# Chapter 20

## How to engage policy-makers with research: a relational approach

One of the greatest privileges of being a researcher is the potential we have to operate in a sphere of influence far beyond many other professions. A water engineer might provide drinking water to thousands of villages during their career, but by working with governments we have the potential to influence policies that can bring water to many millions more people. In this chapter, I want to discuss how you can work more effectively with the policy community to generate impacts from your research.

By 'policy community' I don't just mean policy-makers. I am talking about the diverse network of people who feed into the development and implementation of policy, including politicians of all levels (from backbenchers to ministers, both members of the government and opposition parties), civil servants (including those working in both evidence and policy roles in government departments, agencies and other governmental organisations), and the dynamic group of individuals and organisations that shape policy as they move in and out of spheres of influence at different points in the policy process (including, for example, third sector organisations, unions, consultants and lobbyists).

The aim of this chapter isn't to give you a detailed guide to the political apparatus of any particular country — for that you will need to look elsewhere. My goal, instead, is to get you to think differently about how you engage with the policy community, and to persuade you to consider taking a more relational approach to your work in this sphere. In this way, I believe we can become more influential, and increase the chances of our work generating impact. I am not suggesting that we abandon the traditional ways of engaging with policy. Instead, I am suggesting that we don't stop engaging once we've submitted our consultation response or given evidence to a committee. For most of us, what happens next to our evidence is a black box. We may eventually see our work cited in a policy document that leads to impact, or we may never hear anything further. I am suggesting that we do what we can to enter into that black box and help colleagues in the policy community work with our evidence to address the challenges they are facing as they develop policy. This approach may create risks to our time and reputation if things don't go according to plan. In this chapter, I want to make you aware of these risks, as well as the opportunities of taking a more relational approach, and show you how you can mitigate some of these risks to have greater influence on policy.

## There is no such thing as evidence-based policy

I'd like to start with a bold statement. There is no such thing as evidence-based policy. For this to exist, policy-makers would need to base policy on evidence. However, evidence is often highly fractured, providing evidence about a single part of the problem in a specific context, or describing future environmental impacts based on natural science alone, without considering social, cultural or economic factors. Evidence may be uncertain, providing competing claims based on different methods at different scales. Few citizens or politicians have sufficient technical understanding of our research to be able to critically evaluate competing claims and counter-claims, making it easy for lobbyists to sow confusion by amplifying uncertainties.

As a result, members of the policy community must interpret often contradictory research findings, alongside other lines of argument put forward by people with competing ideologies. Policy-makers must therefore consider moral and ideological arguments alongside practicalities (such as budget constraints) and unpredictable external events that constantly change the parameters of the decision being made.

Some have described the relationship between research and policy in more cynical terms, as a way for governments to legitimise policies with reference to evidence from research only when it supports their politically-driven priorities. As J.M. Keynes put it, *"There is nothing a politician likes so little as to be well informed; it makes decision-making so complex and difficult".*

It is easy to sit on the sidelines and criticise colleagues in the policy community for the many imperfections of real-world policy processes. It is a lot harder to be critical if you have spent any time working in government departments, trying to juggle the multiple competing claims on your time and the curve-balls that get thrown at you by politicians or external events. In addition to synthesising evidence from research, there is the need to balance the interests of different stakeholders and public opinion, and listen to the practitioners who may explain why theory (from our research) doesn't always translate into practice.

One response to this complexity is to defend the primacy of scientific knowledge as the only way of finding rational argument and universal truth upon which policy can be based. In response to the conflicting accounts often provided by science, we simply need more and better research.

An alternative response is to accept that pragmatic and ideological considerations will probably alter little in response to more and better research. Instead, we move from trying to achieve evidence-based policy to seeking evidence-informed policy. We become knowledge brokers, using the widest possible body of evidence to provide evidence-based options. While it might appear that the evidence is stacked in favour of one option, we empower a policy-maker to choose an alternative option in the full knowledge that the evidence suggests there will be trouble ahead. In a world of evidence-informed policy, our task is to ensure that the evidence is available and on the table, in forms that are just as palatable and persuasive as the arguments being proposed by others for options that we know from the evidence are likely to be fraught with difficulty. If we care about getting our evidence onto the decision-making table, we need to learn how to become more influential. We can't just submit our evidence and hope for the best.

## Combining bottom-up with top-down approaches to influence policy

As a researcher, I want to make evidence accessible to policy-makers in an engaging and influential way. The word 'influence' in this context is problematic for many researchers, but if we want to take a relational approach to impact, I believe that it isn't enough to simply create a policy brief and put it online. The reality is that the majority of people in the policy community call on trusted advisors for advice relating to research evidence, and are less likely to listen to evidence from sources they do not trust. Just having your paper published in a top journal isn't enough to engender trust and be listened to. You need to demonstrate your credibility and trustworthiness in the context of a long-term relationship with key members of the policy community and become embedded in that community if you really want to be listened to.

I believe that one of the most effective ways of achieving policy change is through a ‘pincer’ movement of influence from the bottom up and the top down (Box 13). It is usually easiest to start from the bottom up, connecting with policy analysts and government researchers who have a similar background to you, and who are likely to easily understand the research and where you are coming from. Starting by building strong, trusting relationships with more junior civil servants, you can begin to understand which of their managers have relevant interests and influence, and begin to introduce them to your ideas too.

However, this approach can only go so far if the top decision-makers (e.g. ministers) are not aware of your work. Getting access to these top decision-makers is a rare opportunity for most researchers, so you may need to rely on intermediaries, such as charities or others, who have existing relationships and routes to those in power. I’ve discussed some of the ethical dilemmas that this poses for researchers below. If you can present a case for policy change based on your evidence (even if second-hand via an intermediary), and convince a senior policy-maker that they should take action, then it is important that they are met with informed civil servants when they take the idea to their team. If their team hasn’t heard of your work, doesn’t trust you and isn’t convinced by the case as it is put to them by the minister (which may not be how you would have put it to them), they may raise so many questions and doubts that your ideas are dismissed as unworkable. On the other hand, if the minister is met with informed judgements from civil servants who are already aware of your work, and have critically examined it, there is a much higher chance that change will occur. Equally, just convincing civil servants that your research deserves attention may not be enough if it doesn’t fit with the interests and priorities of the minister at that time. So taking both the top-down and bottom-up route is, I believe, important if you really want to effect change. Box 13 provides a few questions that can help you design your own ‘pincer’ movement for evidence-informed policy change.

## Box 13: Designing a pincer movement for evidence-informed policy change

1. Identify policy stakeholders from your stakeholder analysis (see Chapter 13 and template in Part 4). Check that you are being as specific as possible: which policy area, department or team are you identifying that might be interested in your research?
2. Identify areas of policy that may be related to or similar to your research in some way:
   a) Can you link your research to these live policy debates in some way? Would the insights from your research enrich these debates?
   b) If so, who would you need to collaborate with to connect to these wider debates?
   c) If not, what future work might you do that could contribute to these debates? What could you do now to start this work?
3. Top-down influence:
   a) What other organisations are working in this policy area to influence policy?
   b) Which of these do you think has most influence?
   c) What are the key messages from your research that are likely to be of most interest to them?
   d) Can you find out more about their priorities and modes of operation, and start to get to know people in the organisation who will be interested in your work?
4. Bottom-up influence:
   a) Which evidence teams within the civil service are working on the policy debates you can connect to?
   b) Can you make a policy brief that is relevant enough to secure you a meeting with someone junior?
   c) If not, can you get introduced by someone who they already know and trust (look through your network and those of your colleagues and work

out what you could do for the person who might introduce you).

d) Once you have a contact within government, find out from them what evidence gaps they need to fill and offer to help.

e) Stay in regular touch and build trust, asking questions that will enable you to work out who in their team and wider network has most influence. Find out about the events that these people go to and try to connect with them there so they know who you are and what you're doing before you are introduced to them by their own colleagues.

f) Gradually connect your research with people of increasing influence via departmental seminars and one-to-one meetings.

**5.** Plan for your impacts: go back to your impact plan (Chapter 10, Table 3) and revise your activities and timings for engaging with policy stakeholders

## How should I start?

The first step is to identify the key messages from your research that are likely to be relevant to current or future policy, and why these messages are important. This is often an iterative process, researching the policy environment and getting feedback from people in the policy community, to help you focus on the most relevant aspects of your research and frame clear messages that are likely to resonate with the issues and challenges they face. This initial feedback may be via social (or other) media or via people at the periphery of the policy community e.g. researchers who have a long track record of working with the policy community in your field, government researchers or agency staff. It is better to get constructive feedback from these people to have a polished, concise and relevant pitch ready for those who are likely to have greater influence.

If you are working on a fairly narrow topic (a common problem for PhD students who want to work with the policy community), it can be hard to make your work relevant enough to warrant attention from busy policy analysts. However, if you are able to make connections between your work and the work of colleagues, and contextualise this within the latest research findings that link your narrow research topic to the bigger picture, then it may become easier to reach these audiences. Although your research may now be reduced to a box or a paragraph and accompanying figure, at least there is a good chance that people will engage with it now.

Consider exactly what you might want a policy-maker to do with the knowledge you are providing — make sure it is something that is actually achievable, and if it isn't, then work out what the initial steps might be towards the action you'd want to see in the longer term. There is evidence that research findings that build on rather than break down existing policies are more likely to be adopted — recommendations for a series of incremental changes rather than a single-step change are more likely to be adopted. Having said this, sometimes it may be as important to enable an individual or organisation to 'unlearn' certain accepted concepts and ways of doing things (such as the accepted health effects of a particular food or lifestyle choice) in order to take on board new understanding based on the latest research (e.g. suggesting that what we previously thought was healthy may have negative consequences for health).

One of the greatest challenges of constructing messages from your research is how to communicate complexity and uncertainty clearly, without putting off policy-makers who want definitive answers. It is important to avoid giving a false sense of certainty e.g. via numbers, graphs or maps that hide variability, error bars or alternative scenarios. However, case studies, stories and personalised findings can help communicate complexity and bring the key points home to decision-makers. A common problem that members of the policy community have with researchers is our propensity to selectively promote our own latest research, overlooking equally valuable and often highly complementary work by other researchers that could significantly increase the value of our own research for policy-makers. By summarising other research on the topic, you may also be able to reduce uncertainty and increase the credibility of your own work by showing the range and depth of research that backs up your claims.

It can often pay dividends to work with professional communicators (e.g. science writers, knowledge brokers, your institute's public relations officers and/or film-makers) to translate your work into terms that can be understood by those you want to influence. Also, knowledge brokers can help facilitate your dialogue with policy-makers, helping you 'translate' discipline-specific language and mediate if necessary.

## When should I engage?

The best time to engage is at the start of every research project. After you have identified your 'target audience', you need to find out if these groups really do find your research relevant to their work. Together, you will then be able to formulate research questions that are relevant for both of you. By doing this, everyone involved knows what outcomes are likely to arise from the research (and when), and potential uncertainties can already start to be communicated at this stage.

There are certain times when a piece of evidence may be crucial in policy decisions. It is therefore important to be in regular contact with members of the policy community, so that you can easily identify those key moments and changing demands. If they already know you, they're likely to come to you for the answers. Even if that means that you are being asked for evidence before the research has been completed, remember that you have a much broader knowledge base than the project you are currently working on, which could still enable you to link to existing published evidence to help provide the answers that are needed. In some cases, it may be possible to provide preliminary findings, as long as the limitations and uncertainties are made clear. New political leadership in a particular government department or agency can be a problem (in terms of continuity), or in fact may become an opportunity to present new ideas to leaders looking for new ways of achieving their goals. Working with political parties to get your ideas into election manifestos can be an effective way of getting research into policy, if you don't feel too uncomfortable about appearing to be affiliated with a particular party.

## Where should I engage?

The majority of key players are extremely busy, and you need to consider how to bring your message to them. Most government departments and agencies will host seminars if you can demonstrate that your research is of great enough relevance, for example, by bringing together a number of key experts to present their research alongside yours. You can also hire a venue near the parliament and offer a free lunch to incentivise attendance. However, for many of the most important players, you may need to arrange a short face-to-face appointment with them or their close advisors to get your message across. Many politicians are active on social media, and this can be an easy way to get their initial attention and start to build relationships with them.

To engage with policy-makers on international policy matters, you will need to explore events and bodies relevant to your work, such as the UN Convention of Biological Diversity and its associated Subsidiary Body of Technical and Technological Advice. Remember, it is these technical events where many decisions are typically made and where you have greatest influence as a researcher, rather than the larger, better-publicised events which the high-profile politicians attend. Some countries have set up specific science-policy interfaces or platforms to enhance dialogue between researchers and policy-makers. It is worth checking if one exists for your given research area.

## Identifying who has the power to affect policy change

Using publics/stakeholder analysis (Chapter 14), it should be possible to identify organisations and key individuals within those organisations who are particularly influential, who you might want to try and build relationships with. These may be policy-makers themselves, or it may be the advisors who work closely with them within the civil service. It is important not to overlook organisations and individuals outside the policy community who have long- standing relationships with key members of the policy community and may have a lot of influence, for example, non-governmental organisations, charities, think tanks, business and lobby groups.

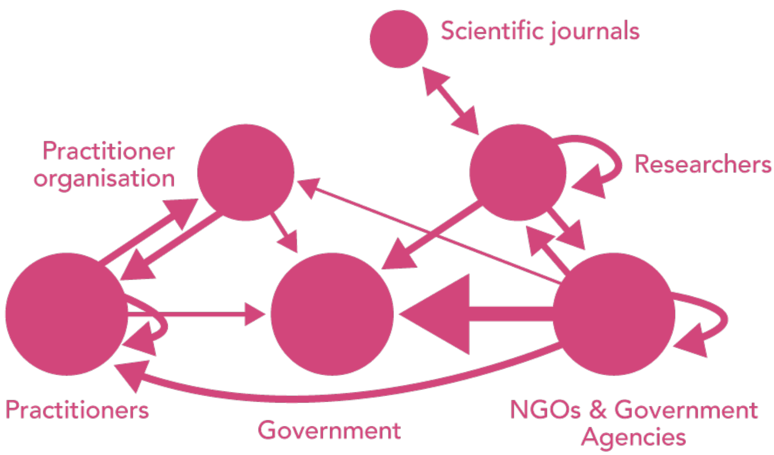


**Figure 15:** Simplified representation of a Social Network Analysis, showing how peatland research reaches policy-makers. Circles represent different sources or users of knowledge, with larger circles more likely to provide/ receive knowledge than smaller circles. Arrows show flows of knowledge from one source to another, with the thickness of the arrow proportional to the number of times communication of research findings occurred between sources.

Where possible, identify 'boundary organisations' that are able to cross boundaries between otherwise disconnected networks of actors, including researchers and policy-makers. There will often be key individuals within these organisations who understand the research and are well connected to and trusted by the policy community and who may be able to help you engage credibly with their contacts. If you understand who has influence, you can start to identify the messages from your research that are likely to resonate with these influencers and develop a communication strategy that will enable you to build relationships with these key people, who will then open doors to the policy community for you.

A few years ago, I decided to try and trace how research was getting into policy and practice (or not), and my colleagues and I chose 77 different research findings and traced how they travelled from peer-reviewed literature into policy and practice through social networks using social network analysis and interviews with those who had found out about the research, to see how they learned about it and who they had passed it on to. One of those findings was the work on peatland carbon that I'd been involved with, and Figure 15 is a simplified representation of the network map showing how that research got into policy and practice. It shows how peatland researchers tend to mainly communicate their findings through scientific journals, which are not used directly as a major source of knowledge by policy-makers or those who seek to influence them. On the other hand, researchers in this case were as good at communicating their findings to NGOs and charities as to policy-makers directly, and it was through these NGOs and charities that most of the information reached the government.

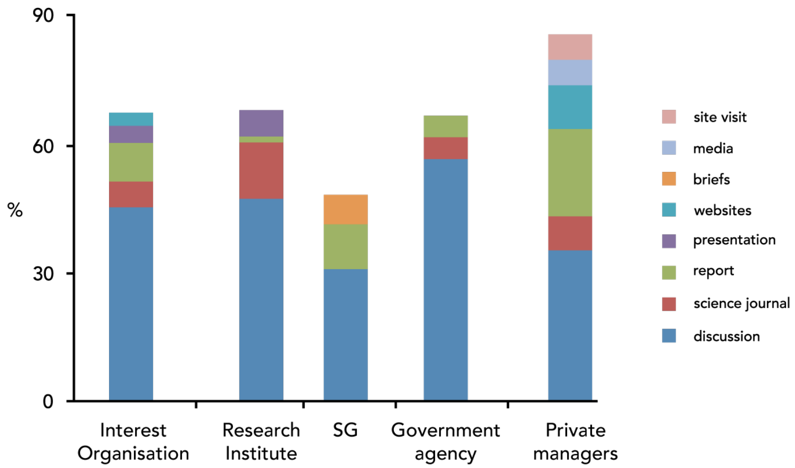


**Figure 16:** Case study research showing how different groups find out about new research findings, based on interviews in Scotland as part of the Ecocycles project

This presents an interesting dilemma for researchers. Charities and lobby groups have more time and resources to promote research findings that support their causes than researchers typically have, but they have an incentive to present a selective or biased representation of the research. Again, this often comes down to relationships. Although it is impossible to control how others represent our research, by engaging with these knowledge brokers, it is possible to increase the likelihood that they fully understand it, including important nuances, caveats and remaining uncertainties. If you can create a strong, trusting relationship with key people in these groups, they are more likely to keep you informed of the way they are using your work, and respond proactively if you spot problems with the way they are using it.

## How to build relationships with policy-makers

Relationships are at the core of my approach to working with policy-makers. My own research and other published evidence shows that although policy-makers find out about research from many sources, it is information from face-to-face contact with people they trust that most commonly influences decisions (Figure 16). It doesn't matter whether it is at a one-to-one meeting or at a workshop, conference or seminar, and it doesn't matter if the contact is directly with the researcher or more indirectly via some sort of intermediary, for example, someone from a government agency or a charity or lobbying group. The important thing for researchers is to invest time in developing trusting, two-way relationships with key members of the policy community working in their field.

Although Figure 16 is based on just one case study, the key points appear again and again in the literature: policy-makers find out about much of the research they use through face-to-face contact with trusted sources. The graph above shows that although the interest groups and agencies advising and lobbying the government do use journal papers as a source of knowledge, they are far outweighed by face-to-face communication with trusted sources. While they do use policy briefs, again, face-to-face discussion with trusted sources is the most important way they find out about research evidence. Creating a policy brief is not enough: it is what you do with your policy brief that counts. Leaving a policy brief as a reminder of key points and a link to further information after a face-to-face meeting with someone is far more likely to effect change than simply mailing out briefs and hoping someone reads them.

Finally, it is important to consider how you will demonstrate the credibility of your message, when you're not going to have time to present all the methods and data that lie behind it. In many cases, this credibility can be earned by proxy, by referencing a key paper in a prestigious journal that your findings are based on, and by being introduced under the brand of your funders or by key figures who are already trusted by the policy community.

## Influencing policy

In the world of politics, emotion is often used to bias decisions away from the evidence. Many researchers prize their objectivity and detached independence. However, positive, effectively channelled emotion gets people's attention — it makes people sit up and take notice. Using emotion appropriately, as researchers, we can connect with our audience and engender empathy. By engaging with both hearts and minds, we increase the likelihood that our audience is really listening, and actively considering how our evidence fits with the other evidence they have access to, their goals and their worldview.

As experts, we hold a privileged position of authority, which is likely to be a key factor in getting us an audience with decision-makers in the first place. Retaining that credibility is essential, and so it is important to carefully channel our emotions. Decision-makers are more likely to respond to positive emotion than they are to anger or doom and gloom predictions. For example, there is evidence that decision-makers are less receptive to messages about the value of nature if these messages are perceived as threatening their psychological needs of autonomy (e.g. because they feel manipulated or coerced), happiness (e.g. environmental and sexual health campaigns based on fear), reputation (e.g. because they feel implicitly criticised or patronised) and self-esteem (e.g. because they start to feel responsible for or guilty about the issues concerned). On the other hand, enthusiasm is infectious. Presenting our evidence with passion and crafting our arguments to meet the innate psychological needs of our audience is more likely to get people to listen, even if they don't act on what they hear.

So far it has been implicit that the evidence itself is unquestionable; the question is only whether we as researchers should use emotion to communicate that evidence. But there are many researchers who would challenge the idea that research is (or can ever be) entirely independent, emotionally detached and objective. If we recognise that our research is just one strand of evidence feeding into what are usually political decision-making processes, then we can begin to explore the subjectivity inherent in many of the processes we use to generate ‘evidence’, and can become less detached and more emotionally engaged in the normative goals that pervade our work.

Traditionally, the mass media has been an important way of amplifying messages, so policy-makers receive our messages from many different sources and are given a sense of the weight of public opinion behind that message. Nowadays, social media is an increasingly important way of amplifying messages in a more relational way, raising awareness of the issues we’re working on and demonstrating wider public support for our ideas very transparently via counts of retweets, likes and views. Whether you’re using social media or not, developing a partnership or ‘policy network’ with other individuals and organisations who are interested in the messages arising from your work can also help amplify your message, getting your research to different members of the policy community in different ways (these approaches are considered in more detail in the previous section). Importantly, it is often possible to directly engage with members of the policy community around these messages via social media, enabling you to persuade rather than simply using the pressure of the mass media. Of course, in many cases, having visibility in both mass and social media can further amplify your message.

Practical tips for influencing policy through relationships:

1. **Develop a structured and systematic engagement strategy:** it doesn’t have to be written down; even if it is only in your head, thinking systematically about how you will engage with key stakeholders can significantly improve your chances of being relevant and helpful. First of all, map your stakeholders to work out who actually holds decision-making power within an organisation. Often, people with high levels of personal and transpersonal power have greater ability to actually make things happen in an organisation than the people at the top of the hierarchy. Also beware of automatically gravitating towards the ‘usual suspects’ who are highly visible, and consider whether there are marginalised and powerless individuals or groups that could really benefit from your work, and who may be highly motivated to work with you. Once you’ve worked out who you want to engage with, you need to work out what’s likely to

motivate them to engage with you. What messages from your research might resonate with their interests and agendas? What modes of communication are they most comfortable with? What is the best timing/occasion for communication? What sort of language do they use or avoid? If you can't reach those with decision-making power to start with, identify people in the organisation who are more likely to engage with you, and expand your network from there. Those with decision-making power are more likely to listen to you if the rest of their team are already listening to you.

2. **Empathise:** put yourself in the other person's shoes; work out what motivates them, how they might be feeling, and what they might want from your research. Work out what is likely to build trust in the relationship between you. For example, do you need a letter-headed initial approach or do you need to be introduced over a pint of beer? It may be worth doing some digging about the person and their organisation to help you empathise effectively. For example, you might research them online, looking at their profile and the sorts of things they're writing or tweeting about. Alternatively, you might ask what others in your network know about them. If none of these ideas work, you can talk to other people in similar roles first, to get a feel for the sorts of issues that are likely to motivate them, and the language and modes of communication they're likely to respond best to. It's a bit like the sort of process an actor or actress would go through to research a role they've been given.
3. **Practise your communication skills:** find out about body language, so you can read how the people you want to influence are reacting to you and adjust your approach accordingly. Adopt confident body language. If possible, practise in front of a camera or mirror, or get feedback from a colleague. You need to practise open body language that tells the other person you trust them and that they can trust you (e.g. avoid crossed arms and legs and give plenty of eye contact). Think about your handshake and what it conveys — a firm handshake conveys confidence and is more likely to instil trust than a limp one. Put your pen down when you're not writing and make sure there are no physical barriers between you (e.g. a pad of paper propped up between you). Be mentally aware of your facial expressions, to make sure you're not slipping into a scowl as you concentrate on what the other person is saying; try and be as smiley as comes naturally to you. It is important to make it clear you're listening and genuinely valuing what they tell you with nods and non-verbal, encouraging sounds.

If you're really listening with all your heart, you'll find yourself naturally mirroring the other person to an extent. For example, if you make a strident start and discover the other person is very quiet and shyly spoken, you'll probably feel uncomfortable continuing to talk loudly and confidently, and will moderate your behaviour to be less different from them. If you are able to adapt your tone of voice and body language to theirs, they are likely to feel respected and more able to connect with you. If all of this doesn't come naturally, start small and build from there. Like other roles you have to adopt professionally (e.g. lecturing), with practice it will become second nature, and eventually become entirely natural.

4. **Give:** ensure there genuinely is something in the engagement for the other person that they really want, and think about how you'll deliver those benefits in concrete terms in the near future. If you've managed to really empathise with them, then this bit should be easy.
5. **Assess your power** in the context of the stakeholders you want to work with, bearing in mind that you may be significantly more or less powerful in different contexts (see Box 10). For example, in some contexts, as a result of negative experience with other researchers, your status as an academic might mean people expect you to be irrelevant or exploitative. Whereas, with a different group of stakeholders, your status as an academic might mean your view carries greater weight. One way of thinking about how powerful you might be in a particular context is to think about your levels of:
   - Situational power( e.g. your level informal hierarchies, access to decision-makers)
   - Social power (e.g. your social standing, race, marital status or whether you have Dr or Professor in front of your name)
   - Personal power (e.g. how charismatic, trustworthy and empathetic you are perceived to be)
   - Transpersonal power (e.g. a connection to something larger than yourself, ability to transcend past hurts, freedom from fear and commitment to an altruistic vision)
   - If you don't have enough power or legitimacy yourself, then think about ways you might be able to improve your personal and transpersonal power (as these are easier to change than your social and situational power). And if you need a quick shortcut to more power, get yourself introduced or be accompanied by someone who is already well trusted and perceived to be legitimate in the eyes of the people you want

to work with. You can assess your own levels of power using the prompts in Box 10.

6. Finally, where necessary, **go around or above obstructive individuals,** developing a tailored engagement strategy for the next person in the organisation you need to engage. If you have done everything you can to adapt to the needs and priorities of someone who is preventing you from reaching those with decision-making power in an organisation, see if you can find others in the organisation who have slightly different needs and priorities, or a different world view or perception of risk, and see if they will open a door to decision-makers on your behalf instead. Some individuals are naturally more likely to be receptive to new ideas (they are 'early adopters' of innovations) and others (sometimes termed 'laggards') hang back and wait for others to try new ideas first. You need to identify the innovators in the organisation you're trying to influence. In a few rare situations, there may be a case for going to someone higher in the hierarchy. For example, a minister might see a political opportunity in a high-risk idea emerging from research that their civil servants might not have been willing to consider. However, under instruction from the minister, civil servants are likely to be happy to investigate your ideas.

## Sustaining trusting relationships

Where possible, get feedback on your interactions with policy-makers, whether directly (e.g. via feedback forms after a workshop) or indirectly from colleagues' observations of your interactions. Seek out colleagues and peers from your discipline who are already successfully working with policy-makers on related issues, and learn from them. They will be able to advise on the key people to communicate with, and how best to approach each person. If possible, take opportunities to watch colleagues who have experience of collaborating with policy-makers at work. You can also study examples of successful (and unsuccessful) policy uptake of similar research. By understanding the factors that led to (or prevented) policy uptake, you may then be able to identify mechanisms you can use or avoid yourself. Although research project funding typically stops after between three and five years, it is important to find ways to sustain engagement with the policy make an impact. Only with sustained engagement is it possible to develop trust. It is these trusting relationships that will get you the ear of policy-makers, and enable you to adapt your research to

their needs. Finally, be tenacious: put the same effort into building relationships with the latest civil servants to move into the roles you need to work with, again and again…

## Top pathways to policy according to researchers

I'd like to conclude with a perspective from researchers who have worked with policy-makers on the key pathways that enabled them to effect change. In 2015, the Higher Education Funding Council for England published a searchable database of impact case studies, collected as part of its evaluation of UK research under their Research Excellence Framework. I commissioned an analysis of a 5% sample of impacts on social (including health), economic and environmental policy, and classified the different pathways to impact that the researchers identified (you can read the full results in the table below). The most commonly cited impact pathways make interesting reading:

1. **Publications:** as you might expect, the number one pathway described by researchers in their case studies was academic publications, typically in peer-reviewed journals. Given that most case studies contained multiple pathways, the role that academic publications played in achieving impact is debatable. Also in the top ten pathways, however, were industry publications and policy briefs, underlining the importance of translating academic findings into formats that are more likely to be read by non-academics.

2. **Advisory roles:** being asked to contribute to government inquiries, reports, panels and committees was one of the most important ways that researchers influenced policy, with over 50% of the case studies we reviewed using this pathway.

3. **Media coverage:** researchers perceived that getting their research covered in the mass media was an important route to policy impact. This might be because of the visibility that media coverage can afford research, putting it directly in front of decision-makers who engage with the media (themselves or because they are made aware of media coverage by their civil servants), or more indirectly by contributing to a body of public opinion that decision-makers then respond to.

4. **Partnerships and collaborations** with industry and NGOs: by finding organisations that shared their research interests,

researchers may have been able to harness the lobbying power of these organisations to promote their work more actively and at higher levels than they would have had the time, resources and ability to do as researchers on their own. These partnerships also enabled researchers to test their research in real-life situations, which gave it more credibility when approaching policy-makers.

5. **Presentations** with industry, the public and government: face-to-face meetings, whether one-to-one or in workshops and conferences, can be a powerful way to get research findings noticed and understood, partly because the audience has the opportunity to question the research team. Although researchers cited presentations directly to government, they were just as likely to cite presentations to industry and the public as their pathway to policy impacts. This may suggest, like the previous point, that many impacts were achieved via the knowledge brokerage role of industry partners, or by raising the public profile and contributing towards a weight of public opinion that policy-makers could not ignore.

6. **Developing easily accessible online materials** based on the research was also a commonly cited pathway to policy impact. Although this is rapidly changing with open access, a significant proportion of research findings (particularly older material) is behind journal paywalls. Making this material both available and easily accessible via online materials that translate the findings for specific audiences can be an important way of getting research into policy.

One of the most important pathways was advisory roles. Although these roles are sometimes one-off interactions, for example, giving evidence to a parliamentary committee, many are medium- to long-term roles over a period of years, in which the researchers are able to build trust with other panel/committee members and provide advice on an ad hoc basis between formal meetings. Apart from this, however, the majority of the main pathways were in dissemination mode. Although partnerships and collaborations with industry and NGOs feature strongly in the pathways reported by researchers in these case studies, these organisations appear to primarily have operated as knowledge brokers, helping to translate and amplify messages arising from the research, and enabling them to reach policy-makers.

It is clear from the case studies we reviewed that well-targeted dissemination of research findings can pay dividends, but if the experience of these researchers is anything to go by, certain types of dissemination may be more likely to achieve impact, for example, publications, online resources, press releases and presentations. But it is just as important to invest in longer-term relationships with the policy community and key players who have the time, resources and expertise to help you form those relationships and amplify your message. In the long term, this may open up opportunities to contribute to advisory committees and other processes that directly feed into the policy process.