

Policy Engagement



Creating policy impact in a Scottish context

- Exploring the research about impact
- Mapping the Scottish policy context
- Building policy engagement in praxis
- Measuring progress and learning

Having an Impact

How is change brought about in policy and what role do knowledge and evidence play in securing that? What are the characteristics of impactful research or research related activities and what distinguishes those from other interactions with policy?



What do we know about Impact?



Impact and REF are not the same thing

- REF and other professional considerations are important, but are not the whole story.
- REF may only show one slice of a longer policy journey.



Deficit models of impact don't work

- Policymakers are not waiting around for researchers to point them in the right direction.
- Policy is messy and requires evidence from many sources.



It's not (just) about being heard

- Communication tools only get you so far.
- It is important to understand how policy is shaped by networks, existing interests and power.



How is impact achieved?

- **Collectively**

We know that the best way to think about and achieve impact is by establishing networks, understanding the needs and motivations of others in that network, and through collaboration with colleagues inside and beyond the academy.

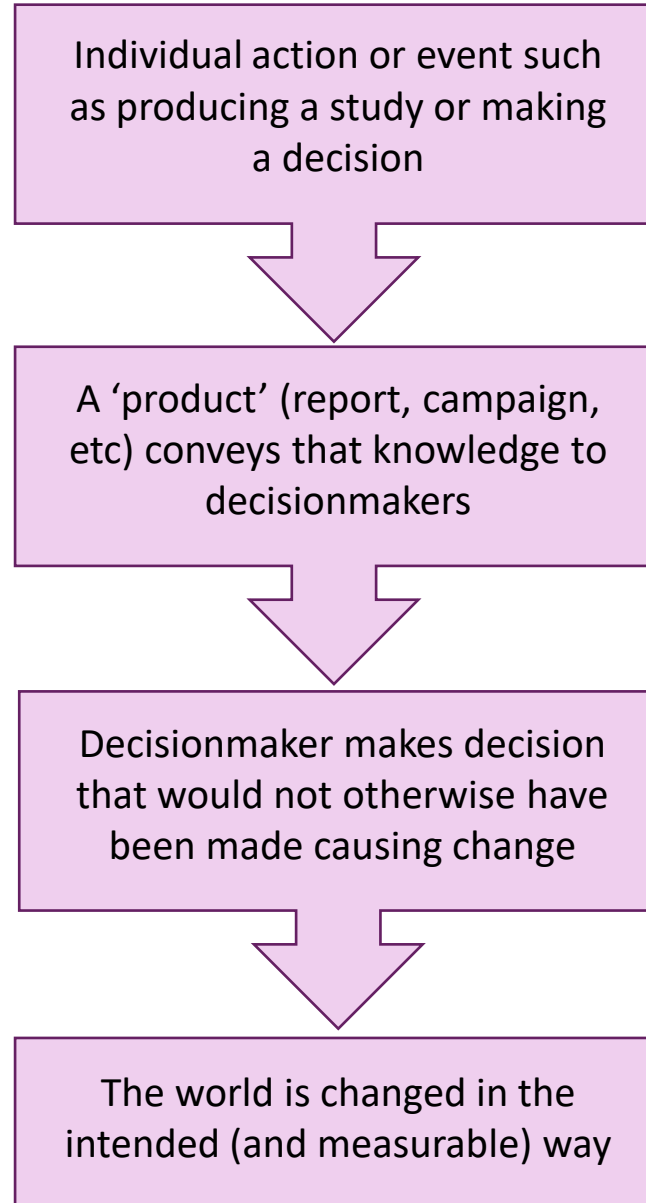
- **Incrementally**

Setting specific, achievable, measurable targets and agreeing those goals iteratively with others involved in the process secures the best results. Funders, coproducers and other agencies such as government appreciate modest but determined objectives.

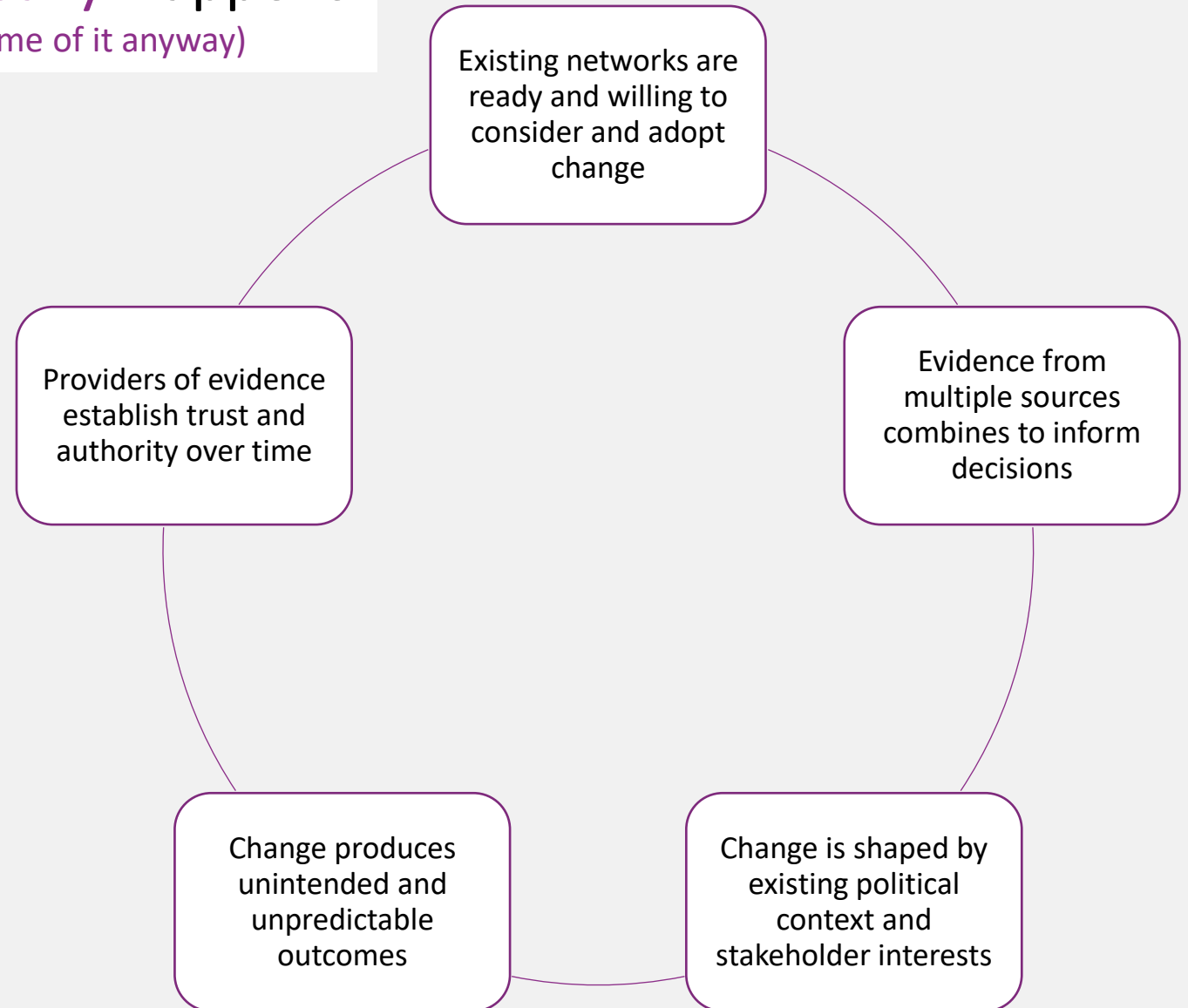
- **Progressively**

Successful impact is built over time – frequently the length of a career not a REF cycle. Building on previous successes establishes a reputation but also establishes more effective relationships. Most importantly, it delivers change, which accretes over time and can be personally as well as professionally rewarding.

How we **assume** policy is changed



How Change **Really** Happens (Some of it anyway)



What this Doesn't Mean



All Evidence is Equal

Legitimacy, rigor and relevance matter.

Evidence drawn from experience or investigation must still stand up to scrutiny.



Tools are irrelevant

How you communicate ideas determines how they're received. Be aware that how

you say it reflects on what you say.



There are no solutions

Policy is complex but not impossible.

Gradual change is still change, it just takes time and planning.

The basics still **matter**

- **Evidence**

Most policy is contested. The most effective defence of any type of evidence against those who disagree with it is that it succeeds by its own standards, clearly relates to the issue and hand and is honestly and reasonably presented.

- **Tools**

Although communicating clearly and using appropriate tools are only part of the story, they really matter. It's like getting to the interview on time; doing so doesn't get you the job but not doing so makes it much, much harder.

- **Realism**

Policy can be and is changed through the application of evidence. That doesn't mean that the only reason it hasn't been changed was that the evidence wasn't there previously. Context is king and modest progress should be recognised and celebrated.



What kind of projects deliver impact?

There are certain characteristics shared by impactful projects. In policy terms, impact doesn't need to involve changing the law, banning something, or addressing the hot topics of the day.

A huge amount of policy change happens quietly and is often pretty dull. Informing the way in which regulations are shaped or working with a network of organisations to influence the priorities of a local authority or other public body can have a massive effect on the lives of people and their communities.

The Ingredients of Impact

- Set achievable goals for the short, intermediate and long term
- Understand the needs and motivations of all participants
- Address well-defined problems and agree what success looks like with partners
- Recognise that there are many types of impact you might have on audiences other than your intended 'target'



Policy in Scotland

How does policy work in Scotland? How do Scottish policymakers make use of evidence and knowledge? What parts of that context are unique to Scotland and what parts are shared with other countries in the UK and beyond?



Devolution in practice

Two Governments



- Based in London
- Led by the Prime Minister



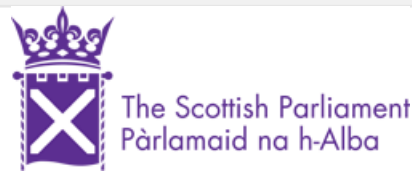
- Based in Edinburgh
- Led by the First Minister

Governments have agency in the world, they raise and spend tax, hire public sector staff, basically run things.

Two Parliaments



- Based in London
- Led by the Speakers



- Based in Edinburgh
- Led by the Presiding Officer

Parliaments hold governments to account and represent the public by scrutinising legislation, passing laws & debating issues.

Responsible for 'reserved competencies', including:

Defence, foreign affairs, large parts of tax and economic policy, trade, energy, the constitution and research policy.

Responsible for 'devolved competencies', including:

Health, schools, local government, law and order, parts of welfare, some tax, environment and higher education.

But that's not the whole story...



Getting Started

Before beginning the process of engaging with policy, it's worth taking stock of the journey ahead and what you're taking with you. In many cases this might inform top level decision such as the specifics of the question you will address, the others involved in that process and how you believe change can be brought about.

Scope out the **Landscape**

What challenge are you trying to address? Who else is working on it? Who has responsibility for that policy area? Which relationships do you need? Which do you already have?

Consider your **Audience**

Who are you trying to influence or persuade? What motivates them? What are their goals? How do they usually learn? In short, what's in it for them? What else is on their agenda? How much is this a priority?

Look at **Yourself**

It's worth taking a moment to think about the values and motivations that you bring to engaging with policy, as well as the skills and 'allies' you start off with. If you're hoping to secure change, it may take a considerable time and involve new activities such as working with the media or politicians. How comfortable are you with that?

What **Networks** exist?

Securing long-lasting change tends to come about through the actions of many. Sometimes you might need to draw together a new network as part of that but it's important to see what already exists and work with those where possible

Reflect on the **Past**

Policy never operates in a vacuum and ideas are considered in the context of previous discussions. Who was involved in those earlier debates? Whose interests benefited from previous decisions and who lost out?

What Constitutes **Success**

What do you and those with whom you're working consider to be a successful outcome? Some but not all of these may be determined by professional requirements. It is worth being clear what success looks like and how you measure impact for yourself as well as others.



Policy Engagement in Praxis

We know that trusted relationships deliver policy change but how are they built? How do policy institutions learn and what are their motivations? Are there approaches that are particular to Scotland? How do other sectors achieve impact in policy?



Everything

Has to Start Somewhere

Governments (and other policy institutions) are made up of people. Those people are usually busy and have their own jobs to do. **Offering something helpful** is a great way of getting anyone's attention.

Impact is delivered over the long-term, so focus on **building relationships** and a reputation that can last. Officials change jobs frequently, but bureaucracy is for ever.

Relationships matter and professional ones work well when they're grounded in shared interest and mutual benefit.

Starting with one successful interaction, in which everyone gains something, provides a solid basis for building a longer terms relationship.

Knowledge **exchange** is just that – a two-way street. The process of working with policy professionals is an opportunity to learn about policy just as much as it is an opportunity to share your research.



Questions Matter

Just as Much as Answers

Focussing on the 'policy question' rather than the 'research answer' will clarify both what it is you are trying to say and the best tools to use to say it.

The element of your research that is of most interest to policymakers **may well not be the academic headline**. Indeed, it may be of little or no academic interest at all.

The defining characteristic of a policy question – as opposed to a research question – is that its answer can be implemented.

It can be useful to **get ahead of the game** and take a look at what questions will be 'live' in a few months.

Policy professionals are more often **seeking your expert option** than the results of any particular study – although they will have that too when it speaks to the question.



Learning

From Success and Failure

Successful policy impact usually **accretes gradually** – a succession of **small changes**, sometimes secured in different ways, that **build over time** to change the narrative about a topic or reframe the political debate.

It's important to track what works (and what doesn't) and to celebrate success, **how** ever incremental.

Setting unrealistic goals that require extensive legislation or huge expenditure is not only unwise, it's incredibly dispiriting.

It can be helpful to see you own **learning**, the growth and **development of networks**, and the acquisition of **new skills** or approaches as goals in their own right.

Similarly, rather than abandoning relationships, tools or tactics that prove unsuccessful, it is worth **investing the time** in considering why they failed.



Context

Is Everything

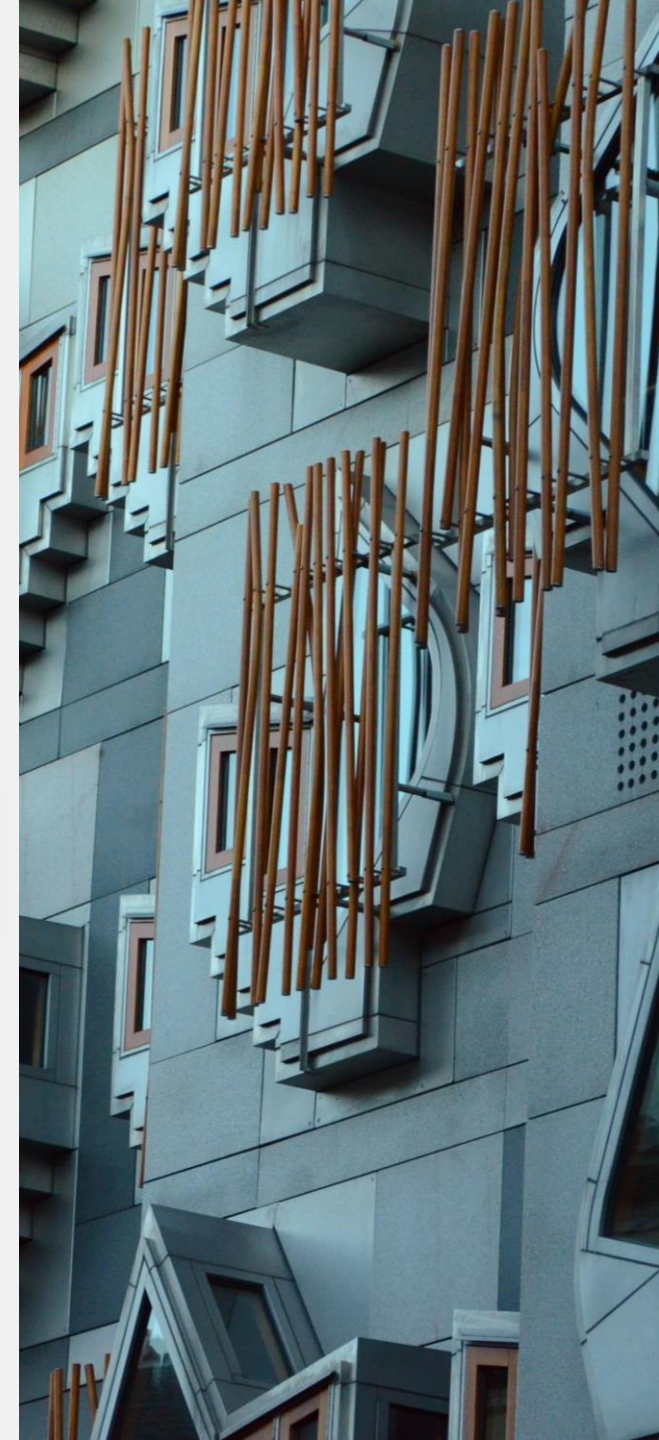
Policy change is influenced by a bewildering array of **factors that may be beyond your control** – political inclination of governing parties, world events, the state of the economy, the vagueries of the media, and so on. But there are **others you can control**.

Frame your approach in terms of the general political direction of that organisation. Geography also matters – how does your work sit in the context of the area governed by that body?

The more you can understand the political context in which you want to operate, the more headaches you can avoid later on.

Working with groups to bring **other types of knowledge** – practitioners or those with lived experience – will also help ground your goals in the particular context you are trying to influence.

Never try to engage with policy actor without first having **taken the time to understand the political context** in which they operate.



Measuring Progress and Learning

As with any lengthy process, it's easy to forget what we've learned. The pressures of REF and other professional targets can also subsume other kinds of record keeping. Policy presents an unpredictable terrain and tiny scraps of experience can often be hugely useful.



Recording Impact



Relationships

Has the quantity or quality of your relationships improved. Which networks have been strengthened or expanded? Do you have a better understanding of the needs of others involved with this issue? Have you changed the power dynamics involved?

Digging into Data

Quantitative top level metrics on the number of interactions with decision makers, the public, website users, etc. can be useful but using tools such as surveys or focus groups can enrich that data and allow you to discover what which groups you're missing.



Learning

What do all stakeholders (including you) now know that they didn't know before? How has that influenced their actions, What will you, your team and your organisation change as a result of this experience?

Outcomes

Outcomes are the results of engagement – the gold standard of impact measurement. What was different in the world as a result of the actions. Remember this may be a change in the actions of stakeholders other than your key audience.



Opportunities

Impact is developed over time. It's worth noting what opportunities have been opened up by any interaction or series of engagements. What will be easier next time? Just as you've learned things and added others to your networks, others have learned about you. How will that help in future?



Thank you

There are more resources at:

On blogging for policy [here](#)

On writing a policy brief [here](#)

On communicating with non-academic audiences [here](#)

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