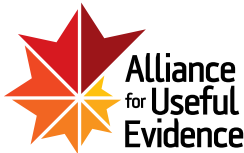


The Scottish approach to evidence

A discussion paper



Pippa Coutts and Jenny Brotchie



About the Alliance for Useful Evidence

The Big Lottery Fund, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Nesta have come together in partnership to create The Alliance for Useful Evidence. By championing the need for useful evidence, we provide a focal point for improving and extending the use of social research and evidence in the UK. In doing so, we work with other organisations in this field to encourage debate, discussion, collaboration and innovation. Our aim is to become the hub for evidence initiatives in the UK, providing a forum for members to share good practice and avoid the duplication of work. Membership is free.

To sign up, please visit www.alliance4usefulevidence.org



About the Carnegie UK Trust

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

To find out more about our work, please visit www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk



About this paper

This discussion paper draws on debates from the Scottish Approach to Evidence roundtable, hosted by the Alliance for Useful Evidence and Carnegie UK Trust in 2016. The paper is not a report of the event and it shouldn't be read as reflecting the opinion of the meeting as a whole or any consensus among the attendees

Views and unintended errors in the discussion paper are the authors' own. We hope that the paper will stimulate debate. The Alliance for Useful Evidence and Carnegie UK Trust intend to use the paper to continue to promote evidence use in policy and practice, looking specifically at what sorts of evidence is appropriate for Scotland at this time, and how we can effectively increase their uptake.

What do you think? Get in touch

We hope that this discussion paper and the evidence seminar that contributed to it are just the start of a conversation that will clarify what we mean by good evidence in the current Scottish context. We hope the paper will stimulate debate, allied to our overall purpose of increasing the capacity and motivation of stakeholders to use appropriate evidence in the support of policymaking and practice which makes a difference to citizens.

This is a complex field, where various actors are likely to have different views, so we hope that you will respond to the paper with your comments and ideas. We see this paper as being a starting point for an ongoing, important discussion.


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Contents

Foreword	1
Executive summary	2
 1. Introduction	3
 2. What is the ‘Scottish approach’ to public policy?	5
 3. Is there a distinctly ‘Scottish approach’ to evidence?	9
 4. A shared challenge: moving toward appropriate evidence	12
 5. Conclusion	18
Appendix: List of participants	20
Endnotes	21

Foreword

At the Carnegie UK Trust and the Alliance for Useful Evidence, we work with decision makers from a range of disciplines, across the UK, from the public, private and third sector. All are motivated by the same goal of improving lives and the society that we live in. And all are grappling with the same big challenges: stubborn inequalities, complex social issues, relentless and rising pressure on public services and squeezed resources.

We see common themes, as well as variation in their approaches. Devolution, in particular, has led to the development of distinct and divergent policy contexts in the different jurisdictions of the UK. This difference provides an important opportunity to learn from each other about what works for whom, when and where. It could be vital in helping inform difficult decisions about where, how and what to invest scarce resources in in this challenging fiscal and demographic context, whilst together figuring out how to improve lives.

But we know this kind of evidence exchange isn't easy. Our work in this area has identified many barriers. Part of the challenge is that we don't all have the same view of what high-quality research constitutes, our research questions differ according to policy context and sometimes our fundamental assumptions and theories about how change comes about can vary. This can make sharing evidence between jurisdictions challenging.

This discussion paper focuses on the specific policy context in Scotland and the impact this has on evidence. Discussions with our stakeholders in Scotland suggest that there is a different view here of what constitutes useful evidence in comparison to other jurisdictions of the UK. We explore here whether there is really such a thing as a 'Scottish approach' to public policy and whether there is also a Scottish approach to evidence and research. We also look at what implications this

might have for evidence-informed decision-making in Scotland and beyond. The paper draws on existing research by the Carnegie UK Trust and the Alliance for Useful Evidence and includes opinions from participants at a roundtable discussion in Glasgow in 2016 on this topic.

We conclude that the Scottish policy and evidence landscape shares commonalities with other parts of the UK, in terms of policy directions (along with a shared failure to fully realise the rhetoric in reality). But, in Scotland, there appears to be a particularly strong sense of shared ownership of the strategic direction built on the pillars of participation, prevention, partnership and performance as set out in the [2011 'Christie Commission' report](#) and recently strengthened by the enshrinement of the outcomes based [National Performance Framework](#) in legislation.

We think this places Scotland in a strong position to develop expertise on participative, outcomes-based approaches to government and evidence, which could be applicable to other jurisdictions too. To realise this position, however, the evidence base must catch up with the policy direction. Decision makers need access to robust, relevant and appropriate evidence. Tensions between communities as both users and producers of evidence will have to be worked through.


The research, policy and practice communities must work together to ensure that the diffuse learning that this kind of policy context favours can be collated, shared and translated into different contexts.

If we take the steps this policy context offers an exciting opportunity for policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders both within Scotland to enhance participative, collaborative, preventative and outcomes-based policymaking, assess the kind of impact it has and understand how it can be delivered effectively.



Jonathan Breckon

Director, The Alliance for Useful Evidence team



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Chief Executive, Carnegie UK Trust

Executive summary

There is an emergent Scottish approach to public policy

The advent of the National Performance Framework, in 2007, which outlined the Government's vision, represents an important milestone in the development of a Scottish approach to public policy. It signalled the Government's desire to improve societal wellbeing, and for government and public services to work to an outcomes-based approach. The National Performance Framework not only provides a lens for planning for the future, but also measures the Government's progress against its stated objectives.

The National Performance Framework and the Scottish approach reflect the Scottish Government's wish to move on from siloed systems of government, encouraging more joined-up, cross-sectoral working.

The Christie Commission on public service reform spelt out four pillars underlying the Scottish approach: empowering people; promoting partnerships for service provision; prioritising spending on preventive strategies; and more efficient public services. Recently, these principles have been reinforced by statements from the Government on engaging with citizens; seeking to be an open government and promoting the empowerment of individuals and communities.

Whilst we understand these intentions may not be matched in implementation, we think the Scottish approach offers exciting opportunities. It seeks to put citizens and community interests at the heart of public policy and emphasises the need to make headway on some of our most complex social issues.

Although there is an emergent Scottish approach to policy, the approach to evidence isn't there yet

The nature of the Scottish approach to policy demands a mix of evidence types. It necessitates the production and use of system-wide evidence, rather than evidence focussing on an individual sector or programme.

The Scottish approach means more collaboration and increasing use of co-production, eg between service users and providers, or between researchers, communities, service users and commissioners. However, the evidence base for these approaches needs to be strengthened and we need to develop clearer approaches to involving citizens in evidence production and use. This is at the same time as protecting against biases and ensuring we

have access to rigorous evidence for decision-making.

Scotland is developing these participatory, outcomes-based approaches to evidence, which will be applicable to other jurisdictions. However, these developments in evidence production and use still need to catch up with the Scottish approach to policy. Questions remain that we'd like to explore in the future. How can we gain insights from participatory research and directly from communities to support the development of effective policy? How do we increase the uptake of such evidence by decision-makers? How can organisations collaborate and pool data to produce useful evidence of this type?

There is an opportunity for Scotland to be a world leader in developing evidence approaches for policy with a prevention, co-production and outcomes focus.

For evidence to support the emergent policy approach in Scotland, we need to:

- Strengthen the outcomes approach and promote the use of the National Performance Framework at local level.
- Invest in high-quality research on co-production.
- Help decision-makers, at all levels identify and use a mix of high quality evidence.
- Build relationships across professional boundaries, and enable academics and the third sector to work together.
- Learn from policy and evidence developments across the UK, and share the Scottish experience.



1. Introduction

“Evidence is bound to disappoint those who want conclusive proof from it. Evidence alone does not ensure wisdom or deliver something called ‘objectivity’ or ‘the truth’. Evidence alone cannot quickly silence doubts (about climate change and the role of renewable energy sources, for example). Nor does evidence settle once and for all the value of a specific

activity or policy (such as support for SMEs to drive economic growth). Evidence is always contingent on context, sources, perceptions and timing. Good evidence may be ignored, bad evidence may be used misleadingly. Knowing all this helps us to use evidence wisely.”

Dr Ruth Levitt, 2013, *The Challenge of Evidence*. The Alliance for Useful Evidence

How can you improve educational outcomes attainment for all, tackle isolation and loneliness, end cycles of poverty?

These are deep-rooted, long-standing highly-complex public policy challenges. They represent just some of the many such shared concerns for citizens, policymakers, third-sector organisations and academics across the UK and beyond.

In the face of economic uncertainty following the EU referendum; a decline capacity in the civil service and local government;¹ declining public spending in the medium term² and a growing demand for public services³ these challenges are as significant as ever. To tackle them effectively we need to draw on evidence about what works well [for who, where and when](#).⁴ This includes learning from what has been tried before, or elsewhere, and has been shown to be ineffective.

Using evidence in policy has never been more important. To make the best use of scarce resources, it makes sense to invest in policy and practice that has been

shown to make positive differences. Equally, when trying out a programme or policy, independent evaluation is important to share the learning. For example, the Troubled Families Programme in England had been claimed to be a success, but the recent evaluation has shown that the programme didn't make the difference to people's lives it was aspiring to.⁵

We can't afford to repeat mistakes, and keep reinventing the wheel. When money is tight, we need to think about whether the same or more substantial gains could have been achieved at less cost. Evidence helps with this, as it provides a rigor and independence to decision-making, taking us away from an over-reliance on experts, who, at times, can get it wrong, or from eye-catching interventions that don't make a real difference.

The different UK jurisdictions often tackle these public policy challenges in quite different ways, for example in how they are reforming the public sector. In previous work, we have argued that devolution in the UK, accompanied by increasing policy divergence means

that we could have a ‘policy laboratory’, where differing policies and interventions are tried out, evaluated and the learning shared. However, there are challenges to this cross jurisdictional learning not least that policy is inherently tied to politics and there may be political reasons why sharing is not encouraged – particularly as the jurisdictional governments in the UK all are led by different policy parties. There also are structural reasons, such as the lack of exchange between the UK Home Civil Service, lack of bodies and mechanisms for sharing data and evidence, and culture differences around how policy is made and what important terms, like wellbeing, mean.

An assumption behind the value of evidence exchange in a diverging policy landscape is that the context is similar enough so that what works in one place is applicable to another. In conversations with stakeholders across the UK, Carnegie UK Trust and the Alliance for Useful Evidence have heard people say, with regard to both policy and evidence, that the context in Scotland is markedly different to other parts of the UK, particularly Westminster. For example, as [Devolution as a Policy Laboratory](#) highlighted, there is a growing feeling that a divergent approach to evidence is emerging.

“We heard from several officials that a divergent approach to evidence itself was emerging in the different governments . . .

Participants saw the devolved governments as having a more catholic approach to evidence with more value attached to both user experience and expert opinion.”⁶

As the report concluded, this doesn’t mean that we can’t and shouldn’t learn from each other, but to effectively apply that learning, we need to better understand the contexts of each of jurisdictions. In Scotland, there is increasing talk of a distinctive Scottish approach to policy, marked by the [National Performance Framework, Scotland Performs](#), and tied to the four pillars to the public service reform: prevention, performance, people and partnership.^{7,8}

Given that public policy in Scotland is being framed as distinctly different from other UK jurisdictions, we need to consider whether there is, or should be, a Scottish approach to evidence, to provide policy relevant learning.

To explore these questions further, Carnegie UK Trust and the Alliance for Useful Evidence convened a roundtable of academics and policy makers in the public and third sector in Scotland in August 2016.

We discussed:

- What is distinctive about the Scottish policy approach?
- What that means for evidence, generation and use in Scotland?
- What are the opportunities for Scotland to build a robust approach to generating evidence and use that is appropriate to this type of policy context?

This discussion paper draws on the debates from the roundtable, augmented by the views of the Alliance for Useful Evidence and Carnegie UK Trust, formed from our experiences in the world of evidence and policy.

The opportunities and challenges that we set out here, with regard to generating and using evidence appropriate to an outcomes-based policy context which values participation, collaboration are not unique to Scotland. On the contrary, as Carnegie UK Trust research on [The Rise of the Enabling State](#) demonstrates many are shared with others, in the UK and beyond.

2. What is the ‘Scottish approach’ to public policy?

Distinctly Scottish health, education and the legal institutions, systems and styles predate devolution in 1999. The emergent Scottish approach to policy (see Box 1), accelerated in 2007, with an incoming (then minority) Scottish National Party (SNP) Government, which has remained in power since then. Given this political context, is difficult to say definitively whether all components would continue with a change in government, and to what extent the Scottish approach is simply reflective of

the ideas and priorities of a government that has been in position for almost a decade. However, the National Performance Framework is now enshrined in legislation and components of the approach are now being articulated more frequently. As we outline below, this clarification of the overarching approach, when coupled with a broad consensus around it, implies a sustainable model that would survive a change in government.

Box 1: The Scottish approach

- Abolition of departmental structures: discouraging silos and facilitating effective cross-cutting government.
- National Performance Framework: setting out, in the Purpose and National Outcomes, a unified vision for Scotland. A wide range of indicators developed to assess progress.
- Partnerships with local actors across all public services.
- Places strategic leadership and the facilitation of cooperation between organisations and sections of society at the heart of the role of central government.
- More recently, emphasis on asset-based working, co-production, community empowerment, participation; and on methods to achieve change.

Adapted from Tannahill, Carol, Presentation to Carnegie UK Trust Towards a wellbeing framework – from outcomes to actions conference, Belfast, 28th September 2016.

Discouraging silos

In 2007, the new government was keen to clearly articulate its purpose and at the same time, the head of the civil service in Scotland sought to simplify the mechanisms of government. This led to the introduction of the distinctive outcomes-based National Performance Framework and the abolition of ‘departments’ within the Scottish Government, which were replaced with 37 directorates reporting to six Director Generals.⁹

Together, these changes aim to encourage a joined up approach to public policy and a focus on outcomes rather

than process and inputs. Most recently, under the 2016 Programme for Government, the Government has made that case for considering economic outcomes when designing social policy, and visa versa, and bringing these together has further emphasised the need for government policymakers and analysts to work across sectors.

Of course, the reality is that moving on from siloed policy making is a challenging change process and many people interacting with the Scottish Government may continue to feel frustrated by a perceived lack of sharing across government.

A vision and outcomes for Scotland

The National Performance Framework, now in its fourth parliamentary term, articulates the vision of the government. It focuses the public sector in Scotland on five strategic objectives, 16 underlying outcomes and

55 progress indicators. Carnegie UK Trust research¹⁰ has demonstrated that the National Performance Framework, Scotland Performs is a world-leading example of a wellbeing approach to government (Box 2) albeit with opportunities for improvement.¹¹

Box 2: Wellbeing approaches to government

In the last few decades, there has been growing international interest in measuring societal progress through measuring wellbeing as a multi-dimensional concept that describes progress in terms of improvements in quality of life, material conditions and sustainability.¹² The OECD has been at the forefront of this movement, through its Better Life Index¹³ but governments of all sizes, at both the national and sub-national level and across the world have been establishing wellbeing frameworks to measure progress

and prioritise resources. Examples include Toronto, Rome, Southern Denmark and Newcastle.¹⁴

Wellbeing frameworks aim to understand social progress in the round and don't prioritise one aspect of wellbeing above others. They support cross-departmental working, planning ahead to allow governments to focus on the medium to long term and can catalyse a meaningful conversation with citizens and communities about what matters to them.

One of the key areas for improvement identified in relation to Scotland Performs was for it to be given statutory status. This has been realised through the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which has enshrined the National Performance Framework in legislation. This will ensure that the framework will outlive the current Government, placing a duty on Scottish Ministers to consult on, determine and publish national outcomes for Scotland and to regularly report on progress.¹⁵

Despite this clear articulation by the Government of its vision for Scotland, and the outcomes it wants to achieve, it is difficult to find evidence that the performance framework has stretched very far from central government. Yet, the move towards promoting better outcomes for individuals has been significant for public services, not least in that the relationship between Local Authorities and the Government has been styled around outcome agreements.

The Christie Commission: Partnership, prevention, people and performance

Concurrent to this vision has been an emphasis on the need for public sector reform. In 2010, in response to demographic and fiscal challenges, the Scottish Government commissioned Campbell Christie to lead a 'Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Service' to recommend how to secure improved outcomes from public services in the future. The Christie Commission report recommended that public services should: prioritise prevention; involve people and communities; promote partnership working, and increase the efficiency of the public services, viewing them as a whole system and reducing duplication¹⁶ (Box 3).

Box 3: Public Service Reform in Scotland is built on the four pillars of:

- **Prevention** – Reduce future demand by preventing problems arising or dealing with them early on. To promote a bias towards prevention, help people understand why this is the right thing to do, the choices it implies as well as the benefits it can bring.
- **Performance** – To demonstrate a sharp focus on continuous improvement of the national outcomes, applying reliable improvement methods to ensure that services are consistently well designed based on the best evidence and delivered by the right people to the right people at the right time.
- **People** – We need to unlock the potential of people at all levels of public service, empowering them to work together in innovative ways. We need to help create ways for people and communities to co-produce services around their skills and networks.
- **Partnership** – We need to develop local partnership and collaboration, bringing public, third and private-sector partners together with communities to deliver shared outcomes that really matter to people.

Source: <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Government/PublicServiceReform>

The importance of participation and service improvement has been played out in practice in some interventions, such as the Early Years Collaborative.¹⁷ This ‘golden thread’ linking strategic approach through to delivery is significant. [Weathering the Storm](#) – a review of small country’s approaches to public policy reform in response to economic, demographic and other pressures found that only in Scotland could this ‘golden thread’ be so clearly discerned.¹⁸

An open government: working in partnership and empowering individuals

In recent years, the Government, and the current First Minister, has emphasised that they want to develop more relational government, which interacts directly with citizens. This can, more formally, manifest itself through consultations, such as [Healthier Scotland](#) and [Fairer Scotland](#), or through developing partnerships between people and professionals or public services, as emphasised in Realistic Medicine and the People Powered Health and Wellbeing Programme in health and social care.¹⁹

“Our First Minister has made it clear repeatedly, that she wants – and I’m going to quote – an outward-looking government which is more open and accessible to

Scotland’s people than ever before. I want the government that I lead – this is her words, not mine – I want the government that I lead, and the public services that you lead, to be known for the quality of our relationship with Scotland’s communities. So important words there about quality of relationships, about openness and accessibility. And it’s a strong message that we’ve all received, whatever policy area or whatever part of government business we’re working in, our approach has to be participative.”

Professor Carol Tannahill, Chief Policy Advisor to the Scottish Government

This is about increasing people’s engagement with the government, promoting collaborative approaches to solving problems and redesigning services. It includes ways of working, such as co-production, where individuals and communities are supported to engage in service redesign, delivery and evaluation.*

*Co-production essentially describes a relationship between service provider and service user that draws on the knowledge, ability and resources of both to develop solutions to issues that are claimed to be successful, sustainable and cost-effective, changing the balance of power from the professional towards the service user. The approach is used in work with both individuals and communities. (source: The Scottish Coproduction Network).

The previous Chief Medical Officer for Scotland described co-production as ‘Co-production is the process of active dialogue and engagement between people who use services, and those who provide them’ – [Sir Harry Burns, Chief Medical Officer for Scotland](#).

For example, in the speech launching the 2016 /17 Programme for Government, the First Minister said:

“There is no ‘us and them’ in Scotland – only us . . .

We must put local communities more in charge of the decisions that shape their live,’ and: ‘It is only by empowering individuals that we will achieve our shared ambition for a fairer and more prosperous nation.”

First Minister, Scottish Parliament, Priorities Speech, Taking Scotland Forward

Does this constitute a distinctly Scottish approach?

These shift towards a more joined-up, outcomes-focused government centred on people and communities whilst clearly apparent in Scotland are, of course, not confined to Scotland. As Carnegie UK Trust research on the Enabling State identifies similar policy shifts are evident in governments across the UK, Ireland and Europe (Box 4). The Trust has characterised these collectively as the shift toward a more Enabling State.

Box 4: From Welfare State to Enabling State (the policy shifts common in the move to a more Enabling State)

- From new public management to public value.
- From central to local states.
- From representative to participatory democracy.
- From silos to integration.
- From crisis intervention to prevention.
- From recipients to co-producers.
- From state delivery to the third sector.

From Wallace, J, *The Rise of the Enabling State*. Carnegie UK Trust: Dunfermline 2013.

We think, what appears to be unique to Scotland is a greater sense of a shared appreciation of the benefits of such approaches and a common language evident across sectors. Previous Carnegie UK Trust research which includes interviews with stakeholders from within government and the social sector suggests that this is particularly strong in Scotland.²⁰

Some participants at our roundtable agreed, for example Carolyn Sawers, Head of Policy and Learning, Big Lottery Scotland, said:

““ It feels to me like there’s a much stronger traction for the work here in Scotland . . . we seem to be using the same language across different sectors, which seems unique, and there’s been real leadership, I think, both from within the third sector, which I see, and also within the public sector. ””

And, when discussing how, in some places, these participative approaches tend to be the domain of the third sector, another participant said:

““ I think what’s distinctive is the support from the Government at the moment for that, for that context and that approach, which doesn’t seem the same in other areas. ””

However, there is also some scepticism about the degree to which policy and implementation follows through on the Government’s rhetoric of engagement and change. This was also reflected by some roundtable participants:

““ There’s also kind of structural schizophrenia around consistency between community empowerment and drilling down to localised level, but at the same time many avenues of policy are centralising. ””

3. Is there a distinctly ‘Scottish approach’ to evidence?

Research evidence is only useful if it answers questions appropriate to the policy and programming context. As there appear to be a number of distinctive features of the Scottish approach to policy-making then it follows that there might also be a distinct approach to evidence use and generation emerging.

“... these kind of shifts around asset based approaches, the place, focus, prevention, I think they do have an impact on the kind of evidence that we’re looking to use, and also evidence that we’re generating with our partners.”

Roundtable participant

This chapter explores what type of evidence might be particularly useful in the more relational, outcomes focused policy context we see in Scotland and asks whether a distinctive Scottish approach to evidence has emerged alongside this differing policy context.

Outcomes

The particular focus on outcomes in Scotland has a clear implication for evidence, in that outcomes ask the question: is the policy or programme making a difference to individuals and communities in the round? This is in contrast to the typical basket of indicators for social programmes and projects, which focus on input or outputs, such as how many police are patrolling the streets, or how many training or skills courses a job seeker has attended.

The holistic approach of the National Performance Framework and the concomitant emphasis on partnership and joined up working recognises the interdependence of policy areas, and that measuring what works in one sphere alone might not be sufficient if our eye is on the overall prize.

However, transitioning to an outcomes approach across sectors and levels is complicated and takes time. Not

least because many front-line staff and managers are not accustomed to, or don’t have available outcomes data. In addition there has been a culture of audit where information on expenditure and inputs was prioritised. This leads to a situation described by one roundtable participant as:

“My problem at the moment is that we’ve got the aspiration to do outcomes and all that kind of stuff, and a whole bunch of measurements that do the exact opposite.”

Roundtable participant

Service Improvement

The Scottish approach to policy appears to contribute to an interest in not only evidencing impact, but also explaining why and how outcomes are achieved.

“... if we think what works is building relationships, unlocking strengths, then our evidence really needs to reflect that, and the characteristics of that good work really result in really diverse forms of evidence, so people’s stories rather than statistics, people’s journeys rather than their destinations...”

Roundtable participant

The change agenda for public services, has led to the growing use of service improvement methodologies (see Box 5). This has included an emphasis on reflective practice, within professional education or development in nursing, teaching and social work, where learning from experience can influence service change, and promote experimentation with new interventions or ways of working.²¹

Box 5: Service improvement methodologies

The Scottish Government's interest in the question of whether services and interventions are making a difference can be seen in the development and use of service improvement methodologies in some parts of government. This has been perhaps most obvious in NHS Scotland, where from the mid-2000s, the Plan Do Study Act service improvement technique has been used to iteratively evaluate and improve services.²²

Service redesign, and improvement, also is increasingly using co-production. For example, Homeward Bound project involved older people and carers working with social care practitioners to redesign of the pathway from hospital to home for older people. This process showed that older people saw the journey as a circle from home back to home, rather than as the more linear view often taken by services. This led to support at both home (discharge at home) and in hospital (admissions co-ordinator).²³

To provide additional support to public services, the Scottish Government, in partnership with the Economic and Social Research Council and the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow set up [What Works Scotland](#). This was begun in 2014, with the aim of supporting public-sector development and reform.

Building an appropriate evidence base

Building an evidence base for the type of asset-based, participatory approaches valued in the Scottish policy context is challenging, as:

- What works is often heavily context-dependent and interventions don't tend to follow linear structures.²⁴
- Evidence is likely to include people's stories; information on communities' assets and indicators of engagement, eg through participation in engagement tools like participatory budgeting or quality of relationships. As we will discuss in Chapter 4, this type of evidence by its nature can be challenging to work with and is not always highly valued by decision-makers.²⁵

Box 6: A growing interest in contextual evidence

Funders, specifically The Big Lottery Fund, are increasingly asking applicants for contextual information about their project and the communities they work in rather than just focussing on the project in-hand, and its plans. The Big Lottery Fund also realises that communities will increasingly need to be able to access evidence.

“ We need to make sure that the purpose of our work in this area is to empower people to improve their communities and their own lives. ”

Joe Fearn, bigblog, April 2016

In addition, funders, politicians, policymakers and citizens often want to see positive changes from projects and programmes quickly. This is problematic for moving to effective preventative services, as they are designed to deliver an impact over the longer term. Gathering robust and unambiguous evidence on prevention is challenging, not least because prevention is a strategy with an emphasis on intervening early to stop long-term issues developing/worsening. Change can be slow and it requires a long-term programme of evidence gathering, beyond electoral cycles.²⁶ Another complication is that the negative outcomes that preventative programmes seek to tackle are influenced by a multitude of factors. It can therefore be highly challenging to disentangle and attribute the impact of specific policies and programmes on outcomes over the long term. Evidence on prevention requires a level of long-term investment and cross-sectoral collaboration and data sharing that often can be difficult to secure.²⁷

Has a distinctly Scottish approach to evidence yet emerged?

The Scottish policy context – outcome-focussed, relational government and public-sector reform – does appear to call for a specific type of evidence.

However, the evidence base is not yet fully developed. Our roundtable participants agreed that the evidence base was out of step with the policy direction in Scotland.

“... the way that we’ve looked at evidence in communities to date has been through those linear, rational, structured professional approaches that we’re trained [in] and we’ve brought into those environments, and now we are in a sort of more than multidimensional, chaotic, multi-connected fast-moving environment.”

Roundtable participant

Professor Carol Tannahill pointed out that there is a need to build the evidence base related to co-production and asset-based working and to move from sector-based evaluations and research to thinking about wider systems and outcomes:

“... [there is a] need to build the evidence base relating to asset-based working and coproduction in particular, and showing how those approaches help us deliver different outcomes, so we know whether we’re impacting on some of the outcomes that are real priorities to do with inequality, social justice and so on ...”

[There is a] need to move from intervention evaluations to systems based thinking and evidence. Everything I’ve described in [the] evolutionary chain [of the Scottish approach] is about moving from individual policy spaces or individual interventions to something that’s across a whole government system or delivery system, our evidence isn’t keeping up to date with that.

The focus on ‘individual policy spaces or individual interventions’ is, in part, to do with ‘demand failure’. We know for example that the outcomes approach laid out by the National Performance Framework has not translated easily to all parts of the public sector, or all parts of government. The Scottish Parliament Finance Committee in 2015 stated that there is ‘much more scope to use the National Performance Framework in holding public bodies to account for the delivery of outcomes’ and highlighted that subject committees might want to work with public bodies to examine the contribution they were making to the National Performance Framework outcomes.²⁸

The performance management of service providers and commissioners also mitigates against a move to gathering evidence on the outcomes of complex, multi-sectoral interventions. As Audit Scotland in their 2016 report on Community Planning Partnerships note:

“The way in which public bodies report performance, and are held to account, does not always reflect the Scottish Government’s policy of promoting outcomes, prevention and reducing inequalities. In particular, some short-term national performance targets are making it difficult to reform services to deliver more preventative service models.”²⁹

4. A shared challenge: moving toward appropriate evidence

Moving toward an evidence approach that can answer some of the questions and requirements of the Scottish policy context is challenging. The prize, however, is a people-focused evidence base that helps decision-makers form effective policies and programmes. This chapter sets out some of the risks, opportunities and challenges that must be navigated along the way. There will not always be clear-cut solutions and some require a political decision about what risks are acceptable.

Belief versus evidence

“ I think there’s a deeply philosophical question here about the relationship between facts and principle, and in many ways, we should discuss principles equally as well as facts. ”

Roundtable participant

“ A commitment to empowerment at both a personal and community level, and an assets-based approach, focusing more on prevention . . . and understanding that place matters . . . we’ve got a belief that work that has those characteristics is more likely to achieve the outcomes we are looking for. ”

Roundtable participant

Many participants at our roundtable spoke about the role of ‘belief’. That is, particularly, a belief that a participative, joined-up and preventative approach to policymaking can improve outcomes in areas where

traditional approaches have previously failed. The use of the word ‘belief’ belies the fact that in this arena, public policy is moving faster than the evidence base.

Acting on belief isn’t necessarily bad, or even in antithesis to an evidence-informed approach. A lack of available evidence doesn’t necessarily mean the approach or intervention doesn’t work – it just may not have been studied yet. In addition, there is a clear case for innovating, developing and testing new approaches to tackling complex, seemingly intractable problems.³⁰ However, there is a risk that, unless we begin to gather robust evidence about these new approaches, we will continue to act on ‘belief’ only, without ever truly understanding why we’re doing something, whether or not it works and how we can make it better.

Stories and opinion

A policy environment with a strong emphasis on hearing the views of citizens is bound to be interested in stories, whether from patients, practitioners, community activists or individuals. We know that stories provide ‘a hook’ for change – in many cases, they speak the language of elected representatives who are mandated to listen to their constituents’ views. Also, they can help policy makers, including civil servants, who are looking to draw attention to a pertinent issue. Stories can provide a way into other evidence, which might be both more rigorous and denser.

“ My job is to kind of try and convince decision-makers or people close to decision-makers that it’s worth paying attention to the evidence. The way I do that is by telling stories, and so that’s where the qualitative stuff is really useful, but you need . . . the kind of professional in me needs to be convinced that it’s backed up by something a bit more quantitative. ”

Roundtable participant

Stories are susceptible to bias and don't have the advantage of the greater rigour and independence of research evidence (whose story do you believe?). They can be used selectively, to back up vested interests. One round-table participant gave an example of the challenges of using stories:

““ And there's some good evidence of the person or the story at a committee meeting trumping everything else, even when it isn't representative at all. ””

Roundtable participant

Biases

Alongside stories and people's testimonies, expert opinion from academics and professionals are valuable sources of evidence. The Alliance for Useful Evidence's scoping of the policy environment in the UK jurisdictions in 2015 found that policymakers from across the UK, including Scotland, rely on:

“... experts from think tanks, universities and the third sector. Policy and government research advisers often refer to academics (or other experts) who they already know and trust on a particular topic or development.”³¹

This was confirmed in the roundtable discussion:

““ One of the issues that I found over a number of years working in government was ministers use experts, particularly outwith their remit. ””

Roundtable participant

However, relying too heavily the opinion of experts (including experts by experience) has pitfalls. Evidence users and consumers need to be aware of the biases that we are all subject to. As individuals, there are up to

150 cognitive biases that distort our thinking and true objectivity can be difficult to achieve.³² For example, we are subject to confirmation biases where we tend towards trusting information that confirms their beliefs. For academic sources, publication bias is possible, where the outcome of the research determines whether or not it is published.

““ There's also something for me about ... it's a kind of form of publication bias, because we only ever hear about the success stories ... you don't send ministers to visit the failed projects. ””

Roundtable participant

Another bias to guard against is the 'echo chamber effect'. The shared narrative, although often positive, can run the risk of creating an overly-consensual environment or a sense of 'groupthink' where it can become more difficult to critic evidence or policy. We need people who can play a necessary critical role, in challenging the prevailing orthodoxy.

What is appropriate evidence?

““ We're undoubtedly still in a place where quantity is seen to have greater value than quality in terms of evidence, and we need to shift that. ””

Roundtable participant

In discussions with stakeholders, we hear qualitative evidence being pitted against quantitative evidence. However, both are valid, because what evidence is appropriate depends on what you want to know. This necessitates being clear about why you are going to use or gather evidence.

Box 7: Learning from international development:

The field of international development, which is no stranger to complex environments, has provided guidance on choosing research or evaluation designs, suitable to the question you want to answer, such as the *bond Impact Evaluation Guide for Commissioners and Managers*.³³

Different types of design are needed depending on whether you want to demonstrate causality, provide an explanation for a change, or describe a situation: all of which are likely in Scotland. The Alliance for Useful Evidence Practice Guide summarises the distinctions as:

- Some research designs are better suited for demonstrating the presence of a causal relationship, such as experimental and quasi-experimental designs.
- Others are more appropriate for explaining such causal relationships – such as Theory-based approaches, eg contribution analysis.
- While some designs are more useful for describing political, social and environmental contexts – such as observational studies.

Using Research Evidence: A Practice Guide. (2016, Alliance). Adapted from DFID, 2014³⁴

The change agenda that comes alongside the rollout of the outcomes approach in Scotland contributes to an interest in not only evidencing impact, but also explaining why and how outcomes are achieved. This is typical of complex environments (see Box 7).

Quality of evidence is important too: how do we know it is good enough for our purpose?

Tools have been developed, and are constantly being updated, to help organisations and policy makers to think about the quality of evidence (see Box 8).

Box 8: Evidence quality

Standards of evidence help assess whether activities or services will benefit their target audience, and they have been used in healthcare for many years to avoid harm: which also is concern for social policy and programmes. Standards help ascertain the confidence you might have in activities' or services' claims of impact.

Standards of evidence were developed in the UK in 2010 by the Dartington Social Research Unit through consultation with international experts, leaders of children's services and practitioners, to support children's services in London through *Project Oracle*. The standards are ladders with levels, which services can progress through. In subsequent years, the standards have been tried in different environments, for example by Nesta for making investment decisions based on impact. The levels

have become associated with hierarchies of evidence, with the top rungs of the ladder being associated with experiments with controls. The Big Lottery Fund has piloted the *NESTA Standards of Evidence* by third-sector organisations in their Accelerating Ideas initiative and the advantages and challenges with this have been evaluated by the Dartington Social Research Unit (Dartington, 2016).³⁵

There are other ways of defining quality besides the laddered standards of evidence. NICE and DFID have explicitly not used standards of evidence. NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) started with them, but dropped the approach as it was seen as too simplistic (see *The Nice Way*), and DFID (Department for International Development) use a set of principles.³⁶

Finding an appropriate method to judge the quality of evidence is particularly difficult when we want to find out about how change happens as much as we want to learn about the impact of a particular intervention. For example, Dartington Social Research Unit's review for Accelerating Ideas found that the standards of evidence don't necessarily 'lend themselves particularly well to broader, more flexible approaches'.³⁷

This has some resonance with the situation in Scotland, where we need a mix of evidence types, and therefore relying on standards of evidence alone is not likely to be sufficient. However, this begs the question of how we support decision-makers, at all levels, to judge what is most appropriate evidence for their needs.

Managing and making sense of diffuse data

Relational evidence, whether this be on citizen's experience of public services, their personal aspirations and strengths or the tacit knowledge that lies within communities and within organisations is challenging in that it can't be easily aggregated or codified.

“... evidence from that space [the population who are on the receiving end of how that policy's being delivered] its very diffuse, it's not at all codified, it's quite difficult to know what to do with it in policy terms ...”

Roundtable participant

A key challenge in the evolution of a Scottish approach to evidence is how to manage and make sense of this data. Are there opportunities to gain insights from this data to support the development of effective policy? How can organisations collaborate and pool data to produce useful evidence of this type? How do we make useful comparisons? How do increase the uptake of such evidence by decision-makers?

“The first for me is the lack of comparative evidence, so if evidence is unique to each circumstance it becomes a huge challenge, I think, to compare it, and to sort of discern wider value, and that's important for us, because we're trying to choose between different things when there's not enough money.”

Roundtable participant

Then, there is the challenge of making evidence more useful to a wider community of users. A recent review of the literature on effective strategies to increase the use of research evidence found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that a lot needs to be done, but there is no one 'superpower' intervention.³⁸ What's effective is a blend of strategies, including practical tools – protocols, committees, IT – for organisations; training skill-development and strong leadership.

Complexity

The focus on citizens and communities in the Scottish approach is a recognition that we live in complex environments with multiple influences on our wellbeing. In this context, it can be difficult to measure impact. For example, a review of the partnership working in UK public services found that partnership working is a 'messy process' with complex arrangements between public, third and private sectors where the contribution of partnership versus single agencies is difficult to establish.³⁹ However, benefits like increased community ownership or decision-making maybe realised over time. It's important to look at features and processes of successful partnerships as well as their outcomes – transparent, inclusive, flexible and responsive – because knowing about these can support the development of more productive partnerships in future.⁴⁰

In complex environment, often there is a need for explanations, how and why, as much as for understanding causality. So, we think there is a need to go beyond narrow, intervention-focused evaluations to consider also contextual aspects such as the focus on partnership and asset-based working.

Communities as producers and consumers of evidence

In this more participatory landscape there is a move away from communities having research ‘done to them’, towards hearing directly from citizens about what matters to them. They will become more active, or equal, participants in any evidence gathering by researcher or academics - defining the project, collecting and analysing the data. More collaboration between academics and non-academics runs the ‘risk of disrupting researchers’ traditional roles and it creates challenges for researchers and prospective partners’.⁴¹ These challenges can include moving to new ways of working, which may be more expensive and time consuming. However, gains are possible, in terms of increasing the ownership that partners (including local people) feel towards evidence and working towards increased involvement in decision-making.

Furthermore, the community empowerment agenda in Scotland implies that communities will increasingly be making decisions about service delivery, spending priorities etc, and therefore need access to appropriate evidence.

“ I still feel that if we’re really committed to local and to local approaches, we need to find a way to place evidence right there at the feet of communities, accessible and useful and ready for them to use it. ”

Roundtable participant

Placing evidence in the hands of communities can have benefits. For example, research shows how ‘local opinion-leaders’, who are trustworthy and influential, have made a difference in take up of evidence-based interventions in healthcare.⁴² However, it’s not yet common.

“ ...the idea of communities using evidence so that community consultation isn’t completely just based on what communities think, but could take place at a setting in which evidence is part of what you’re thinking about. We don’t know much about that... ”

Roundtable participant

Engagement versus evidence

The Scottish approach to policy recognises the benefits of engagement and control and the positive impacts that participation can have on wellbeing. However, a balance must be found between the need to include empower individuals and communities, involving them in service re-design, and the need to make good use of public money by implementing effective policies and programmes. As governments and others shift toward more enabling approaches this will be a big challenge. As one Roundtable participant pointed out:

“ ... we started off from very cosy spaces, and ignored the logical ends points ... we haven’t come close enough to the discomfoting questions yet ... where you have evidence that the community wants to serve a kids’ club, and all they want to feed them is fizzy orangeade and chocolate sandwiches, because that’s what the kids eat, like do you go, well, actually, no. ”

Roundtable participant

Where there is evidence that interventions picked by communities have limited effect or are particularly expensive projects that may be unaffordable, what should we do?

There are no easy answers and a community-led answer may well be part of the solution. As the stakes are high, it makes sense to mitigate some of the risks when we are devolving decision-making to communities. We should support communities and individuals to have access to the tools, experience knowledge to make those decisions, even if this requires time or resources.

“... let's have better evidence based policymaking, let's make sure it's bottom up, and I still feel that we need to kind of square that circle a little bit, because people in communities might well take a year to work out what works in engaging young people or what works in

supporting families, and actually the community ten miles down the road's already worked it out, but actually that community might choose to do something that's not well evidenced.”

Roundtable participant

In this situation, to avoid spending money on something with limited evidence to support its effectiveness and that may, potentially, do more harm than good, we suggest decision-makers continue to refer to other sources of evidence, too, and use a mix of evidence types.

5. Conclusion

Ambition

The Scottish approach offers exciting opportunities to put citizens and community interests at the heart of public policy and public service delivery, to make headway on some of our most complex social issues and to improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged.

To do so it requires an evidence base with both breadth and depth that supports the user interest and provides

robust and relevant evidence to support the development of effective joined up, participative public services that improve wellbeing. There is a real opportunity for the Scottish Government and partners in the wider public, third and private sectors to build on the world leading outcomes-based approach of the National Performance Framework.

For this to happen, we propose that the following steps need to be taken:

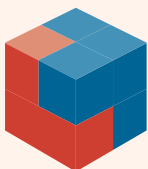
STEP 1



Strengthen the outcomes approach and promote the use of the National Performance Framework at local level:

The National Performance Framework has for nearly 10 years been encouraging the departments of government to work together towards shared outcomes. Over time, it is leading to less of a focus on administrative data and a commitment to measuring the difference a policy or service makes. A strengthening of the outcomes approach would require three things. Firstly, continued investment in high-quality representative data on subjective and objective wellbeing outcomes and specifically on how different groups experience public services and how outcomes differ within the population. Secondly, supporting the use of the National Performance Framework and outcomes evaluations across all levels of the public sector, and in the third sector. This implies talking about outcomes in the same language and measuring the same outcomes across public services and user groups so that data can be more readily joined up and the impact of specific programmes and policies can be more easily understood in the round. Thirdly, there is a need to continue to develop audit and scrutiny functions to take into account the outcomes framework, so that services are increasingly held accountable for the outcomes they deliver, as well as the activities they undertake.

STEP 2



Build a strong evidence base for the Scottish approach: There is a shared belief and commitment to co-production, prevention and asset based working but the evidence base for these approaches remains underdeveloped. The shared commitment to these type of approaches offers a an opportunity for cross sectoral partners to come together, invest in and produce robust evidence about the effectiveness of these approaches in improving outcomes for whom and in what circumstances. This evidence will not only be of interest to decision-makers in Scotland, but also in other parts of the UK and beyond.

STEP 3



Develop robust and appropriate methodologies: There are many challenges associated with gathering, analysing and using the kind of evidence appropriate to the Scottish Policy context but participants at our roundtable were clear there is a role for robust, rigorous evidence in the development of policy and practice in Scotland. There is an opportunity for stakeholders in Scotland to take a lead in developing some of the emerging methodologies associated with participative, joined up, preventative and outcomes focused policy and practice. In particular co-produced research, which is an emerging field. Co-produced research can help ensure that evidence is user focused, relevant and understandable to communities seeking to take a more active role in public service delivery or other activities to improve outcomes. But, as the recent project *The Science of Using Science* found, we don't know if it increases the use of evidence (Breckon and Dobson, 2016).

STEP 4



Help decision-makers, at all levels, identify and use a mix of high-quality evidence:

Experimental and quasi experimental methods have their place in the evidence mix but are not always sufficient or appropriate. Given the potential for ladders of evidence standards to be seen as ranking evidence-types, there is a need to move beyond these. At the same time, the focus on community led initiatives means that there is a growing pool of evidence users and consumers. There is a need to develop new tools to support people, policymakers and practitioners to identify, use and commission a mixed economy of high quality, robust research types.

STEP 5



Learning from each other: This will be critical on two levels. Firstly as we identified at the start of the paper, devolution and divergence in UK policy provides an opportunity for the jurisdictions to learn from the approaches others are taking. It is recognised that a shift to an outcome focus and involving citizen and service users is not unique to Scotland. Developing a suitable evidence base is thus a shared challenge and there will be much for other jurisdictions to learn from progress in Scotland and vice versa. Secondly, as Professor Mark Shucksmith argues in *InterAction: How can academics and the third-sector work together to influence policy and practice?* the development of new knowledge requires collaborative working across professional boundaries. In both these aspects, the academy will have a vital role to play. Investment in knowledge exchange, relationship building across professional boundaries and innovative approaches where explicit (academic) and tacit (policy and practice) knowledge can come together will be required. The Alliance for Useful Evidence and Carnegie UK Trust are committed to supporting the exchange of this learning at policy and practice level.

Appendix 1: List of participants

List of participants

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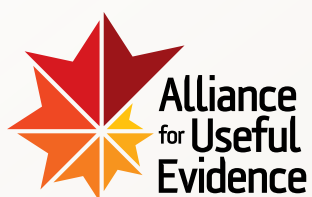
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January 2017

