

DRNS Conference – 28 November 2018
Communicating research effectively with policy makers

1. WORKSHOP PURPOSE

Aim: learn techniques to communicate your research with more impact

Objectives:

1. Understand the world of policy making
2. Appreciate the importance of knowing your message and your audience
3. Understand the five steps to crafting your communication
4. Put ideas into practice
5. Develop personal action plan

2. CONTEXT

Key points:

- Policy makers are busy people with many competing demands on their time.
- Although we can't influence everything in the policy making process, we can influence how we communicate.
- Information for policy makers should be brief, understandable and memorable.

Policies are activities, strategies and legislation to deliver public services. Policy makers are people who initiate and influence policies. **Policy makers** can refer to elected representatives (e.g. MSPs) and non-elected officials (e.g. civil servants). Many local authority and NHS staff also make policy decisions.

Ministers are members of a political party who are elected to government and serve in senior positions. They have a wide portfolio (e.g. [Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing](#) covers alcohol, drugs, tobacco, sexual health, diet, physical activity, sport, carers, maternal health and much more). Their average week is extremely busy. It includes meetings with constituents, parliamentary debates and meetings, and a range of other events. They rely on civil servants' expertise, advice and recommendations.

Civil Servants are politically neutral and provide objective, impartial advice to the elected government. They have many responsibilities, including answering parliamentary questions and ministerial correspondence, writing speeches, developing policy and strategies, briefing Ministers, and supporting Ministers at meetings and events. Some civil servants are professional analysts, who help policy makers to understand evidence and use it in decision making.

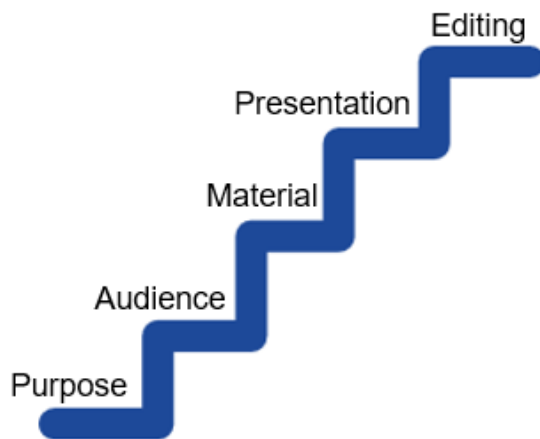
Research is important in the policy context. It is part of the evidence base used to inform decisions and may provide insights to a problem. A challenge for researchers is that people are limited in what they can remember and understand, particularly when there is so much competing information. It's worth acknowledging that evidence isn't the only factor in policy making – politics, finances and other considerations come into play.

3. FIVE STEPS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Key points:

- You should have a clear idea of what your message is and who it is for.
- Think about the must, should and could know information. Prioritise a few key points.
- Make sure you are accurate, brief and clear (ABC).

There are five things we need to pay attention to when communicating something: (1) the purpose, (2) the audience, (3) selection of material, (4) the presentation and (5) editing. These steps apply to types of communication – writing a research summary, posters, websites, infographics, social media, presentations and verbal briefings. We often rush to get to the writing part, but it's important to spend time planning at the start and refining at the end. This helps to make your communications more impactful.



PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Some useful questions to ask yourself:

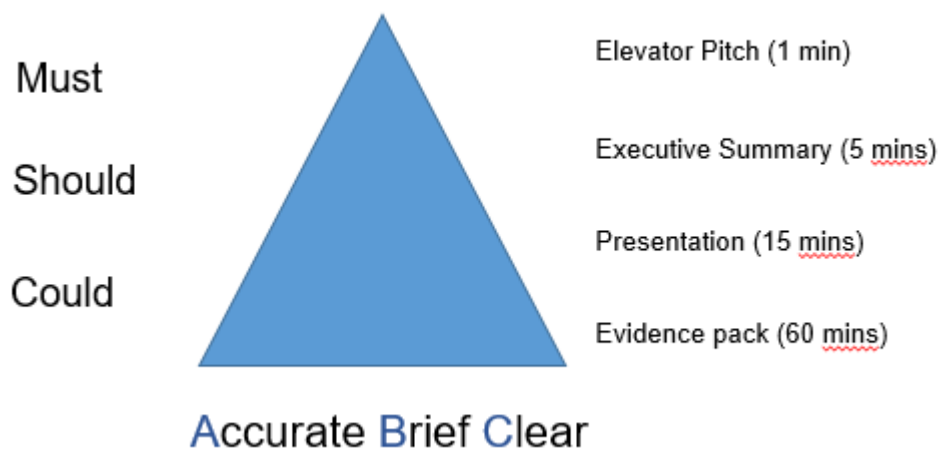
- What do you want the person to know? What is the one thing you would like them to remember, share or act upon?
- What do you want them to do with the information? (Do something? Change something? Talk about something? Think something? Feel something?)
- Put yourself in their shoes. How might they react to the information (well or badly)? What's in it for them/why should they care? Why should they listen to you or trust you? Who are their stakeholders and what might they think? How much do they know already about this?

DRNS Conference – 28 November 2018
Communicating research effectively with policy makers

SELECTING, PRESENTING AND EDITING MATERIAL

A pyramid or layered approach is a useful way to approach communications for a policy audience. You can make things more memorable by putting the key information upfront – think about what the audience must know, should know and could know. Prioritise 2-4 points that support your key message.

Don't default to a typical academic style, which may focus on background (which policy are probably familiar with), methods and/or theory (which policy may be less interested in). It also leaves the most important information for policy - findings, implications and recommendations - buried at the end. The risks of focusing on the detail (bottom up) is that the reader switches off, misses the key message or cherry picks what they find most interesting.



Online news is a good illustration of how we consume content in layers and the importance of engaging your audience at the start. For example, we would read the headline first, which captures the essence of the story. If this interests us we read the first paragraph, and then the full article. If we're really interested we might click on links for further detail. A similar approach can be applied to communicating research.

The following pointers can help to engage your audience and help them understand the messages from your research:

- In written work: use short sentences (15-20 words), sub-headings, numbered paragraphs and avoid dense text. Check if it looks good on the page.
- Explain or avoid jargon, technical language and abbreviations. (See www.plainenglish.co.uk: A-Z of alternative words).
- Where appropriate visual information (e.g. annotated graphics), analogies, stories, comparisons and examples can be used to make complex information easier to understand.
- Get someone else (preferably a non-expert) to review your work. Make sure written work is proof read, with not typos or inaccuracies.