



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

# How Can Academics Influence Policy?

## Is Evidence Enough?

**Dr Ellen Flint**

**Department for Work & Pensions**

Head of Central Analysis & Science Strategy

Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser

# Aims

## Practical tips for effective engagement with UK Government Departments:

- Why engage?
- How to engage
- When to engage
- With whom

## NB

- I won't be talking about theory, but about my experiences and observations from both 'sides'.
- Much of this applies broadly across the public sector, but it is from a UK Central Government perspective. Even within that, Departments vary.
- Keen to provoke conversation and sharing of advice and experiences. This should always be a two-way conversation.

**These are my personal views and reflections**

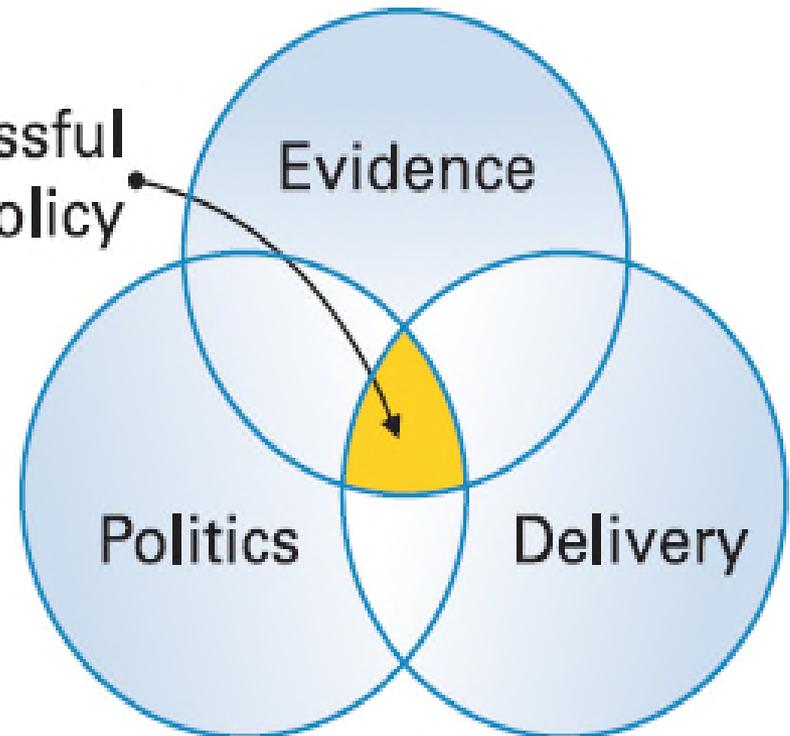
# Good policy is at the interface of **politics**, **evidence** and **delivery**

## What is good policy work?

Successful policy depends on:

- the development and use of a sound evidence base
- understanding and managing the political context
- planning from the outset for how the policy will be delivered.

Successful  
Policy



***NB Many Government Departments are also directly responsible for the operational delivery of policy e.g. DWP & Jobcentre Plus. Doing this effectively also requires an evidence-base.***

Source: Policy Skills and Knowledge Framework, Civil Service Learning

# Why does policy go wrong? Organisational and systemic issues often unrelated to 'evidence'.

**Short-termism**

**Cultural Disconnect**

**Lack of accountability**

**Group-think**

**Peripheral Parliament**

**Prejudice**

**Unintelligent Customers in  
Government**

**Operational disconnect**

**Insufficient Deliberation**

**Panic, Symbols and Spin**

# Evidence-informed policy in practice

At an overall government level, the idea of evidence-informed policy-making has support. Understanding and using of evidence is a required competency for policy officials. There isn't a high-level lack of will.

HOWEVER there are other things going on which affect policy development, beyond the evidence.

- General direction of **government policy**;
- Perception of **public opinion**;
- **Resource constraints**;
- Complex **operational issues** (such as whether an over-stretched organisation could cope with more innovation).

When urging a particular course on policy makers, researchers should be aware of this context.

# Key Issue 1: Short term vs Long term

Government often values short-term results and operates on timescales which are different to academia.

- Ministers (and to an extent officials) want to be able to **do something themselves** within a short term of office.
- **Politically we operate within an electoral cycle and a Spending Review cycle**, which can create pressure to make progress on an issue within a certain time frame.
- Where policy is being made to respond to a problem, that problem will continue to exist until something is done about it. **Sometimes the political, or even moral imperative to take action will override the need to take time to research an issue fully.**

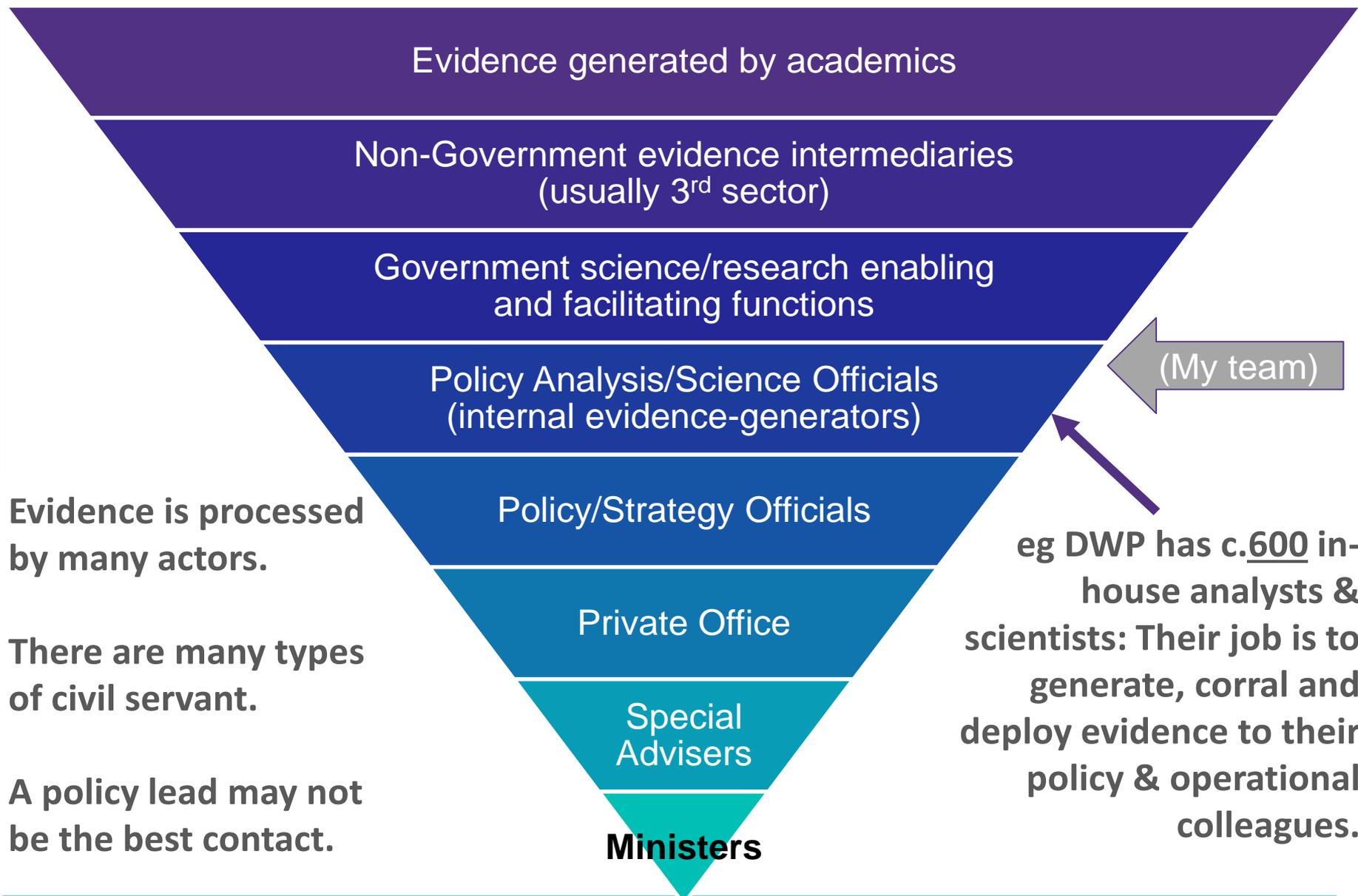
But the thing about short term cycles and politically driven timeframes is that they change, and issues resurface.

- A key role for academia is the **need to develop the evidence base on long-term perennial issues**. We need a bedrock of good quality evidence which comes from longterm research, insulated from deprioritisation.

# Key Issue 2: How to engage

- **Motivation:** What are you trying to achieve by engagement? *Creating strong links will take energy and determination – be prepared to do some of the running. A long Pathways to Impact Statement or even a signed Letter of Support does not mean your evidence is actually influencing policy.*
- Officials and Ministers value **synthesised, authoritative accounts of an accumulated body of evidence**. Hearing about one individual's latest results is less useful (and easier to dismiss if so minded). **Academia has a key role in objectively packaging evidence for policy makers.**
- Often there is more interest in **'what works and how'** than **'what is and why'**. The latter is important but more difficult to operationalise, and more subject to ideological challenge.
- **Sometimes true impact is much about the decisions evidence *PREVENTS from happening***, but often evidence-producers will not know their evidence was used in this way (there are no citations in Green Papers to track!). **Carry on regardless!**

# Key Issue 3: Who to engage with?



# What do Government Analysts do?

Don't assume there is nothing happening, just because Government doesn't publish in academic journals! e.g. at DWP we run an internal research programme including:

- Analysis of our extensive admin data
- Randomised control trials
- Quasi-experimental studies
- Primary qualitative research
- Surveys (including co-funding of national surveys e.g. USoc)
- Simulation Modelling
- Behavioural science

And more...

Many Government Analysts have PhDs and almost all have Masters qualifications, however we are not always at the cutting-edge of methodology and research like Academics are. **A brilliant working relationship between Government Analysis and Academia is the key to brilliant knowledge exchange and evidence-informed policy-making.**



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# Mapping the Departmental 'Evidence' Ecosystem



# Mapping the Cross-Government 'Evidence' Ecosystem



- From both sides, it is hard to find the right person. At the working-level, officials do not have public profiles
- There is a complex ecosystem which exists in the intersection between 'evidence' and 'policy'.
- This is true within Government but also non-Government organisations and initiatives within HEIs and Research Funders.
- Remember that if you find it hard to know who to contact, Officials have the same view of academia!

# Key Issue 4: Opening a 2-way Conversation

- Government Departments have a responsibility to clearly communicate their evidence priorities and requirements to Academia. (i.e. their *'known unknowns'*).
- **To this end, Government Departments are now publishing their 'Areas of Research Interest' (ARI) statements.**
- ARI publications are a key way in which you can provide evidence of the likely relevance and impact potential of your proposed research in grant applications. Reference them!
- ARI publications are also a great 'way in' to Government Departments, who are likely to be more receptive to your research if you open with how relevant it is to their stated ARI priorities.
- ARIs should not be viewed as prescriptive or limiting of new or difference research directions. They do not have funding attached. Academia has a crucial role in illuminating *'unknown unknowns'* too.
- A range of Departments have published ARIs, with more to come.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/areas-of-research-interest>

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Research and analysis

## DWP Areas of Research Interest 2019

This publication summarises the most important research questions facing the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Published 1 March 2019

From: [Department for Work and Pensions](#)

### Documents



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## **Top Tip: Look for opportunities to undertake secondments, placements or internships within Government Departments (never unpaid!)**

- There is no better way to gain insight than to **spend some time working in a Government Department.**
- You will begin to instinctively understand the evidence/policy interface as you experience it first-hand. You will also build up contacts and be able to ‘map’ the engagement pathways intuitively.
- Look out for the **UKRI Policy Internship Scheme** if you are research council funded. (Search for this on the web for more info).
- **Individual Government Departments run their own PhD secondment schemes** (including DWP, DfE, DEFRA, Cabinet Office, and others). These are advertised directly through Centres for Doctoral Training so get in touch with your CDT Office if you haven’t seen these opportunities circulating.
- **Get in touch with your UCL Public Policy team** for brokerage of government secondments, contacts, etc. You are lucky to have such a great facility; they are fantastic! <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy/>

# DWP Objectives

- 1** Build a more prosperous society by **supporting people into work** and helping them to realise their potential.
- 2** **Improve outcomes and ensure financial security for disabled people and people with health conditions** by increasing opportunities to realise their full potential with the help of the welfare system and through the labour market.
- 3** **Ensure financial security for current and future pensioners** by: helping people to increase their pension savings; providing information on their private and state pension provision to enable effective planning for the future; and supporting older people to extend their working lives.
- 4** **Increase every child's opportunity to succeed** by helping separated parents agree effective child maintenance arrangements and supporting families in distress to reduce parental breakdown and separation.
- 5** **Transform our services** and work with the devolved administrations to deliver an effective welfare system for citizens when they need it while reducing costs, and achieving value for money for taxpayers.



Department  
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# Thank you

**Get in touch:**

[Evidence.StrategyTeam@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:Evidence.StrategyTeam@dwp.gov.uk)

**DWP Areas of Research Interest:**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dwp-areas-of-research-interest-2019>