

Making sense of evidence

A guide to using evidence in policy

MARCH 2018

Why using evidence effectively matters

As a policy practitioner, programme designer or evaluator, you already know how vital evidence is to your work. But you may not know the best types and sources of evidence to draw from, any problems with them, and how to select and use the most relevant evidence.

About At a Glance

Superu's At a Glance series uses infographics to illustrate research findings or key information about a priority topic.

Understanding types and sources of evidence

Evidence usually falls into three main types: research evidence, evidence from the context or setting, and evidence from people's experiences. It is important that you consider all three types so that you have a balanced perspective.

It might be tempting to ignore the need for evidence when you are in a hurry but it is always better to have some evidence than none at all.

Each type of evidence addresses different questions...

Contextual evidence can describe

- the socio-economic and other characteristics of the target population
- who will implement the policy and if they have the skills, resources and capacity to do it
- how well it matches the needs and aspirations of your target population
- the relevant cultural values and priorities in your setting, particularly kaupapa Māori
- how to strengthen the approach for the context you are working in.

CONTEXTUAL
EVIDENCE

RESEARCH
EVIDENCE

Evidence informed
decision-making

EXPERIENTIAL
EVIDENCE

Research evidence can

- support your hypothesis, the target group and/or the drivers for change
- show effectiveness in addressing the issue you want to resolve in a similar setting or with a similar population
- demonstrate the effects for different cultural groups, particularly Māori
- validate the success factors or outcomes you are seeking
- identify positive, negative or unintended effects
- highlight resources, processes and capacity needed for successful implementation.

Experiential evidence can identify

- how well your approach reflects the experiences and knowledge of the people it aims to serve
- how acceptable, important and appropriate your proposal is to the target group
- what has previously worked or not worked
- how well matched the experiences and aspirations of the target group are to your goals
- how their experiences could be used to strengthen your approach
- what Māori, Pacific or other ethnic group values, perspectives and strengths need to be incorporated.

Three principles for selecting and using evidence effectively

Selecting and using evidence effectively and with integrity means not manipulating or cherry-picking evidence to suit or promote a desired outcome. You can select and use evidence based on these three guiding principles, and look across the range of evidence to see if there is a pattern or trend.

Appropriate

What do you need to know from evidence?



The type and source of evidence you use will be influenced by:

- The stage of the policy-making process you are in. Do you want to demonstrate the effectiveness of an intervention, describe the context, identify the target population, understand the pitfalls of implementation, explain causal relationships or something else?
- The context (setting or location) for the policy – has it been shown to work in New Zealand or in similar settings to the one you are working with?
- Timeliness – the relevance of evidence can change over time.
- Your audience – they may have a view on what evidence they see as ‘appropriate’.

Credible

What is the quality of the evidence?



Once you’ve identified the most appropriate sources of evidence, you need to think about :

- Does the evidence come from a known and reputable person or organisation?
- Are the research design, method and analysis appropriate for the research question being addressed? Did the methodology for gathering and/or analysing the evidence follow valid and reliable practices to minimise the risk of bias? What’s appropriate will depend on the type of evidence you need.
- How strong is the evidence base? Consider the consistency of findings across the body of the evidence: are they repeated or corroborated in different studies and contexts or in a systematic review? You can use Superu’s *Evidence Rating Scale*.
- Has the evidence been peer reviewed by recognised experts?

Transparent

What can you say, or not say, based on the evidence?



Transparency in evidence use means being open and honest about what evidence you’ve used, how you’ve used it and why:

- Are the findings and/or conclusions supported by the results?
- Are the findings, conclusions and/or lessons learned applicable to a larger or different population, a different setting or another group?
- Has evidence been incorporated throughout the process? You can use the *Transparency of Evidence Framework* to check.
- Can you identify any gaps in the evidence? Are potential reasons for any gaps flagged?
- How important are these gaps to the policy problem you are addressing and/or to others involved in or affected by the policy or programme?

Effective decision-making requires good advice, and that depends on informed use of evidence

Peter Gluckman, Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor (2013)

The full guide has tables summarising the **appropriate** types and sources of evidence for each stage of the policy process. It is up to you to assess how **credible** the evidence is that you have gathered and to use it in a **transparent** way.

Dealing with gaps and uncertainty



Policy decisions are often made with a less-than-ideal evidence base, hence the importance of being transparent about what you can say or not say about the evidence you have collected and to identify any evidence gaps.

Gaps can exist because of time pressure. When you have to compile advice quickly, you might not have enough time to identify, find and analyse all the evidence. Other gaps can come from a lack or absence of evidence. Evidence being absent doesn't mean it doesn't exist, so your policy advice should state this clearly. The full guide provides suggestions about how to handle conflicting or weak evidence, and working out how much evidence is enough.

Bridging different cultural perspectives

The Treaty of Waitangi creates an obligation to ensure that your policy development recognises and draws on evidence – which may have different characteristics or meanings – from te ao Māori.

There are not yet any formal approaches to describing the nature of evidence from te ao Māori perspectives, so consultation is important when you have competing evidence or doubts about the standard of 'Western science' evidence.

Pacific peoples and other cultures may also describe evidence from their own perspectives and may place different values on different sources of evidence. The cultural make-up of your target population will determine who you most need to draw from to inform your policy decisions.

The full guide includes a framework to help you work with integrity when gathering knowledge and evidence from different cultural perspectives. Superu has also published a report on Bridging Cultural Perspectives, which can be found here: thehub.superu.govt.nz



Getting stakeholder buy-in to evidence-informed policy

Early and on-going engagement is the key to making sure stakeholders know the reasoning behind policy decisions. It is also important to make sure you involve all stakeholders in the process.

Follow the KISS – Keep It Simple Strategy to ensure people understand why you are doing things.

- Use easy-to-read, simple language
- Include graphics or images where helpful
- Include stories about real people
- Make it relevant and timely



About Superu

Superu is a government agency that focuses on what works to improve the lives of families and whānau.

What we do:

- Generate evidence that helps decision-makers understand complex social issues and what works to address them.
- Share evidence about what works with the people who make decisions on social services.
- Support decision-makers to use evidence to make better decisions to improve social outcomes.

We also provide independent assurance by:

- developing standards of evidence and good practice guidelines
- supporting the use of evidence and good evaluation by others in the social sector.

More Information



The full document – *Making sense of evidence: A guide to using evidence in policy* can be found at superu.govt.nz/resources/policyhandbook



Bridging cultural perspectives
superu.govt.nz/research_evidence



For help with evaluation – superu.govt.nz/resources/handbook



Kapasa – The Pacific Policy Analysis Tool
mpp.govt.nz/library/policy-publications/kapasa



Learn more at superu.govt.nz

Superu
PO Box 2839
Wellington 6140

Telephone: 04 917 7040
Email: enquiries@superu.govt.nz
Website: superu.govt.nz



Follow us on Twitter:
[@nzfamilies](https://twitter.com/nzfamilies)



Like us on Facebook:
Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit