Making Policy Evidence-Based:
The UK Experience:

Philip Davies, PhD
American Institutes for Research
Washington, DC and Oxford England
Summary

• What is Evidence-Based Government?
• Why Evidence-Based Government?
• Making Evidence-Based Government Happen:
  - Wanting it to happen
  - Requiring it to happen
  - Incentives for it to happen
  - Getting compatible systems for it to happen
  - Reconciling different notions of evidence
  - Reconciling different sources and types of evidence
  - Some Suggestions for Action
What is Evidence-Based Government?

“Evidence-based policy helps people make well-informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation.”

(Davies, P.T., 1999)
“But what about factors other than evidence?”
Evidence-Based Government: Factors Other Than Evidence

- Pragmatics & Contingencies
- Lobbyists & Pressure Groups
- Habits & Tradition
- Values and Decision Making Context
- Experience & Expertise
- Judgement
- Research Evidence
- Resources
Evidence-Based Government

“Evidence-based government means integrating experience, expertise and judgement etc. with the best available external evidence from systematic research.”

(Davies, P.T., 2000)
Why Make Government/Practice More Evidenced-Based?

- Effectiveness - ensure we do more good than harm
- Efficiency - use scarce public resources to maximum effect
- Service Orientation - meet citizen’s needs/expectations
- Accountability - transparency of what is done and why
- Democracy - enhance the democratic process
- Trust - help ensure/restore trust in government and public services
Evidence-Based Government: Wanting It To Happen

“Social science should be at the heart of policy making. We need a revolution in the relationship between government and the social research community - we need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what type of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective …”

(UK Secretary of State for Education, 2000)
Evidence-Based Government: Wanting It To Happen

- Policy making must be soundly based on evidence of what works
- We must improve departments’ capacity to make best use of evidence
- We must improve the accessibility of the available evidence to policy makers
Evidence-Based Government: Requiring It To Happen

Making Evidence Part of the Fiscal and Public Expenditure Framework

- Comprehensive Spending Review (every two years)
- Public Service Agreements:
  - Set out Government’s key priorities
  - Provide public with indication of what to expect from Govnt.
  - Set Departments’ Objectives
  - Up to ten performance targets per Department (three from 2008)
  - Plus, a Value for Money (VfM) target
  - Outcomes focused and evidence-based - £s follow EB outcomes
  - Ineffective or un-evidenced policies = no expenditure (in theory!)
Evidence-Based Government: Requiring It To Happen

Professional Skills for Government

*Policy Makers’* Core Skills (from October 2005)

- Leadership
- Financial Management
- People Management
- Project and Programme Management
- Communications and Marketing
- Strategic Thinking
- Professional expertise
- Broader Experience
- Analysis and Use of Evidence

Incentives to Make it Happen

Build Into Appraisal and Rewards Systems
Evidence-Based Government: Requiring It To Happen

PSG: Policy Makers’ Core Skills
Analysis and Use of Evidence

- Anticipate and secure appropriate evidence
- Test for deliverability of policy/practice
- Use evidence to challenge decision making
- Identify ways to improve policy/practice
- Champion a variety of tools for collecting/using evidence
- Ensure use of evidence is consistent with wider government requirements
- Work in partnership with a wide range of experts/analysts
Evidence-Based Government: Requiring It To Happen

PSG: Researchers’ Core Skills

• Meet customers’ needs
• Works in partnership with other analysts and policy makers
• Critically evaluate data and information
• Synthesize and use data from a variety of sources
• Make sound evidence-based decisions
• Understand the bigger picture - think imaginatively
• Use interpersonal and other communication skills
• Communicate written and oral information clearly/concisely

Incentives to Make it Happen

Build Into Appraisal and Rewards Systems
Evidence-Based Policy in the UK

- Large growth in government research personnel (GSR: 250 in 1997 - 1000 in 1999-2006)
- Large increase in government research spending (GSR: £40m in 1997 - £175m in 2006)
- Proliferation of guidance on research and analysis (GSR: the Magenta Book; GES: the Green Book)
- Development of www.policyhub.gov.uk and other websites
- Training in research use for Ministers and SCS
Evidence-Based Policy in the UK
Some Positive Examples

• New Deal/Welfare-to-Work policies
• Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Demonstration
• Job Retraining and Rehabilitation Project (JRRP)
• Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)
• Sure Start Programme (evidence base variable)
• Connexions Programme
• Many policy pilots
Evidence-Based Policy in the UK
Some Dubious/Negative Examples

• Millennium Dome BSE Outbreak
• Foot and Mouth Outbreak
• Integrated Transport Policy
• Instant fines for street drunkenness
• Ban on hoodies in shopping malls
• National Identity Cards
• Faith-based schools
• Prisoner release programme
• WMD in Iraq
EBG: Getting Compatible Systems for It to Happen

Government/Practitioners

Boundary Distance

Researchers

Government/Practitioners

Researchers
Getting Compatible Systems for It to Happen
Some Problems

• There are often *systemic* differences between the research and the policy/practice communities
• ‘Boundary distance’ between social systems
• Different values and expectations
• Challenge function *versus* problem-solving
• The ‘awkward squad’ *versus* the ‘handmaidens’
• Knowledge for its own sake *versus* as a basis for action
• Different *notions* and different *sources* of evidence
Different Notions of Evidence
(J. Lomas et al, 2005)

Policy Makers’ Evidence
- Colloquial
- Anything that seems reasonable
- Policy relevant
- Timely
- Clear Message

Researchers’ Evidence
- ‘Scientific’ (Context free)
- Proven empirically
- Theoretically driven
- As long as it takes
- Caveats and qualifications

Making It Happen
Policy Makers’ Types of Evidence

- Research/Analytical Evidence
- ‘Experts’ evidence
- Opinion-based evidence (incl. lobbyists/pressure groups)
- Ideological ‘evidence’
- Media evidence
- Internet evidence (see www.malepregnancy.com)
- Lay evidence (constituents’, citizens’ experiences)
- ‘Street’ evidence (urban myths, conventional wisdom)
- Cabbie’s evidence
Where Do UK Policy Makers Go For Evidence?

- Policy or Practice
- Special Advisers
- 'Experts'
- Professional Associations
- Think Tanks/Opinion Formers
- Lobbyists and Pressure Groups
- Media
- Constituents, Consumers and Users
- Academic Research

Sharks

Plankton

Make It Happen
EBG How Do We Make it Happen: Some Suggestions

- Strategic planning of policy and research systems - together
- Incentives - taking people from ‘require’ to ‘want to’
- Ownership of the evidence, not just the policy
- Systems to search, find and capture knowledge/evidence
- Critical appraisal systems - separate the wheat from the chaff
- *Data* extraction systems (‘what are the data?’)
- *Knowledge* extraction systems (‘what do the data tell us?’)
- Clear and concise messages, and diverse evidence ‘products’
- Appropriate presentational formats (1:3:25)
- Active dissemination and knowledge management systems
- Persistence and Opportunism (Matthew Taylor, 2005)
Davies’ Theorem

Evidence-Based policy is no substitute for thinking-based policy
Contact

Philip Davies PhD
Executive Director
American Institutes for Research UK

England
2 Hill House, Southside
Steeple Aston
Oxfordshire OX25 4SD
England
Tel: +44 1869 347284
Mobile: +44 7927 186074
PDavies@air.org

USA
1000 Thomas Jefferson Street, NW
Washington DC 20007-3835
USA
Tel: 1 202 403-5785
Mobile: 1 202 445-3640
PDavies@air.org