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EVIDENCE, POLICY AND WELLBEING

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CWiPP considers how people´s well-being can be defined, measured and improved in ways that help policy-makers to make the best use of scarce resources; and investigates the determinants of well-being insofar as these are relevant to policy formulation. The Working Paper Series offers a medium to place relevant research material in the public domain for discussion. Each paper is internally reviewed by two members of the editorial group. The contents remain the sole responsibility of the author(s).

Abstract

Wellbeing is increasingly important in politics and policy across a range of contexts and not least in the UK. In October 2014 the UK government announced that funding would be provided for the creation of an independent What Works Centre for Wellbeing that aims to develop a 'strong and credible evidence base' to help promote wellbeing in policy. In this context, this paper reviews both academic and practitioner-focused contributions on the evidence-policy relationship and presents initial findings on some of the challenges of bringing wellbeing more squarely into policy.

INTRODUCTION

Wellbeing is increasingly important in politics and policy across a range of contexts and not least in the UK.[1] David Cameron has suggested that 'Improving our society's sense of well-being is… the central political challenge of our time'[2]. A pivotal moment in UK developments came in 2010 when the Prime Minister publicly endorsed the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Measuring National Wellbeing programme, which aims to 'to develop and publish an accepted and trusted set of National Statistics which help people understand and monitor well-being'.[3] In launching the programme, Cameron argued that it would:

> '…open up a national debate about what really matters, not just in government but amongst people who influence our lives: in the media; in business; the people who develop the products we use, who build the towns we live in, who shape the culture we enjoy. And second, this information will help government work out, with evidence, the best ways of trying to help to improve people's wellbeing'.[4]

The ONS subsequently conducted a series of hearings and presented its first findings to government in July 2011. Since the launch of the ONS programme there have been a number of significant developments in Whitehall[5] and wellbeing is increasingly prominent elsewhere in the UK. [6]

In October 2014 the government announced that funding would be provided for the creation of an independent What Works Centre for Wellbeing (WWCW). The Centre, which has 17 founding partners,[7] aims to develop a 'strong and credible evidence base' which will support organisations 'to concentrate efforts on interventions that will have the biggest impact' on wellbeing.[8] Funding for the Centre was confirmed after the 2015 general election, which gave a strong signal of the government's continuing commitment on the issue. The creation of the WWCW followed the establishment of other What Works Centres in a limited number of high priority policy areas: crime reduction, health and social care, education, early intervention, ageing better and local economic growth. The centres 'help to ensure that policy makers, practitioners and commissioners can make informed decisions based on impact and cost effectiveness'.[9]

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[1] See Bache, I. (2013) 'Measuring quality of life for public policy: an idea whose time has come? Agenda-setting dynamics in the European Union', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20:1, 21-38; and Bache, I. and Reardon, L. (2013) 'An idea whose time has come? Explaining the rise of well-being in British politics', *Political Studies,* Vol. 61, 898-914.

[2] Cameron, D. (2006) 'David Cameron's Speech to Google Zeitgeist Europe 2006', The Guardian, 22 May. Available from: http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/may/22/conservatives.davidcameron. [Accessed October 2015].

[3] Self, A., Thomas, J. and Randall, C. (2012) *Measuring National Well-being: Life in the UK, 2012* London: Office for National Statistics

[4] Cameron, D. (2010) 'PM Speech on Well-Being'. Speech given by the Prime Minister, London, 25 November: http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/11/pm-speech-on-well-being-57569. [Accessed January 2011].

[5] See Bache, I. and Reardon, L. (2016) *The Politics and Policy of Wellbeing: Understanding the Rise and Significance of a New Agenda*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

[6] For instance, Scotland's *National Performance Framework* arguably embeds a wellbeing approach (Wallace 2012), while Wales's *Wellbeing of Future Generations* Act includes a 'wellbeing duty' and aims to improve the 'social, economic, and cultural wellbeing of Wales' (Welsh Government 2015).

[7] Economic and Social Research Council, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, Department for Communities and Local Government, Department for Health, Department for Work and Pensions, Arts and Humanities Research Council, Department for Culture Media and Sport, Arts Council England, Sport England, English Heritage, Heritage Lottery Fund, Public Health England, Food Standards Agency, Cabinet Office, The Big Lottery Fund, Local Government Association and the Office for National Statistics.

[8] Cabinet Office (2015) 'Government guidance – What Works Network', *Gov.UK***,** accessed 8 September 2015 at https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network

[9] Cabinet Office (2015) 'Government guidance – What Works Network', *Gov.UK***,** accessed 8 September 2015 at https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network

Wellbeing is a complex and multi-dimensional issue. It has contestation over definition and measurement at its heart: as much if not more than other topics covered by other What Works Centres. It is also a more recent topic on the policy agenda. Considering the use of wellbeing evidence in policy is therefore a distinctive challenge and not one covered in John Shepherd's (2014) review of evidence ecosystems for the What Works network[10], which was conducted before the WWCW was established. The aim of this paper is to begin the process of bridging this gap by reviewing some of the key contributions on the use of evidence in policy and relating this to the challenge of wellbeing. It draws on interviews with policy-makers and stakeholders undertaken as part of the work of the Community Wellbeing Evidence Programme team's work for the WWCW[11].

The paper begins by clarifying the key terms of 'evidence' and 'policy', before discussing some key academic contributions relating to the evidence-policy relationship. It then turns to more practitioner-focused reports that were specifically recommended by the ESRC for the WWCW teams to consider,[12] alongside other reports for government on the use of evidence. This section also discusses the government's take up of evidence on improving access to psychological therapies (IAPTs), which has obvious relevance to the wellbeing agenda. The focus on both academic and practitioner-focused contributions reveals a wide range of issues and perspectives relating to the use of evidence in policy – from the more critical to more problem-oriented. The third section reflects specifically on the issue of wellbeing and the particular challenges of bringing evidence into policy in this complex area, presenting initial findings from the interviews.[13]

EVIDENCE AND POLICY

Much of the discussion throughout this paper reflects on what constitutes 'evidence', 'useable evidence' 'good evidence' and so on, but a brief introduction to some of the issues around the use of the term 'evidence' in policy-making is useful. Even more important perhaps, is the need to unpack the notion of 'policy'.

What is evidence?

The use of evidence in policy has a long history, but has particular emphasis in UK government since the late 1990s. A key moment was the publication of the Modernising Government White Paper of 1999, which emphasised the role of *evidence-based* policy:

> *This [White Paper] recognised the need for policy making to be more responsive to citizens' demands; looking forward; evidence-based; properly evaluated and based on 'best practice'*[14]

Subsequent acknowledgement of the many drivers of policy making[15] (see also below) has shifted the discourse away from the idea of evidence-*based* policy and more towards *evidence-informed* policy.

Evidence can take a variety of forms. A report for the Alliance for Useful Evidence[16] noted that, in relation to the question of 'what works', forms of evidence are often placed in a hierarchy based on study design. The following illustrations were provided:

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[10] Shepherd, J. (2014) *How to achieve more effective services: the evidence ecosystem – crime reduction / health and social care/ education/early interventions/ ageing better/ local economic growth*, Cardiff University/ ESRC What Works Network.
[11] ESRC Grant Ref. ES/N003756/1
[12] Shepherd (2014); and Rutter, J. (2012) E*vidence and Evaluation in Policy Making*, London: Institute for Government
[13] I would like to thank Saamah Abdallah of the New Economics foundation (NEF) for his helpful comments on this work and NEF for their help in arranging interviews.
[14] GSRU 2007, p.9
[15] For example, GSRU (2007); and the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2006) Scientific Advice, Risk and Evidence Based Policy Making, Seventh Report of Session 2005-06, Volume 1, London: The Stationery Office Limited.
[16] Nutley, S., Powell, A. and Davies, H. (2013) What Counts as Good Evidence? Provocation paper for the Alliance for Useful Evidence, Research Unit for Research Utilisation (RURRU), School of Management, University of St Andrews

Table 1: Two illustrations of simplified hierarchies of evidence based on study design[17]

• Level I: Well conducted, suitably powered randomised control trial (RCT) • Level II: Well conducted, but small and under powered RCT • Level III: Non–randomised observational studies • Level IV: Non–randomised study with historical controls • Level V: Case series without controls *Source: Bagshaw and Bellomo 2008, p.2. 7*	1. Systematic reviews and meta–analyses 2. RCTs with definitive results 3. RCTs with non–definitive results 4. Cohort studies 5. Case control studies 6. Cross–sectional surveys 7. Case reports *Source: Petticrew and Roberts 2003, p.52*

In providing these illustrations the report also identified a number of challenges to hierarchies based on study design. [18] Specifically, such hierarchies:

- neglect too many important issues around evidence
- tend to under-value good observational studies
- can lead to a loss of useful evidence by excluding all but the highest-ranking studies
- pay insufficient attention to the need to understand what works, for whom, in what circumstances and why
- provide an insufficient basis for making recommendations about whether interventions should be adopted

Evidence is used at various stages of the policy cycle, from creating, developing and implementing policy to defending and justifying a policy decision.[19] The Government Social Research Unit's (GSRU 2007) report on 'evidence based-policy in practice' drew on interviews with officials in Whitehall, Scotland and Wales to identify a ***range of evidence used by policy-makers***:[20] The categories identified by policy-makers, which are not mutually exclusive, are summarised in Table 2:

[17] Nutley et al (2013), p.10
[18] Nutley et al (2013, p. 11
[19] GSRU 2007, pp. 16-18
[20] GSRU (2007) Analysis for policy: evidence-based policy in practice, London: Government, Social Research Unit, HM Treasury, pp.20-24

Table 2: Range of evidence used by policy-makers (identified by policy-makers)

Evidence form	Comments (of interviewees)
Quantitative/statistical evidence	Seen as particularly important at the policy development/ rationale stage, to understand the broad policy landscape
Economic evidence	Important in relation to the need for cost effective/value for money measures
Surveys, attitudinal and behavioural evidence	Valuable for understanding why people act in a certain way
Qualitative evidence	Helpful for insights unavailable from quantitative research, particularly the perceptions and attitudes of service delivers and clients
Anecdotal evidence	References to the value of 'real life stories' and 'fingers in the wind' [but not clearly distinguished from qualitative evidence]
Scientific evidence	Can be crucial (in certain departments) for developing and defending policy decisions [this is taken to refer to the natural sciences]
International evidence	Policy-makers abroad often face similar challenges and Ministers are often interested in learning from overseas experience
Social experiments / controlled trials	Seen as an effective tool for policy development if their distinctive contribution is well understood
Systematic reviews / meta-analysis	Seen as rarely used in government and not well known or understood by policy makers
Consultations	Engagement with stakeholders, customers, clients and citizens seen as a very important source of information, but there questions about methods sometimes used

The GSRU reported familiarity among policy-makers with a broad range of evidence sources, but less clarity on their relative merits, tending to 'focus on the "end product", rather than how the information was either collected or analysed'.[21]

A number of reasons are advanced for using evidence, from helping to understand an issue, to identifying the appropriate policy response and shaping future thinking.[22] These issues are discussed further below, but one particular GSRU finding that resonates with much of what follows is worth noting here:

> *Crucially, reliable evidence was seen to be able to give policy makers and Ministers confidence in their policy decisions and confidence to defend these decisions in parliament and to the media. Policies based on evidence were seen as more likely to be better informed, more effective and less expensive than they otherwise might have been. Strong evidence could help secure resources for a policy, and account for how public money was spent…*[23]

What is policy?

On a general level, policy might simply be understood as any course of action (or inaction) pursued by governments or other organisations. A more specific definition of public policy refers to:

[21] GSRU (2007), p. 20
[22] GSRU (2007), p.15
[23] GSRU (2007), p.15

> *'a set of interrelated decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation where those decisions should, in principle be within the power of those actors to achieve*[24]

This definition is helpful in distinguishing between ends and means and in recognising that policy challenges are rarely addressed by a single decision.

Building on this means-end distinction, Michael Howlett and Benjamin Cashore (2009) developed a conception of policy as a 'complex regime of ends-and-means related goals (more abstract), objectives (less abstract) and settings (least abstract)'.[25] From this they developed a six-fold taxonomy (Table3).

Table 3 – A Taxonomy of Policy Components[26]

Policy Content				
Policy Focus		*High Level Abstraction*	*Programme Level Operationalization*	*Specific on-the-ground Measures*
	Policy Ends or Aims	**GOALS:** What general types of ideas govern policy	**OBJECTIVES:** What does policy formally aim to address?	**SETTINGS:** What are the specific on-the-ground requirements of policy?
	Policy Means or Tools	**INSTRUMENT LOGIC:** What general norms guide implementation preferences?	**MECHANISMS:** What specific types of instruments are utilized?	**CALIBRATIONS:** What are the specific ways in which the instrument is used?

The value of an elaborate framework is that it allows a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of policy change and stability for different elements of policy. Thus, at one end of the spectrum (changes to broad goals) a paradigm shift in thought and practice may be required, while changes at the other end (e.g., settings and calibrations) are likely to be more incremental and thus change is more likely.

ACADEMIC LENSES

There is an extensive academic literature on the use of evidence in policy. This section provides a flavour of some of the main contributions from the political science and public policy literatures, a starting point for which is Carol Weiss's (1979) seminal work on *The Many Meanings of Research Utilization.*[27]

Typologies of knowledge utilisation

Weiss identifies seven ***meanings associated with the use of social research in public policy,*** which are identified here as potentially relevant for the WWCW.

- The *knowledge-driven model* assumes a sequence of events: basic research - applied research - development - application. It assumes that 'the sheer fact that knowledge exists

[24] Jenkins (1978) quoted by Howlett, M., Ramesh, M. and Perl, A. (2009) Studying Public Policy: Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems 3rd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.6
[25] Howlett, M. and Cashore, B. (2009) The Dependent Variable Problem in the Study of Policy Change: Understanding Policy Change as a Methodological Problem, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 11 (1), p.38
[26] Howlett and Cashore 2009, p. 39
[27] Weiss, C. (1979) The Many Meanings of Research Utilization, *Public Administration Review*, September/October 1979, 426-31.

presses it towards development and use'[28] Most examples relating to this model come from the physical sciences and it is not likely to be a feature of social science research findings unless other important conditions are in place (identification of a pressing problem, politicisation, parameters of action agreed upon etc).

- The *problem solving-model* is viewed as the most common concept of research utilization, and involves the direct application of a specific piece of research to a pending policy decision. Here it is assumed that the policy goal is in place and the purpose of the research is to help identify the appropriate means to achieve the goal. The research may either pre-date the setting of the goal or may be specifically commissioned to inform the pending decision, the first of which is most obviously captures the thrust of the work of the WWCW.

- The *interactive model* does not assume a linear relationship between research and policy decisions but emphasises a less orderly relationship with 'back-and-forthness' a key characteristic of the relationship between policy-makers and evidence providers. The value of this understanding for the WWWC is that acknowledges that researchers 'rarely have a body of convergent evidence'[29] but through 'mutual consultations' with policy-makers can shape more effective policy responses.

- In the *political model*, policy positions are shaped by interests or ideology and are unlikely to change. Here evidence is sought as 'ammunition' to support a particular position. This might mean that evidence is taken out of context for political purposes but, given that it has ready-made allies, might also mean that it has a greater chance of impact. Making evidence available to all participants in the policy process can address equity concerns raised by this model.

- In the *tactical model* evidence is used in ways that may bear little relation to the substance of evidence. Policy-makers may search for evidence to illustrate responsiveness to client groups or may use the absence of evidence as a tactic to delay action. The use of evidence might also deflect responsibility for a decision and thus help deflect any subsequent criticism. Drawing on evidence from reputable organisations can also enhance organisational prestige and potentially enlist authoritative allies who may help defend the position taken.

- The *enlightenment model* captures the way in which social research 'diffuses circuitously through manifold channels',[30] whether academic, the media, policy networks and so on. In this model it is rare for a policy decision to be traced back to a specific piece of work but is more about the sensitizing effects of research over a long period that puts new issues on the agenda or changes the way an issue is viewed. The flip side of this model is that, through diffusion, evidence can become distorted or misrepresented and the outcome one more of 'endarkenment'.

- *Research as part of the intellection enterprise of society* conceives social research not so much as an independent variable that might inform policy but another of the dependent variables along with policy (and law, philosophy, history etc) that responds to the currents of thought in a given time. So research and policy interact but are both simultaneously influenced by wider trends and discourse.

[28] Weiss 1978, p.427
[29] Weiss (1979), p.428
[30] Weiss 1979, p.429

Argument and persuasion

Giandomenico Majone's (1999) main theme is that policy analysis tends to start with 'plausible premises' rather than hard facts, which means that argument and persuasion are central to all stages of the policy process. In this view:

> *… facts and values are so intertwined in policy-making that factual arguments unaided by persuasion seldom play a significant role in public debate'*[31]

Majone makes an important distinction between 'evidence' and 'data or information', with the former understood as 'information selected from the available stock and introduced at a specific point in the argument in order to persuade a particular audience of the truth or falsity of a statement'.[32] Here, the role of policy analyst is one of marshalling arguments, more akin to that of a lawyer rather than an engineer or scientist. Argument is particularly important for securing policy change because of the inbuilt inertia within bureaucracies that give a comparative advantage to existing ideas and practices.

Majone's argument is not to doubt the value of evidence, but rather to emphasise that 'few arguments are purely rational or purely persuasive'[33] and that a 'careful blend of reason and persuasion is usually more effective in changing policy than exclusive reliance on one or the other'.[34] This latter point resonates strongly with the experience of bringing IAPTs into policy (below). Majone (1989, 48) suggests that:

> *An inappropriate choice of data, their placement at a wrong point in the argument, a style of presentation that is unsuitable for the audience to which the argument is directed – any one of these factors can destroy the effectiveness of information as evidence, regardless of its intrinsic cognitive content… While facts can be evaluated by more or less objective tests, the applicability of evidence depends on a number of features peculiar to a given situation, such as the nature of the case, the type of audience, the prevailing "rules of evidence," and even the persuasiveness of the analyst*[35]

The symbolic uses of knowledge

Following Weiss, Majone and others (e.g., Radaelli 1995), Christina Boswell (2008)[36] distinguishes between *instrumental* and *symbolic* uses of knowledge: the former 'helping an organization to deliver its goals' and the latter 'a means of demonstrating the credibility of the organization or its decisions'[37]. For the WWCW, understanding the motivations of organizations can help inform thinking of 'what might work' in particular settings.

Boswell's main purpose is to shed light on the ***symbolic functions*** of knowledge, relating specifically to Weiss's political model (above), of which there are two types:

- In the *legitimizing function*, an organisation uses knowledge to 'enhance its legitimacy and bolster its claim to resources or jurisdiction over particular policy areas'[38]

[31] Majone, G. (1989) *Evidence, Argument and Persuasion in the Policy Process*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p8
[32] Majone 1989, p10
[33] Majone 1989, p.37
[34] Majone 1989, p.37
[35] Majone 1989, p.48
[36] Boswell, C. (2008) The political functions of expert knowledge: knowledge and legitimation in European Union immigration policy, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15:4, 471-488
[37] Boswell 2008, p. 471
[38] Boswell 2008, p.472

- Through the *substantiating function*, knowledge lends authority to particular positions, 'helping to substantiate organizational preferences in cases of political contestation'[39]

An organization tends to seek legitimacy 'where it perceives itself to be operating in an unstable environment: uncertainty [sic] about its survival, or about the distribution of resources between itself and rival agencies'.[40] The strategies for securing legitimacy will depend on the type of organization: *action organisations* tend to derive legitimacy from their output or interventions, while *political organisations* derive legitimacy from 'espousing certain norms and values' and acting on issues that 'have been framed as requiring political action'.[41] In short, action organisations tend to use knowledge instrumentally to improve the quality of their output and political organisations tend to use it to signal their legitimacy.

Beyond these broad distinctions, it is possible for different parts of an organization to view and use knowledge in different ways, depending on their specific role, and for views to change over time through experience.

Lesson Drawing

Lesson-drawing refers to the process by which actors in one time or place draw lessons from another time or place that may be incorporated into their own policies and practices. A lesson is an 'action-oriented conclusion about a programme or programmes in operation elsewhere'.[42] Lessons drawn may be either positive or negative and, as such, may or may not lead to the transfer of policies or practices. For WWCW purposes, lesson-drawing adds something distinctive in highlighting issues relating to evidence from other countries, but also contains more general insights.

Richard Rose (1991; 1993) examines certain key features that encourage and inhibit the process of lesson-drawing as well as discussing some of the practical steps required for successful lesson-drawing. He notes a spectrum of lesson-drawing which goes from 'copying' (which is unlikely to be exact in the real world) to 'inspiration'.

Rose suggests that policy-makers generally prefer to allow programmes to operate routinely without disruption. Given pressures on time and resources, they do not spend their time seeking to create the 'ideal' policy in any given area but act as 'satisficers'. ***Satisficing behaviour*** seeks to maintain satisfaction with the status quo with minimum disruption. The fact that another programme may be superior is not enough to encourage satisficers to promote a change of programmes that would disrupt the current routine. Those who wish to see a change of programme must promote a disjuncture between popular aspirations and the achievements of the current programme, thus creating dissatisfaction with the status quo. This point links to Majone's emphasis on the inbuilt inertia in bureaucracies and the role of argument.

Sensitivity to context is crucial to understanding the potential for lesson drawing, with organizations varying across a number of dimensions including values, capacity and financial resources. Effective lesson drawing requires identifying the obstacles to policy change and understanding a hierarchy of influences from the most place and time specific to the most general. Rose identifies a number of ***factors that make lesson-drawing more likely:***[43]

- The simpler the cause and effect relationship of a policy
- The smaller the scale of change resulting

[39] Boswell 2008, p.472
[40] Boswell 2008, p.473
[41] Boswell 2008, p.474
[42] Rose R (1991): 'What is Lesson-Drawing?, *Journal of Public Policy*, 11 (1), p.7
[43] Rose 1993, pp.132-141

- The greater the interdependence between programmes undertaken in different jurisdictions
- The greater the congruity between the values of policymakers and a programme's values

Policy Transfer

Policy transfer focuses on policy content and on the role of agency in transferring ideas from one time or space to another. This concept highlights important contextual factors relating to the use of evidence. In seeking to explain why policy transfer occurs, David Dolowitz and David Marsh (1996) distinguish between two main ***types of transfer***, *voluntary* and *coercive*, with a further distinction between *direct* and *indirect coercive* policy transfer.[44]

- *Voluntary transfer* refers to the process by which policy-makers freely choose to adopt policies or practices from another place or time. This process is usually the result of perceived dissatisfaction with existing arrangements and relates closely to the idea of lesson-drawing.

- *Direct coercive transfer* in its most obvious form exists when one organization forces another to adopt a particular policy or practice.

- *Indirect coercive transfer* can arise from a range of factors: externalities, technological change, economic pressures and national/international consensus. Each of these 'push' factors may lead to similar policy responses from different organisations.

In terms of ***what is transferred***, seven possible elements of transfer are identified: goals; structure and content; policy instruments or administrative techniques; institutions; Ideology; ideas; and attitudes and concepts.[45]

In developing their argument on policy resistance (below), Ian Bache and Andrew Taylor (2003)[46] suggest that the notions of voluntary and coercive policy transfer are best understood as ideal types situated on extreme points of a continuum of transfer. In many cases there are likely to be different coalitions of actors within the receiving organisation who support or oppose changes. Moreover, even in the most extreme cases of coercive transfer, the receiving organisation is likely to possess resources that allow it some capacity for translation and/or resistance as policy is implemented. So, in reality, the process of transfer is unlikely to be entirely coercive or voluntary but the outcome of a bargaining process between interdependent actors, whether internal-external, intra-organizational, or both.

Policy Diffusion

Policy diffusion focuses on the timing and sequence of the spread of ideas and practices, rather than the content. It seeks to explain why some organizations either adopt or adapt policies and practices more readily than others. The policy diffusion literature places the concepts of immunity and isomorphy at opposite ends of a spectrum.[47]

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[46] Bache, I. and Taylor, A. (2003): The Politics of Policy Resistance: Reconstructing Higher Education in Kosovo, *Journal of Public Policy*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 279-300

[47] Bache, I. and Olsson, J. (2001): 'Legitimacy through Partnership? EU Policy Diffusion in Britain and Sweden', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 218.

- *Immunity* is an extreme situation, which means that no diffusion of policy is possible because the organisational unit is not receptive to new external ideas.

- *Isomorphy* says that diffusion of ideas occurs quite easily, resulting in an efficient homogenisation process across organizations.

Beside these macro-hypotheses, lies a focus on the behaviour and strategies of important actors in processes of policy diffusion. *Imitation* is one way of reacting. Here, new ideas and concepts in the surrounding world are adopted fast and uncritically. More common are strategies of adaptation and resistance.

Adaptation

Adaptation is the most complex response and may occur on either the conceptual level or in practice, or possibly both. ***A separation may develop between conceptual adaptation and practice.*** An organisation may simply adapt conceptually in order to register agreement with dominating ideas in the surrounding world. However, changes on the conceptual level may eventually affect practice through a 'virus effect', as new ways of acting will emerge slowly and imperceptibly in relation to changes on the level of discourse. In other words, while change might initially only be conceptual, it might ultimately spread to practice.[48]

This type of adaptation can also be interpreted as a *translation process.*[49] In this view, ideas and concepts are not universally exact, but have to be given meaning from a 'local' perspective if they are to be relevant. In a process of translation, ideas and concepts are formulated slightly differently and changed meanings may develop in different contexts. In this way, organisations can make external ideas and concepts their own. This means that organisations may proceed to develop unique policy-styles that may persist over time.

Resistance

This theme is particular relevant where there is pressure on policy-makers to adopt a particular course of action against their judgment.[50] The strategy of resistance may be an expression of strong organisational identity, which can develop into a defence of established values that are seen as threatened by external ideas. The nature of resistance will be shaped by past practices and related interests within an organization.

In this view, even the most subordinate of actors has tactics and resources that can be deployed as part of a resistance strategy. This strategy may take the form of ***a two-stage game***:

- In *stage one*, policy-makers accept the conditions of policy change in order to receive benefits or avoid sanctions.

- In *stage two*, as implementers, policy-makers can decide whether to resist or subvert the conditions agreed.

In pursuing this strategy, policy-makers are likely to adopt low-level forms of resistance rather than overt opposition or defiance. This may include the development of a ***'hidden transcript'***,[51] through which there is outward agreement and cooperation that disguises strategies of non-compliance.

[48] Rovik (1998) in Bache, I. and Olsson, J. (2001): 'Legitimacy through Partnership? EU Policy Diffusion in Britain and Sweden', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, p.218
[49] Rovik (1998) I Bache and Olsson (2001), p. 218.
[50] Bache and Taylor 2003
[51] Scott 1990, Bache and Taylor 2003

Section summary: academic lenses

This section has reviewed some of the main academic contributions relating to the use of evidence in policy. The purpose here is to extract some of the main themes to keep in view during the work of the WWCW and, more specifically, to help frame the interviews with policy-makers. Five main themes are identified as relevant to the use of evidence in policy: policy content, motivations, processes, organizational factors and responses. These are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 - Key themes in the use of evidence in policy (summary of academic literature)

Policy content	**Description**
Goals	General ideas governing policy
Objectives	What policy formally addresses
Settings	Specific requirements on the ground
Instrument logic	Norms that guide implementation preferences
Mechanisms	Specific types of instrument
Calibrations	Ways in which instruments are used
Motivations	
Problem solving	The direct application of a evidence to a pending policy decision
Political	Evidence as ammunition to support a particular position
Tactical	Use of evidence to illustrate responsiveness or use of absence of evidence to delay action
Symbolic	Use of evidence to enhance the legitimacy of an organization or bolster its claim to resources; evidence to substantiate organisational preferences in cases of contestation
Processes	
Argumentation	To challenge inbuilt inertia in organisations
Lesson-drawing	Taking policies from one place or time to another through copying, adaptation, making a hybrid, synthesis or inspiration
Voluntary transfer	Willing adoption of policy/evidence
Direct coercive transfer	Imposed policy/evidence
Indirect coercive transfer	external factors that 'push' change (e.g., technology, economic pressures, national/international consensus)
Organizational factors	
Values	Of dominant actors within organizations
Organizational capacity	Human resources, knowledge etc.
Financial resources	Availability for policy implementation
Political resources	The legitimacy of the organisation to act in the relevant policy area
Responses	
Satisficing	Seeking to maintain satisfaction with the status quo with minimum disruption
Imitation	Uncritical adoption of ideas/evidence
Adaptation	Adjustment of either language or practice, or both
Resistance	Potentially through outward agreement concealing non-compliance

PRACTITIONER-FOCUSED STUDIES

Supply and demand in the use of evidence

Jill Rutter's (2012) work took as its starting point the findings of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) report in 2011 that, despite substantial efforts to make policy more evidence-based, this was still regarded as an area of weakness by both ministers and civil servants. Her report summarised the findings of four seminars held at the Institute of Government and organised in collaboration with the Alliance for Useful Evidence and NIESR.[52]

Rutter's report makes a central distinction between supply and demand side barriers in the use of evidence. In highlighting this distinction here we note that many important issues are on the relationship between supply and demand, rather than one side or the other, and discuss this below. However, there may be some heuristic value in this distinction. Significant ***barriers on the supply side*** included:

- Academics finding it difficult to engage effectively with policy-makers
- Policies not being designed in way that allows for evaluation
- A lack of useable data to provide the basis for research

Rutter's report provides useful illustrations of how some policy-makers view the supply of evidence,[53] including:

> *I was always looking for the evidence to support what we should do and being very disappointed that the academic community hadn't provided the answer for me (ex-Treasury official)*
>
> *We got really high quality papers but it was always felt they were answering yesterday's question tomorrow (senior civil servant)*
>
> *There are some good academics out there who know their stuff, think rigorously and understand the policy process. If you're lucky enough to have some of those academics… make the most of them (former chief analyst)*

However, what was often needed was not a specific piece of research to address a particular problem but 'general expert advice to help them think through and frame an issue and act as a guide to the state of current thinking'.[54]

The report also highlights differences in the thought process and motivations of politicians and civil servants, with one civil servant commenting that there was:

> *... a real danger that [when] we look at "what works" we will often jump over what the objective is and what the "what works" means… what I failed to pick out was that there was a difference between what we analysts meant by what works and what [my secretary of state] meant'.*[55]

A key finding of this research though was that most participants thought that '***in practice the demand side barriers were more significant***' and the culture of key policy-makers – ministers, civil

[52] Rutter 2012, p.4
[53] Rutter 2012, pp.10-11
[54] Rutter 2012, p.11
[55] In Rutter 2012, p.13

servants and other public service providers ‘militate against more rigorous use of evidence and evaluation’[56]. *Significant **demand side barriers*** included:[57]

- Problems with the timeliness and helpfulness of evidence and the mismatch between political timetables and those of evidence producers, allied to ethical reservations about experimentation
- The fact that many decisions were driven by values rather than outcomes – and that ‘evidence-drive’ responses could bring significant political risk
- The lack of culture and skills for using rigorous evidence within the civil service

One dimension of timeliness is the mismatch between research and political timetables. One politician sketched out a discussion with a research body that would need to bid for funds, conduct the research, have the policy put in place and allow time for impact, concluding ‘I’ll be the fisheries minister by then’.[58] Another dimension was that research was often sought after decisions had been made, with the more open initial policy phase being ‘the hardest phase for outsiders to access’, according to one academic.[59] Politicians were seen not to want evidence at times because issues were about values and there was also the risk of ‘inconvenient truths’.

In relation to civil service culture and behaviour, one former civil servant commented that ‘a lot of the policy community… is far too self-confident about what they know and what they don’t know’.[60] Others pointed to the lack of incentives on civil servants and ministers to be rigorous in the use of evidence: ‘there being no sense that “the better your evidence, the more money we’ll give you”’.[61]

The seminars underpinning Rutter’s report did not attempt to come to an overall conclusion. However, one concluding comment that may resonate with wellbeing evidence was the point that:

> *One of the challenges is to move beyond the more “technocratic” end of the policy spectrum into more “political” or ideological areas. For that, proper evaluation needs to be seen as the friend – not the enemy – of the radical politician trying to make permanent change*[62]

This point resonates with Weiss’s articulation of the *political model* (above), in which evidence is sought as ‘ammunition’ to support a particular position.

The importance of politics comes across strongly in the GSRUs (2007) report on ‘evidence-based’ policy, alongside stakeholder and public and media influences. *Political influences* included manifesto commitments, broader principles and ideology, time pressures exerted by the political cycle, and changes in government/leadership.[63] A range of *stakeholders* were seen influence policy, with some having particularly close relationships with ministers and special advisers. While this advice was sometimes informed by ‘sound evidence’, in other cases it was ‘less dependent on robust evidence’.[64] *Media and public influences* were seen as particularly important on politicians and;

> *… several policy makers made the point that public perceptions were just as essential as hard evidence in securing support for policies*[65]

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[56] Rutter 2012, p.4
[57] Rutter 2012, pp.16-17
[58] In Rutter 2012, p. 17

[60] Rutter 2012, p.18
[61] Rutter 2012, p.20
[62] In Rutter 2012, p29
[63] GSRU 2007, p13.
[64] GSRU 2007, p.14.
[65] GSRU 2007, p.14

This emphasis on politics also raises the issue of the different types of knowledge and expertise that might inform policy-making. Brian Head's (2010) critical review of the research literature on evidence-based policy identified three ***legitimate types of knowledge*** in democratic societies, alongside scientific analysis[66]:

- *Political knowledge* - the strategies, tactics and agenda-setting abilities of political leaders and their organisations set the 'big picture' of policy priorities and approaches
- The *professional knowledge* of practitioners and managers is essential for understanding feasibility and effectiveness
- The *experiential knowledge* of service users and stakeholders is central to 'client focused' service delivery

The value of these alternative forms of knowledge is a recurring theme across both academic and practitioner-focused studies.

How to achieve more effective services: the evidence ecosystem
Shepherd's (2014) report to government on how to achieve more effective services is explicitly aimed at What Works initiatives. His report covers the use of evidence in six What Works Centre policy areas: crime reduction, health and social care; education; early intervention; ageing better; and local economic growth.

Shepherd's starting point is that 'the creation and adoption of effective policies, programmes and interventions depends on a functional evidence ecosystem'.[67] He suggests that:

> *What Works Centres are an essential part of this ecosystem and need to be concerned not just with evidence synthesis and adoption but with the whole system in their sector so that faults can be identified and put right*[68]

His starting point is to compare the evidence ecosystem with the supply chain from the petrochemical industry, with analogies to pumps, pipelines, usability, product blending, fuel, waste, viscosity and costs. Shepherd's approach focused on ***four features of the evidence ecosystem***:

- evidence sources
- transmission lines
- problems
- incentives

These domains were chosen because 'they cross ecosystem boundaries and facilitate the collection of information about evidence demand (evidence pull) and promotion (evidence push)'.[69]

The ***three key elements of the evidence ecosystem*** are:[70]

> *1. A useful, relevant and dynamic evidence base* presented in a way that is usable for policy makers, commissioners and practitioners

[66] Head, B. (2010) Reconsidering evidence-based policy: key issues and challenges, Policy and Society 29, p.83
[67] Shepherd 2014, p. 5
[68] Shepherd 2014, p.5
[69] Shepherd 2014, p.22
[70] Shepherd 2014, p.11

2. Supportive structures that are dedicated to the effective transmission and uptake of evidence informed interventions and policies
3. A workforce able and motivated to apply evidence for the improvement and commissioning of services

Table 5: Three key elements of the ecosystem[71]

A useful and relevant body of evidence[72] (relates to)	**Comments**
Presentation of evidence	While academics may want to qualify findings and this can be important for nuanced and context-based policies, it can also lead to uncertainty that reduces the chance of implementation: 'obfuscation can do more harm than good' (interviewee).[73]
Ease of implementation	This is a key factor in the take up of evidence-informed policy.
Prior knowledge	Policy-makers tend to adopt policies that do not challenge their core beliefs or values and evidence that suggests a paradigm shift rather than incremental change will be ignored for longer (echoes arguments of Rose on policy makers as satisficers, above).
Practical realities	Evidence must acknowledge these and must speak to the experience of policy-makers.
Supportive structures (include)	
Knowledge translators	Intermediaries who 'sift through the evidence and synthesise, consolidate and pump it to those in positions to capitalise on it in accessible and usable forms'.[74]
Implementation networks	Provide both mechanisms for engaging practitioners with evidence and promote an 'evidence-reliant culture' among their members.
Workforce able/eager to use evidence (promoted through)	
Educational meetings	Didactic, interactive and combined formats.
Audit and feedback	Summaries of performance against evidence-based standards, along with feedback on good practice and areas for improvement.
Educational outreach visits	By experts or trained facilitators.

The key point made here is that 'intervention choices should be governed by the needs of practitioners and policy makers in particular sectors and environments where an intervention is being deployed: these may differ according to which guideline is being implemented'.[75] In short, understanding the context and the audience is crucial to bringing about behavioural change.
Shepherd identified ***three pre-requisites for behavioural change:***[76]

- Ability – knowledge and technical ability, technology and resources (time, money, personnel etc.).
- Motivation – positive (rewards) and negative (sanctions).
- Trigger – prompts at the point of decision.

[71] Based on Shepherd 2014, pp.11-14.
[72] Shepherd 2014, pp.11-13
[73] Shepherd 2014, p.12
[74] Shepherd 2014, p.13
[75] Shepherd 2014, p.17
[76] Shepherd 2014, p.18

Table 6 gives indication of Shepherd's findings across the four features of the evidence ecosystem in the six policy areas covered. Often the responses to the domains varied according to different actors or organizations (e.g., teachers vs. education commissioners) but for the sake of simplicity and space these distinctions are not generally made in the Table.

Table 6: Summary of Shepherd's findings in the evidence ecosystem across six policy areas

	Sources	Transmission lines	Problems	Incentives
Crime reduct-ion	• Campbell Collaboration Crime and Justice Group • Universities • NICE • Internet searches • Force leads • College of Policing • Other police forces • Community Safety Partnerships • Society for Evidence-Based Policing	• Strategic command course • Chats with colleagues • Visits to initiatives detected through 'police grapevine' or via Twitter • Meetings with force and ACPO crime leads • Association of Policy Commissioners • Police Science Inst.(Wales)	• Evidence wells are 'shallow' and 'dry' • RCT capacity is low • Academics don't understand issues • Academics not good at explaining • No police evaluation funding scheme • Offers' lack of understanding of what evidence is • Poor connectivity with academics	• Better force performance • New Society for Evidence Based Policing and College of Policing provide incentives and encouragement • Fulfilling 'moral and public service obligations and knowing what the latest thinking is'
Health and social care	• Specialist journals • Royal colleges (e.g., Psychiatry, Surgeons) • International meetings • NICE • General medical journals • British National Formulary • Internet searches • Twitter, LinkedIn	• Hard copy and online articles • Small group discussions (some via royal colleges) • CCG commission teams	• Lack of contextual evidence • Health technology assessment appraisals 'not fit for purpose' • Products of Cochrane evidence reviews often seen as unstable • Information overload • Academic language • Status of evidence • Nursing research often too theoretical	• Location of a NICE unit in a royal college an 'in-built' incentive • Royal College of Surgeons Clinical Effectiveness Unit outcome data • Peer pressure • Competitiveness between clinicians • Quality Outcome Framework (gen. practice) • Value for money
Educati on	• In-service training days (often private sector-led) • Colleagues • Action research in own schools • Social media (especially Twitter) • Department for Education • Education Endowment Foundation • Association of Commissioners of Children's Services	• Other teachers • Heads use evidence from other schools • Poor heads/schools generally not well connected • Educational commissioners in local authorities have RAs	• Low quality evidence • Not enough evidence • Low credibility of academics who produce the evidence ('not in the classroom' • Lack of funding for Inset days • Lack of context-specific evidence • Ofsted seen as a problem by some, as are edicts from government	• Improve skillset, quality of life and efficiency (teachers) • Improve school performance (heads) • Fear of punishment from poor results/Ofsted local authority reports commissioners) • Improve reputation of local authority and attract better recruits to teaching/ LA
Early interve-ntion	• UK social scientists/ Universities • International research literature • Local Government Information Unit / local authorities / SOLACE/ Inlogov • Dartington Trust • In-house policy teams • Twitter feeds - (esp. from govt. depts.) • Children and Young People Now • Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Sciences / Institute for Government / Institute for Education • Office of Public Management • Local family support services • Packenham Project • Chance UK	• Paper reports on evidence from policy teams • Twitter • Local authority training courses • LinkedIn • Local meetings • Newsletters	• Much research is sociological criticism or too theoretical • Lack of an ESRC field trials unit or other evaluation expertise • Research findings often 'too complicated'/ 'too wide ranging' • Some international models don't fit UK context • Diverse nature of delivery by different groups/practitioners • Paucity of EEF-style guidance on cost benefit and reliability • Access to academic journals • Lack of evidence for some	• Commissions feel that applying evidence makes a difference • Getting financial returns on investment • Seeing better outcomes • Meeting government statutory functions • Success in delivering integrated services • Freedom to act on evidence rather than having policy dictated • Freedom to withdraw funding from services not

	• Family Action • National Family Intervention Programme. • DCFS / Department of Health • LinkedIn • Early intervention websites • NHS England commissioners		government policy changes • Late intervention rather than early intervention culture • Low quality training • Lack of reliable outcome measures for service impact • Little evidence reaching front line	adhering to evidence-based practice
Ageing better	• Action research (with home care staff) • Joseph Rowntree Foundation • Care Quality Commission • Social Care Institute of Excellence • Department of Health • Care home managers and care teams • Housing 21/ Age UK • Alzheimer's Society • Universities	• ;My Home Life' knowledge broker and facilitators • Local, face-to-face meetings	• Snowstorm' of information, often unusual, too extensive, irrelevant or obvious • Some evidence lacks credibility (not involved service users) • 'Avalanche of information' hides useful evidence • Conferences expansive/' need time off • Evidence doesn't reach front-line	• Knowing about the 'horrific' lives that older people often lead • Delivering government strategy (esp. PM's on dementia) • Difficult economic climate an incentive to adhere to evidence
Local econ. growth	• Local agencies' knowledge often institutional • Local authority/ Local Government Association reports • BIS reports • National Audit Office reports • LinkedIn • ONS data • Business sector groups (e.g., Housing Association, Chambers of Commerce) • Academic articles • Bank of England reports • Economists and consultants • Chief Economic Development Officers Network • Universities	• Email • Hard copy reports • Informal local telephone networks • A (low profile) LEP networks • In-house enterprise partnership teams • Local Government Chronicle, • Municipal Journal • Local business newspapers	• Little awareness that experimental evidence on effectiveness might be useful (not just statistical data) • Few university, think tank or social media sources used • Few respondents know about relevant courses / CDP opportunities • Evaluations 'usually unsound'. • Too few evidence champions • Standardisation of growth measures needed • LEP communications can be difficult • Researchers not connected 'on ground' • Unavailability of some evidence • Lack of evidence database • Government inconsistency in its choice of evidence to win funding	• To build business cases • For applications for City Deals • Strategic Economic Plans • ERDF, ESF and LEP funding • Ensuring best use of public money (linked to career progression for some) • Reducing the chances of 'doing the wrong thing' – leading to waste of public money, lack of growth etc.

Case study: Improving access to psychological therapies
Richard Layard and David Clark's[77] story of improving access to psychological therapies relates directly to the challenge of bringing wellbeing more squarely into policy. It highlights, among other things, the role of political contingencies in the successful take up of evidence. They refer to two particularly opportune moments to put new ideas into policy – before a general election and before a government's spending review.

Prior to the 2005 election, while the Labour party (then in government) was preparing its manifesto, Layard and Clark produced a paper for the PM Blair's Policy Unit called 'Mental Health: Britain's biggest social problem'. They argued for the creation of 8,000 more therapists in England to treat 15 per cent of the diagnosable population each year, informed by NICE guidelines. Layard and Clark suggest the paper ***made an impact through emphasizing three simple points***:[78]

- The scale of suffering this policy would address and the related injustice of denying people treatments that were recommended by NICE (based on evidence).
- There would be no net cost to the Treasury.
- Routine outcome measurements would clearly show what was being achieved.

The arguments were subsequently put forward at a Downing Street meeting and, a few months later, the Labour manifesto included a commitment to improving mental health services, referring to both behavioural and drug therapies. After the election, the returning Labour government established a programme for Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPTs), although it was not clear at first what should be included in the programme.

Two pilot studies were established – one on low intensity therapy, the other on high intensity therapy – and the Department of Health set up a group to advise the programme, while Layard's host institution, the London School of Economics, set up group to work out the next steps. The key question remaining was whether the programme would secure the necessary financial backing from government. This is where the point about political contingencies becomes interesting:

> *… as the October 2007 spending review approached, things did not look good. A Treasury committee of officials reported that the plan was not based on evidence and was also too expensive. But then things changed. Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, and he and his Downing Street officials backed the programme. At the same time an outstanding politician, Alan Johnson, was appointed Secretary of State for health…. And he provided every penny that had been asked for*[79]

Despite the importance of changes in key personnel in government, Layard and Clark are clear that this decision would not have been taken without the evidence provided by NICE: 'Policy-makers these days demand evidence before spending taxpayers' money, especially if the area of spending lies outside their comfort zone'.[80]

Section summary: practitioner focused studies
The contributions by Rutter and Shepherd provide heuristic frameworks that are useful for thinking about the evidence-policy relationship in wellbeing. Head's work is a reminder of the range of legitimate forms of knowledge in policy-making, while Layard and Clark's discussion highlights the importance of both evidence and political contingencies in a wellbeing-related case. From this

[77] Layard, R. and Clark, D. (2014) *Thrive: the power of psychological therapy*, London: Penguin
[78] Layard and Clark 2014, 195
[79] Layard and Clark 2014, 196
[80] Layard and Clark 2014, 206

discussion a number of key themes are identified as relevant to the use of evidence in policy. These are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7 – Key themes in the use of evidence in policy (practitioner-focused studies)

	Key themes
Conceptual frameworks	
Evidence ecosystem (evidence sources, transmission lines, problems and incentives)	Identifies *key elements* as: • A useful and, relevant and dynamic evidence base - quality of presentation, ease of implementation, prior knowledge of policy-makers, speaking to practical experience • Supportive structures - knowledge translators who can 'pump' evidence to those in relevant positions) • A workforce able and motivated to apply evidence - can be promoted through educational meetings, audit and feedback, outreach visits Identifies *pre-requisites for behavioural change* • Ability - knowledge and technical ability, technology and resources (e.g., time, money and personnel) • Motivation - rewards and sanctions • Trigger – prompts at the point of decision
Supply vs demand	*Supply barriers* include: • Academics finding it difficult to engage effectively with policy-makers • Policies not being designed in way that allows for evaluation • A lack of useable data to provide the basis for research *Demand barriers* include: • Problems with the timeliness and helpfulness of evidence • Decisions driven by values rather than outcomes • Lack of incentives for civil servants and ministers to be rigorous in use of evidence
Types of knowledge	
Political	• Strategies, tactics and agenda-setting abilities of political leaders and their organisations
Professional	• Of practitioners and managers
Experiential	• Of service users and stakeholders

WELLBEING

As noted above, in comparison with other policy areas covered by What Works Centres, wellbeing is more recent to the policy agenda and is arguably subject to greater contestation over definition and measurement. However, in relation to definition, the ESRC has provided a starting point for the WWCW, drawing on the work of the ONS:

> *Wellbeing, put simply, is about 'how we are doing' as individuals, communities and as a nation and how sustainable this is for the future. We define wellbeing as having 10 broad dimensions which have been shown to matter most to people in the UK as identified through a national debate. The dimensions are: the natural environment, personal wellbeing, our relationships, health, what we do, where we live, personal finance, the economy, education and skills and governance. Personal wellbeing is a particularly important dimension which we define as how satisfied we are with our lives, our sense that what we do in life is worthwhile,*

our day to day emotional experiences (happiness and anxiety) and our wider mental wellbeing. [81]

This definition is helpful in setting out common ground for the different programmes in the WWCW but, as the ESRC acknowledges, will not resolve debate over definitional issues and – as suggested above – ideas and concepts are translated by policy makers and changed meanings may develop in different contexts. Moreover, while there is an emphasis in this definition on personal wellbeing, the ONS framework is broad and some aspects of this framework will be emphasised more in some policy areas than others. And, as the ESRC notes, other dimensions may also emerge.[82]

The newness of the policy agenda means that while there is a lot of research that highlights different drivers of wellbeing and the effects of some policies on wellbeing, this research will generally not have been conducted with this definition in mind and wellbeing will usually have been a secondary or even tertiary outcome of policy.[83] Existing research has been conducted in different contexts for different purposes and it is a task of the WWCW is to bring greater cross-disciplinary integration of evidence and 'continued critical reflection on the emerging research base'.[84] As the ESRC notes: 'Persistent research challenges remain such as the ability to establish cause and effect from such evidence'[85]

The review of both academic and practitioner-focused contributions on the evidence-policy relationship above highlights the difficulty of separating issues of politics, values and interests from the issue of 'what works' in practice and illustrates the importance of keeping a wide perspective. Drawing on these contributions, and particularly on the approach taken in Shepherd's (2014) review of evidence ecosystems for the What Works network, a number of themes and questions were identified to structure the interviews with policy-makers and stakeholders.[86] These were as follows:

1. Key terms and issues
    - Wellbeing - how do you understand this term? How do they think other people understand it? What do you understand by 'community wellbeing'?
    - 'What works' – what does this mean to you?
    - Policy – What does 'policy' mean to you? Are some policy areas more conducive to a wellbeing approach?

2. The evidence ecosystem (based on Shepherd's approach)
    - Evidence sources – what sources of evidence do you know about and what are the ones you use?
    - Transmission lines – what are the channels through which your organisation receives evidence?
    - Problems – What are the main challenges around the use of evidence?
    - Incentives – What are the main incentives for using evidence?

3. The challenge of wellbeing
    - Does the issue of wellbeing present specific challenges in the use of evidence? If so, of what types?

[81] ESRC (2014) What Works Centre for Wellbeing 2014/15: Common Specification (*www.esrc.ac.uk/_.../what-works-wellbeing-common-specification_tcm8),* p4.
[82] ESRC 2014, p.4
[83] ESRC 2014, p.5
[84] ESRC 2014, p.5
[85] ESRC 2014, p.5
[86] Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted between August and September-October 2015 with individuals from a range of organisations including UK government, local government and the third sector.

- Other than research evidence what other forms of knowledge are important to wellbeing (e.g., political, professional, experiential)?

4. Moving forward
   - What specifically do you want from the WWCW?

A summary of ***initial findings***[87] is presented here.

Key terms and issues
Wellbeing
Interviewees generally defined wellbeing in a holistic/multidimensional way. For example:

> *It's about how the nation's doing, how communities are doing and how individuals are doing.*
>
> *'Social, economic and health - many things – and how you fit and in and relate to the community.*

However, most interviewees suggested 'others' tend to have a narrower understanding. For example,

> *Professionals in different areas will give different definitions - emotional wellbeing, mental wellbeing…'*
>
> *Policy-makers in my field tend to associate it with mental health: they medicalise it.*
>
> *You ask ten people, you get 11 different answers, essentially.*

For some interviewees this difference presented an ongoing challenge in relation to advancing wellbeing in policy.

Community wellbeing
There was less consensus on definitions of community wellbeing, although not all interviewees were specifically engaged in this area of policy. Definitions included:

> *Benefits to a whole community…*
>
> *I see it in social capital terms… amount of space and opportunities to mix: mix between social groups.*
>
> *We tend to talk about social wellbeing – our approach is influenced by Sen's work. Participation is emphasized – it is for communities themselves to identify.*

[87] These findings will be analysed further alongside additional data for future publications

What works?
On the meaning of 'what works', responses to this tended to be similar and reflected the aims of the WWCW (i.e., they were related to the use and standards of evidence):

> *Identifying, based on evidence, what works and then doing something with that information so it leads to change.*
>
> *Not just to take things at face value.*

Are some policy areas more conducive to a wellbeing approach?
On this question there was a range of responses. Some identified particular policy areas (e.g., ageing health, mental health) as particularly conducive, while others took a broader view:

> *It could be quite central to a lot of policy-making now.*
>
> *Policies that don't just look at the thing in isolation.*
>
> *It's those that really have a social impact and doing them for social reasons, community reasons rather than purely economic reasons.*

The evidence ecosystem
Evidence sources used
A wide range of evidence sources are used, varying across different organisations and for different purposes. These include (in no particular order):

- Commissioned research and evaluations
- Randomised control trials
- Systemic/meta-reviews (e.g., Kings Fund/NICE/Nef)
- Voluntary and community sector
- Grey literature
- Syntheses of academic literature (e.g., by think tanks, VCS)
- Participatory approaches
- Focus groups
- Online surveys
- In-house research (some use ONS SWB indicators)
- Academic papers
- Evaluations
- Parliamentary events
- All-Party Parliamentary Groups
- Secondary datasets
- Government reports (Cabinet Office, DWP)
- Government surveys (ONS, Cabinet Office)
- Legatum Institute
- Internet
- OECD
- Roundtables
- Co-production

Observations on evidence sources included:

I occasionally go back to the source material, but there is so much research

I think it's important that the ecosystem of evidence is equally valued and equally mined but that when one is looking for some direct correlation between an input and an output that might be subject to slightly more rigorous scientific, methodological means.

If you have a hierarchy of evidence that puts certain types of evidence at the top, then that immediately narrows the amount of available evidence to you, doesn't it?

The Government favours quantitative evidence

Evidence sources least used
Some interviewees said they could make more of international sources (and evidence from elsewhere in the UK) but there were issues of capacity and replicability/transferability.

One interviewee suggested that social media might be used more. It gives 'lower quality but very large volume measures on wellbeing, which can then be effectively correlated or used in natural experiments to establish direct effects on wellbeing'.

Most interviewees do not generally read academic papers (although one described these as their 'main source'). Generally academic research was received through summaries or through face-to-face presentations and individual contacts

Transmission lines
Interviewees received evidence through a diversity of transmission lines (in no particular order):

- In-house research and light touch evaluation, literature reviews, evidence-gathering
- Commissioned research
- Academics
- Professional networks
- Wider sector networks
- Policy advisory groups
- Guidance from national bodies (e.g., PHE)
- Circulars (NICE, NHS, Kings Fund etc.) around specific issues (e.g., obesity).
- Twitter
- Own organisation (e.g., local authority)
- Search engines (e.g., Pub Med)
- Conferences and seminars
- 'People send us things' (think tanks, personal emails from various actors)
- Meetings (e.g., Alliance for Useful Evidence/NESTA)
- Information services (provide regular bulletins)
- Universities
- Private consultancy organisations
- Co-production
- Presentations (given face-to-face)
- Internet
- Parliamentary events

The interviewees were well connected within relevant networks and a lot of material comes to them through personal contacts:

You have the right conversations to make sure you're not missing any tricks.

…making sure I'm linked in with the right experts and then reports may come my way as a result of that… not very scientific at all.

Problems

Problems in relation to the use of evidence were identified on both the supply and demand sides (in no particular order):

- Awareness ('knowing that it exists')
- Understanding evidence
- Understanding who the evidence is for and why they need it
- Lack of staff skill in using evidence
- Timeframes (i.e., within which impact has to be seen: 'It takes time to commission decent work and produce decent work')
- Timeliness (i.e., evidence not available when it is needed; legislative cycle not right)
- Time pressures (on staff)
- Funding /capacity constraints
- Access to evidence (e.g., academic journals)
- Policy making is 'messy' (not rational and linear)
- Bad evidence
- Academic work not accessible/practical
- Lack of clarity on the relative strengths of the evidence
- Challenging the default position ('some are culturally and educationally programmed to consider only one type of evidence').
- Evidence focused on individual outcomes not social (e.g., 'improving blood pressure, not social capital')
- Qualitative evidence less valued ('financial climate - value for money')
- Sheer volume of research

A key issue is the ***presentation of research***:

The packaging is really important and the plain English

If something isn't packaged in the right way I don't really have time

Issues of ***time, timing and timeframes*** are also important:

Unless I can download it instantly, print it off, have it there and make sure I've given some time to read it, it's no good to me

It can take a generation to influence a community but it is difficult to plan in advance with financial uncertainty. It stifles innovation and planning. You look for options that can give more immediate results

On the ***relative strengths of different forms of evidence***, one interviewee stated:

I think it is beholden in publications to say, "Look, this is what we're basing these findings or statements on and here's the levels of evidence". So it's just that much more honest and open, transparent way of which evidence is being used. And letting people make up their own mind to a certain extent.

Finally, a number of interviewees pointed to the ***messiness of the policy process*** pointing to the importance of issues such as political processes (manifesto commitments, interest groups, electorate etc.)

Incentives

There were a range of internal and external incentives to use evidence (in no particular order):

- Quality of 'own' work
- Assurance processes
- Value for money
- Population benefits
- Producing better policies
- Influencing government
- To get more funding
- To learn and improve
- Credibility (e.g., 'it might give us a seat at the table')
- Appraisal processes within Whitehall ('you're going to be challenged')
- Confidence ('that that decision that you're making isn't just based on instinct, hunch or bias')

Interviewees regularly referred to the 'current climate' and issues of scrutiny and value for money. This was both within organisations and in the wider policy arena – particularly within government. For example:

> *Civil servants want to develop policies that will work – we don't want to be caught out.*
>
> *it's even more important in the current climate in that there is a definite view that charities are kind of ideologically-driven, political mouthpieces… you leave yourself very, very vulnerable to [this criticism] if you're not evidence-based.*
>
> *We want this evidence to be so strong that the government and the Treasury cannot turn away the findings because their methodologically unsound.*
>
> *If you're publishing a policy you've got to back it with evidence… [There are] gates to get through for decision-making gates for big policies, like impact assessments and business cases, spending reviews. So big incentives are built into the system in some respects… also dealing with the public...*

Other forms of knowledge

To varying degrees, all interviewees identified other forms of knowledge as important: professional, political and experiential. For example:

> *People understand that the evidence ecosystem is pooled and shaped and manipulated in different directions by each of those different interests…*
>
> *We proceed on a case-by-case basis… stakeholder experience of the problem, frontline workers who are engaged in your policy or who could help to deliver solutions.*

We absolutely liaised with the voluntary sector, who do frontline delivery. We liaised with the infrastructure bodies.

Service users can throw up implementation issues.

We're a membership organisation so we're always surveying our members.

About one-third is evidence.

The challenge of wellbeing
For most interviewees the complex/multidimensional nature of wellbeing and contestation over definition and measurement presents a particular challenge for the use of evidence:

It's still a contested term – I doubt there will be a consensus.

Wellbeing might require more complex interventions.

It does need to move us into areas of scientific inquiries that are much more integral or integrated across disciplines. And that challenges the way in which academia currently organises itself and scientific funding is currently distributed.

There were difference between those who believe a broad range of indicators should be used for wellbeing in policy and others who think that subjective wellbeing indicators are a way forward, pragmatically at least. So, on the one hand:

They say we can't reduce wellbeing down to a couple of questions. No, you can't, but if you think that it's practical always putting 20 or 30 wellbeing questions into a survey - it's very naïve to think that's the case. You have to sacrifice yourself and basically, reduce or boil down to a few questions.

And, on the other:

The use of subjective wellbeing as a dominant measure is because we – a lot of people - are looking for simplistic answers to very complex questions… we need to balance that with much greater objectivity.

There was also a sense that some that contestation over definition and measurement is inevitable and that:

There's no point in criticising anyone's approach on wellbeing because it has to be administration/context-specific.

One organisation dealt with this issue through participatory research, drawing on what people in specific contexts view as 'the most important things in their lives'. However, this interviewee acknowledged that this approach 'probably has some gaps methodologically'.

Moving forward
There were numerous suggestions on what the What Works Centre for Wellbeing might do to ***address issues in the evidence ecosystem***. These included (in no particular order):

- Improve accessibility of evidence ('short and simple')

- Promote different types of sources
- Scale up examples of good practice (e.g., within a community)
- Give 'concrete examples' of what worked and why
- Improve availability of evidence
- 'Find more innovative, creative and successful channels of evidence transmission.'
- Organise events/ promote networking
- Provide an online resource bank for different methods
- Have direct contact with organisations

More ***generally*** the WWCW should:

- Be collaborative ('not least with people on the ground')
- Prioritise? (i.e., provide a specific focus within wellbeing)
- Link with other WWCs (the 'multidimensional challenge')
- Address definitional issues/ build consensus around the term 'wellbeing' and related metrics (e.g., in government)
- Build capacity of organisations (esp. VCS)
- Provide simple tools and frameworks for policy-makers
- Provide evidence 'beyond what might be politically expedient'
- Create a demand for wellbeing evidence
- Provide insight into upcoming/emerging trends on wellbeing
- Develop a strong brand ('that can be trusted')

The need to translate of complex research into short and accessible information was a key theme. A number of interviewees identified a rapid growth in research on wellbeing – an 'exponential curve'. One interviewee suggested that 'wellbeing has tended to be a very academic subject we're trying to convert into something that's very clearly actionable and can influence decisions'. And that for policy-makers this might be 'a checklist of ten questions that policy-makers should ask themselves based on domains of wellbeing, or whatever it is'.

A number of interviewees also raised the issue of whether the Centre should have a specific focus (e.g., mental wellbeing, subjective wellbeing). One gave the example of how the Joseph Rowntree Foundation had 'honed down on poverty'. However, there was no clear consensus on what this specific focus might be for the WWCW

There was some consensus on the need to embrace and promote different types of evidence. One interviewee stated that the complexity of wellbeing required:

> *… a much more modern way of addressing the issues; a much more integrated sense of all of these things together. And that lends itself to, I think, new and potentially very exciting forms of evidence… the Wellbeing What Work Centre needs to promulgate that ecosystem and multiplicity of what we consider as justifiable evidence.*

Another interview suggested that 'sometimes evidence gets used because it's the most visible evidence and the Centre should 'bring a lot more evidence into play to make that more visible'.

Finally, the Centre might also play a key role over definitional issues and in promoting a 'common currency' for appraising and evaluating the value of different policies. While the ONS questions were seen as having widest recognition in many contexts, it was suggested that the 'WWCW could help here by setting out different measures for different purposes'

Final reflections
The interviewees indicated considerable demand for evidence of different types and for a range of purposes. While there are issues about definition and measurement outstanding, there is also a sense that scepticism around wellbeing had receded significantly in recent years:

> *I think people do understand that wellbeing is important and I think some of those arguments have generally been won. They don't think it's mad anymore to be measuring this. I think what they want is to do something about it.*

At the same time, this level of acceptance has to contend with other priorities. For example:

> *If they have a pound to spend on research on obesity, they're going to focus on the research around body mass index [rather than measuring wellbeing.*

This issue links to the question of funding challenges facing some organisations. As one interviewee put it:

> *I don't think there's resistance to wellbeing. The white elephant in the room is the funding crisis. It's increasingly difficult to innovate and do long-term planning.*

CONCLUSION
The paper has reviewed both academic and practitioner-focused contributions on the evidence-policy relationship and has presented initial findings on some of the challenges of bringing wellbeing more squarely into policy. Both the idea of wellbeing and its role in public policy is subject to much debate and contestation. These ongoing debates contribute to the 'wicked problem' of bringing wellbeing into policy, which combines complexity, uncertainty and divergence and for which there are no definitive answers.[88] Yet the idea of wellbeing as a goal of public policy is one that has increasing support: as O'Donnell et al (2014) put it, 'The tide had turned'[89]. While there is an ongoing challenge for wellbeing advocates to sell the idea to a wider range of policy-makers and stakeholders, including the general public, the generation of evidence that promotes greater understanding of 'what works' for wellbeing in policy is central to this task.

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[88] Bache, I., Reardon, L. and Anand, P. (2015)
[89] O'Donnell, G., Deaton, A., Durand, D. Halpern, D. and Layard, R. (2014) Wellbeing and Policy, Report Commissioned by the Legatum Institute, p.15

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