

Centre for Social Policy  
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# Evidence and expertise in social policy

# This talk

- Taking stock of the development of 'evidence-based policy-making' (EBP) in UK central government since the 1990s
- Key question: are we living in a 'post-truth' society that threatens EBP and expertise?

# Background to Evidence-Based Policy (EBP)

- EBP brings evidence into public policy design and implementation according to goals of 'rational' policy-making
- 'EBP is about using experience or new information to avoid a repetition of the errors of the past or to find better resolutions to policy problems by means of policy-oriented learning' (Knill & Tosun: 2012: 196)
- Aim to improve *reliability* of policy advice, but disagreement about what constitutes evidence and which methodologies are most suitable for producing evidence
- Wide range of evidence from RCTs to qualitative citizen feedback
- Uneven impact of EBP: influential in some policy areas, less in others

# Why was EBP taken seriously?

- *Failure of existing policy approaches*: growing concern in 1980s and 1990s that problems going unaddressed or key programmes achieving poor rates of return e.g. child with conduct disorder aged 10 costs state £70k by age 25 compared to £7k on average – but evidence on problem prevention largely ignored (Sebba, 2010)
- *Renewed interest in tackling ‘wicked issues’*: challenging interlinked and ‘ill-structured’ problems e.g. domestic poverty, crime, lifestyle illnesses etc
- *Changes in policy process*: EBP consistent with new models of policy-making e.g. radical incrementalism: refining, modifying and improving programme to increase impact e.g. early intervention and FNPs (Halpern, 2008)
- *Shift towards targets*: provide evidence-base for setting performance indicators overseen by Treasury: increasing focus in public sector on financial efficiency and effectiveness
- *Justify large increases in public spending*: health, education, early intervention, childcare spending

# Post-1997 UK Governments

- Came to power committed to modernisation of public policy after perceived neglect
- EBP is key driver of modernisation of policy-making
- EBP viewed as central to improving UK policy capability: *Modernising Government White Paper (1999)*
  - Belief that 'what matters is what works' (rather than 'ideology')
  - Increasing attention paid to policy evidence and evaluation
  - Investment in policy relevant research and evaluation (social science research councils, ESRC)

# Making policy more evidence-based

- New Labour's push towards EBP
- Growth of pilots and RCTs
- Investment in government research and evaluation
- Outsourcing policy-making e.g. MPC of the Bank of England
- Appointment of experts to NDPBs
- Network of 'what works' centres
- Behavioural Insights Team
- Cabinet Office 'Policy Lab'

# Role of 'evidence institutions'

- Institutions rely on reputation for independence and credibility
- Transparency is critical part of reputation-building
- Resourcing models underline independence
- They access both internal government information and draw on – or create – robust evidence base
- They are clearly linked into the policy process

(IfG, 2012)

# EBP in social policy over last 20 years

Case-studies of where evidence improved policy with positive outcomes since 1990s:

- The Sure Start programme
- Education Maintenance Allowance
- The Connexions programme
- New Deal welfare-to-work and employment programmes
- New Deal for Communities and Neighbourhood Renewal
- Employment retention and advancement project
- The literacy strategy in primary schools
- Range of policy pilots
- Benchmarking and strategy audits undertaken by PMSU

# Role of EBP in social policy



- EBP in government did not start in 1997!
- EBP in social policy developing since late 19<sup>th</sup> century
- *Waves of EBP:*
  - Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Fabianism and New Liberalism
  - Post-1945 economic planning
  - 1960s/70s rational policy-making models
  - 1990s growth of EBP movement
  - 2010s RCTs and behavioural change approaches

# Supply constraints

‘I find it difficult to think of a major social policy area in the UK where you can say ‘we’re doing [it] this way because a randomised control trial told us that worked and something else didn’t’ which is fundamentally rather depressing’.

**Jonathan Portes, Director of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research**

## The economist John Maynard Keynes on EBP

*'There is nothing a politician likes so little as to be well informed; it makes decision-making so complex and difficult' (1926)*



# Scepticism about EPB

- *Governments disinterested in past policies*: not greatly concerned about predecessor's approach
- *Timescales out of sync*: evaluations published long after policy has been adapted, modified or even terminated so scope for EBP-making is limited
- *Departments tone down unfavourable findings*: soften criticisms; researcher's may acquiesce since they depend on future research contracts
- *Evidence and evaluation not built into policy design*: initial focus is delivery; evaluation design is after-thought
- *Departments and civil service not equipped* to understand and interpret knowledge effectively
- *Contested nature of knowledge and evidence*: disagreements about key concepts, methodologies, research agenda (e.g. education, criminal justice, employment)
- *Policy-makers rank academic research below other influences*: e.g. think-tanks, special advisers, media (Dorey, 2014)

# EBP: tensions

*'[Ministers] should certainly not seek selectively to pick pieces of evidence which support an already agreed policy, or even commission research in order to produce a justification for policy: so-called **'policy-based evidence making'** (see paragraphs 95–6). Where there is an absence of evidence, or even when the Government is knowingly contradicting the evidence - maybe for very good reason - this should be openly acknowledged'.*

**Paragraph 89, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee: Scientific Advice, Risk and Evidence-Based Policy-Making (2006)**

# Different 'lenses' of policy evidence

*Head (2008): Three 'types' of knowledge central to design and implementation of public policy:*

- *Scientific knowledge*: even here seldom consensus between social scientists about causes of problems and best approach to solutions – disagreement about methodological approaches from Randomised Control Trials to ethnographic 'action research'
- *Practical implementation knowledge*: 'practical wisdom' of professionals and 'street-level bureaucrats' at front-line; draw on particular forms of knowledge to overcome implementation problems and address users' needs
- *Political knowledge*: Policy about persuasion, support, argumentation, rhetoric – as much as objective knowledge; knowledge is produced in context shaped by partisanship and ideology

# The evidence base in UK children's services (Sebba, 2010)

Methods used in 625 studies (selective)	Number of studies	Percentage of studies
Qualitative	230	37
Mixed methods	108	17
Longitudinal	74	12
Quantitative dataset analysis	16	3
Non-randomised trial	8	1
Randomised control trial	3	<1
Systematic review	2	<1

# State of EBP: Summary

- Two decades of focus on EBP has produced significant gains
- A lot of policies are still not evidence-based; Michael Gove at DfE demonstrated: *“Political schizophrenia on education... on one hand pursuing non evidence based policy on driving universal ‘academisation’ and free schools but also funding the Education Endowment Foundation, an innovative and potentially very exciting challenge fund.”* (IfG, 2015)
- Need to change incentive structures around EBP e.g. Treasury and commissioning bodies should encourage use of evidence in making spending decisions

# Role of expertise in policy-making

- EBP also faces challenges related to broader crisis of expertise
- In present era, we are confronted by paradox of *expertise versus scepticism*
- Some argue the influence of experts is growing in modern democracies:
  - Growth of EBP since late 1990s
  - More 'experts' are being appointed as advisers to governments (in UK, Italy, Spain, Latin America)
  - More experts are recruited to decision-making bodies with discretionary powers e.g. central banks and scientific agencies; NICE in the UK
  - Economists have taken on particular responsibilities in the policy process alongside other social scientists
- Social and economic policy problems have increased in their complexity, hence rise of so-called 'wicked problems'
- In many countries the proportion of the population educated to a higher (graduate) level is rising so there is greater demand for expertise
- **Yet:** there is arguably greater cynicism and disquiet about the role of expertise
- Notions of 'post-truth democracy' and the rise of political populism have gained momentum

# Who is a policy 'expert'?

- (1) Fundamental difference between 'experts' and 'non-experts'
- (2) Experts located in academic institutions in social/natural sciences, research institutes, key professions
- (3) Experts possess technical skills and knowledge, including manual and intellectual skills
- (4) Experts are impartial which makes their advice trustworthy; credibility rests on objective knowledge of issues
- (5) Experts supply their advice to a relevant agency or actor
- (6) Experts help to make decisions that cannot be left to democracy: voters are 'ignorant' and prone to cognitive bias

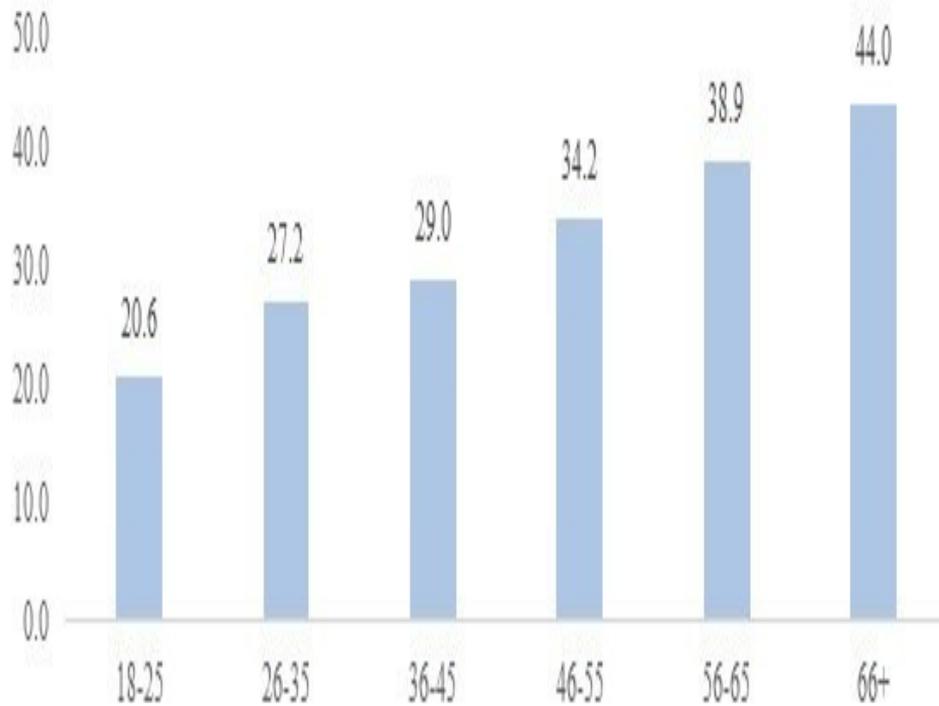
<http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/37643/1/art%253A10.1007%252Fs11024-016-9308-7.pdf>

# Trust in experts



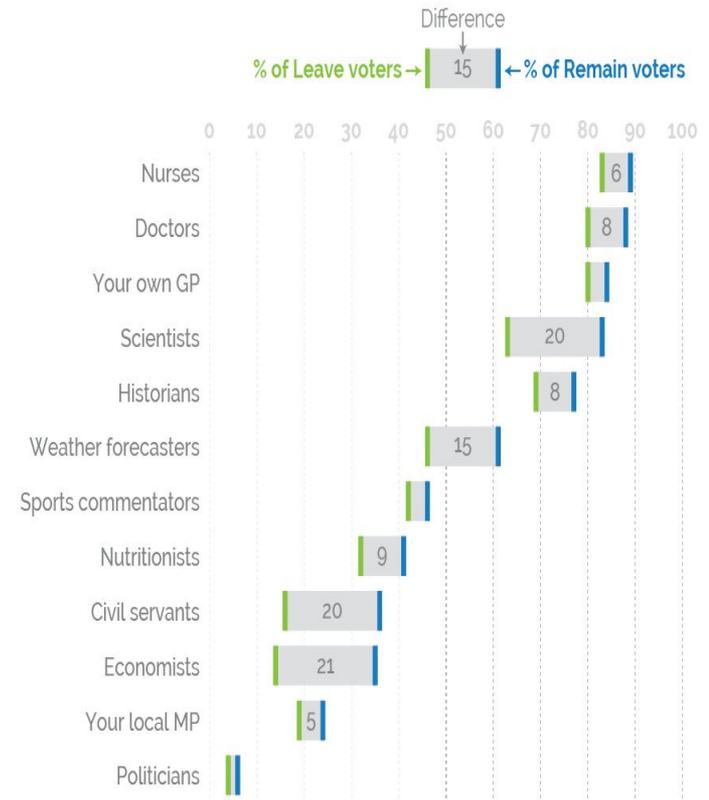
# Trust in experts

Table 1: I'd rather put my trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinions of experts (BES Panel 9) (%)



## Trust in experts: Remain vs Leave voters

The scale shows the % of Remain/Leave voters who trust each of the following experts when they talk about their fields of expertise, plus the gap between them



# Trust in professions



- Emergence of ‘fake truths’ via digital media e.g. climate change, immunization
- Growth of ‘pseudo-experts’
- But some researchers do not support bleak ‘post-truth’ commentary on experts e.g. Dommet & Pearce, 2019
- Reveal broadly positive attitudes to experts among UK public
- Lack of reliable survey data on public attitudes

# The future of expertise?

*‘The whole world of evidence, like so many other fields, is in a moment of fluidity of competition. Very different models of learning are out there, with many, as it were, amateur or citizen evaluators and users of data. In one vision of the next few years, the provision of much more public data – administrative data as well as outcomes data – spawns an industry, a society, of armchair evaluators who analyse things, spot patterns, lobby and completely change the way in which politics and policy is done’.* **Geoff Mulgan, Chief Executive, NESTA**

# Questions

1. Why has there been growing criticism of policy 'experts' in recent times?
2. In what ways do notions of 'post-truth democracy' undermine evidence-based policy-making?
3. How should experts seek to influence policy-making in an era of greater scepticism and disaffection?

# References and further reading

H. Davies (et al) (2000) *What Works: Evidence-Based Policy and Practice in Public Services*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

P. Dorey (2014) *Policy-Making in Britain*, London: Sage.

B.W. Head, 'Three Lenses of Evidence-based Policy', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 67, (1):

[http://www.vic.ipaa.org.au/sb\\_cache/professionaldevelopment/id/36/f/3%20Lenses%20of%20Evidence%20Based%20Policy%20-%20Brian%20Head.pdf](http://www.vic.ipaa.org.au/sb_cache/professionaldevelopment/id/36/f/3%20Lenses%20of%20Evidence%20Based%20Policy%20-%20Brian%20Head.pdf)

W.Parsons, 'From Muddling Through to Muddling Up' in *Public Policy and Administration*, 2002. Available as a download:

<http://ppa.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/17/3/43>

An excellent overview is Peter Well's article: 'New Labour and Evidence-Based Policy-Making 1997- 2007:

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CARICAD/UNPAN022647.pdf>

J. Sebba, 'Maximising research use in policy and practice in education':

<http://education.academy.ac.il/files/Session2-Sebba131212.pptx>

Another useful website for EBP in education:

<http://cebenetwork.org/what-cebe>

The Overseas Development Institute have done a good deal of work on Evidence-Based Policy: read, for example:

<http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/2804.pdf>