

Use of evidence in public policy

21 June 2017



Roundtable with Dr Sarah Morton



**The
Policy
Project**

Responsive today,
shaping tomorrow



Background and intent

Superu and the Victoria University School of Government (SoG) hosted a roundtable for senior officials and experts with Dr Sarah Morton (Co-Director for the Centre for Research on Families in Edinburgh, and a Director of What Works Scotland). Andrew Kibblewhite, as Head of the Policy Profession (HoPP), joined Dr Morton in providing introductory remarks. Professor Jonathan Boston, SoG, chaired the roundtable.

The aim of the roundtable was to share knowledge and experience of how to achieve positive outcomes from the uptake and application of evidence gained from research and evaluation. The desired outcome is that public servants are better equipped to improve their agency's uptake and application of evidence.

Participants

Andrew Kibblewhite
Head of the Policy Profession
Department of the Prime
Minister and Cabinet

Andrea Schollman
Ministry of Education

Antony Kennedy
Ministry of Business, Innovation
and Employment

Clare Ward
Superu

Deb Struthers
Ministry of Health

Guy Beatson
Te Puni Kōkiri

Jeremy Wood
New Zealand Police

Jonathan Boston
School of Government

Julia McKenzie
Drummond Street (Melbourne)

Kirsten Thomlinson
Superu

Malcolm Menzies
Superu

Margaret MacDonald
Human Rights Commission

Mike Reid
Local Government New Zealand

Nicholas Pole
Education Review Office

Rodney Scott
State Services Commission

Sarah Morton
Centre for Research on Families
and Relationships (Edinburgh)

Simon Wakeman
Social Investment Unit

Tim Ng
The Treasury

Viv Smith
Superu

Policy Project team

Simon Olsen

A 'view from the HoPP'

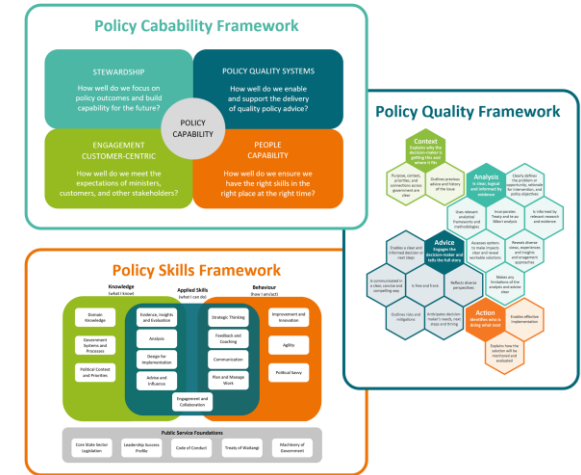
Andrew Kibblewhite, Head of the Policy Profession (HoPP), provided introductory remarks

“Government spends significant amounts of taxpayer money and regulates how we live our lives. Without evidence, including from evaluation, we have no way of knowing if our policy settings are optimal. The Policy Project works with the policy community to collectively improve the quality of policy advice and the evidence underpinning that advice. This is supported by policy improvement frameworks and tools, including the [Policy Quality Framework](#) (which emphasises the need for advice to include evidence and insights from diverse perspectives) and the [Policy Skills Framework](#) (which describes skills related to evidence, insights and evaluation). The [Cabinet Manual](#) has also just been revised, to strengthen expectations for officials to consult diverse sources in policy development.

New Zealand is at the forefront in some areas of policy design (e.g. the investment approach), but in others we are lagging (e.g. applying behavioural insights and design thinking). We need to get better at generating and using data. To maintain trust in government, we need to ensure social licence for the use of data, and to foster a cultural shift towards more public debate on policy issues. Transparency around the Better Public Service Results and major investment programmes is helping with this.

The Public Service needs to invest in the capability to look beyond current government priorities. We need to help ministers see the value of stewardship and looking beyond ‘in the moment’ decisions to think about the longer-term. For this we need to keep a learning mind-set, moving beyond enthusiastically launching new initiatives to also critiquing the results of past initiatives and thoughtfully debating these with ministers, advisors and the public.”

Andrew Kibblewhite, Head of the Policy Profession, 21 June 2017



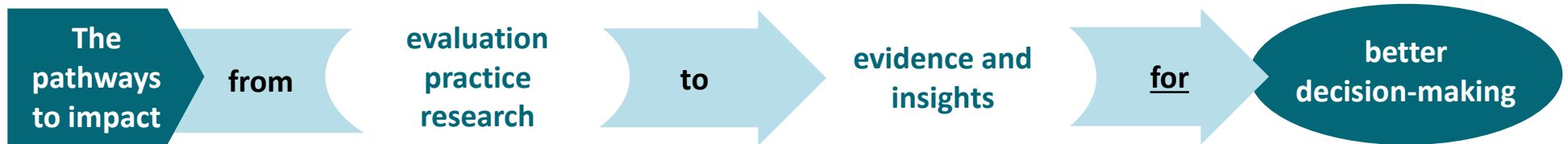
From better evidence to better decisions...

Dr Sarah Morton's introductory remarks



We often know a lot about the problems with using evidence: accessibility, cost, timing, links between professions, and skills. We now need more focus on solutions:

- get skilled people in the right place at the right time
- ensure research and evaluations include 'pathways to impact'



What system changes might help the best evidence be used at the right decision point?

We need to ensure that decision-makers:

- have more time to reflect on evidence, value it, and demand it
- understand current practice (evaluation and research)
- understand community/citizen needs.

This requires us to:

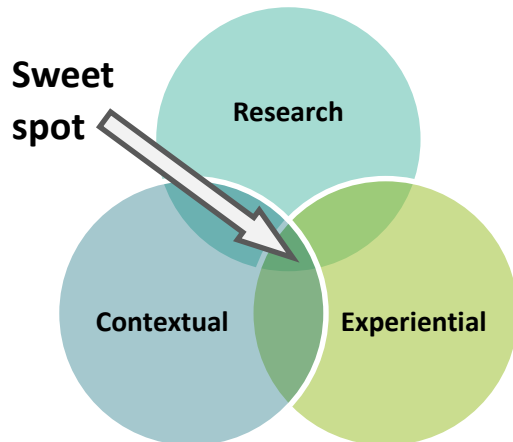
- match synthesis to the specific decisions needed (and why)
- map the evidence landscape and identify the gaps (e.g. in which domains do we know a lot, and a little?)
- ensure the landscape includes terrain that officials *and* citizens are interested in
- consider what each deliberative decision-making process should look like
- link to relevant research entities and programmes.

Building our knowledge base

The group discussed how to build the knowledge base (capital), including research, evaluation, evidence and data to inform policy debate, advice and decisions

What people consider to be ‘knowledge’ depends on their relationships and contexts. Politicians have good access to stories from constituents, which form part of their knowledge base. Officials also hear from citizens, and have access to administrative data, evidence and insights. The challenge is to synthesise and make sense of the diverse sources of information, and ensure that it reflects and resonates with those diverse perspectives.

There are different types of knowledge



If we *really* don't know what to do, we need to innovate: record the ‘action research’, and include the right people to build the new knowledge base.

We know innovation is not well embedded so just start doing it, while building capability. Both those commissioning for outcomes and being commissioned need to *collectively* ask: What is the problem? What works or might work? How might we know?

“We need to understand the different sources of evidence, and how they can be brought together”

“Claims of innovation are false when something is not new”

“If we don't hear from different parts of the ‘system’ we will miss some of the knowledge.”

Building the authorising environment

The group discussed the need to build the authorising environment for producing better evidence and insights (knowledge)

We need to enable and encourage the sharing of what works, and what doesn't. This requires more 'permission' to fail (preferably small and fast) and a culture of sharing the lessons from that failure. This can strain against performance management frameworks and risk averse cultures (exacerbated by media scrutiny).



“There is an art to framing ‘failures’ as being ‘less valuable than other initiatives’”

Gaining specific approval and funding to undertake evaluation (as an integral part of policy design and delivery) ensures that we build evidence ‘as we go’.

Be thoughtful about transparency of innovation in the public domain, gaining small permissions and preparing the ground for an experimental approach. Think about different types of risks and how they can be managed.

“We need a ‘full court press’; academia can help too”

Building human and relationship capital

The group discussed the importance of people and skills to undertake research and analysis (human capital) and relationships and engagement to support knowledge (relationship capital)

People need to be brought into the ‘knowledge base generation’ – it is powerful to build ‘evidence generating capability’ with those who are normally ‘subjects’ or users of research or evaluation. This still needs some centrally-determined parameters.

“Knowledge is embedded in relationships”

Do we have the capability and is it joined up?

In New Zealand, there is a small pool of skilled evaluators (or ‘knowledge brokers’). While numerous agencies now have dedicated teams for research and evaluation, we may not be making the most of our collective capability. How might we create more opportunities for them to connect and join up the evidence, insights and expertise?

“The tide is changing towards more demand for skills in research and evaluation”

Evidence from action is a process, not an event – it requires relationships (e.g. we act on suggestions to use research from people we trust). Relationships can help spread insights to different contexts. To scale up or spread what works, in the end, we can only scale up *processes*, and these need to be adapted to specific contexts through skilful engagement.



Toward 'big data in context'

The group discussed the shift towards 'big data' analytics and how other forms of evidence complement this

With the investment approach, Budget decisions have become increasing evidence-based. The foundations are being laid for more collection, analysis and use of data – but 'sucking data in and pushing it out' alone won't affect good change. Data won't tell you what to do. The challenge is knowing the right time to use the right data, and having the analytical skills and professional judgement to make sense of it.

"Using evidence can be seen as practice process, rather than a policy process."

By itself, big data can sometimes be disempowering for those on the ground, if it is not seen to reflect or resonate with the experience of local groups or agencies. Most change is actually affected by whanau and citizens, not government. We need to apply the right lenses (e.g. cultural) to evidence, and keep confronting our biases, which can affect our interpretation of data and sense-making.



We should not conflate big data with central decision making. It's also about getting data out to decision makers on the ground and about front line operational staff using ICT tools (e.g. smart phones/tablets) to use data modelling to support their decisions on the ground. This also saves on paper work and administrative costs by making data more accessible and useable. They can also help generate data.

"Some practice issues can only be addressed through relationships (e.g. 'doing with, not to')"

Conclusion

Key points on how to get better evidence for public policy:

1. **Co-design** – leverage a broad range of relationships to build the knowledge base, involving those who are both satisfied and dissatisfied, ‘far from the norm’, and from points along the ‘outcome value chain’.
2. **Innovation** – gain small permissions to try and learn what works, be thoughtful about transparency with the public, foster a learning mind-set, and adapt scaled-up processes to specific contexts.
3. **Data analytics** – be careful not to misuse modelling or data, avoid confusing correlation with causation, and use other forms of evidence to make sense of it.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone for their constructive engagement, energy and insights.

Want to know more?

The [Evidence Rating Scale](#) provides a standard against which evidence for effectiveness of social sector policies, programmes, services or practices can be assessed.

[The Hub](#) is a one-stop-shop for New Zealand social science government research.

The [Government Outcome Catalogue Tool](#), developed by the Treasury and Superu, is a catalogue of the social outcomes for government priority programmes, mapping government priorities, outcomes, and proposed or actual measures (where available) for a range of social sector programmes. It also lists how the data is collected, when and by whom.

The [Evidence & Policy Journal](#) assesses the relationship between research evidence and the concerns of policy makers and practitioners, as well as researchers e.g. refer to the article on [evidence synthesis for knowledge exchange](#).

What Works Scotland’s review of [Scaling-up Innovations](#) considers how to effectively scale-up small scale innovation for transformational change.