



**Environmental
Policy Skills**



Evidence-informed policy

An introduction to environmental policy



November 2023

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Evidence-informed policy

An introduction to environmental policy, November 2023

This is a briefing paper for IES members, providing a short introduction to some of the ways that environmental professionals can use evidence to engage with policy issues, take part in advocacy, and increase the impact of their work. While providing an overview of all the basics necessary for environmental professionals to begin engaging in evidence-informed policy, this paper should be viewed as just one aspect of the wider range of policy-related skills needed for greater engagement in policy.

See also: [Policy analysis and awareness: An introduction to environmental policy](#).

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1. Introduction

Environmental policy making has never been so crucial for addressing the interlinking social, economic, and environmental needs of people and communities.

In that context, there is a vital role for evidence in the policy making process to ensure that the design of policies addresses pressing environmental challenges and that the delivery of policies is carried out with reference to empirical evidence about what works and where unintended consequences may arise.

Evidence is integrated into the policy process from many sources, but the role of environmental professionals and scientists remains of paramount importance to provide the voice of robust scientific evidence from the front lines of working with and within the natural world.

Whether through direct calls for engagement, consultations, and long-term policy partnerships or as a result of emerging research, knowledge, and best practice, there are myriad points of engagement where the voice of professionals is well-regarded as a 'critical friend' to policy.

To that end, evidence-informed policy is crucial and the role of environmental professionals and scientists in delivering that evidence through the science-policy interface is instrumental to securing positive outcomes for nature, the economy, and society.



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2. Touchpoints for engaging with policy

There are many different ‘touchpoints’ for engagement between professional scientists and policy makers. The most effective will often be specific to the context of that engagement, the evidence that is being used, and the objective of engaging with the policy process. It may be necessary to utilise multiple points of engagement to supplement one another.

Some examples of general touchpoints for engaging with policy are:

- [Consultations and Government surveys](#);
- Inquiries or calls for evidence by [Parliamentary Committees](#);
- Engaging with political representatives such as [Members of Parliament](#), local representatives, or [members of the House of Lords](#);
- Direct engagement with [Government Departments or regulators](#);
- Expert panels or advisory groups;
- Work-specific engagement pathways for universities, research institutes, or other policy-relevant organisations; or
- Using networks or communities for a collective voice in policy conversations, such as engaging in policy through the [IES and our partner organisations](#).

It is important to recognise that policy engagement is a ‘two-way street’. Whether or not professionals are actively trying to, they can influence the policy process and they are inevitably influenced by it.

This can create complex feedback loops between environmental science, policy making and the public, as emerging evidence shapes understandings of policy challenges and policy drives the priorities and process under which science operates.

The environment sector influences policy by:

- Providing evidence and case studies which influence the strategic priorities of policy;
- Supporting the implementation and improvement of policy and setting expectations for how the sector will respond to policy and secure its practical delivery;
- Representing the views and values of those who work in the sector, who play a crucial role in shaping the ways that policy design and delivery interact;
- Helping to inform and empower the public with new understandings of the social and natural world, influencing the ways that society and electors engage in the policy process.

Policy influences the environment sector by:

- Setting strategic priorities for action across the sector, including through the provision of research funding,

Government grants and tenders, and by driving the creation of jobs in green industries;

- Creating regulations which directly determine how many jobs in the environment sector are carried out, such as [Environmental Impact Assessment](#) and [Biodiversity Net Gain](#) regulations;
- Employing and appointing experts to advise and work on policy issues, influencing the direction of the sector;
- Facilitating or impeding environmental science through policy frameworks.

Ultimately, all environmental policy also has an impact on the environment, so it can influence outcomes for the environment which can affect jobs in the sector, individuals working in the environment, and the places in which they live.

3. Using evidence to understand policy

While evidence plays a crucial role in the development, design, and delivery of policy, it can also help to increase understanding of policy issues and how they can affect different priorities and values.

Often, the first step in the process of evidence-informed policy will be to establish the ways in which evidence interacts with policy, which requires an awareness and analysis of key policies.

Our briefing paper: [‘Policy Analysis & Awareness: An introduction to environmental policy’](#) covers how to gain a better understanding of the policy process and how to engage in policy research, using evidence to develop greater understandings of policy and how it interacts with the natural world.

[Read the briefing](#) for more information.



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4. The role of evidence in advocacy

All decisions are influenced by the people who make them, so the ways that policy makers think will inevitably shape the nature of policy decisions. Policy makers may instinctively make decisions based on popular theories and knowledge, personal experiences and beliefs, or political pressures.

For evidence-informed policy making, individuals must put aside these assumptions and pressures, instead making decisions once they are fully informed by robust and relevant evidence.

This leads to informed decision making that has the best chance of achieving the objectives of policy. For instance, without exposing political leaders to the full evidence on biodiversity loss and access to nature, their perspective on the issue could be influenced by the state of biodiversity in their local area, incorrectly depicting the scale or nature of the challenge involved.

In reality, decisions may still have a significant subjective element to managing trade-offs in the public interest, but it will be easier to make those trade-offs if the decision maker has a full understanding of what the evidence shows.

Environmental professionals and scientists can use their specialist knowledge, research and 'on the ground' experience to summarise and present policy-relevant evidence. Multiple stages in the policy process can support an evidence-informed approach, including:

- Establishing an evidence base to support a full understanding of the issue;
- Identifying and developing effective and deliverable policy solutions;
- Monitoring the implementation of policy to avoid unintended consequences; and
- Evaluating the success of policies.



5. Identifying the needs of policy makers

Unfortunately, it is often insufficient to let the evidence 'speak for itself'. For evidence to be impactful, careful consideration must be taken to communicate the evidence to policy makers in the most effective manner.

In this context, that will often mean presenting evidence which is 'policy relevant', as well as relevant to your expertise.

Given the number of voices seeking to influence policy, you can maximise your reach by focusing on your 'unique selling point' as an expert and the areas where you have contributions which are not already being made elsewhere. This can help your voice to carry more weight and make an impactful difference to decisions.

To further strengthen your voice, consider engaging jointly with colleagues from different disciplines. Coalitions or networks increase the credibility of evidence.

In addition, environmental challenges and solutions are usually interdisciplinary, so evidence that reflects an interdisciplinary perspective will often be more compelling to policy makers.

Timing is also critical. Policy agendas and cycles can move quickly, so ensuring that evidence is policy-relevant requires an understanding of current and upcoming issues. The IES's briefing paper: ['Policy Analysis & Awareness: An introduction to environmental policy'](#) has useful tips and resources for how to stay up to date.

Being aware of policy issues and acting promptly can ensure that evidence is considered by policy makers before key decisions have already been made.

Providing evidence once an issue is already in the political or public sphere may mean that it is too late for decision makers to incorporate the evidence into the policy process. For instance, once a challenge has already been acknowledged, it may be more impactful to focus on providing evidence of possible solutions, rather than reiterating evidence of the problem's existence.

Focusing on the issues that decision makers prioritise within your area of expertise can maximise the chance that evidence is seen as relevant and useful.

Naturally, sometimes evidence needs to be provided when it is not a priority for decision makers, even (and often especially) when it is inconvenient.

To that end, building relationships with those decision makers through prolonged engagement on the issues they do prioritise will open the door to ongoing communication on issues which are seen as a lower priority.

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6. Presenting evidence for policy makers

The presentation of evidence plays a significant part in its impact on policy makers. As with the type of evidence, considering your audience is key: presenting evidence for civil servants and politicians is very different to communicating with fellow experts, professionals, academics, or even students.

Senior politicians can often be ‘intelligent generalists’, who may not have a professional background in their portfolio, or who may rely on advisors to provide a specialist understanding of environmental issues.

Generally, the best approach is to be clear, simple, and concise, avoiding technical jargon or material which is not directly relevant to the issue being considered.

Communicating any complexities and uncertainties remains important where they are relevant, but the best presentation of evidence will always be focused on the purpose for which you are engaging with your audience, and the goal you are seeking to achieve.

Try as much as possible to ‘speak the language’ of your audience. For resource-constrained decision makers, this may require you to communicate any relevant costs, including social and economic impacts.

There are many resources with more detailed advice on communicating complexity to public and policy audiences, including:

- [Communicating climate risk: a handbook](#) (UCL Climate Action Unit)
- [Effective environmental communication](#) (IES Webinar, Stephanie Wray)
- [Communicating on Climate Change](#) (UN Department of Global Communications)
- [Communicating environmental science](#) (IES Journal)
- [Communication: Getting comfortable with talking about the tricky stuff!](#) (IES Land Condition Early Career Network)

Good scientific storytelling can uphold the accuracy and integrity of evidence while also communicating it simply enough to be compelling and engaging.

Identify the most helpful way to ‘make the evidence real’ for your audience, using analogies, case studies, and current events, as well as a range of mediums such as video, audio, and pictures.

If you are struggling to get your evidence in front of policy makers, think about presenting it in different and more engaging forms, such as blogs or short briefings.

7. Building relationships

Building relationships are at the heart of all policy influencing; without good relationships with policy makers, expertise and evidence is less likely to be influential.

The process of building a relationship with a decision maker may sound intimidating, but it should make it clear that everyone has the potential to be an effective advocate for the environment through simple communication.

All environmental scientists have opportunities to build relationships with policy makers, though it can take time to establish a good relationship.

Attending events such as conferences and seminars allows you to introduce yourself and tap into existing policy networks. Speaking at these events can also be a good way to present your evidence directly to policy makers.

Similarly, if you are in the position to invite policy officials to industry or academic events, this can be a great way to meet relevant contacts.

After establishing contact, you also need to showcase your credibility and build trust. This can be done by engaging consistently, and by being accessible, flexible and humble. These relationships are often built on the potential for mutual benefit, so demonstrating how you (and your evidence) can support policy is crucial.

Ultimately, even the best practice in evidence-informed policy influence relies on a significant degree of luck. Policy change is often reliant on exploiting ‘windows of opportunity’, which are most likely to arise in times of crisis when there is a momentary acceptance of the need for change.

Taking advantage of these windows requires experts to be ready with evidence of potential solutions and already established relationships to communicate those options to the right decision makers.



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Case study: How does the IES promote evidence-informed policy making?

As a professional body, the IES represents the voices of environmental professionals, sharing insights from the front lines of working with the environment. In doing so, we promote an evidence-informed approach to decisions.

The IES engages with policy making through various channels:

- We maintain relationships with parliamentarians, civil servants, and arms-length bodies, who we influence with briefings, meetings, and other engagement activities;
- We engage in horizon scanning on emerging science and upcoming policy developments, working with our members to identify policy priorities;
- We produce policy reports and guidance, developing thought leadership positions and influencing policy agendas;
- We collaborate with other organisations as part of networks such as the Science Council and the Society for the Environment to represent the voice of the sector;
- We give expert perspectives in the media and are a UNFCCC admitted observer NGO;
- We respond to consultations and produce position pieces on emerging policy topics;
- We produce written content, events, and videos, informing our members and the public about relevant environmental policy issues;
- We provide training, briefings, and knowledge resources for our members, supporting them to champion their own voices in policy.

Read the [IES Theory of Change](#) for more information.

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8. For policy makers: being evidence-led

Experts need to know how to effectively present evidence to policy makers, but many policy makers may also want support to develop their own skills in using evidence to inform their work.

Using evidence in the public interest

For environmental experts working in policy, it can be challenging to ensure that decisions are consistently informed by the right evidence, particularly in light of:

- An increasingly complex evidence landscape, where there are many sources of information including those from public, private, and third sector sources;
- Increasingly sophisticated data which may bring with it challenges for ensuring validity and reliability;
- Managing strict deadlines and tight budget and resource constraints; and
- Other organisational objectives, commitments, and ethical obligations.

Prioritising the public interest is a vital part of policy making. Those priorities should not come at the expense of evidence informed policy making, as the public interest is better protected when interventions are informed by evidence that avoids unintended consequences and maximises the potential to secure multiple benefits for people and the environment.

The [Nolan Principles](#) are a useful guide to taking an objective evidence-informed approach to working in policy.

Handling large quantities of evidence

In the face of large quantities of evidence, a degree of rationalisation is needed to identify which sources will be most useful to inform decisions.

In the first instance, mapping different sources of evidence, expertise, and data will be a useful tool to give you confidence that you are using the right evidence to inform your decisions.

1. Identify all the sources of information available to you, such as core evidence associated with your organisation or project, internal and external datasets, partner organisations, expert stakeholders, public consultation, and knowledge networks.
2. Assess the 'unique selling point' of each source: what does it do better than other sources of evidence?
3. Identify the circumstance when you would opt to use that source of evidence, and the process you would follow when doing so, as well as any other factors to consider, such as associated costs or challenges.

Maintaining a robust bank of evidence to inform decisions is a crucial element of ensuring effective policy making, so it is often wise to build relationships with organisations or stakeholders who can provide expertise to inform decisions.

Proactively building links with research, practice, and other stakeholders can allow for cheaper and faster access to evidence when it is needed.

Using evidence to inform implementation

Evidence can also inform the implementation of policies. Monitoring data is a fundamental element of ensuring that policies are achieving their intended objectives, without creating unintended consequences.

Adaptive feedback loops from the implementation of policy can improve future decisions: if the evidence suggests that an aspect of a policy's implementation was particularly successful or challenging, that knowledge can inform how you make decisions in the future.

The [Environmental Policy Implementation Community](#) (EPIC) is a useful starting point for adopting evidence-informed approaches to policy implementation. [Find out more.](#)

There is a wealth of expertise and experience to support evidence-informed policy making, from academics and researchers to the environmental professionals implementing policy on the ground.

The IES is well-placed to bring those perspectives together, reflecting the full depth and breadth of expertise in the sector, so can help decision makers find the experts needed to support evidence-informed policy making.

For more information [get in touch](#).

9. What next: other ways to engage with environmental policy

Evidence-informed policy is only one approach to engaging with the complex environmental policy landscape. For many environmental professionals, it may be necessary to identify other ways to engage or interact with the policy process.

For those professionals seeking to improve their skills in influencing policy or diversify their approaches to engagement, the IES offers training and other resources. Find out more by visiting [our events page](#).

The IES also works to represent environmental science in policy across disciplines and sectors. If you want to become part of the conversation, ensure that your voice is represented by joining one of our communities or [getting in touch](#).



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