sustainable diets.

The Guiding Principles are broadly organised according to three different stages of the evidence-use process:

- generation: the creation of evidence (which might be primary research studies or secondary generation through review and synthesis)
- translation: the interpretation, communication and dissemination of evidence to evidence users
- adoption and implementation: the integration of evidence into policy or practice, and its conversion into deliverable actions.

Evidence generators are able to directly influence the first and second stages of the evidence use process. They can decide on the content, methods and types of evidence they create. Effective evidence generation involves providing the evidence which users actually need, by understanding gaps, bridging evidence silos and including the information which users require to take action. Including users at an early stage when creating evidence can ensure it meets their needs.

Generators can also directly influence how their evidence is communicated and disseminated. Good translation involves making sure evidence gets to the users that can actually take action on it, which might be directly or indirectly via a ‘broker’. A knowledge/evidence broker is an intermediary between generators and users, and may perform this role explicitly or implicitly. Effective translation also involves communicating evidence well, by understanding the role of trust and credibility in how evidence is perceived by users. It involves communicating the evidence clearly and at the right time. It involves ensuring different evidence user needs are catered for. Most evidence generators can influence the adoption and implementation of evidence only indirectly, because there are many other influences on adoption and implementation into policy and practice than simply the provision of evidence. An explanation of the evidence-use process - and roles within it - can be found in Appendix B.

Linking research, policy and practice; a range of terms

Many different terms are used to describe the relationship between scientists, policymakers and practitioners and the efforts to strengthen that relationship. They include:

- Bridging research and policy/practice
- Engagement
- Knowledge exchange
- Knowledge transfer
- Use of research evidence
- The science-policy interface
- Translational science
- Research impact
- Research-practice partnerships
- Professional partnerships

These different activities may differ in focus but all, in essence, are about aligning evidence to the needs of, and challenges faced by, evidence users.

The Guiding Principles for more effective evidence use

This handbook sets out eight Guiding Principles for evidence generators to consider when producing evidence for food policymakers and practitioners. For each Guiding Principle, where possible, an example of good practice is provided, along with a list of key questions to consider. Each Guiding Principle also features quotes from the evidence users who participated in the primary research.

The Guiding Principles: Summary

The following summary of the Guiding Principles offers a concise version of the findings. More detail on each Principle is included in the remainder of the document.

Generation

Take a joined-up approach to evidence

- identify which evidence gaps need addressing
- recognise when sufficient evidence on a problem or solution has been established
- position your evidence within the broader context
- demonstrate how your evidence aligns with evidence on other parts of the broader picture
- link to other complementary evidence sources

- provide rigorous, unbiased synthesis of evidence
- focus on the how and by whom
- look holistically at issues
- address both health and sustainability in your evidence
- include economic implications of your evidence where possible, but don't assume economic impacts
- include estimated costs in evidence on policy initiatives and other interventions
- consider the financial impacts for businesses of acting on evidence
- be aware of funding constraints on third sector practitioners
- consider the behaviour change aspects of recommended actions
- provide horizon scanning support to policymakers and practitioners

Involve evidence users and citizens in generation

- utilise different mechanisms to engage with evidence users (such as deliberation platforms, professional partnerships and fellowships)
- involve policymakers early to make your evidence as useful as possible to them
- include commercial practitioners in evidence generation so your evidence takes account of their pressures and incentives and is practically implementable
- consider different methods for citizen involvement, including living labs, or conducting lived experience research

Identify who needs to see your evidence and understand their needs

Identify:

- which diet-shift actors your evidence relates to
- who in an organisation your evidence is relevant for (and don't assume they will share evidence internally)
- which levels of government, and government departments hold the levers to take action on the issue your evidence is addressing

Decide which 'policymakers' you are looking to target:

- elected officials like members of parliament or civil servants (who might be analysts, for example, economists, statisticians, and social and operational researchers who develop the evidence base for policy, or policy officials) or
- corporate policymaking groups and industry sector key opinion formers

Understand users, to:

- demonstrate why different actors should care about your evidence and what actions they might be able to take on it
- create evidence which is food system specific, and sector specific - tailored to particular food system actors and accounting for their different priorities and needs
- consider multiple actor needs simultaneously, for example public acceptability and business implications of a policy intervention

Understand policymaking and the role of politics, to understand what actions policymakers themselves can take

Recognise that:

- policymakers do not hold all of the levers for change, and rely on on-the-ground actors to implement actions
- policymaking is messy, complicated and non-linear

- factors other than evidence provision influence policy, including experience, values and ideologies of policy officials, resources, habits and tradition, and lobbyists, pressure groups and the media

Be explicit about the policy problem you are addressing (which is not the same as a scientific problem)

Translation

Familiarise yourself with different types of evidence, sources where users find evidence and the role of evidence brokers

Recognise that policymakers:

- draw on many sources, including their own experience, information - ranging from peer reviewed scientific evidence and the 'grey' literature - public opinion and feedback from consultation
- often rely on academic research much less frequently than evidence from government, private sector and not-for-profit organisations
- are rarely experts in the field for which they are making policy and rely on evidence synthesis and peer-review for steer

Recognise that commercial practitioners:

- use peers, networks and their suppliers as important evidence sources
- find evidence synthesis reports and webinars useful
- often do not have systems in place around evidence-use
- vary significantly in technical expertise / resources available to them

Recognise that third sector practitioners:

- get evidence from academia, other NGOs, and international sources
- often don't have systems in place around evidence-use
- can be constrained by funding requirements including reporting, which shape the types of evidence or evaluation employed

Use population-level data such as on demographics and income to justify the need for a specific programme or practice

Understand that credibility can mean different things to different users (for example scientific credibility vs real-world credibility)

Undertake and utilise systematic evidence reviews where available

Improve the credibility of your evidence by ensuring methods used to produce it are robust and clearly explained

Build relationships with evidence users to enable trust, but recognise that relationship-building involves investment of resources

Be aware that brokers are used by all different user groups, who have their own particular types and favoured organisations

Understand that for practitioners, whether they be professional or commercial, their relevant professional body is an important source of evidence

Be clear, concise and direct

- communicate evidence clearly and concisely
- match language used to the knowledge base of the audience
- aim for the 'general but not ignorant reader'
- provide quick summaries and take-aways to aid comprehension
- consider employing the services of a professional editor or professional design services (and costing these into research project budgets)
- be as direct about findings and recommendations as possible (while acknowledging complexity or uncertainty where it exists)
- offer clear definitions, including on 'what is a sustainable diet?'
- be explicit about what practical action needs to be taken on your evidence
- clearly explain the 'status' of the evidence – how robust it is (indicative, proof of principle, validatory, etc).
- avoid uninformed or naive policy recommendations
- reflect on, and address, how your evidence can be translated by users to their specific food system activities and to citizens on the ground

Think about how you want to 'frame' your evidence

- consider framing your evidence around the 'why', for example, 'why is this evidence relevant' to a particular user?
- decide whether to position yourself an 'issue advocate' (for example, framing the evidence in a persuasive style) or an 'honest broker' (framing it as neutrally as possible)
- recognise that if your evidence challenges an existing paradigm, you may need a persuasion strategy, but understand that framing evidence in a persuasive manner comes with risks (because evidence generators who become evangelical may be considered to be too much like a political actor and lose credibility). Be explicit about what is evidence and what is interpretation within a message
- consider communicating evidence in the form of a story to aid connection and motivate action

Adoption/Implementation

Be visual and explore multiple formats

- use aesthetically pleasing and easy-to-understand visuals to help users process information quickly and easily
- consider how headings, graphs, tables, icons and infographics can help convey complex information quickly and save space
- be aware that including diagrams / figures in your outputs may increase their likelihood of citation
- understand how presenting evidence in an exciting way (such as through video, social media, a personal experience, etc.) is more likely to engage and connect with audiences
- use multiple mechanisms - and balance auditory and visual presentations - to ensure evidence caters to different user preferences and learning styles
- consider digital inequality, particularly when end-users are individual citizens
- consider educational inequality and cultural differences between end-users, especially when they are individual citizens
- look at the evidence of effectiveness of different formats for different audiences

Get your timing right

- time delivery of your evidence to align with the needs of users
- recognise that making papers timely can involve compromises on developing the 'perfect' piece of evidence
- make your evidence as convenient and accessible as possible

- consider frequent and ongoing communication throughout a project, which may be more useful than complete evidence at the end

Figure 1: The guiding principles at a glance

Source: Authors

Figure 1: The guiding principles at a glance (accessible version)

Generate

- take a joined up approach to evidence
- involve evidence users and citizens in generation
- identify who needs to see your evidence and understand their needs

Translate

- familiarise yourself with the different types of evidence, sources where users find evidence and the role of evidence brokers
- be clear, concise and direct
- think about how you want to 'frame' your evidence

Disseminate

- be visual and explore multiple formats
- get your timing right

Adoption and implementation

Remember this is not a linear process and you may need to revisit some steps.