

# Making Sense of Evidence: A Good Practice Guide

Summary of roundtable

July 2017



**The  
Policy  
Project**

Responsive today,  
shaping tomorrow

# Background and intent

---

In July 2017, a round table discussion on the use of evidence in public policy was co-hosted by Superu and the School of Government at Victoria University (see a summary [here](#)). The key themes were capability development and improving the policy process. Superu has since worked with other agencies to develop *Making sense of evidence: a guide to using evidence in policy*. The purpose of this December 2017 roundtable was to provide feedback on the draft guide, and to discuss barriers and enablers for increasing the use of evidence in policy.

*Making sense of evaluation: a handbook for everyone*, released by Superu in mid 2017, is a companion to the new guide. It won the award for Best Plain English Document (Public Sector) at the 2017 Awards, and is available [here](#).

Since 2014, one focus of the Policy Project's work has been increasing both the demand for and supply of policy advice that is evidence and insight-informed. An important part of the Policy Project's 'collective impact' operating model is to help build on good practice, and spread the lessons to the broader policy community. This is why the Policy Project is endorsing Superu's guidance and has co-produced this conversation tracker with them.

---

## Participants

**Malcolm Menzies**  
Superu

**Carolyn O'Fallon**  
Superu

**Len Cook**  
Superu

**Jonathan Boston**  
Victoria University of Wellington

**Keith McLeod**  
The Treasury

**Manjula Shivanandan**  
Statistics New Zealand

**Emma Mawby**  
Statistics New Zealand

**Andrew Tideswell**  
Statistics New Zealand

**Jeremy Wood**  
New Zealand Police

**Sally Faisandier**  
Land Information New Zealand

**Sarah Stacy Baynes**  
Ministry of Social Development

**Steven Sue**  
Ministry of Social Development

**Kirsten Thomlinson**  
Ministry for Vulnerable Children  
Oranga Tamariki

**Kerri Kurse**  
Human Rights Commission

**Charles Sullivan**  
Health Promotion Agency

## Policy Project team

**Diane Owenga**  
Programme Manager

**Simon Olsen**  
Senior Advisor

**Alpa Modi**  
Team Coordinator

# Making sense of evidence

Making sense of evidence: a guide to using evidence in policy will help us take a structured approach to using evidence at every stage of the policy cycle. It will help us:

- know the best types and sources of evidence to draw from
- select and use the most relevant evidence
- deal with gaps and uncertainty
- bridge cultural perspectives.



As policy advisors, it is our responsibility to take evidence-based policy to Ministers. Policy development is rarely a linear or clear process, and it is often time-critical. Thinking about using evidence early will ensure the evidence you gather makes a valuable contribution.



“The time is right for this guide, as the Government looks for evidence-informed advice on how to implement its new priorities.”

“The guide will also be useful for teaching.”

# Three main types of evidence

According to the guide, evidence usually falls into three main types:

- research evidence (about the effectiveness of intervention)
- contextual evidence (about the population, location or circumstance)
- experiential evidence (about people’s feelings, history and perceptions).

Strong policy combines all three types to form high-quality advice.

This typology legitimises many kinds of evidence, including those that we think aren’t scientific. We need to place more emphasis on contextual and experiential evidence, and integrate it effectively. Experiential and contextual knowledge can complement research, help frame policy questions and increase the likelihood that evidence will be used. Contextual evidence helps ensure the relevance of policy analysis and advice, and often resonates with people, helping them to better understand the scientific research.



“Evidence is a result of methodology. Some methods, and sources, can produce multiple types of evidence – which can overlap. Let’s not confuse types of evidence with methods.”

# Principles and tips

---

Three principles are recognised internationally for guiding the selection and use of evidence:

- **Appropriate** – what do you need to know from the evidence?
- **Credible** – what is the quality of the evidence?
- **Transparent** – what can you say, or not say, based on the evidence?

Principles of integrity for bridging cultural perspectives:

- **Partnership** (collaboration)
- **Respect** (e.g. Western science and Mātauranga Māori)
- **Honesty** (acknowledge gaps in understanding)
- **Relevance** (clarify who benefits and how)
- **Reciprocity** (negotiate and share)
- **Protection** (intellectual property)
- **Participation** (safe, open, trusting)

## Dealing with gaps and uncertainty

- When an issue hasn't been identified or tested anywhere, you can propose to generate evidence through pilots. Together with monitoring and process evaluations, you can capture useful evidence over time.
- If you have conflicting evidence, ask yourself what the nature of the conflict is, and why it has come up.
- When you find that the research evidence base is consistent in its findings, but weak (perhaps with little research or few evaluations), you could place more emphasis on experiential evidence, including exploring public perception and acceptability.
- You may have to acknowledge evidence gaps or shortfalls, and indicate how these will be addressed over time (usually through monitoring and evaluation).

## Collaboration and communication

- *Engage stakeholders early, and keep them engaged* – the Policy Project's [Start Right guide](#) helps ensure stakeholder views are gathered and understood, and that you ask the right questions.
- *Engage with the target population and community* – the Policy Project's [Public Participation](#) tool provides useful tips for this.
- *Communicate your findings* – if possible, take a multi-faceted approach to sharing your findings and progress; use a mixture of written papers, presentations, and interactive sessions.



# System level challenges

---

## Demand for evidence in policy

Demand for evidence in policy agencies requires a culture of curiosity about what we don't know, and about what types of evidence will deliver insights. It also requires willingness to identify and test the validity of our working assumptions. The challenge is to get all the parties involved in the policy process (from commissioning Ministers and senior officials through to analysts) to value the gathering of evidence, and to enable them to look beyond what they know already.

Research is good for validation but should not be 'cherry picked'. There needs to be a balance between using evidence for *supporting* proposals and using it for *illuminating* what the issues actually are (and what actually works to resolve them). The operating environment for managers may be reactive and fast paced with tight deadlines. This creates a reliance on available evidence, rather than generating new evidence which could be more relevant (but more costly and would take more time). The challenge is to prioritise investment in new evidence and the capability to generate it, in a way that optimises both government priorities and stewardship responsibilities.

## Supply of evidence for policy

Some agencies have research and evaluation expertise that is spread very thin, not well integrated with their policy function or only used for one-off, back-end, evaluations (rather than for upfront design).

The range of tertiary and private evaluation training is limited, and of variable quality. Participants also reported that the research and evaluation workforce is ageing. Some agencies rely on contractors to write evaluation plans – and good ones can be hard to find.



# Bringing policy and research together

---

## Policy development as evidence generation

The model of evidence promoted by the Making Sense guide means that it's not just down to research and evaluation teams to supply evidence. Policy development processes are form of evidence-generation, if they are run well with strong user engagement. For example, human-centred design approaches can generate contextual and experiential evidence.

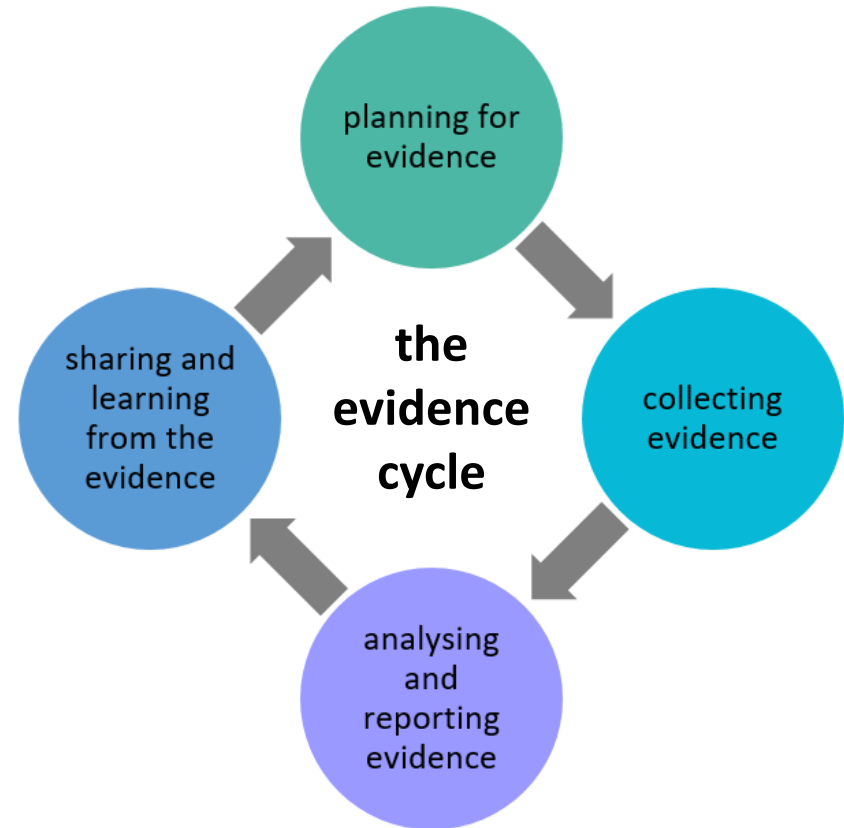
Policy analysts, managers and commissioners should ideally conduct policy processes in a way that generates high-quality contextual and experiential evidence.

## Starting right to include evidence in policy

Evidence should not be an afterthought.

Policy commissioners and policy managers will ideally build in the time and resources for policy development to enable high-quality evidence to be the bedrock for advice.

Commissioners and managers should also develop staff and secure access to skills to meet this responsibility, both within the context of policy projects and as part of ongoing staff capability. That includes when external resources have been contracted in.



# Next steps

---

## Superu will:

- publish the next BETA version online
- develop an easily digestible 2-page summary to support demand
- present the guide to the policy community in a seminar or workshop format, supported by the Policy Project.

## The Policy Project will:

- work alongside Superu and the research and evaluation community to provide information on best-practice use of evidence in policy (this information will be included in the Policy Methods Toolbox, starting with this Guide)
- support the supply of relevant skills through work to improve collective formal training
- link the guide into other policy quality tools, including for peer review and commissioning (Start Right).

## The Research and Evaluation Community of Practice will:

- own the guide's maintenance and promote it within their agencies and the policy community
- co-develop supporting tools
- develop case studies on the use of evidence in policy.

## Tools and resources

- [An Evidence Rating Scale for New Zealand](#)
- [Making Sense of Evaluation: A Handbook for Everyone](#)

## Have a question or want help?

Please email:

- [enquiries@superu.govt.nz](mailto:enquiries@superu.govt.nz)
- [policy.project@dpmc.govt.nz](mailto:policy.project@dpmc.govt.nz)