HOW TO WRITE A POLICY BRIEF

Dr Sarah Weakley
Research Officer, Policy Scotland

Dr Mariola Tarrega
Digital Resources Coordinator
SPRE
WHAT IS A POLICY BRIEF?

• Policy brief is a concise, stand alone publication with a specific purpose to inform/advise a non-academic external audience of an issue that requires policy attention
  • Written for a specific audience in mind (not just ‘policymakers’)
• They are one way key facts and points of reference about a given issue are conveyed to decision-makers for a specific purpose
  • Other types of outputs include blogs, working papers, seminars, submitted evidence to inquiries
• Can review the state of play in the field for a specific purpose (e.g. POSTNotes on marine renewables) or can focus more on translating new pieces of evidence from you or your research unit into the evidence base (what we’ll do today)
WHY WRITE THEM?

• Decisionmakers and practitioners should make decisions informed by the best evidence possible.

• But they often can turn to more readily accessible forms of evidence to influence their decisions. These may not have academic rigour or even be the most up to date/valid.

• Our job as public academics is to better convey complex academic material to policy-making audiences in a way that is immediately accessible and useful.

• WE CAN STEP UP! YOU HAVE GREAT KNOWLEDGE & RESEARCH, SHARE IT!
# CONTENT & STRUCTURE

## CONTENT

- Presents a problem, its context, and gives clear policy recommendations or implications.
- Provides evidence to support the reasoning behind these recommendations.
- Promote some kind of change: in law, health policies or regulations, agency funding priorities, organisational practices or programme implementation.
- Spend more time on new evidence and solutions/options rather than introducing the problem.

## STRUCTURE

- A summary and a list of key points up front.
- A clear structure with well signposted sections.
- Use of boxes for figures, case-studies, glossaries and other contextual materials.
- Accessible language to ensure ease of reading: short sentences, use of common words. Avoid jargon. Use active voice.
• Come in a few standard formats, but generally a short document (2-4 pages) written using a professional style that is easy to understand without specialised knowledge.
Before you begin writing with your team:

- **Describe and identify the target audience** (done in session 1)

- **Develop and overarching message**: what is the main aim of the brief – what do you want your audience to know?

- **Describe the problem**: for introduction and context.
  - Why is this important
  - What’s the extent of the issue?

- **What data and results do you think are most compelling?**

- **What actions or policy changes does the research point to?**

(Link to template in Resources slide)
Introduction (150-200)
• Aim to capture attention
• Explain purpose of brief
• Context & background info

Executive Summary (150-200 words)
• Context, key points/results (bits of new data)
• Recommendations and implications: often in bulleted list!

Methodology (50 -100)
• Conveys authority & validity
• Describe methods but avoid overly technical language

Research, Results & Conclusions (400 – 500)
• Provides summary of issues
• Move from general to specific for key results
• Tailor findings to audience & interests
• Base conclusions on results – these should be concrete

Policy Implications/Recommendations (400 - 500)
• State clearly what should happen next – following on from conclusions
• Recs describe steps that are credible, relevant and feasible.
• Recs are self-contained
• Implications less direct – describe consequences of research

References and useful resources: if synthesising evidence from many sources, cite list. Acknowledge funder. Direct readers to more by same author if useful.
**Implications and Recommendations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implications</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Less direct</strong></td>
<td><strong>Actionable steps backed with evidence from the brief. Specific &amp; appropriate for the audience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Research suggests the promotion of X to address problem Y’</td>
<td>• ‘Increase/decrease/change policy X in Y institution/location.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Evidence points to X population being impacted in Y way, which may call for Z resource to be mobilised’</td>
<td>• Ex: Remove soda from all vending machines on school campuses. Insert new curriculum on healthy eating to children starting at age 5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ex: Promote healthier foods in schools.</td>
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</tbody>
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**Key point!** Recommendations are not a policymaker’s to-do list. Provide people with enough information to make informed decisions and give options.

**Incrementalism:** policy changes are often small and incremental. Consider how to amend existing policies or programmes rather than scrapping and starting over.
THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

• **Audience:** Keep in mind who you are writing for and know the level of influence they have/what they can change.

• **Address ambiguity and complexity** (Cairney & Smith 2020): how does your evidence help us make better sense of a complex problem? What does it clarify?

• **Focus on the solution rather than the problem:** where do your results suggest efforts should be focused? Where does your evidence reduce ambiguity?

• **Keep your ethics about you!** Avoid making unequivocal claims from our data – and if there is inconclusive evidence, say so.

• **Policymakers often want one right answer, but do not fall into the trap.** Give options, suggestions, interpretations from the data. Enacting policy decisions is a political – not academic – process.
Policy Brief Templates and Examples:

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2015. Policy Briefs: A guide to writing policy briefs for research uptake [1]

Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology How to write a policy briefing.

Policy @ Manchester Policy Brief Template Notes for Use

See Policy Brief Template here:

A GUIDE – writing style advice for your policy briefing

A BLOG - simple and easy definitions of complex policy terms

"What is policy?" by Professor Paul Cairney