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THE FORUM

The use of evidence in government and parliament

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Introduction

Evidence has a crucial role in making and shaping policy that improves people's lives. Using evidence well in government helps policy makers to identify problems, set goals, design interventions and evaluate whether policies have had the intended effect. Using evidence well in parliament helps MPs to hold government to account on its performance, prevent bad policy from being implemented and draw attention to problems the government has missed.

Of course, evidence could never, and should not, drive all decision making in government and parliament. The forming of policy is a political exercise rooted in values and the democratic process. Policy makers weigh many factors – their own beliefs, manifesto commitments, constituents' views, wider public and media attitudes – when considering a proposal. Evidence is far from the only source of legitimacy.

Yet senior ministers, civil servants and parliamentarians all consistently express a desire to improve the way governing institutions access, and use, evidence.

Michael Gove, the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and de facto deputy prime minister in charge of civil service reform, gave the fullest account of the current government's views in his Ditchley Lecture in July 2020.[1]

Gove argued that as well as ministers who ask the right questions, government needed civil servants with "deep, domain-specific knowledge... able to make a tight, evidence-rich fact-based argument". Poor training and rapid turnover were preventing officials from becoming "creators of original policy", he said, while government had failed to create enough external bodies that produce evidence of "what works".

The civil service itself has recognised many of these problems for at least half a century. Over the last two decades there has been a string of initiatives to ingrain "evidence-based policy making", reform the policy-making process and ensure analysts and other experts within government get more of a hearing.[2] But officials, too, acknowledge that they still find it difficult to obtain the most timely and useful evidence.[3]

In parliament, MPs report that they struggle to access a wide range of evidence and expertise, while select committee members and staff admit they are often guilty of relying on 'the usual suspects' for providing information. A 2017 study of how MPs shape policy found that academic research often does not "cut through".[4]

The Institute for Government has long had an interest in the role of evidence in the way policy is formed and the way parliament performs its scrutiny.[5] We have argued for reforms to how policy is made to establish a more rigorous test of the evidence underpinning it; for senior officials to be more accountable for standards of evidence; and for the government and parliament to make better use of a range of routes to sourcing expertise, such as secondments and advisory bodies.

Earlier this year, in partnership with The Forum, the policy engagement programme at Imperial College London, we organised two private roundtables, held online, to look again at these themes in the context of the new parliament:

- In March, we discussed how to improve the use of evidence in government and the civil service with a group of senior officials from government departments and arms-length bodies;
- In June, we discussed the way parliamentarians use evidence, with contributions from current and former MPs including Dame Diana Johnson and Sir Norman Lamb, and parliamentary staff. The event was attended by 20 MPs from the 2019 intake.

Our aim for the series was to identify priorities for ministers and officials in government departments and members in the House who wish to see evidence used more effectively. This short paper summarises the two discussions.

Using evidence in government

At the first roundtable, we asked participants to consider how the government can benefit from the best external evidence and expertise; and, in turn, how it can ensure that evidence is properly used in the formation of policy.

Civil servants are time poor and often lack connections with external bodies

Civil servants often lack the time to sift through a wide range of evidence and expert opinion when drafting policy advice for ministers. Timeframes can be very compressed – a minister might ask for a submission on a tricky issue in two weeks' time – and assessing evidence competes among several other priorities. Even when they do have time, civil servants often do not know who it is best to go to: connections with academic or other expert institutions are patchy.

One civil servant said that in the high-pressure environment of working with ministers, "timing and pace are everything". Officials needed to both "respond to the issues of the day, and predict what is coming around the corner".

Meanwhile, cultural barriers – most academics have a poor understanding of how government works; most government officials have a poor understanding of how academia works – make building successful relationships difficult.

Problems like the dominance of generalists and high turnover are well known – but hard to tackle

Michael Gove and Dominic Cummings, the prime minister's chief aide, have identified excessive turnover of staff and a dominance of generalists – particularly arts and humanities graduates – as priority areas for civil service reform. Both problems make it more difficult for officials to develop the "domain expertise" that Gove spoke of in his lecture.

Rapid turnover is particularly damaging to the use of evidence, because connections with external experts are often not passed on, and policy officials who know they will only stay in an area for 12 or 18 months have less incentive to build external relationships.

Attendees agreed these should be priorities for reform, but cautioned that they had been talked about for more than 50 years with little progress made.[6] Sustained attention would be needed to implement changes in tricky areas such as pay and career progression.

Even when ministers and officials have access to evidence, they are not always good at using it

In some cases, the problem is not finding evidence but using it. Government has a large number of analysts (economists, social and operational researchers, statisticians) who tend to have stronger connections with external experts and see "keeping on top of the latest evidence" as a core part of their role.

But they are often not "in the room" with ministers and policy officials when decisions are made. This means they cannot use their understanding of the evidence base to help inform policy choices. One analyst said that the analytics profession was focussed on "how to influence" and communicate evidence in a way that landed with ministers and policy officials.

Ultimately, ministers set the tone for the standard of evidence expected in submissions – and who is trusted and brought into decision making. It is easier for civil servants to base submissions on rigorous evidence if their minister demands high standards – or at least does not discourage the inclusion of evidence that contradicts their viewpoint.

But participants agreed there was a clear duty on civil servants to base their advice on the best evidence even when they found themselves in more difficult circumstances.

Relying on personal relationships to access external expertise has downsides

Civil servants often rely on personal relationships with academics. These can be helpful in establishing the trust needed to communicate freely. But there is a risk of relying on "the usual suspects" – including in some cases connections made as far back as university. This tends to be poor for diversity.

Contributors agreed that civil servants need to keep up to date with a changing academic landscape. As one participant put it:

> "There is a danger that you miss rising stars, or where the discipline has changed. How does government better understand how academia is moving?"

A reliance on personal relationships is also problematic given the frequency with which officials move posts. The way to tackle this is to further institutionalise connections, for instance through the creation of 'expert networks'.

Government needs better ways to benchmark evidence use

Without benchmarking, discussions about how government uses evidence risk becoming repetitive. Many of the barriers that officials face are well known, as are many of the routes to improving connections. But there is little sense that departments currently look across their policy making and assess how well they are using evidence. As one participant noted:

> "The way to avoid going round in circles in these conversations is to benchmark where we are getting evidence into the policy process, and ask how we make progress on those indicators... [Finding] solid indicators of how we're doing and progressing would be helpful."

The policy profession has developed a set of standards for policy making, including guidance on using evidence. But officials did not feel compliance with these criteria was being routinely assessed. The civil service should look for ways to measure where progress is being made and where standards are slipping.

There is a lack of clarity over responsibility for evidence use in departments

Part of the problem is a lack of clear responsibility for standards of evidence use – or as one speaker put it: "Everyone owns this issue, and so no one does." There is not enough of a professional stake present in demonstrating that evidence has been used well.

Setting the standard of evidence used in a department should be a role for permanent secretaries, chief analysts, chief scientific advisers, and departmental heads of the policy profession (HoPPs). But in practice the role often falls between the cracks. Departmental HoPPs are a relatively recent innovation and tend to do their work voluntarily on top of a demanding day job. As one participant said:

> "I'm not convinced that heads of the policy profession are very influential on policy officials."

There are now chief scientific advisers in every department. But their influence is varied. Some are excluded from decision making and do not oversee or manage any staff, which means they have limited means to exercise influence over departmental processes.

Some senior officials do have levers for influencing how the staff they oversee use evidence. One economist told us:

> "The chief economist has influence over economists through the performance appraisal process and through the review of analytical work."

But there is work to do to make a focus on evidence more consistently a priority within departments. This needs to come from the top – from permanent secretaries and ministers.

Failure to understand and communicate risk can blur the line between advice and decision making

The Covid-19 crisis has brought the government's relationship with evidence into sharp focus. The insistence that it was simply "following the science" prompted participants to highlight the division between scientific expertise and political decision making. One said:

> "Analysis determines the risk – but risk management is a policy job… Scientists do the analysis but management has to be the role of politicians and policy makers."

One reason this division can be obscured is that the government has difficulty understanding uncertainty and risk. Policy makers are sometimes unwilling or unable to appreciate that most evidence comes with a degree of uncertainty and is contestable.

Risk communication – "eking out the space to say what you know and what you don't" – is essential, one contributor explained. This is easier if there is a common language for communicating uncertainty.

Another highlighted independent public body the Committee on Climate Change as an exemplar:

> "Their reports have a mature nomenclature for talking about uncertainty. They have language they use to convey what is known, what is believed and what is speculation."

Building on this point, one speaker suggested that a common language, or "a grading, or even a gold standard" to communicate uncertainty more effectively could:

> "Create space to have a richer conversation with politicians about what we know and what we don't, while allowing room to not know".

Another observed that:

> "We're not always even-handed about how we accept uncertainty. People are more accepting about the uncertainty of economics - we need to bring that to other disciplines and types of evidence."

Taking a similar approach to other areas of scientific advice and evidence, and categorising risk rather than hoping to eliminate it, could help policy makers to make sound judgments.

Government has failed to invest in external evidence-producing institutions

Public institutions outside of government can play a crucial role in producing evidence. They often have more freedom and greater ability to develop deep expertise. However, contributors felt this capacity has been degraded in recent years. One reflected that:

> "Over the last 10–15 years science capability has been hollowed out, R&D [research and development] spending has been cut in departments, and agencies and national laboratories have been pushed away from government."

Even where this capability still exists, in places like the Health and Safety Executive and the Food Standards Agency, it is often relatively untapped.

Gove made a related point in his Ditchley lecture, arguing that – beyond the Education Endowment Fund, which he established as education secretary – there had been too little investment in institutions that produce evidence of "what works".

Whitehall departments must also be able to signal their research needs to universities and funding bodies. A Government Office for Science initiative to get departments to publish Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) aims to meet this gap. Launched in 2018, every department (with the exception of the Treasury) has now published its evidence gaps.

The ARIs were seen as a welcome step, but attendees stressed that they need to be the start, not the end, of a conversation between the government and academia about how to develop and share the evidence needed to tackle long-term policy problems.

Using evidence in parliament

At our second roundtable, current and former MPs and parliamentary staff discussed the use of evidence in parliament with a group of MPs elected in December 2019.

MPs also often find it difficult to access timely evidence and expertise

MPs told us that sourcing timely and reliable evidence is challenging. They often rely on their researchers to find evidence to help them prepare for debates. But researchers tend to be generalists with few connections to academia, and little time to develop them. MPs can fall back on known and trusted sources, such as think tanks – although like any organisation, these may have divergent priorities.

There are other sources that can help – particularly the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) and the Commons library. But these are not used as widely for providing links to external experts as they could be.

Select committees have more resources at their disposal. Clerks and committee specialists have a good sense of their policy area – and can help members to find an expert or a piece of research for a particular inquiry. But committees, too, are guilty of relying on the 'usual suspects' – particularly experts who have appeared at inquiries before and proved themselves adept performers.

Understanding parliamentary tools and procedure is critical to being an effective MP

Whether they are scrutinising government policy or pursuing the concerns of constituents, MPs need to know how to bring evidence to bear effectively. This means understanding the range of tools available to them in parliament.

Labour MP Dame Diana Johnson successfully led a campaign on the contaminated blood scandal which led to victims securing compensation and, eventually, a full public inquiry. She explained her approach to deploying the evidence she had gathered in the House:

> **"When backbench business debates were brought in, a new procedure, we used them, we used urgent questions, written questions, and we even used as SO24 [standing order 24] emergency debate. We used the evidence, but we applied it through the procedures of the House."**

Our speakers agreed that All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) can be helpful for pushing forward an issue of concern. APPGs are extremely variable – some meet very infrequently, lack transparency, or struggle to gain momentum. But active groups can become centres of expertise and influence – and vehicles for co-ordinating activities and "doing things a select committee could never do".

Whereas members of a select committee must attempt to reach consensus on an inquiry's conclusions, which often delays publication or leads to findings being toned down, APPGs can operate more nimbly as a campaigning operation for MPs with shared interests.

The secretariats of APPGs are often provided by relevant charities or campaign groups. For example, the APPG on Haemophilia and Contaminated Blood's secretariat was staffed by the Haemophilia Society; Green Alliance recently took over as the secretariat of the All-Party Environment Group.

Many of these forums are already well connected with academics and campaigners, which makes them a useful route for experts to present their evidence to MPs. As Sir Norman Lamb, a former Liberal Democrat minister, told us:

> "I chaired an APPG on sodium valproate, which if taken with pregnancy can lead to developmental issues in children… it's a huge scandal. By combining with two very effective campaigners outside parliament, we were able to force this onto the government agenda, and they appointed Baroness Cumberlege to look into it properly. We're still awaiting the outcome, but the APPG was instrumental."

Dame Johnson cited the work of the APPG on Contaminated Blood – and its appreciation of political dynamics – in ultimately securing the inquiry after the 2017 general election:

> "The PM and government were in those very early days and hadn't yet reached a deal with the DUP. The APPG stepped in and used that opportunity to persuade all the leaders of the opposition parties in parliament, including the DUP, to sign a letter saying there was compelling evidence that demanded a public inquiry. That opportunity was there [only] when the PM was most vulnerable – and so we finally got the nod that the government would agree… A select committee could never be as fleet of foot in those particular circumstances."

Whether an urgent or written question, a backbench business debate, an APPG or a select committee – parliamentarians need to understand the tools they can use to ensure evidence has an impact.

Select committees should reach beyond the 'usual suspects'

The tendency of select committees to rely on the same voices – who are disproportionately white, male and London-based – means they struggle to access a diverse range of expertise.

While there is not consistent data available, one study showed that of the academics who gave evidence to House of Commons select committees between May 2013 and May 2014, 74% were men and over 60% came from London or the south of England, with around 5% from the Midlands and 12% from the north of England.[7] In March 2019, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee apologised after all 10 of its witnesses for an inquiry on national statistics were men.

Some select committees have taken measures to improve the diversity of witnesses. But members and clerks will need to continue to prioritise these efforts.

Select committees could be more proactive in identifying weaknesses in the evidence underlying policy

Select committees are parliament's primary scrutiny tool. They take in a wide variety of different forms of evidence related to every aspect of government business.

Committee staff can help their members find evidence beyond the usual written and oral statements that are the stock-in-trade of select committee inquiries. One participant with experience as a select committee specialist said that from what she had seen, staff take their lead from members – so MPs and peers should direct staff to look for wider sources of evidence.

Several participants felt that, as well as gathering evidence themselves, select committees should be more willing to challenge individual departments on the evidence they use to design policy. As one contributor put it:

> "Going back to the original studies that form the basis for government's received wisdom is really important."

One tool committees could use more frequently is an 'evidence check'. One attendee explained how these work:

> "... take the old committee inquiry model and spin it on its head. Normally you define the terms you think would be valid, call for evidence, and then synthesise it and have oral sessions. The evidence check starts with policies of interest, then goes to the department and asks, 'what is your evidence base?' We then take that to the public and to academics and ask if it makes sense."

The Education Committee has carried out several of these checks in the past – and they have proved effective. But other committees have been slow to take them up. The Liaison Committee has recommended that they should be used more frequently.

Ministerial experience can also help MPs to become more effective at scrutinising the government when they return to the backbenches. Lamb, reflecting on his move to the Science and Technology Committee after leaving the government, said:

> "Being a minister helps you understand how the system works or doesn't work... [and] it gives you a degree of authority if you have established something of a reputation as a minister."

More junior MPs should look to learn lessons about "where the bodies are buried" from colleagues with experience in government.

MPs should generate their own evidence on issues that are important to them

As well as knowing where to look for evidence, MPs can also uncover evidence themselves through Freedom of Information (FoI) requests. Lamb told us that he used an FoI to ask every health trust for its waiting times for autism diagnoses and its compliance with maximum waiting times for psychosis treatment.

But MPs do not always have to go through the formal FoI process. The Science and Technology Committee also produced a survey, which was sent to every mental health trust in the country, to find out their policy on promoting e-cigarettes as a way of quitting smoking. The committee found that many trusts banned the practice, even though those with mental ill health suffer from lower average life expectancy, and reducing the smoking rate among the group helps partially offset the discrepancy. The committee was able to take this new evidence to the government. Lamb told us:

> "By doing surveys, using FoIs, and [taking] data published by the NHS, you can create your own story about what's going on around the country. It's credible evidence, and you can use it to put pressure on the government."

Ultimately, the committee challenged existing government policy, and had the guidance changed to allow "the sensible use of e-cigarettes to help people quit smoking".

Combining evidence with compelling stories is the most effective approach

Evidence should provide the foundation of a member's case when they are making a speech in the House. It also helps to give a sense of the scale of the problem. But it is not enough. Evidence needs to be combined with strong narratives in order to change colleagues' minds. One MP said:

> "I found what works best in the Commons is talking about individual stories. Evidence is vital, but you also have to paint pictures and tell stories to get your point across – it's all very well having an evidence base, but pulling the heart strings has the biggest effect in capturing the mood of the chamber."

Another added that building a reputation as someone who takes evidence seriously would make those stories more effective:

> "I tried to always be credible and rational. If you build a reputation for what you say having substance to it, of having reliable and credible evidence as well as powerful stories, then people will be more inclined to listen to you. I spent years campaigning for equality for people with mental ill health – on that issue there are very compelling stories, and [there is] also massively compelling evidence on inequalities. When you combine the two, you get the best effect."

Conclusion

Evidence is at the heart of good governance. Those forming policy rely on it to identify problems, design interventions and test whether they have worked. Those scrutinising policy rely on it to hold the government to account. Ministers, civil servants and parliamentarians have all taken steps to improve the way evidence is used in policy making. Yet many still struggle to access and use evidence effectively. We hope this report contains some useful lessons and helps identify priorities for reform.

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