

Chapter 11

Influencing policy and practice through social science research evidence

Authors

Lisa Scullion, University of Salford, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5766-3241

Dave Beck, University of Salford, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4600-6905

Katy Jones, Manchester Metropolitan University, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8090-4557

Catherine Connors, Salford City Council

Philip Martin, University of Salford

Andrea Gibbons, Independent Researcher, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4600-806X

Celia Hynes, University of Salford

Abstract

In this chapter, we contribute to debates about how social science research can influence policy and practice. We draw upon our own experiences as social policy researchers whose work focuses on poverty and social security to provide case studies of our varied efforts to influence policy and practice at both local and national level. We identify three main approaches that we have utilised across our research: working collaboratively with policy and practice stakeholders in the design and delivery of research; engaging with national policy and practice stakeholders during the lifetime of projects; and submitting research evidence to government consultations. Our approaches represent varying degrees of relationship building and ‘closeness’ with policy and practice stakeholders, which in turn impact on both the level of influence our work has achieved but also our understanding of that influence. In this chapter we provide some reflections and lessons learnt from across our work.

Keywords

Evidence based policy making; policy maker and practitioner engagement; qualitative research; research impact.

Introduction

The role of social science research evidence in policy making is not new. Without the ground-breaking empirical work of social researchers, policy making would be far removed from what we experience today. For example, Charles Booth’s examination of poverty in London ‘shape[ed] social and political responses to poverty’ (Bales, 1999: 155) and combined with Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree’s research on poverty in York, evidenced the structural causes of poverty across the country. Described as the ‘pioneers’ of modern poverty research (Lister, 2021: 24), their research heavily influenced the Liberal social welfare reforms of the early Twentieth Century.

In contemporary UK society, the use of research evidence in policy making is often attributed to the New Labour Government and its modernisation agenda (Sutcliffe and Court, 2005; Andrews, 2017), which advocated that ‘policy decisions should be better informed by available evidence’ (Sutcliffe and Court, 2005: piii). Consequently, a new relationship between social science and policy making emerged, as the government looked to social scientists to ‘tell us what works and why and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective’ (Blunkett, 2000). The term evidence-based policy making (EBPM) became common parlance, and the government produced several documents on

EBPM emphasising the knowledge produced by researchers in relation to causal or theoretical knowledge of ‘what works’ (Parsons, 2002). This commitment to the use of evidence continued under the subsequent Coalition and Conservative Governments, with the introduction of the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), the Open Data Institute, plus the creation of the What Works Centres (Andrews, 2017). The latter represented an expansion of initiatives of the Labour Government, with a network of 13 What Works Centres¹ in existence today, which aim to ‘ensure that robust evidence shapes decision-making’ (Cabinet Office, 2019).

Government commitment to using evidence have often determined that specific types of research evidence are favoured, with an overwhelming bias towards quantitative approaches (Parsons, 2002). With specific reference to addressing poverty and inequality, we can see the emphasis on quantitative data in some of the ‘how to’ guides that are available in relation to EBPM (see the What Works Network, 2019, for example). However, there have been increasing debates about the significance of qualitative evidence in supporting the policy making process (Salee and Flood, 2012; Maxwell, 2020; Natow, 2021; Scullion et al., 2021). Maxwell (2020) identifies three key contributions that qualitative inquiry can make to public policies and programmes: (i) understanding how people interpret and respond to policies; (ii) understanding the context within which policies are experienced and that can impact on consequences; and (iii) understanding the processes through which outcomes occur. Qualitative inquiry has increasing importance as part of a broader shift towards ensuring that research evidence provides an understanding of the experiences of those at the sharp end of specific policy or practice (Dwyer et al., 2022). Indeed, as Millar (2007: 537) states in relation to the dynamics of poverty, although ‘quantitative data can map out trajectories...qualitative data can provide an understanding of what lies behind these’.

Methodological debates aside, there are broader debates about EBPM in and of itself, highlighting the muddled relationship between knowledge and policy making (Parsons, 2002), with the implementation of research within the policy making process being regarded as a political activity (Alcock, 2004). This can impact on how evidence is used and ‘typically involves trade-offs between multiple competing social values, with only a very small proportion of policy decisions simply concerned with technical evidence of the effects of interventions’ (Pankhurst, 2017: 5). Indeed, it has been argued that ‘Policymaking is rarely ‘evidence-based.’ Rather, policy can only be strongly *evidence-informed* if its advocates act effectively’ (Mayne et al., 2018: 1). For academics who are seeking to influence policy and practice through their work, there are also significant practical challenges including: understanding policy making processes and the policy cycle; building relationships with policy makers; and how to make research relevant to policy makers (see Oliver and Cairney, 2019 for an excellent systematic review of the key issues). However, despite these debates and acknowledged challenges, there remains a consensus that an evidence-based approach to policy and practice is a positive development (Sutcliffe and Court, 2005) and many academics remain committed to trying to influence policy and practice through their work.

In this chapter, we contribute to the debates about evidence-based approaches and methodologies with reference to our own experiences as social policy researchers whose work focuses on poverty and social security. We draw upon case studies of our projects to describe our varied efforts to influence policy and practice at both local and national level. Across our work, we were able to identify three main approaches that we have taken. The following sections of this chapter are therefore structured around these three approaches. In the *first* section, we draw upon an example of *working collaboratively* with key policy and practice stakeholders in the design and delivery of research, drawing upon a specific partnership that was developed with a local authority. In the *second* section, we focus on the process of *engaging with national policy stakeholders* during the delivery of research projects, drawing upon the case study of a significant qualitative longitudinal project that we are delivering. In the *third* section, we reflect on our experiences of *submitting research evidence* (written or oral) as part of various policy consultations. The three approaches that we have utilised across our research represent varying degrees of relationship building and ‘closeness’ with policy and practice

¹ <https://www.whatworksnetwork.org.uk/>.

stakeholders, which in turn impact on both the level of influence our work appears to have achieved but also our understanding of that influence. We conclude the chapter by providing some broader reflections and lessons learnt from across our work.

Influencing policy and practice at a local government level through collaborative research: the *Salford Anti-poverty Taskforce*

In this section we will provide an example of how we worked *collaboratively with* key policy stakeholders in the design and delivery of research. The example we draw upon is the *Salford Anti-Poverty Taskforce*, an innovative research and knowledge exchange collaboration between Salford City Council and the University of Salford. We begin this section with some background to the partnership, before providing two case studies of research projects delivered through this partnership. The section will conclude with our reflections on the delivery of the research and subsequent impact.

Background to the Salford Anti-Poverty Taskforce

Salford is ranked as the 18th most deprived local authority in England and the third most deprived area of Greater Manchester (Indices of Deprivation, [IoD], 2019), with around 70 per cent of Salford's population reportedly living in areas classed as deprived and disadvantaged (Salford City Partnership, 2017). In recognition of the on-going challenges of addressing poverty and inequality, the Salford City Mayor and Salford Youth Mayor on behalf of Salford City Partnership launched a new anti-poverty strategy in 2017: *No one left behind: Tackling Poverty in Salford*. The Foreword to that strategy stated that 'behind all the statistics are the lives of real people experiencing poverty every day' (ibid: 1). As part of the commitment to understanding the 'lives of real people,' the strategy included the creation of the *Salford Anti-Poverty Taskforce* [hereafter *Taskforce*], which would support Salford City Council and partners to address gaps in the knowledge base; thus 'Creating an evidence base for action' (ibid: 29). The Salford City Mayor's office approached one of the author's (Scullion) to discuss the creation of this *Taskforce*, with a key ask of 'exploring lived experience' (ibid: 29) through a range of qualitative projects. This built upon a recognition of the value of qualitative inquiry from earlier studies conducted in Salford focusing on the impact of welfare conditionality² and benefit sanctions (Connors, 2014; Salford City Partnership, 2015), and a recognition of Scullion's involvement in a significant qualitative longitudinal project focusing on the effectiveness and ethicality of welfare conditionality (Dwyer et al., 2018). Scullion was able to secure financial support from the University of Salford to develop the partnership and the *Taskforce* was created.

The *Taskforce* consists of both frontline and strategic staff within the City Council, representatives from the third sector, and University researchers across a range of social science disciplines and career stages, including postgraduate researchers, and early, mid and late career researchers. The *Taskforce* has core members who take responsibility for leadership of the partnership, and who meet on a regular basis (usually monthly or bi-monthly). In the early stages of the *Taskforce*, initial meetings were focused on identifying a range of specific policy and practice areas where the Council felt that a deeper understanding of people's experiences was needed. A key challenge for the researchers within the partnership was expectation management (which we will return to later) and prioritisation of projects, given that they could not all be delivered at once. Since its inception, this partnership has delivered research on poverty in the private rented sector (PRS) (Scullion, Gibbons and Martin, 2018), living rents (Gibbons, 2019), young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and not claiming benefits (Jones, Martin and Kelly, 2018), and experiences of Universal Credit (UC) both before and during Covid-19 (Scullion et al., 2022a). These

² Welfare conditionality refers to the conditions that are attached to the receipt of publicly funded welfare benefits and services. In this chapter we are referring specifically to the conditions attached to social security benefit receipt. For example, benefit claimants may be expected to engage in various work-related activities and attend regular work focused interviews at the jobcentre. Failure to do so can result in a benefit sanction.

projects have sought to bring together the experiences of poverty in its multiple dimensions with the experience of frontline staff in both the Council and third sector as a basis for both Council action and advocacy. Here we draw upon two of those projects to briefly describe where our collaborative research was able to influence the policies and practices of the Council in key strategic areas.

Precarious lives: Poverty in the private rented sector

Precarious Lives (Scullion, Gibbons and Martin, 2018) was the first project developed and delivered by the *Taskforce*. Although research had been undertaken in Salford around the PRS, particularly in relation to its size and nature, very little was known about the experiences and challenges of being a 'private renter,' beyond the anecdotal information that was available. This project therefore addressed the following interconnected objectives: to map people's diverse pathways into the PRS (for example, previous tenure experiences; reasons for living in the sector; and degree of 'choice' exercised over tenure selection); to explore people's experiences in their current accommodation (for example, conditions; relationships with landlord/contractual arrangements; security of tenure; affordability); and, to provide an understanding of how living in the PRS intersects with other vulnerability factors (for example, links between tenure and low paid/insecure employment; impacts on children/families; benefit take up/experiences; and impacts on health and well-being). The project involved in depth interviews with 29 PRS residents, alongside consultation, though a combination of focus groups and interviews, with 19 practitioner stakeholders representing a range of organisations across Salford.

The *Precarious Lives* report was published in 2018 and the findings presented at an event that brought together key stakeholders from Salford, but also from Greater Manchester (GM), including GM Mayor Andy Burnham. The research highlighted a range of issues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, affordability was the most common concern, particularly the proportion of income that is spent on rent and the difficulties of managing these costs on a low income. The research highlighted that for many participants 'housing costs were prohibitive and acted as a barrier to accessing alternative properties' (ibid: 24). However, there were also issues relating to negative interactions with landlords and letting agents, and the conditions of many properties, including the lack of response to requests for repairs. Additionally, the research highlighted that the participants often felt 'trapped,' with no viable alternatives available, particularly when social housing was perceived to be so difficult to access. Although the research focused on housing experiences, it provided insights into the precarity that some people were experiencing on a day-to-day basis. This related to their wider circumstances in terms of low wage employment, social security benefits, and, in some cases, ill health, whereby even small changes in circumstances could impact on their ability to maintain their tenancy.

Akin to the honest broker (Pielke, 2007) approach, whereby researchers 'simply disseminate their research honestly, clearly, and in a timely fashion' so that policy and practice actors can use it to shape debate and solutions (Oliver and Cairney, 2019: 4), the report did not make recommendations. Rather, it presented a summary of the key issues emerging from across the sample, with a view that the Council would then use this evidence to make decisions in relation to where they felt they should provide additional support to residents. Following the delivery of the research, there have been a number of commitments and developments made by the City Council and partners. For example, commitments to increase the pipeline of affordable homes working with existing Registered Providers, increased planning measures in particular areas as a means of providing further regulation of houses in multiple occupation, and consultation on a selective licensing scheme in an area of the city. The City Council also made a successful bid to the PRS Access Fund, with a focus on a guaranteed rent scheme, and landlord and tenant support for single vulnerable applicants under the age of 35. Additionally, the City Council has established its own housing company – *Dérive* – to deliver new affordable housing and 'tackle the 'housing crisis' in the city (*Dérive*, n.d.). However, we are not suggesting here that the research was solely responsible for these developments. Indeed, the City Council and partners were already considering and developing initiatives. The value of the research was being able to move away from anecdotal to more robust information.

Hidden young people in Salford

Hidden young people in Salford (Jones, Martin and Kelly, 2018) was the second project delivered by the *Taskforce*. As with the PRS research it was developed due to a lack of in-depth understanding about the experiences of a specific ‘group’ within Salford; in this case young people who were NEET and not claiming benefits, identified by the Council as ‘hidden’ NEETs. In Salford, the Council estimated that more than 2,000 young people were unemployed and ‘hidden’ from mainstream support at any one time, which equated to around half of the total number of those aged 18-24 who were unemployed and considered to be NEET (ibid: 1). The research involved several key phases: a desk-based review of existing evidence; a local consultation event with key stakeholders from youth-related organisations; interviews with ‘hidden’ young people in Salford; and focus groups with key relevant practitioner stakeholders across the city. The research highlighted a range of key findings, with young people demonstrating limited awareness about the support they were entitled to, both in terms of the benefits system and wider local opportunities. Many participants were undertaking temporary employment and ‘cash in hand’ work, with few, if any, legal protections, and some had experienced exposure to crime. Overall, there was a sense that a significant proportion of young people ‘fell through the net’ with the true scale of young people who are both ‘hidden’ and ‘NEET’ in Salford unknown (ibid: 19).

Where this project differed from the *Precarious Lives* project was in relation to both funding and governance. First, the City Council had a budget available for the research from the relevant department responsible for this area of work. Second, rather than reporting to all core *Taskforce* members, the budget holder and lead of the relevant department was identified as the main point of contact for reporting on project progress and outputs. Third, the Council was undertaking work to develop a new NEET Reduction Strategy, which this research was designed specifically to feed into. As such, the project was delivered more as a research commission than the previous project. It also differed in that this report provided a series of recommendations. The recommendations were framed around the following key areas for consideration: the need to count and recognise the issue; informing young people and their families about their eligibility for benefits; reviewing the adequacy and availability of current support provision for young unemployed people; ensuring that young people and their families are aware of all relevant local support services; recognising the role of local organisations in providing extensive outreach to young people, and appropriately supporting these organisations; and encouraging youth friendly employment practices. A consultation event was held to sense check the findings and recommendations with members of the Youth Panel, which was a group of young people engaged with Greater Manchester Talent Match³. The final report was then published in 2018, and as with the PRS report above, the findings were presented at an event that included key relevant stakeholders from Salford and GM. The report, and recommendations, were incorporated into Salford City Council’s 2019-2021 NEET Reduction Strategy and the action plan that was developed to deliver on that strategy (Salford City Partnership, 2019: 10-11). Central to this outcome was the openness of policymakers to critically examine how well their existing services were working, and a commitment to identifying practical, research-informed solutions to better supporting young people across the city.

Reflections

The *Taskforce* projects represent a direct relationship with those in local government who are responsible for developing specific strategies. As highlighted above, the partnership was built on the premise of collaboration with projects co-designed with the City Council based on their specific information, policy and service needs. As such, this approach could be seen as a positive model of policy and practice engagement for researchers because the projects you develop are designed and delivered to help shape specific strategies. As the partnership developed, we learnt practical lessons around policy stakeholders needing recommendations to be made from research evidence (as above,

³ Talent Match was a five-year National Lottery funded programme focusing on supporting the employment of young people (see: <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/talent-match>).

see Oliver and Cairney, 2019). These were vital for the relevant officers to be able to shape specific strategies, but also made it much clearer for us, as researchers, to understand how the research would be used. The *Hidden young people in Salford* project, for example, made a series of recommendations, *in consultation with* relevant stakeholders. This helped ensure that they could be acted upon; that is, it ensured that they were written appropriately but were also realistic in relation to delivery within the strategy and action plan that would be developed.

However, the partnership has not been without its challenges. We learnt lessons from the delivery of the first project (*Precarious Lives*) in relation to two different ‘cultures’ coming together; that is, the University and the local authority. As researchers, we had to manage expectations in relation to how many projects could be delivered and delivery timescales, particularly when working in situations of limited or no funding. Indeed, the *Hidden young people in Salford* project was the exception rather than the rule as a project that was fully funded. Overall, the *Taskforce* has operated on the basis of the University funding a part time research fellow to deliver projects alongside the commitment of various unfunded academics who wanted to support the local authority in their efforts to address poverty across the City. However, for many of the academics involved, this has presented workload challenges, particularly where work was unfunded, or more appropriately ‘self-funded’ (Edwards, 2020). The City Council have provided officer time as in-kind support to help shape the strategic direction of the *Taskforce* and facilitate access to key staff and external stakeholders who could support the delivery of the research. However, there was, and remains, a much more significant challenge relating to the resourcing of this evidence-based approach moving forward, particularly within the context of local authority budget constraints where resources to commission research are minimal or non-existent.

Engaging with government departments: the *Sanctions, Support and Service Leavers* project

In this section, we focus on an example of our efforts to engage with policy makers at a national level, drawing upon on a project called *Sanctions, Support and Service Leavers* (Scullion et al., 2017; 2018; 2019; 2022b). Funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT), the project represents the UK’s first substantive research to focus on military veterans’ experiences within the benefits system. The project is using a qualitative longitudinal approach to track the experiences of veterans as they navigate the benefits system over time. Initially, the research was undertaken over two years (2017–2019), with two waves of interviews completed at a 12-month interval over that period. The inclusion criteria for the research were those who had served in the UK Armed Forces and were claiming one of the following out of work benefits: Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) or UC. A total of 68 veterans were recruited, with the support of a range of organisations, as a starting sample for the project, with 52 taking part in follow up interviews around 12 months later. The baseline interviews focused on a range of issues relating people’s transitions from military to civilian life, including experiences of moving to various civilian ‘systems;’ for example, health care, housing, employment, education/training. The interviews then focused specifically on their experiences within the benefits system. The follow up interviews explored what had happened to people in the period since their first interview; for example, any changes in their benefits, experiences of benefits assessments, movements into or out of work, as well as any changes relating to their health and well-being.

The project was designed to address a significant gap identified in existing knowledge and literature (Scullion et al., 2017), and aimed to provide an evidence base to inform policy and practice in relation to the provision of social security for veterans. As such, stakeholder engagement was vital. From the outset of the project, including during the development of the research proposal to FiMT, a Project Advisory Group (PAG) was established, which included representatives from Armed Forces charities, the Ministry of Defence (MoD), the National Health Service (NHS), and academics with expertise in relation to military transitions. The PAG acted as a ‘sounding board’ for the research and was regularly contacted for comment, advice and support on various aspects of the project. For example, providing input into the research instruments, supporting participant recruitment, and providing feedback on the reports. The research team also engaged with the Department for Work and Pensions

(DWP) to ensure that they were aware of the project and the aims. Although not involved at the outset, the DWP subsequently joined the PAG around half-way through the project as a key stakeholder.

Across the lifetime of the initial project (2017-2019), two reports were produced (Scullion et al., 2018; 2019), which presented both key findings *and* recommendations, with recommendations being seen as key by FiMT, PAG members and the research team to provide policy makers with ‘concrete’ issues to respond to. The recommendations included: ensuring that guidance on eligibility to benefits was provided to those leaving the UK Armed Forces; ensuring that Armed Forces background is recorded by the DWP so that veterans can be identified and tracked within the benefits system; ensuring that disclosure of Armed Forces status triggers appropriate support, including signposting to any relevant local third sector organisations; urgently reviewing benefits assessment processes to ensure they are appropriate for the mental and physical health issues that may be attributed to service in the Armed Forces; and, reviewing the DWP Armed Forces Champion role to ensure the support being provided by those undertaking the role is consistent.

There were two significant policy and practice changes that the research helped support: first, an enhanced DWP Armed Forces Champions Network and the introduction of a new role within DWP of Armed Forces Lead, to oversee the work of the DWP Armed Forces Champions; and second, the introduction of an Armed Forces ‘marker’ on UC (FiMT, 2021), to enable recording of Armed Forces background when people make benefit claims and to trigger signposting to relevant support where needed. A commitment was also made by the DWP and MoD to work collaboratively to provide further guidance on the benefits system to Armed Forces Service Leavers (FiMT, 2020).

Reflections

Elsewhere we have reflected on the importance of the longitudinal nature of the project for enabling this positive policy maker engagement, specifically in relation to providing sufficient time for meaningful relationship building (Scullion et al., 2021). Additionally, on-going sharing of emerging findings was important (Corden and Nice, 2007), particularly opportunities for pre-publication sight of the reports (Scullion et al., 2021) and regular briefings on the project to key stakeholders. Similar to the *Taskforce* reports above, both the interim (Scullion et al., 2018) and final report (Scullion et al., 2019) were launched at a stakeholder event. However, the *Sanction, Support and Service Leavers* project focused primarily on reaching stakeholders nationally rather than targeting local/regional influencers. As such, the final report launch took place at the House of Lords to encourage attendance of relevant parliamentarians and civil servants. The approach taken to the report launch was also to have invited responses from two relevant government departments (DWP and MoD); as such, following the research presentation, representatives from the departments publicly reflected on the findings and discussed how they would respond to the recommendations.

A key approach to our engagement with policy and practice stakeholders in this project was our efforts to ensure that they could see the value of the research. As such, opportunities to help shape areas of focus - for example, being able to add questions of relevance to them to the question guides - but also our commitment to identifying good practice was vital (Scullion et al., 2021) to avoid a polemic report that might discourage positive engagement with the findings and recommendations. Although the project involved public facing dissemination through launch events, most of our efforts to engage with policy makers went on behind the scenes, with regular email exchanges and meetings to discuss the findings and understand how these could best support policy and practice. As such, we need to reflect on the considerable effort involved in trying to influence policy that is often unseen.

At the time of writing the project continues up to autumn 2023, following a continuation of funding from FiMT (FiMT, 2021). The positive stakeholder engagement also continues, with additional policy stakeholders joining the PAG, including a representative from the Office for Veterans’ Affairs. Additionally, the research is also spanning new areas, including advocating for trauma-informed

approaches within the benefits system (Scullion and Curchin, 2022), and working with trauma-informed care experts from the NHS in this endeavour.

The more elusive influence? Submitting research evidence to government consultations

The third approach we identified in relation to our efforts to influence policy practice was the submission of research evidence to government consultations. Engaging with the UK and Devolved Governments in evidence giving is relatively straightforward. There are regular ‘calls for evidence’ from both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, plus from many subject specific Parliamentary Select Committees, centred on specific areas of government policy, for which evidence can be submitted by anyone. The submission of evidence is given in line with specified terms of reference; typically, these are questions that the relevant consultation or specific Select Committee want answering.

Over many years and across numerous projects, the authors have contributed to the submission of research evidence in response to relevant calls for evidence. For example, Beck, drawing upon his PhD research (2014-2018), evidenced the rising incidence of food poverty and food banks across Wales, combining both the numbers of new food banks, with a qualitative understanding of why people were forced to use them (Beck, 2018). Overall, the research demonstrated the link between welfare reforms and austerity measures and the rise in food insecurity and food bank use. Beck submitted responses to several ‘calls for evidence’ from both the House of Lords and the House of Commons, plus Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Government Committees, all of whom were keen to understand the rise of food banks within the context of welfare reform (see Beck, Closs-Davis and Gwilym, 2021; Closs-Davis, Gwilym and Beck, 2021 as examples of these submissions). As a mixed-methods research project, being conducted at the most intense period of food banks the UK has witnessed, the evidence generated was hoped to be of significant value to policy makers. Indeed, Beck’s work was cited in a number of reports published following specific inquiries and consultations (see for example, Forsey and Mason, 2015; Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, 2020).

Similarly, the other authors of this chapter have also contributed to various calls for evidence, specifically in relation to the benefits system. Two of the authors (Jones, Scullion), as part of their involvement in a project focusing on the impact and ethicality of conditionality within the benefits system (Dwyer et al., 2018) contributed to written evidence submissions that were cited in the reports of seven Westminster or UK level inquiries: Work & Pensions Committee 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018; Public Accounts Committee 2018; Social Security Advisory Committee 2016; Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee, National Assembly for Wales 2017. Their work was also cited in the final report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur Professor Philip Alston’s 2018 *Inquiry into Extreme Poverty and Human Rights in the UK*.

Our research has been submitted to calls for evidence covering a range of issues and experiences relating to the benefits system, including: the impacts of benefit sanctions; in-work progression and UC; experiences of health assessments for benefits; and social security reforms during Covid-19. In some cases, the submission of written evidence has led to a subsequent request to provide oral evidence. For example, in 2017 Scullion gave oral evidence to the National Assembly for Wales’ Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry on *Making the Economy Work for People on Low Incomes* and in 2021 gave oral evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee *Benefits System in Wales* inquiry; the latter focusing on research that was undertaken during Covid-19. In 2022, following written evidence submitted to the Work and Pensions Committee *Health Assessments for Benefits* inquiry, Martin gave oral evidence at a session focusing specifically on the experiences of veterans. Direct approaches have also been made to the authors to provide oral evidence following the publication of research findings; for example, Jones was invited to give evidence at the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee’s Inquiry in 2020 on the *Economics of Universal Credit*, following the publication of her research report focusing on the often-overlooked perspective of employers (Jones et al., 2019).

Reflections

Although the presentation of oral evidence at government committees can be an intimidating prospect (Jones, 2022), it has provided us with opportunities to present our research evidence in greater detail, often responding to questions that go beyond the original questions posed within the written ‘call for evidence’, as well as the opportunity for direct dialogue with key policy stakeholders such as parliamentarians. The submission of written and oral evidence based on research findings therefore remains a key facet of the impact work undertaken by us (and many other academics), and there is much guidance available on how to submit evidence to inquiries (see, for example, House of Commons, 2016; House of Lords, 2018). What is not clearly articulated within much of the guidance, and indeed what is much less clear to us is what happens after this written or oral evidence is submitted? We are aware that the written evidence is published online, and likewise with the recordings of the oral evidence sessions. We are aware, as above, that our work has been cited within the committee documents that have subsequently been published. We are also aware that Ministers have discussed and debate the evidence, and on some occasions have written to us to indicate how useful our contribution has been. However, how, or indeed whether, this evidence then goes on to influence policy remains elusive to us.

Conclusions: Lessons learnt and considerations for researchers

In this chapter we have presented some of the main approaches we have taken in our efforts to influence policy and practice through our research. As highlighted in the introduction, across our various projects, we identified three main approaches that represent different degrees of closeness and collaboration with key policy and practice stakeholders, from co-produced research briefs and engagement with government departments as members of a PAG, through to submissions of written evidence to an ‘unknown’ group of policy stakeholders. Within the previous sections we have reflected on our approaches and some of the ‘successes’ but also the challenges. Here, we make some final broader practical reflections on our efforts to influence policy and practice.

First, we have learnt the importance of *identifying who your key stakeholders are and engaging with them from the outset*. Indeed, ‘the earlier the better’ would be our advice to those who want to engage with policy and practice stakeholders through their research. Most of our projects have involved policy and practice stakeholders from the outset either as stakeholders involved in developing a research brief, as was the case with our *Taskforce* projects, or as invited members of an advisory or steering group. This early involvement has been vital for helping us to shape research objectives, research instruments and dissemination strategies, to ensure that the research responds to policy agendas (Oliver and Cairney, 2019), but also that it is disseminated in ways that encourage engagement.

Second, we have learnt the importance of *highlighting good practice as well as bad*. Our research often focuses on people who are experiencing significant hardship, including those with multiple and complex needs. The accounts we have given through our research, and the reports we have published, are often critical of specific aspects of policy and practice, and perhaps make difficult reading for those stakeholders who are instrumental in the design and delivery of such policy. These messages are vital and we in no way suggest that findings should be tempered. However, we have learnt that it is important to highlight where people have received positive support, where they have been helped or where things have ‘worked.’ Understanding where support has worked for people can help provide a basis for policy and practice stakeholders from which they can build (Scullion et al., 2021).

It is fair to say that we have favoured approaches that focus on reaching out directly to key policy and practice stakeholders at the outset and trying to establish positive relationships with those stakeholders over time. However, we have also contributed to numerous written submissions to a range of government consultations and although the impact of these submissions is less certain, we still believe that these are an important tool within a toolbox of approaches that academics can take when

considering how to influence policy and practice through their research. Our *third* reflection here is to *answer the questions that have been posed* in the consultation. It may be tempting to upload a full report, with an expectation that a committee can read it to find the answers to their questions, but we suspect that there is a greater likelihood of messages being read and understood if they are provided within the appropriate format. Related to this, our *fourth* reflection is the need to *write succinctly for your specific policy and practice audience*. Indeed, after many years of writing detailed lengthy research reports to do justice to the data that we have collected, we have learnt that these reports are unlikely to be read in full. As such, we have learnt that the executive summary is vital for communicating the key findings and recommendations ‘up front.’

The final broader reflection we make is to *never underestimate the time and resources required to engage with policy and practice stakeholders*. As Oliver and Cairney state: ‘Policy engagement is a career choice in which we seek opportunities for impact that may never arise, not an event in which an intense period of engagement produces results proportionate to effort’ (2019: 8). Even within those research projects where funding may be available to resource engagement and impact activities, it is impossible to ever predict the ‘emotional, practical and cognitive labour’ required, and the ‘risks and responsibilities are borne by individuals’ (ibid, 2019: 7). Building up relationships with policy and practice stakeholders across our various projects has taken significant time and effort for us, as individuals and as research teams, and even when such relationships have been developed, policy and practice influence is never a certainty. Indeed, more often than not, the impact of our research remains unknown. As researchers, we are increasingly required to demonstrate the impact of our research. Perhaps there should be an equal expectation on policy makers to be more transparent about which research they are using to shape their policy decisions and the process through which this happens? However, despite these challenges and uncertainties we remain committed to the belief that ‘Evidence matters for public policymaking’ (Pankhurst, 2017: 4) and will continue with our varied efforts and approaches to try to influence policy and practice through our research.

Further reading

Jones, K. (2022) *How to win friends and influence policy: a guide for new researchers*, in Vorley, T., Rahman, SA., Tuckerman, L., Wallace, P. (eds) *How to Engage Policy Makers with Your Research - The Art of Informing and Impacting Policy*. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

Mayne, R., Green, D., Guijt, I., Walsh, M., English, R. and Cairney, P. (2018) ‘Using evidence to influence policy: Oxfam’s experience’. *Palgrave Commun* 4, 122.

Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) ‘The dos and don’ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics’, *Palgrave Commun* 5, 21.

Pankhurst, J. (2017) *The politics of evidence: from evidence-based policy to the good governance of evidence*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Scullion, L., Jones, K., Dwyer, P., Hynes, C. and Martin, P. (2021) ‘Military veterans and welfare reform: bridging two policy worlds through qualitative longitudinal research’, *Social Policy and Society*, 20(4): 670-683.

References

Alcock, P. (2004) The Influence of Dynamic Perspectives on Poverty Analysis and Anti-Poverty Policy in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, 33(3), 395-416. doi:10.1017/S0047279404007731.

Andrews, L. (2017) ‘How can we demonstrate the public value of evidence-based policy making when government ministers declare that the people ‘have had enough of experts’?’, *Palgrave Commun* 3, 11.

- Bales, K. (1999) 'Popular reactions to sociological research: the case of Charles Booth', *Sociology*, 33(1): 153-168.
- Beck, D. (2018) The changing face of food poverty with special reference to Wales. PhD Thesis. Bangor University, online at: https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/files/22198649/2018_Beck_D_PhD.pdf.
- Beck, D., Closs-Davies, S., and Gwilym, H. (2021). Inquiry into Benefits in Wales: options for a better delivery. Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee. Senedd Cymru.
- Blunkett, D. (2000). 'Influence or Irrelevance: can social science improve government?', reprint of speech to a meeting convened by the ESRC on 2 February, *Research Intelligence*, 71: 12-21.
- Cabinet Office (2019) Guidance: What Works Network, online at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>.
- Closs-Davis, S., Gwilym, H., and Beck, D. J. (2021). The benefits system in Wales. Welsh Affairs Committee, House of Commons.
- Connors, C. (2014) DWP Conditionality and Sanctions: An interim report into the Department for Work and Pensions' regime and impacts in Salford, report for the Salford City Council Skills and Work Board, Salford: Salford City Council.
- Corden, A. and Nice, K. (2007) 'Qualitative longitudinal analysis for policy: incapacity benefits recipients taking part in Pathways to Work', *Social Policy and Society*, 6(4), pp. 557-569.
- Dérive (not dated) Launch event for Salford City Council's new housing company, online at: <https://www.derivesalford.co.uk/news/launch-event-for-salford-city-council-s-new-housing-company/>.
- Dwyer, P., Batty, E., Blenkinsopp, J., Fitzpatrick, S., Fletcher, D., Flint, J., Johnsen, S., Jones, K., McNeill, J., Scullion, L., Stewart, A. and Wright, S. (2018) Final findings report: Welfare Conditionality Project 2013–2018. York: Welfare Conditionality Project.
- Dwyer, P., Scullion, L., Jones, K., McNeill, J. and Stewart, A.B.R (2022) The impacts of welfare conditionality: sanctions, support and behaviour change, Bristol: Policy Press (forthcoming).
- Edwards, R. (2020) Unfunded research: why academics do it and its unvalued contribution to the impact agenda, LSE Impact Blog, online at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/08/13/unfunded-research-why-academics-do-it-and-its-unvalued-contribution-to-the-impact-agenda/>
- FiMT (2020) Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) 2019 Impact Report, online at: <https://s31949.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/20200717-FiMT-Electronic-Impact-Report-2019.pdf>
- FiMT (2021) 'Forces in Mind Trust research leads to better support for veterans navigating the benefits system', online at: <https://www.fim-trust.org/news-policy-item/forces-in-mind-trust-research-leads-to-better-support-for-veterans-navigating-the-benefits-system/>
- Forsey, A., and Mason, L. (2015). A Route Map to Ending Hunger as We Know it in the United Kingdom: 'Feeding Britain' in 2015-16. Report for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger, Feeding Britain, online at: https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/437487_a-route-map-to-ending-hunger-as-we-know-it-in-the-united-kingdom_full.pdf.
- Gibbons, A., (2019). Living Rents and Renting in Salford. Salford: University of Salford, Salford.

House of Commons (2016) Guide for witnesses giving written or oral evidence to a House of Commons select committee, online at: <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/witnessguide.pdf>

House of Lords (2018) Information for witnesses appearing before Select Committees of the House of Lords, online at: <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/lords-committees/witnessinfo.pdf>

IoD 2019, Intelligence Briefing: Indices of Deprivation 2019, online at: <https://sccdemocracy.salford.gov.uk/documents/s19853/Intelligence%20Briefing%20-%20Indices%20of%20Deprivation%202019.pdf>

Jones, K. (2022) How to win friends and influence policy: a guide for new researchers, in Vorley, T., Rahman, S.A., Tuckerman, L., Wallace, P. (eds) How to Engage Policy Makers with Your Research - The Art of Informing and Impacting Policy. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

Jones, K., Martin, P. and Kelly, A., (2018). Hidden young people in Salford: exploring the experiences of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) and not claiming benefits, Salford Anti-Poverty Taskforce. University of Salford, Salford.

Jones, K., Berry, C., Rouse, J. and Whittle, R. (2019) Universal Credit and In-Work Conditionality – a productive turn? Productivity Insights Network

Lister, R., (2021). Poverty. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mayne, R., Green, D., Guijt, I., Walsh, M., English, R. and Cairney, P. (2018) ‘Using evidence to influence policy: Oxfam’s experience’. Palgrave Commun 4, 122.

Maxwell, J. A. (2020) ‘The Value of Qualitative Inquiry for Public Policy’. Qualitative Inquiry. 26(2):177-186

Millar, J. (2007) ‘The Dynamics of Poverty and Employment: The Contribution of Qualitative Longitudinal Research to Understanding Transitions, Adaptations and Trajectories, Social Policy and Society, 6(4): 533-544.

Natow, R. S. (2021) How do policy makers perceive qualitative research?, Evidence & Policy Blog, online at: <https://evidenceandpolicyblog.co.uk/2021/04/07/how-do-policymakers-perceive-qualitative-research/>.

Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) ‘The dos and don’ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics’, Palgrave Commun 5, 21.

Pankhurst, J. (2017) The politics of evidence: from evidence-based policy to the good governance of evidence, Abingdon: Routledge.

Parsons, W. (2002) ‘From Muddling Through to Muddling Up - Evidence Based Policy Making and the Modernisation of British Government’. Public Policy and Administration. 17(3): 43-60.

Pielke, Jr, R. (2007) The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sallee, M. W., and Flood, J. T. (2012). Using Qualitative Research to Bridge Research, Policy, and Practice. Theory into Practice, 51(2), 137–144.

Salford City Partnership (2015) DWP Benefit Conditionality and Sanctions in Salford: One Year On, Salford: Salford City Partnership.

Salford City Partnership (2017) No one left behind: Tackling poverty in Salford, online at: <https://www.salford.gov.uk/media/390192/no-one-left-behind-tackling-poverty-in-salford.pdf>

Salford City Partnership (2019) NEET Reduction Strategy 2019-2021: A strategy and action plan for reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in Salford, online at: <https://www.salford.gov.uk/media/394254/neet-reduction-strategy.pdf>.

Scullion, L., Gibbons, A. and Martin, P., (2018). Precarious lives: Exploring lived experiences of the private rented sector in Salford. Salford: University of Salford, Salford.

Scullion, L., Dwyer, P., Jones, K., Martin, P. and Hynes, C. (2017) Briefing paper: social security benefits, welfare conditionality and armed forces service leavers, Salford: University of Salford.

Scullion, L., Dwyer, P., Jones, K., Martin, P. and Hynes, C. (2018) Sanctions, Support and Service Leavers: Social security benefits, welfare conditionality and transitions from military to civilian life: First wave findings, Salford: University of Salford.

Scullion, L., Dwyer, P., Jones, K., Martin, P. and Hynes, C. (2019) Sanctions, Support & Service Leavers: Social security and transitions from military to civilian life: Final report, Salford: University of Salford.

Scullion, L., Jones, K., Dwyer, P., Hynes, C. and Martin, P. (2021) 'Military veterans and welfare reform: bridging two policy worlds through qualitative longitudinal research', Social Policy and Society, 1-14, doi: 10.1017/S1474746421000166.

Scullion, L. and Curchin, K. (2022) 'Examining Veterans' Interactions with the UK Social Security System through a Trauma-Informed Lens', Journal of Social Policy, 51(1): 96-113.

Scullion, L., Gibbons, A., Connors, C., Pardoe, J. and Beck, D. (2022a) 'Complex lives: Exploring experiences of Universal Credit claimants in Salford during Covid-19', in K. Garthwaite., R. Patrick., M. Power and A. Tarrant (eds) COVID-19 Collaborations: Researching Poverty and Low-Income Family Life during the Pandemic, Bristol: Policy Press, 56-70.

Scullion, L., Hynes, C., Martin, P. and Young, D. (2022b) 'Social security during Covid-19: The experiences of military veterans', in K. Garthwaite., R. Patrick., M. Power and A. Tarrant (eds) COVID-19 Collaborations: Researching Poverty and Low-Income Family Life during the Pandemic, Bristol: Policy Press, 149-161.

Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment. (2020). Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food. House of Lords.
<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1762/documents/17092/default/>

Sutcliffe, S. and Court, J. (2005) Evidence-Based Policymaking: What is it? How does it work? What relevance for developing countries? Overseas Development Institute, online at: <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/3683.pdf>

What Works Network (2019) Evidence-based policy in disadvantaged places online at: <https://whatworksgrowth.org/policy-challenges/disadvantaged-places/>