



Using and commissioning research in government



“ It was really daunting to be in high-level, complex conversations... You’re actually looking at, or trying to understand, big data-driven judgment calls and commissioning research, primary research. ”

Lord Bethel
Parliamentary under-secretary of state for innovation (2020–21)

What role does research play in government?

Policy making is a complex weighting of factors, but using research skilfully can be an effective way to strengthen your policies. It can help you define the problem you seek to address – such as by analysing administrative or longitudinal data – as well as allowing you to explore a broad range of ideas for how to tackle it. Research is also a useful tool to understand the impact, including any unintended consequences, of policy options. For example, you can commission policy evaluations or research on the populations affected by policies.

Departments may not always have an existing research base for your priorities. As a minister, you can commission research from your department and from sources of outside expertise such as academia, industry and the third sector. There are different routes to doing this – including advisory committees and policy reviews – that can help you build relationships with relevant experts and strengthen your decision making.



It was then a question of whether we had the expertise and the resource within the department to be able to carry that through. So I made sure we set up best working groups of people... to make sure the officials were being guided and informed well.



Tim Loughton

Parliamentary under-secretary of state for children and families (2010–12)

1. Understand where research might be useful

Your department will have a standing evidence base for its areas of responsibility, but there may be gaps that can be effectively plugged by new research. Commissioning this research can help ensure the department is up to date with wider policy debates – it can let you bring together insights from across government, industry and academia. Former minister Hilary Benn told the Institute that David Blunkett, as education and employment secretary, “needed to bring in outside expertise and capacity” for the literacy and numeracy strategy because the departments’ officials had never been asked to do a similar task before.

You can work with senior officials – including the chief scientific adviser, which most departments have – to assess where the gaps in expertise are that your department faces. Each department publishes its ‘areas of research interest’ (ARIs) to communicate to the broader research community the topics where government could benefit from further input. Commissioned research can supplement the advice and analysis provided by officials, allowing you to draw on a range of insights when making policy decisions.

2. Explore your options for bringing in expertise

As a minister, there is a range of tools that allow you to draw on outside expertise.

Advisory committees can provide advice in various ways. Some may be standing committees about a broadly defined policy area, while others may be set up on an ad hoc basis. They can perform a variety of functions – for example, the Net Zero Innovation Board provides strategic oversight of government’s energy innovation programmes. Committees are a useful way to bring together a range of perspectives on an issue, including from academia, industry and the third sector, and test your assumptions.

Some committees – such as the Migration Advisory Committee – may be more independent from government, with a secretariat and greater powers such as the ability to make direct recommendations. These tend to be advisory non-departmental public bodies, sponsored by your department. Such committees can act as a reliable institution for a policy area that requires consensus and a long-term evidence base. In cases where you seek a solution to a specific problem, you can appoint an external expert to lead a policy review. These studies of government policy, like the Dilnot commission into adult social care funding, can gather evidence through submissions and make recommendations.



So the first thing, I had an advisory group of stakeholders, and I said: 'Look, I have come in, I have looked at my portfolio, I want to do this because I think it has been completely neglected, what is your advice?' And we went from there.



Lynne Featherstone

Spokesperson for energy and climate change (2015–19)

3. Remember that research can take time

For policy areas underpinned by a rich evidence base, you may be able to make decisions quickly – but policy making will inevitably take longer in cases where you need to commission research. Former minister Kitty Ussher told the Institute that, despite the value of research, the time needed to commission it could be “frustrating” when trying to achieve change quickly at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Academics are generally used to producing large pieces of work over a long period, while as a minister you will often need to act within a short deadline, using the best evidence available to you. Be aware of the trade-offs between the need to make a decision quickly and the need to base that decision on high-quality evidence. Policy areas that are relatively novel or involve large-scale change may particularly benefit from a more rigorous research process.

4. Champion research and its findings

The research you commission can be most influential if you give it the right amount of ministerial support. By championing research, you can maximise its value to policy making and – crucially – provide extra momentum to the spending review process. Former minister Tracey Crouch highlighted that strong political support for the review into gambling policy meant “it was very difficult for others to oppose” the review’s findings and recommendations.

The exact impact of research findings will be shaped by your policy priorities, but it is possible to maximise its potential usefulness. You can ask your private office to ensure that policy submissions are clear about both the evidence that they draw upon and the quality of that evidence – while being realistic about what is feasible within a given timeframe. Equally, it is worth considering what staff you feel you need in your private office to help you interpret the findings of research: in the past some ministers have brought in analytical specialists, where other private secretaries have not been able to perform this function.

Questions to ask yourself

- What kinds of outside expertise could improve your policy decisions?
- What is the right structure – a committee, a specific adviser, or something else – to bring in the right research evidence?
- How do you want research findings to be presented to you?
- What aspects of your brief could benefit from further research?

Find out more

If you would like to discuss any of the above in more detail, or talk about potential training we can offer on this topic, please get in touch via ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

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