



Making Better Use of Research to Inform Policy and Practice

Dr Sarah Cattán, November 2025

How do we make better use of research to inform policy and practice?

Introduction

- Growing interest in producing evidence-based policy and practice in governments around the world
- Specific focus on causal evidence of the impacts of particular policies on outcomes for citizens
 - What Works Centres in the UK to synthesize existing and generate new evidence
- While progress has been made, more can be done to make better use of research to inform policy and practice
 1. **Recognise need for different types of evidence**
 2. **Over-invest in evidence translation**
 3. **Create structures and cultures that incentivise and enable evidence generation**
- Lots of examples of impactful research, but here draw from personal experience in research, innovation and government

1. Recognise the need for different types of evidence

Policy-makers and practitioners rely on at least 3 types of evidence, often simultaneously

1. Descriptive evidence	To understand “Business as Usual” To characterise the need/problem to solve
2. Causal Evidence	To determine what works To determine what doesn't work
3. Implementation and systems-wide evidence	To understand feasibility, cost, conditions for scale



Let's bring this to life with a couple of examples

CASE STUDY 1

Causal evidence of policy impact

Evaluation of Sure Start in England

- Major early childhood initiative to join up services for families of children age 0-4 through 'one-stop-shops'
- Turbulent history
 - Roll out from 1999 to 2010
 - Removal of ring-fence and reduction in funding
- Evaluations
 - Government-commissioned evaluations in early and late 2000s showed mixed impact
 - IFS evaluations of the short- and medium-term impacts of the programme showed widespread impacts and positive returns on investment

The short- and medium-term effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes



Economic and Social Research Council



"We know that previous investment in strengthening and joining up family services has had a significant positive impact on child outcomes... We will deliver a new Best Start Family Service...."



Department for Education

Giving every child the best start in life



CP 1362

ion

Sport

Culture

Lifestyle



The Guardian

UK

Education Schools Teachers Universities Students

Early years education

This article is more than 1 year old

Senior Labour figures call for 'life-transforming' Sure Start policy

Gordon Brown and three former education ministers say New Labour's acclaimed early-years programme benefited millions

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Senior Labour figures call for 'life-transforming' Sure Start policy

Gordon Brown and three former education ministers say New Labour's acclaimed early-years programme benefited millions



Department for Education

Giving every child the best start in life



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CASE STUDY

Strengths and limitations of policy evaluation

Evaluation of Sure Start in England

What this evidence was able to do:

- Facilitate case for investment in family services
- Spur cross-government interest in this approach
- Suggest where to prioritise funding (disadvantaged areas)

What this evidence was not able to do:

- Shed light on what made the programme so successful due to lack of implementation data
 - Inform crucial policy question of depth vs breadth

2. Translating evidence for its users is just as important as generating it

There are clear barriers to engaging and using research

- Policy makers and practitioners are often interested and motivated to ground their decisions in evidence
- But they face a number of barriers to accessing, engaging and using research
 - Time
 - Skills
 - Money
 - Networks
- Need to be intentional about translation of research as an active, non-trivial step
- Ideally tailored to specific use cases
 - This requires specific skillset(s)

CASE STUDY 3

Commissioning parenting support interventions

What is the need?

- Evidence based suggests that some parenting interventions can improve early child outcomes
- Local Authorities receive funding to commission these EBIs and need to choose which interventions to deliver

BUT

1. The set of interventions is complex
2. Evidence guides list interventions and summarise quality of evidence and strength of impact
3. But the way the information is presented makes it impossible to map to local family needs and assess comparability of cost-effectiveness



PaSCAL (**p**arenting **s**upport **c**ommissioning
assistant for **l**ocal areas)

CASE STUDY 3

PaSCAL **=** **Parenting** **Support** **Commissioning** **Assistant tool** **for Local Areas**

How does PaSCAL meet this need?

- A digital tool to simplify the process of identifying the best parenting programmes for a particular local authority given a particular budget
- Takes in
 - Information and evidence on over 20 programmes (evidence of impact, cost, and suitability for different kinds of families) made comparable
 - Local needs data
 - Commissioners' preferences
- Recommends an optimised portfolio of programmes to ensure highest value for money and impact on GLD subject to delivery needs and preferences

→ Required researchers, designers, tech product developer, data scientists, generalist

Get started

What is your local authority?

PaSCAL uses National Pupil Database (NPD) data to generate a portfolio tailored to needs in your local area

How much will you spend?

This can be an estimate if you're unsure of the exact figure

Do you have a preference for the mix of online and in-person programmes suggested for your local authority?

- ☐ A mix of both
- ☐ Mostly in-person
- ☐ Mostly online
- ☐ No preference

Are any of these other programme features relevant to you?

PaSCAL will do its best to suggest programmes that fit your priorities

UK-designed or UK-adapted



Not a priority

High priority

Recently developed



Not a priority

High priority

Facilitators only need programme-specific training



Not a priority

High priority

Create my programme portfolio

Portfolio for Lancashire

Summary

PaSCAL's [GLD model](#) predicts that the impact of these programmes would be to increase the share of children reaching a Good Level of Development (GLD) in 2028 from **63.09% to 63.87%**. For the children in Lancashire whose parents actually receive these programmes, GLD would increase from 63.47% to 69.21%.

▼ Your selected inputs

We recommend you reach **4,994 families** with these programmes at a cost of **£143,302**.

• EasyPeasy [Remove](#)

Universal | Cognitive development | Suitable for EAL parents

3,928 families reached at a cost of £98,200 (68.53% of total spend)

Very low cost

Large impact per child

Emerging evidence

High parent appeal

Fit to priorities: UK developed

▼ Read more

• Level 4 Group Triple P [Remove](#)

Targeted | Socioemotional development | Suitable for EAL parents

73 families reached at a cost of £13,724 (9.58% of total spend)

Low cost

Large impact per child

Strong evidence

Medium parent appeal

Fit to priorities: in person

^ Read less

Why this intervention has been chosen for Lancashire:

Aside from its **low cost**, **strong evidence base** and **large predicted impact** on GLD, Level 4 Group Triple P has been chosen for you because it is delivered in person, and you said this factor was important to you.

The best alternatives to **Level 4 Group Triple P** are **ParentChild+** and **Triple P Online**.

3. Create structures and cultures that incentivise and enable evidence generation

Making better use of research requires producing useful research

- Producing useful research requires
 - Relevant research questions
 - Methods and data
 - Funding
 - Professional recognition
- Traditional ways of doing and funding research within academic (and even non-academic institutions) do not always create the right conditions

3. Create structures and cultures that incentivise and enable evidence generation

Doing so requires some shift in structures and cultures

- **Align incentives on the research and policy/practice side**
 - Give **more weight to impact in university hiring, ratings** (e.g. Reference Excellence Framework) **and funding** applications
 - Promote **policy and practice-oriented research in journals** and research **communities**
 - Promote and reward **not only evidence-based but also evidence-generating policy and practice**
 - Allowing testing, learning, (failing) in public services
- **Shorten feedback loops between producers and users of research**
 - **Facilitate access to administrative data** and co-production of management information systems
 - Build **local partnerships** between universities and local government and agencies
 - Create **"Policy Research Units"** with flexible funding to tackle and co-design policy-relevant research questions
 - Encourage **two-way secondments**

How do we make better use of research to inform policy and practice?

It is about culture, capabilities and structures

1. **Recognise need for different types of evidence**
2. **Over-invest in evidence translation** for specific use cases
3. **Create cultures and structures to incentivise and enable** useful research