

Knowledge Sector Initiative

WORKING PAPER 10

Lessons for Building and Managing an Evidence Base for Policy

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May 2016



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The author's views expressed in this publication do not reflect the views of the Government of Australia, Government of Indonesia, or the Knowledge Sector Initiative. All entities will not accept any liability arising as a result of this publication. The authors wish to thank Louise Ball, Fred Carden, Arnaldo Pellini and Josephine Tsui for very helpful comments on the earlier draft of the paper.



Key Messages

- Evidence is often needed rapidly to help policy makers respond to their pressing questions. It is important to meet these needs but it may take months, and sometimes years, to gather robust evidence for some issues. It is therefore important to try to anticipate the sorts of decisions policy makers may need to take in future, and to work out what evidence is likely to be required. Planning in this way distinguishes a strategic approach to evidence from a purely reactive approach.
- A strategic approach to evidence considers how to construct an evidence base for policy and how to manage it effectively so that it meets both short- and long-term needs for evidence to inform all decisions.
- An evidence base contains different types of evidence from a variety of stakeholders. This helps ensure that decisions are based on a range of evidence, not just one or two research reports. An evidence base can be constructed and managed just to cover a single policy issue, or it could cover many issues, even a whole ministry.
- There is no single blueprint for an evidence-based approach. This paper sets out 11 lessons that draw from the experiences to date of three very different UK Government organisations. It shows how the lessons are applicable to ministries in other countries, such as Indonesia.
- The lessons cover what types of evidence to include, how to build relationships to procure the evidence, and how to ensure that the evidence is able to inform all policy priorities. They also show how important it is to make evidence part of business as usual. This means implementing the approach adaptively over time, with support from senior management.
- Understanding how to apply these lessons to each ministry's particular circumstances is the first step towards strengthening an evidence-based approach to policy.



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Abbreviations and Acronyms

Defra	: Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (UK)
FSA	: Food Standards Agency
KSI	: Knowledge Sector Initiative
MCCIP	: Marine Climate Change Impact Partnership



Executive Summary

This paper is aimed at people in government ministries who are interested in taking a more strategic approach to managing their evidence base. It provides a short synthesis of three case studies that were written for the Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI) programme in Indonesia. The case studies outline how two different UK Government departments and one partnership organisation develop and manage their evidence base for policy. They show that it is possible to take a strategic and systematic approach to developing a policy evidence base, but that it may take time and involve deep-seated changes. While all three case studies were written about UK Government departments, they contain valuable lessons for people working in other countries to improve the use of evidence within government. This paper draws out 11 key lessons for investing in evidence. These lessons are relevant for countries like Indonesia, which have achieved middle-income status, want to develop a knowledge economy, need to implement complex economic and social policies, and want to avoid the middle-income trap and falling back to low-income status.

Introduction

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It can be difficult for ministries or departments in developing countries to work out how to ensure that their scarce resources are spent as efficiently and effectively as possible. Simply purchasing more high-quality evidence is not enough. For example, policy makers need to understand the range of evidence that exists and how it is linked together. They need to work out how confident they are in what the evidence says—both about what is currently happening and about what might happen in future. Relying only on their internal capacity may result in a narrow view of the evidence. Sourcing evidence from a variety of organisations will take time and effort. However, it will give a more rounded view of what the evidence is likely to mean for the decisions they need to take.

This paper draws on three case studies, each offering different insights into how two UK departments and one partnership organisation have grappled with what exactly it means to implement an evidence-based approach to policy making. They highlight some of the key organisational changes that have had to be made; the ways of working that have had to be adapted; and the time they have had to take to design, implement and consolidate these changes.

The first case study is on the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), a large government department working over the past decade to implement an evidence-informed approach across the organisation. It describes a three-stage process: first, ensuring that the whole organisation shared a consistent and coherent approach to its evidence base; second, embedding this new approach in its business practices to ensure they delivered value for money; and third, reaching out to its network of linked organisations to spread the approach more widely and ensure that public monies spent on all environmental evidence was as cost-effective as possible.



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The Food Standards Agency (FSA) case study describes the experience of a much smaller government department, with a more limited remit. It shows how it is possible to develop an evidence strategy in a relatively short period of time that is inclusive and effective, and not costly. It also describes what governance arrangements can be put in place to ensure that the strategy is sustainable.

The Annual Report Cards case study illustrates a tool that is used by marine policy makers in the UK to map, synthesise and present the evidence base for key policy issues in the marine sector. The report cards, produced by the Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership (MCCIP), synthesise and set out the evidence for key topics important to marine policy makers. They also assess how confident policy makers and the public can be in the evidence for what is currently happening, and what might happen in future. Policy is generally made under conditions of uncertainty, but through presenting different types of evidence and knowledge, and the consequent contestation, the report cards offer a way to formalise that uncertainty. They allow policy makers to understand the risks associated with any particular decision.

The case studies offer several lessons for people in other countries interested in improving how evidence is used to inform policy making. They are summarised and presented below in two sections: lessons on how to build an evidence base, and lessons on how to manage it. They are not presented in any particular order of importance.

Building an Evidence Base



An evidence base for policy is the collection of evidence that is needed now, and that will be needed in future to inform policy decisions. Policy issues may suddenly emerge that require evidence. It is important to be able to react to those issues as they arise and gather the relevant evidence as quickly as possible. However, relying on this purely reactive approach has drawbacks. For some issues it may take a long time (months, even years) to gather the required evidence. In many cases we can anticipate what policy issues will require decisions in future and what types of evidence could support those decisions. Doing this will enable us to take a more strategic approach to ensuring that the evidence is provided to the people who need it in a timely manner.

Policy decisions need to be based on consideration of a range of robust evidence, not just one or two research reports. This ensures that decisions are grounded in a broad view of the issue. A strategic approach to evidence therefore considers how to construct an evidence base that includes evidence from a variety of

sources. A strategic approach also considers how to manage the evidence base so that it is able to meet both short- and long-term needs for evidence as effectively as possible.

The lessons below set out to think about building an evidence base that supports anything from a single policy issue to a broad programme of work, or even a whole ministry. It does not matter how broad or narrow the issues are, the lessons remain the same. They indicate what types of evidence should be included, who is responsible for managing the evidence base, how to ensure it builds on what is already known, how to balance long- and short-term needs, and who else could be involved.

To make the most effective use of evidence it is important to consider how to strengthen policy knowledge. This is the know-how, analysis and judgement, which builds up within the policy process and improves understanding of how to get things done. Each of the three case studies show how this has developed over time

Lesson 1: Use a broad definition of “robust evidence”

Policy needs to be based on a broad definition of evidence that includes statistical data, as well as evidence from evaluation, monitoring and surveillance activities, citizens and stakeholders and formal research-based disciplines. Budgets and planning processes need to explicitly consider these different types so that there is a good balance of the types of evidence used to inform the policy process.

Much policy is interdisciplinary in nature and requires a range of different types of knowledge. It is helpful to classify evidence into four main types¹:

- *Statistical and administrative data*, which help describe the current state of an issue and outline historical trends

- *Research-based evidence*, which describes causal relationships. It contributes to our understanding of why things have happened in the way they have and explains the relationships between issues
- *Evidence from citizens and stakeholders* (such as civil society organisations or industry), which contributes to our understanding of who values what about policy and how they are likely to respond
- *Evidence from evaluation*, which helps explain what has worked in the past or in similar situations.

Producing a map of how all these different types of evidence contribute to achieving policy goals can be a helpful first step in understanding whether the evidence base as a whole is robust. It also helps ensure that planning and budgeting processes pay attention to ensuring that all types of evidence are as well resourced as possible.

Defra’s first Evidence Investment Strategy process mapped the entire evidence base in the department and uncovered gaps in social science, and monitoring and evaluation. These gaps were filled by procuring studies, research and analysis. In a similar way, the FSA’s Evidence Strategy process involved a wide range of stakeholders in understanding policy needs now and in the future. It worked to determine all the types of evidence that would be needed and how they could be combined effectively. Both organisations took a broad view of what evidence would be needed, both quantitative and qualitative.

Not all evidence is as robust as we would like it to be: policy is often developed and implemented under a good deal of uncertainty about what the evidence means. The MCCIP Annual Report Card addresses this head-on: it presents evidence about key issues together with confidence assessments, noting whether there is a high, medium or low degree of confidence in what the evidence is saying.

¹ See Head (2008) and Jones et al. (2012).

Lesson 2: Policy teams are responsible for managing their evidence base

Designing and managing an evidence base for policy is not something that can be contracted out. Policy makers² are responsible for using evidence as effectively as possible to design, implement and monitor policies.

Evidence informs policy processes in several different ways. It can help answer specific questions, generate new ideas about how change happens, explain causal relationships on complex policy issues, and identify areas where new policies might be necessary. Unless policy makers understand the fullness of the evidence they have and the evidence they need, they may end up with a narrow view of what policy options exist. This means that managing the evidence base for a particular policy issue is an integral part of the policy-making process. This task can be assigned to policy teams; they can map evidence needs and network with internal policy analysis units, planning or monitoring units, or universities and policy research institutes.

The Defra and FSA case studies show how both organisations clearly link evidence to policy goals. They both developed evidence strategy documents to set out their evidence priority areas and the investment necessary to acquire that evidence in the coming years. Defra has worked hard to ensure that all policy teams developed a “line of sight” between policy goals and the evidence base. This made it very clear why they were commissioning specific pieces of research and studies; whether they were continuing to build up a body of knowledge; looking to test specific hypotheses about what might work; or looking for new opportunities or new policy directions in the future. The FSA began to work

² The term “policy makers” is intended to mean the civil servants responsible for designing, developing, implementing and monitoring government policies, not elected politicians.

on its evidence strategy half way through its organisational development process to ensure that discussions about evidence needs and investment in evidence were based on a clear understanding of the organisation’s goals.

The MCCIP Annual Report Cards show how policy “leads” the evidence base, and not the other way round. Each Annual Report Card is put together by researchers from both government and academia. However, a steering group chaired by senior policy makers ensures that the evidence it presents is clearly relevant to current and future policy issues.

Lesson 3: Build the evidence base to serve all policy priorities

An evidence base, for example in a ministry or local government, needs to be able to support all policy priorities. This means managing it to respond effectively to short-term needs; to anticipate, as far as possible, the likely longer-term needs; and to collect evidence in response to legal requirements. Assigning set percentages of the overall budget to these different categories may be helpful.

Much evidence used in the policy process is collected on an on-going basis to satisfy legal requirements, such as international treaties or Parliamentary legislation (this is called *statutory evidence*). Evidence on water quality or air quality is often a legal requirement, and is an example of statutory evidence. Other types of evidence may have to be collected less frequently but are still a requirement of the policy formulation process. These may include evidence from studies that are legally required when a new law or an implementing regulation is formulated. How this is done will vary from country to country but they often help policymakers assess the likely impact of new laws or regulations. In Indonesia, for example, an Academic Paper (or Naskah Akademik) must accompany any new laws or local regulations.³ In other countries other types

³ See Law No. 12/2011 on the Establishment of Laws and Regulations in Indonesia

of assessment, such as environmental or social impact assessments, may be required. This can be called mandatory evidence. A third type of evidence is *discretionary evidence*. This type of evidence is not required by law or a legislative process. Policy makers decide to acquire it through studies, pieces of research and analysis to inform their judgments in the policy making process. This type of evidence can refer to short-term policy needs (*short-term discretionary evidence*) or long-term policy needs (*long-term discretionary evidence*). It can help a ministry or government unit distinguish between these types of evidence, as this informs what proportion of the overall evidence budget to spend on each.

Statutory evidence is collected where departments are required by law to gather evidence about specific issues on an on-going basis. Statutory evidence is a constant drain on resources for evidence and must be resourced regardless of what is happening to wider budgets.

Evidence required by the legislative process

The priorities for **discretionary evidence** are driven by short-term ministerial and political requirements. These may sometimes have quite short time horizons that only extend to the next electoral cycle⁴. If there is too much of a focus on short-term evidence, it can become difficult for departments to collect the evidence they need to respond effectively to longer-term policy issues, such as climate change, an aging population or technological innovation. However, a well-managed evidence base should be able to respond effectively to short- and long-term policy issues, and allocate sufficient budget to procure the necessary evidence. There is no legal requirement to collect this discretionary evidence, so departments need to make judgements about how important it is and how much budget to allocate to it.

Any strategic approach to evidence needs to consider all three types of evidence. This will ensure that policy makers are able to meet all their legal requirements, and that they can

Table 1: Understanding Discretionary, Mandatory and Statutory Evidence

	Short-term priorities (0-3 years)	Long-term priorities (more than 3 years)
Discretionary evidence	Current ministerial priorities	Priorities that last over more than one electoral cycle, such as climate change
Mandatory evidence	This type of evidence is mandatory in some countries during the formulation of new legislation and before it is voted on in Parliament	
Statutory evidence	Statutory evidence does not distinguish between short-term and long-term priorities: it simply has to be collected to satisfy Parliamentary legislation or international treaties	

is not produced on an on-going basis, but only when new legislation is being formulated and discussed. This type of evidence can be called **mandatory evidence**. It is not a drain on resources but it is useful to monitor the policy cycle and new legislation emerging from Parliament to allocate sufficient resources if needed.

⁴ There is no hard and fast definition of short term and long term: it varies from issue to issue and government to government. However, if we consider long-term priorities to be those which need to be implemented over more than one electoral cycle, it is probably reasonable to consider short-term priorities as (very roughly) those which need to deliver outcomes within 0-3 years, and long-term priorities as those with outcomes to be delivered from 3 years onwards.

explore short- and longer-term opportunities, risks and uncertainties (see also Lesson 4).

Because the pressure from ministers to focus on short-term policy requirements is strong, it can be helpful to allocate rough percentages of the total budget to each type of evidence. For example, one ministry might want to allocate 25 percent to statutory evidence collection, 15 percent to mandatory evidence collection, 50 percent to discretionary short-term evidence collection and 10 percent to discretionary long-term evidence collection. Rather than allocating the budget to immediate priorities, this allows enough budget to be saved for the essential long-term evidence work that is needed to inform possible future policy goals. Defra allocates 40 percent to statutory evidence (it does not have a category of mandatory evidence), 40 percent to discretionary short-term evidence and 20 percent to discretionary long-term evidence. The FSA, by contrast, does not specify particular percentages, but looks across all expenditure on an annual basis to ensure it remains consistent with current short- and long-term policy priorities. The MCCIP Annual Report Card presents information about a wide variety of issues, drawing on some statutory evidence, in order to inform both short- and long-term policy priorities.

Lesson 4: Do not reinvent the wheel: derive value from the evidence you already have

Policy makers face constant downward pressure on public sector budgets. The pressure to deliver value for money spent on evidence means that it is important not to reinvent the wheel. It is a good idea to review evidence that already exists before commissioning new evidence.

Time spent assembling the evidence that already exists on an issue is an important aspect of managing the evidence base. It is good practice to ensure that current questions that are important to policy have not already been addressed, either within government or by other organisations. Knowing who provides the

evidence and including them in your network can ensure that you are aware of what you and others know. This ensures that you are able to target resources more effectively towards the real gaps in the evidence base.

Defra and the FSA have explicitly committed to deriving value from their existing evidence base in three ways. First, both organisations make good use of synthesis studies and rigorous reviews to ensure they have a full grasp of what is already known before commissioning new work. In a similar way, the MCCIP draws from both synthesis studies and specific pieces of research to inform its report card.

Second, all three case studies show that by being clear about what their evidence needs are, they can make much better use of evidence that has been created by others. Defra is very careful to distinguish between evidence it must “make” itself and evidence it needs to “buy” from external organisations. The MCCIP draws on a wide range of government and non-government organisations. Some government funding is used, but academic researchers volunteer a great deal of their time. The FSA developed its evidence strategy together with representatives from universities, think tanks, industry organisations and other stakeholders. This ensured they were able to identify areas where they and the FSA could collaborate, or where the FSA could simply draw from their evidence.

Third, Defra is seeking to make much greater use of statutory evidence than it has in the past. Whereas it was once seen simply as a reporting requirement, it is now seen as the basis for other evidence work, such as research. Under the principle of “collect once, use many times”, Defra now asks researchers to consider how they can use statutory evidence before going out and collecting more.

Lesson 5: Build relationships around evidence

Many different organisations can contribute to the evidence base for any policy issue. These will include colleagues in other teams within the department, as well as people in other ministries, local government, universities, civil society organisations, non-government organisations, think tanks, donor organisations and many others. Involving them will ensure that your view of what is important does not become too narrow. As well as providing evidence, they can help plan, quality assure and interpret what the evidence means for what you are trying to achieve.

Every issue has a wide variety of stakeholders interested in what evidence is used, and how it is used, to support policy decisions. These stakeholders are more than just providers of evidence; they can have valuable insights into the most effective way to construct and manage the evidence base. In particular, they can help broaden understanding of the issue, offer alternative interpretations of what the evidence means, ensure that marginalised voices are heard, and alert departments when evidence is weak. Building strong relationships with external stakeholders therefore helps strengthen the overall evidence base. It also

helps ensure that policy makers are aware of what is already known, and prevents a department's understanding of the policy issue from becoming too narrow.

All three case studies involved external stakeholders in deciding what evidence to include, identifying where it could come from and ensuring it was of sufficiently high quality. The FSA involved a wide range of stakeholders in the workshop it held to identify the evidence it needed for the strategy, and representatives from external organisations participate in the group that oversees the evidence strategy process. Defra has an extensive network of government agencies and external organisations, including universities, local government, non-government organisations and civil society. It relies on them to provide much of its evidence base. Knowing what evidence its stakeholders have enables Defra to focus its evidence budget only on issues that are real "evidence gaps". The MCCIP is a much smaller organisation, but it uses academic researchers to provide the evidence it requires in a very cost-effective way. It offers academic recognition for the research papers it commissions. It also has a peer review process similar to that of journal articles, and has developed a tried and tested method for clarifying how much confidence there is in the evidence that exists.

Managing the Evidence Base



A single department will need to build evidence bases for a whole range of issues, and many of them are likely to overlap with each other. The following six lessons show how to think about managing them as effectively as possible.

Lesson 6: Take a “whole organisation” approach to managing evidence

Individual policy teams in departments can develop their own ways of managing their evidence base, with their own theme-based strategy. However, it is often hard to co-ordinate effectively between teams, which may result in gaps and overlaps in the evidence, and management inefficiencies. In order for a department to say that its approach to managing evidence is as coherent and efficient as possible, it is helpful to develop a whole organisation approach to managing evidence.

Inside government departments, different teams (or directorates or divisions) may be granted a good deal of autonomy over how they go about developing and implementing policy. They may develop their own strategies for collecting evidence on their specific policy area and design them in different ways. Although this demonstrates a commitment to using evidence effectively and means they can be responsive to the particular issues they are working on, the danger with this devolved approach is that it becomes internally inconsistent.

Defra is a large department, while the FSA is a much smaller ministerial agency. They arrange their policy teams differently and have different ways of engaging with outside organisations, such as universities and think tanks. But both have found that taking a whole organisation approach, involving everyone (internal staff and external groups) in planning their evidence investments, ensures they deliver value for money across the whole spectrum of departmental policy making.

One of the first things Defra did was to map its entire evidence base across all policy teams in the department. It discovered that not only were there large gaps in what it knew, there were also overlaps in the evidence that policy teams were collecting and using. This sort of duplication is effectively a waste of public money. Consequently, a small central team in the department is now responsible for identifying potential overlaps and ensuring that, where possible, policy teams collaborate with each other, share resources for collecting evidence and learn from each other.

In developing its evidence strategy, the FSA looked across all its evidence needs in two workshops—one with external stakeholders and one with its own staff. The first ensured that its external stakeholders were able to take a holistic view of what evidence the organisation needed, so that their advice was relevant to the FSA's overarching mission rather than just part of it. The second involved staff from across the organisation to ensure they were able to take a similarly holistic view.

Lesson 7: Make evidence part of business as usual

An evidence-based approach to policy making is truly embedded when it is an integral part of departmental business processes and when there is a clear relationship between evidence budgets and programme budgets.

Developing a strategic approach to managing the evidence base is important, but without an associated budget it is simply a framework for action; it does not guarantee that evidence is actually produced and that evidence informs policy change. Departments may need to strengthen the capacities of individuals to understand how to commission, quality assure and interpret increasingly complex forms of evidence. They may need to develop different relationships with universities, think tanks and NGOs. They may need to re-prioritise the types of evidence they collect, or to reallocate resources between different policy priorities as those priorities change. All this needs to be carefully planned so that the right evidence is available to the right people at the right time. It also needs an enabling environment of rules and regulations that creates the right conditions for allocating sufficient budget and procuring evidence from a range of knowledge producers, such as universities, policy research institutes, think tanks and from within the public administration.

One of the challenges Defra faced in the early stages of its evidence investment strategy process was to convince senior management that an evidence-based approach to business planning was a better approach to business planning. Within the department, business planning was seen as somehow separate from the evidence base, which had its own budget and was managed separately. As policy units in Defra began to take responsibility for managing their own evidence base, it became apparent that they also needed to manage their own evidence budgets, and therefore, that evidence planning and business planning

should be closely linked. Each policy team in Defra now publishes its own Evidence Plan which shows what evidence is needed to help it meet its policy goals. These are developed or updated during the annual business planning cycle, and their associated budgets feed into that process.

The FSA put in place a governance structure that ensures its evidence needs are continually refreshed and linked to its overall planning process. The evidence strategy for the organisation runs for five years and a specially commissioned board decides on the priority evidence needs. Individual teams then construct evidence plans, which run for two years. They set out the detailed requirements for each piece of work (with associated budgets). There is a mid-year review and an annual cycle of strategic prioritisation that ensures things remain on track, both in terms of priorities and budget.

The MCCIP Annual Report Cards present evidence about complex issues in a visually appealing way. This helps policy makers understand rapidly what the evidence is saying. This in turn helps them use it in their day-to-day work. The Annual Report Cards provide links to source papers so policy makers can look up more detailed information if they need it.

Lesson 8: Leadership from senior management provides essential support to the process

Senior managers are the people who send the signals to the rest of the organisation that a focus on evidence needs to be part of business as usual. There may be issues that can only be addressed at a departmental level, such as developing prioritisation criteria or setting budget categories for evidence. Their involvement in the process helps demonstrate how important it is to focus on evidence.

Taking a whole organisation approach to evidence requires leadership from senior management. It will uncover issues about

how well equipped a department is to manage its evidence base strategically, effectively and efficiently. It will also indicate whether its business processes (such as planning and budgeting) and its organisational culture enable it to make the most effective use of all the evidence that exists. It is not possible to say how staff across the organisation will be affected by the changes that need to be made—that will be department-specific, but it will not be possible if senior management does not actively support more demand and use of evidence in policy decision making.

Both the FSA and Defra had Chief Scientists who led the evidence strategy process, convincing other senior managers in the organisation of the need to act consistently and coherently to deliver value for money across all their evidence activities. Chief Scientists are Ministerial Advisors so have a good degree of autonomy in their relationships with ministers. It is not necessary for a department to have a Chief Scientist, as long as someone on the senior management team takes overall responsibility for the evidence base.

Lesson 9: Do not try to do everything at once

Changing the way a government department does business can be a big challenge. It will require time to get it right. Commit to taking a whole organisation approach, but rather than setting out a detailed plan for the whole process, break it into smaller stages.

Any organisational change is a complex process and it can take years to get it right. Implementing an evidence-based approach may involve some changes to internal structures and resource allocations. Breaking the process down into manageable stages will ensure that the organisation develops its own confidence to deal with the changes that are necessary.

Defra has taken a decade to become confident that the way it uses evidence can now be developed to include its network

of linked organisations. The first few years focused on taking a whole organisation approach to evidence (Lesson 6), ensuring that all policy teams shared the same strategic commitment to evidence and understanding how to improve the ways that policy specialists and evidence specialists worked together. The next stage helped it embed that understanding in corporate processes so that it became part of business as usual (Lesson 7). Developing evidence plans ensures that policy teams continue to regard evidence as a core part of the policy process (Lesson 2).

The FSA took nine months to construct an evidence strategy, in three clear stages. The first stage was to look ahead to the likely issues and challenges the department would face, and to develop an organisational strategy. During the second stage it worked with external stakeholders to identify the key evidence that would be required to implement the organisational strategy effectively. It then involved internal staff in a process of identifying the most cost-effective ways of procuring and managing the evidence. Finally, the FSA put in place a governance structure that would ensure that its evidence strategy remained as up-to-date as possible.

Lesson 10: Be aware of, but not scared of, the politics of evidence

Many different people, in your ministry and in other organisations, will have an interest in how the evidence base is managed and for what purpose. It will be important to recognise the internal and external politics involved in taking a strategic approach to evidence. Consider how to ensure that these debates are transparent and allow contestation; producing an evidence strategy can help.

Taking a strategic approach to evidence will mean clarifying resource allocations, relationships and responsibilities for different aspects of the evidence base. Much of the evidence government departments need is collected by organisations such as

universities, civil society organisations, NGOs and industry—each of which have their own interests in how evidence is sourced and used and their own ideas of what they can contribute. It will be important to understand what these interests are so that the debate around evidence can be an inclusive one. This means recognising the internal politics of the department and the politics of its relationships with external stakeholders. While it may not be possible to reconcile all the different interests, developing a document which sets out the evidence strategy can be a way of ensuring that the final decisions about the department's priorities for evidence, and how they will be achieved, are made and communicated as openly as possible.

Both Defra and the FSA have consulted widely internally, and have involved external stakeholders in their evidence strategy processes. They have published strategy documents that set out their key objectives for evidence, and how they will deliver them. As well as taking advantage of a broader range of knowledge and expertise, an inclusive process ensures that a wide range of voices is heard on what the main priorities should be, what each person or organisation can offer to the process, and what they will get out of it. All debates such as these are informed by complex relationships of power: such as between senior staff who set the strategic direction, and more junior staff who have to negotiate the best way to implement a strategy. Power and politics also influence relationships between organisations, such as between central and local government departments or between government, industry and academia.

The process of developing a strategy document can provide a structure that encourages open debate around priorities, resources and relationships. The FSA used two workshops to develop its evidence strategy. The first involved external stakeholders to scope the size and shape of the evidence base, while the second involved internal staff in deciding the most cost-effective way of delivering it. External stakeholders remained

involved in the process, commenting on drafts of the strategy document and participating in boards and other arrangements to ensure effective governance of the FSA's human resources and evidence budgets. Defra's first evidence strategy was an internal process, but its second and third strategies were developed with its network of linked organisations. Defra's evidence plans (which it puts online [here](#)) are developed by policy teams in consultation with their external stakeholders. These documents do not explicitly address the politics of evidence, but simply being clear that the intention is to publish them makes it clear that any inter-organisational issues will have to be addressed during the strategy process.

Lesson 11: Learn, adapt and share good practice

Each organisation is different and what works for one will not necessarily work for another. Priorities, timescales, capabilities and budgets all need to be considered. The point of not trying to do everything all at once is to allow time to learn and adapt so that you can develop a strategic approach that works for your department. Identifying how you would apply each of these lessons to your own organisation is a helpful start. Sharing the practices that work for you will help others, and you may well be able to learn from them.

It is important to understand the principles of an evidence-based approach, but there is no blueprint for such an approach to policy making, and no single best practice that can be recommended. Each department will implement the principles in different ways depending on the context in which they work, the issues on which they work, how the organisation is currently structured, what resources are available, and the current "culture of evidence". Taking time to learn and adapt will be important to ensuring that

effective practices really do become part of business as usual.

Each department faces different issues and has different resources. The three case studies were selected to draw out experiences from vastly different organisations: Defra is a central government department with an evidence budget of around £ 200 million per year, while the FSA is a much smaller government agency with a commensurately smaller budget. MCCIP is effectively a secretariat made up of a small number of civil servants who manage the contributions and contestation around the evidence base from a large number of government and non-government organisations.

Each organisation has learned from what others have done: the FSA and Defra collaborated on the evidence strategy process, and MCCIP drew from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's experience to develop its report cards. All three have taken this learning and adapted it to their own organisational rhythms and structures. There is no single method for implementing an evidence-based approach; it needs to be tailored to each ministry or government agency.

What the three organisations have in common is that they have all been persistent. Defra began its work on evidence strategies in 2005, MCCIP in 2006 and the FSA in 2009. All have adapted as they have gone along. Part of the way through its evidence strategy, the FSA's remit changed significantly because some of its work was moved to the Department of Health. It simply repeated the strategy process for its new policy priorities. Defra, arguably the leading department in the UK to embed this sort of approach, had to develop much of its early thinking on its own and had very little external experience to draw upon. But having identified the key principles (Lessons 1-5), and with the support of senior management (Lesson 8) it continued to experiment until it felt its structures and processes reflected what it was trying to achieve.

4

Conclusion



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What is the main lesson out of these 11 lessons? Understanding what these lessons mean for your organisation is a first step in developing a strategic approach to investing in evidence. They are not intended to be a comprehensive assessment of all that is needed to implement an effective evidence-based approach to policy. They highlight some of the main issues from case studies of three very different organisations that have taken a long-term approach to strategic evidence investment. In doing so, they offer insights into what government departments could do to make more effective use of their own evidence base.

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The Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI) is a joint program between the governments of Indonesia and Australia that seeks to improve the lives of the Indonesian people through better quality public policies that make better use of research, analysis and evidence.

KSI is a consortium led by RTI International in partnership with Australian National University (ANU), Nossal Institute for Global Health, and Overseas Development Institute (ODI).



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