Alliance for Useful Evidence—Written evidence (LEG0026)

1. The Alliance for Useful Evidence champions the use of high quality evidence to inform decisions on policy and practice in the UK and beyond. We do this through research, training, advice and advocacy. With a growing network of 3,000 individuals, we work with allies in government, local authorities, and charities. Core funding comes from the Big Lottery Fund, the Economic and Social Research Council, and Nesta. Please note that we have also made a submission on the Evidence Transparency Framework with Sense about Science and the Institute for Government.

2. There are many factors that influence the creation of government policy and legislation. One factor is research evidence. We recommend that there is more use of trustworthy research evidence when preparing legislation for parliament. Research evidence can help diagnose the problem that needs to be addressed, and also look at what might me the most effective (and cost-effective) policy options. What is vital is that policymakers use the most appropriate evidence to answer their questions – rather than just following any type of study that looks credible.

3. It is no longer the case that research evidence is hard to locate and lost in academic journals. There are many sources of high quality research and social science – summarised in a way that is actionable by policymakers involved in pre-legislation. As well as the support of the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries, there are other freely available resources open to all policymakers. Links to a range of sources of evidence can be found in our infographic of the UK evidence ecosystem.

4. When gathering research evidence to prepare legislation, it is essential not to rely on single studies. The single study could be a ‘flash in the pan’ and not replicated elsewhere. Policymakers should look for trusted bodies of evidence. A tried-and-tested approach, now commonplace in health, is the systematic review. When preparing legislation for parliament, policymakers should use more systematic reviews. Reviews are less well known outside of healthcare. But they can provide significant insights into social, environmental, transport and economic policy. They are NOT literature reviews, but something more robust. The approach that is

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1 For more about the range of benefits evidence can have to policy making, see Section C of Using Research Evidence; A Practice Guide, Alliance for Useful Evidence, 2016.  
http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/Using-Research-Evidence-for-Success-A-Practice-Guide-v6-web.pdf This guide informs our Evidence Masterclass training. We are also piloting this training with the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology for Peers, MPs and staff, as part of the cross-Commons working group working on Members Professional Development.

2 See Appendix A on matching different types of evidence to policy needs. This model was adopted from DEFRA, but can be translated into the pre-introduction legislation for other policy areas.

3 https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/infographic/
effectively described by Ben Goldacre, the scientist and writer:

‘Instead of just mooching through the research literature, consciously or unconsciously picking out papers here and there that support [our] pre-existing beliefs, [we] take a scientific, systematic approach to the very process of looking for scientific evidence, ensuring that [our] evidence is as complete and representative as possible of all the research that has ever been done.” Ben Goldacre (2012) Bad Pharma: How Drug Companies Mislead Doctors and Harm Patients, (London: Fourth Estate).

5. Such reviews tell us ‘what we know’ (and how we know it) but also help to clarify ‘what we do not know’ (and how we might know it) and where further research investment should be prioritized.4

6. Systematic reviews have grown outside of healthcare and are easily available on websites such as the Campbell Collaboration5 or EPPI Centre at University College London6. If there are no available Systematic Reviews suitable for the pre-introduction stage, we recommend using Rapid Evidence Assessments. They are more credible than literature reviews by summarising all the available evidence in a rigorous and transparent manner.7 While not as strong as a full Systematic Review, they are faster than reviews and thus more suitable for the tight timetables of much policymaking.

7. For actionable summaries of evidence and systematic reviews, Parliament should make more use of the seven Government-backed ‘What Works Centres’ covering over £200billion of public services, in areas such as education, crime reduction, wellbeing, early intervention, local economic growth, health and social care (there are also associated What Works Centres in Wales and Scotland).8 A good example is the Education Endowment Foundation. It has a toolkit that summarises the Systematic Reviews on interventions for improving pupil attainment in English schools. Not only is the toolkit useful to teachers and parents, it is a valuable for policymakers. Anybody can learn from their online summaries of high-quality international evidence reviews. The What Works Centres are now an integral part of Government. They should be a core part of the work of Parliament.9

5 https://www.campbellcollaboration.org/
6 https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk
7 http://www.alliance4useful evidence.org/rapid-evidence-assessments-a-bright-idea-or-a-false-dawn/
8 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network
9 We have not been able to find any examples of Parliamentary legislative processes using the evidence of the new What Works Centres (with the exception of NICE). For instance, a previous report of House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee recommended more use of the What Works Centres by that Committee. But they have not followed up on that commitment (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee The work of the Communities and Local Government Committee since 2010 Tenth Report of Session 2014–15)
## Appendix A: Rationales for evidence and types of evidence required for policymakers.

*Source: Investing in Evidence; Lessons from the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Louise Shaxson, 2014*

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<th>Heading</th>
<th>'Big questions'</th>
<th>Rationales for evidence needs</th>
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| **A:** Understanding the context; fundamental processes and phenomena, baselines and benchmarks | Where are we now? | • To gather and analyse available / new data  
• To evaluate risks, issues and uncertainties | • Reviews of existing knowledge  
• Surveys of social and environmental data  
• Research on causality  
• Risk assessment |
| **B:** Development of models, methodologies and tools | Where are we going? | • To understand current drivers and trends  
• To predict future drivers and trends  
• To assess implications for policy outcomes | • Sensitivity analysis  
• Horizon scanning  
• Forecasting and scenarios  
• Modelling impacts and outcomes |
| C: Developing and using the evidence base to help set targets and formulate policy | Where do we want to be over the next 5-10 years? | • To understand the economic/social value of change  
• To understand the feasibility / cost of change • To negotiate goals | • Economic and social research  
• Deliberative engagement processes  
• Feasibility and pilot studies  
• Market surveys |
| D: Development and appraisal of options/ solutions | How do we get there? | • To identify / evaluate current options  
• To identify / develop new solutions  
• To evaluate new / old options | • Option / evaluation studies  
• Regulatory impact assessments  
• Interventions to promote innovation |
| E: Optimum decisions and effective implementation through communication, engagement and consultation to influence change | How well did we do? | • To monitor progress  
• To evaluate policies & programs  
• To learn lessons | • Interdisciplinary evaluations  
• Deliberative evaluation processes |
| F: Monitoring progress towards policy/ program targets | | | |
| G: Policy/program evaluation | | | |
Appendix B: Logic of using systematic reviews to inform policy and practice decision making


1. Steps for considering the use of research

   (i) What is the issue upon which you are considering making a decision?
   (ii) What different perspectives/viewpoints should be included in considering this issue?
   (iii) How might research (relevant to these issues and perspectives) inform such decisions?
   (iv) What relevant and trustworthy research has been undertaken on such issues and what do we know from that research?
   (v) What other research in future might be useful?

2. Systematic reviews

When research is used to inform decision making, it is often used in a partial and selective way. Such ad hoc (or purposively selective) presentation and use of research can be reduced through a formal process of producing and presenting the relevant evidence. Systematic reviews are such a formal method for bringing together what is known on an issue. They have:

   - A methodology to ensure that the reviews are relevant and trustworthy
   - The methodology is explicit so that the methods can be checked and are thus accountable

Systematic reviews include a ‘map’ (clarifying what has been studied and how) plus a ‘synthesis’ of the combined results of such studies (what our current knowledge is from all this research). There can also be further formal processes for producing guidance on how such evidence might inform policy or practice decision making.

Systematic reviews can vary in the breadth and focus of question addressed and this should be taken into account in interpreting their findings.

3. Governance and infrastructure to enable the use of research in decision making

For systematic reviews to inform decision making they need to be undertaken and to be made available. What Works Centres provide one existing form of infrastructure to support such provision. There are many other structures and processes that could also enable the production and use of systematic reviews to inform decision making in the UK.

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