Get your timing right

Timing is a cross-cutting theme across several of the Guiding Principles, but is addressed specifically again here because getting the timing right is a well-established enabler of evidence-use. There are several different factors to consider when aiming to time evidence delivery for maximum effectiveness: the timing of evidence; the time available to review it; and the number of times it is delivered. Firstly, evidence should be timed to align with the needs of users. This can be challenging due to the different timetables which characterise evidence generation, policy and practice. One issue is that policy-making is generally extremely fast by academic standards, and complex policy decisions are taken in days, weeks or at most a few months… "the time it takes a competent PhD student to begin an introductory chapter" (footnote 1). Policymaking does not wait for evidence to be ready. This means making papers timely can involve compromises on developing the 'perfect' piece of evidence, if by the time it is available the window for adoption is past.

"An 80% right paper before a policy decision is made is worth ten 95% right papers afterwards, provided the methodological limitations imposed by doing it fast are made clear. (footnote 2)" – Chief Medical Officer and former chief scientific advisor Sir Chris Whitty

Secondly, because policymakers and practitioners tend to be time poor, evidence must be as convenient and accessible as possible (footnote 3). Thirdly, frequent and ongoing communication throughout the project are often more useful than one summative presentation at the end (footnote 4). Update emails, with key takeaways concisely summarised, 'bitesize' presentation sessions and informal conversations over coffee or lunch are all recommended tactics to keep policymakers and practitioners engaged in the research and receptive to evidence findings (footnote 5).

Practical example: Timing

WWF timed the launch of a new initiative to coincide with COP26. The organisation convened its advisory group, along with UK retailers, to launch new metrics to half the environmental impact of an average UK shopping basket. The metrics have been co-created by WWF with industry and a range of other organisations.

Checklist

- does the timing of your evidence match the needs of users?
- are there compromises in the development of your evidence which mean it might be available at a crucial time for a particular user?
- have you made your evidence as accessible as possible for time poor users?
- could you communicate your evidence throughout a research project rather than wait until the end?
- have you considered delivering evidence multiple times?

1. Whitty, C.J., 2015. What makes an academic paper useful for health policy? BMC Medicine, 13(1), p.1-5.

2. Whitty, C.J., 2015. What makes an academic paper useful for health policy? BMC Medicine, 13(1), p.1-5.

3. Sources: Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) 'The dos and don'ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics,' Palgrave Communications, 5(21); Phoenix, J. H., Atkinson, L. G. and Baker, H. (2019) 'Creating and communicating social research for policymakers in government,' Palgrave Communications, 5(98); Breckon, J. and Dodson, J. (2016) 'Using evidence: What works? A discussion paper,' Alliance for Useful Evidence.

4. Sources: Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) 'The dos and don'ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics,' Palgrave Communications, 5(21); Phoenix, J. H., Atkinson, L. G. and Baker, H. (2019) 'Creating and communicating social research for policymakers in government,' Palgrave Communications, 5(98).

5. Sources: Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) 'The dos and don'ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics,' Palgrave Communications, 5(21); Phoenix, J. H., Atkinson, L. G. and Baker, H. (2019) 'Creating and communicating social research for policymakers in government,' Palgrave Communications, 5(98).