5.4
RESEARCHING FOR POLICY RELEVANCE

Critical reflections on government-sponsored research

Deborah Peel and Greg Lloyd

Introduction
Research skills are not simply the province of academic institutions and private study but the bedrock of public policy design and implementation. Governments, for example, commission independent and applied research in order to improve the process and execution of policymaking (Bridgman and Davis, 2003). Incorporating a strong research discipline as part of a policy cycle is held to enable governments variously to identify policy options; assess the likely effectiveness of proposed interventions; monitor and evaluate progress of policies and instruments towards stated ends; promulgate best practice in policy implementation; and test – or indeed legitimate – the appropriateness of policy priorities. From such a positivist assertion, a rigorous research craft lies at the very core of government and governance. A study undertaken for the Scottish government which examined the range of research activities engaged in by practitioners in local authorities, for example, identified certain key areas where it was considered that further research skills training was necessary, including: questionnaire and survey design, general research methods, statistical techniques, evaluation and qualitative research techniques (Lightowler, 2007). Those findings not only highlighted the range of research methods necessary in planning practice but also confirmed the importance of planning and development professionals acquiring a robust research craft.

The importance of high-quality research skills in policymaking has been further legitimated by a deliberate turn to evidence-based decision making (Solesbury, 2001), a movement which has contributed to “reviewing existing evidence, commissioning new research, piloting initiatives and programmes, evaluating new policies, and inviting experts to advise on specialist areas” (Bullock et al., 2001: 18). In contrast to this positivist research tradition, however, there exists a robust argument for planning research to contribute to an “enlightenment” model where society is informed by research evidence in order to debate and determine contextual change, policy options and possible actions (Davoudi, 2006). The need for critical reflexivity with respect to the research discipline highlights that research activity and the interpretation and use of evidence
are not politically neutral and involve policy learning. Following Canessa et al. (2007), such thinking signals the need for research data to be converted into policy wisdom if research is to be meaningful in practice. Policy wisdom, however, requires careful and deliberate nurturing so as to realize any potential benefits from specific research studies. As Young et al. (2002) suggest, policy wisdom invites consideration and questioning of the direction and appropriateness of research policy, challenging established research power relations, and opening up the potential for new practitioner behaviours with respect to the interpretation and use of data and what is then held to be the evidence-base for particular planning actions.

Weighting of evidence and acceptance or rejection of what is deemed to be relevant to specific planning decisions assume particular importance in planning and development activities, given the likely diversity in the range of stakeholders involved in whatever is being socially constructed as in the public interest. These observations are pertinent to strategic planning policymaking and individual decisions relating to the regulation of development, and are equally relevant to the design and execution of government research agendas. For example, what are the motivations and intentions underpinning a particular research programme and individual research projects? What are the practical ways in which governments specify, commission and steer research? How are research governance arrangements configured? In what ways might researchers respond to what is, in effect, a research environment organized according to the principles of contract?

This chapter uses a government-sponsored research project involving the authors as a case study for reflection on the experience of undertaking commissioned policy-oriented research. In contractual terms, the research was designed to scope the potential of the use of model forms of planning policy in development plans and to make recommendations to the Scottish government about the most advantageous topics for model wordings of selected planning policies. From this practical perspective, the chapter outlines the research questions and objectives, and the methodology used. The chapter critically reflects on some of the issues involved in adopting an academic approach to undertaking government-sponsored research, incorporating a theoretically informed conceptualisation of the problem. Client-funded research involves particular institutional, organizational and political characteristics which differentiate it from independent, academic-funded studies. In practical terms, for example, the language, format and style of research outputs may likely be prescribed by the client and require specific recommendations for action. Attention to the rigour of the research discipline may also support contributions to academic theorising in scholarly journals, for example. The chapter comments upon the dual role of academic researchers in both discharging practice-based research for government and identifying lessons for general theorising of planning.

**Government research agendas**

Political devolution in the United Kingdom provides a particular context for critically exploring statutory land use planning in Scotland and its modernisation and reform. The (then) Scottish Executive (1999) announced its intention to initiate the “modernisation” of planning to facilitate its enabling role as well as its regulatory functions. The ambition was distilled from a general public consultation exercise and articulated as a political imperative to make the planning system work better. An iterative and layered process of reform of planning institutions and organizations involved extensive commissioning of research from a range of private sector and academic bodies, consultation with stakeholders and the wider public, deliberation through the publication
of government policy papers, and associated parliamentary scrutiny procedures (Peel and Lloyd, 2007b). Significantly, the modernisation process was explicitly accompanied by a comprehensive research programme encompassing strategic planning, development planning and management, enforcement, civil engagement, economic development and the provision of infrastructure. A practical research agenda was underpinned by appropriate processes of due diligence in relation to research procurement and management. This included invitations to tender; allocation of competitive awards to undertake the research; identification of steering group membership to oversee, manage and advise individual projects; deliberate dissemination strategies; political scrutiny through parliamentary committees; and publication schemes. Taken together, public consultation and a substantive programme of research were presented and used in tandem as a way to legitimise a political agenda, inform and provide evidence for the direction of planning reform, and, importantly, to secure active engagement as part of a wider commitment to advance cultural change (Peel and Lloyd, 2006a). In other words, planning research may here be understood as integral to making the case for transforming the planning system and particular ways of “doing” planning.

In practice, those working in planning and development may be involved in a range of different research activities from collecting data, undertaking statistical analyses of available secondary data, monitoring performance, evaluation, policy or literature searches and reviews; to disseminating information through preparing fact sheets or bulletins, for example; or organizing or responding to consultation exercises. Research may be a core or a relatively marginal activity for those involved in different aspects of planning practice, and may range from providing ad hoc support to developing analytical research tools, knowledge management or commissioning research projects (Lightowler, 2007). It follows that even if one’s primary role is not as a researcher one might contribute to research in a number of ways, such as being an interviewee, survey respondent or focus group participant. It is arguably critical therefore for planning practitioners to understand both the mechanics of the research process and the political and policy environments in which research is prioritised, commissioned, steered and disseminated in the wider public domain.

Reflecting political realities and understanding practical research environments are all important (Davoudi, 2006). In terms of this case study, and at face value, two principal objectives underpinned the comprehensive review of the statutory land use planning system in Scotland – namely, securing greater efficiency and effectiveness and enhancing transparency and inclusivity in its decision making (Scottish Executive, 2001). Government clearly intended modernisation of the planning system to be integral to a broader programme of political and cultural change in institutional and organizational processes of central and local governance relations in Scotland. The nature of the research it commissioned needs to be understood within the context of that programme of change.

An explicit ambition of planning reform was to secure improved effectiveness in the preparation and content of land use development plans, particularly in relation to their currency and consistency in the incorporation and interpretation of national policy at the local level. In practice, the focus on enhancing local planning policies was intended to secure greater certainty and confidence for stakeholders on a Scotland-wide basis. Scoping the potential for introducing “model” planning policies formed a key strand of the reform agenda. Model policies were intended as involving statements of common text applicable over geographical space. It was anticipated by the Scottish government that creating a bank of model policies could potentially offer greater certainty and consistency for users of the planning system working across Scotland’s thirty-two individual local authorities. This deliberate intention was based on harnessing the
perceived strengths of existing examples of policies deemed to “work” and harmonising national policy intentions. The idea was also promoted as a way to speed up development plan preparation, by providing a central resource of model texts upon which local government policymakers could draw. It was anticipated that efficiency gains would then arise from reducing duplication of effort in policy writing by avoiding “reinventing the wheel”, minimising repetition, reducing legal argument and debate at public inquiry over individual policy wording, reducing the overall length of development plans, and enhancing policy interpretation on a more consistent, pan-Scotland basis. The intention was not to reduce the capacity of local planning authorities to deviate from the “norm” or devise locally appropriate policies, but rather to encourage policy sharing in cases where there existed a strong policy steer from government, or where policies addressed issues experienced in common across different Scottish authorities.

Research commissioning

Initial evidence from the earlier consultation paper (Scottish Executive, 2001) provided the basis for the government’s design of the scoping study reported here since the findings suggested that there were many “basic and common planning policies” which were being “reinvented” by the local councils in Scotland, and there were also examples of “differences in wording between policies on the same subject in adjoining local plan areas in the same authority” (Scottish Executive, 2001: 9). From the government’s perspective there were efficiency gains to be secured. Moreover, a relatively blunt analysis of the responses (Table 5.4.1) suggested general support for introducing model planning policies. This summary suggested that there was “widespread agreement that model policies could potentially confer a range of benefits”, including “greater policy consistency across the country, reduced duplication between national and strategic policies set out in plans, time savings in plan preparation and approval as well as in public inquiries, where there is often much debate about the detailed wording of policies” (Geoff Peart Consulting, 2002a: 22). This set the context for the research study.

In practical terms, an invitation to tender was circulated to those organizations that had previously submitted an expression of interest to undertake research for the Scottish government. The research questions devised by the Scottish government were practically oriented:

1. What is the scope for model development plan policies, in type, number and applicability?
2. Can some generic examples be put forward for discussion as part of this research?
3. What are the practical concerns of users and service providers?
4. What approaches to drawing up such policies would offer the most advantages?
5. How can model policies, once drawn up, be kept responsive to changing circumstances across Scotland?
6. Are there any ways that guidance or advice from central government (e.g., on policy form and content) might be adjusted to help?

A number of general points may be made about the research design. First, it is clear that the research parameters were determined by the government’s general political agenda for effecting planning reform. Second, the interpretation of the results of the initial government consultation exercise by an independent consultant was highly influential in devising the details of the research questions. In short, the study focus was articulated by civil servants seeking to meet pragmatic political and practical targets which, in colloquial terms, were defined as “what works”. In other words, the research project was intended to advance practice rather than theory.
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Research design

In identifying and teasing out the practical concerns of service users and service providers, and identifying potential practical and relational issues involved in drawing up and maintaining a bank of model planning policies, the authors’ research design involved a qualitative-interpretive-attitudinal methodology dealing primarily with perceptions and experiences. The tender document proposed a research methodology which would collect the required evidence, triangulate views across contested perspectives and devise a practical way forward (Figure 5.4.1). A mixed methods approach combining inductive and deductive approaches was advocated which involved triangulating existing responses to the consultation exercise with primary data to be derived from face-to-face meetings with users, partners and service providers through a series of cross-sector focus groups.

In addition to a literature review in relation to policy formulation, desk-based research included reviewing a cross-selection of government documentation and policy guidance and examining a sample of “real-world” development plan policies at different scales based on the topics previously identified by government (Scottish Executive, 2001). The final selection was subsequently agreed upon by the government-appointed steering group for the study. Taken together, these methods create a particular form of research design and research culture which are relatively typical of a government-commissioning research environment.

There are a number of points to be made in relation to undertaking research of this nature. Given the practice-oriented nature of the study and the predetermined research questions, the methodology was of necessity attitudinal in approach and principally focused on soliciting views on how policy formulation in local development plans might be enhanced. From this perspective, the research methods were pragmatic, intended to serve a practical purpose in a cost-effective way. Focus groups, in particular, were used to bring together a range of interested parties in different planning contexts across Scotland to share practical experiences. It is worth noting that engagement of such a broad constituency of interests is intentional. It may be argued that such a strategy provides central government access to local government information and practice, can be promoted as serving end users, and potentially helps legitimate the findings by making those participants involved party to the study results and recommendations. A more fundamental question turns, however, on the conceptualisation of the study and the analytical framework used by researchers to frame focus group discussions and to interpret and present the evidence collected. The theoretical framework used in this example to examine and analyse the discussions drew on the researchers critically reviewing the international scholarly literature on

Table 5.4.1 Summary of stakeholder views from the digest of responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Groups</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Share of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Authorities</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Bodies</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesses</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional &amp; Academic Bodies</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public &amp; Voluntary Sector</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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policy transfer and critiques of the public policy cycle. Asserting the importance of, and ensuring the inclusion of, a critical conceptualisation in research design is illustrative of informed academic contributions to government-sponsored research which tends to be solution-oriented. As will be discussed ahead, and in contrast to more academic studies, such theorising is not necessarily deemed to be a requirement by government and civil servants.

**Methodology in action**

Government-sponsored commissions tend to involve compliance with certain protocols. A research steering group was appointed by the Scottish government, comprising a mix of public-private, central-local government organizations and agencies, to oversee the study. Members came from legal, planning, local government, private developer and civil service backgrounds. As such, pragmatic interest in securing particular efficiency gains was evident, even though this was differentiated since membership spanned central, local, development and regulatory agendas. The group generally had some research experience, including in commissioning, executing and using research. The group’s role was to guide and assist in the design and execution of the final methodology, particularly around the appropriate balance of practical and conceptual considerations, and nominated policy topics. Regular meetings between the group and the academic researchers involved robust conversations, notably around concepts, definitions and constructions of a “model” policy, the underlying normative stance of promoting a bank of model texts, and the interpretation of findings. Interim reports and presentations were used throughout the study to inform the client of progress and the nature of its preliminary and final findings. This supported an iterative research process.

A comprehensive digest of responses to the government’s original consultation paper (Geoff Peart Consulting, 2002b) provided an initial, rich secondary data source. The study began with a detailed qualitative analysis of the initial consultation responses relating to model policies. Table 5.4.1 presents particular interest groups. Table 5.4.2 summarises a re-interrogation of the consultation responses and provides a finer classification of stakeholder groups and views than that previously used in the more comprehensive digest. This more detailed analysis revealed an alternative distribution of perceived benefits and practical concerns associated with model policies.
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across different planning and policy communities, highlighting the ways in which the interpretation of data can be contested. Indeed, closer interrogation of the consultation responses indicated the goal of consistency in policy wording was not supported by all respondents. Specifically, concerns pointed to limitations in such a “one-size-fits-all” approach to planning and the relevance, applicability and transferability of model policies across differentiated urban and rural contexts. A fundamental issue voiced by certain interests related to a possible breach of subsidiarity in decision making at the local level which could potentially arise from imposing a Scotland-wide adoption of model texts. The question of subsidiarity was raised as an important argument in planning contexts since it confirmed the convention of retaining autonomy and discretion at the local level. Since this more in-depth analysis provided a more nuanced appreciation of perceptions on the ground across different groups, this made developing a consensus and a bank of model policies for central government potentially more difficult.

Table 5.4.2 Characteristics of planning policies and research methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Local authorities</td>
<td>Twenty-eight (of thirty-two) local authorities responded. This is an incomplete geographical coverage of Scotland. Cautious support evident for model planning policies, particularly with respect to their implementation. Perceived benefits included: clarification, consistency, certainty, assisting national developers and organizations, reducing legal argument and length of plans and time spent on preparation, a streamlining of the system and an efficient use of scarce staff resources. Concerns included: policies should reflect local circumstances, be subject to a clear review process and that local planning authorities should retain the power to depart, and a concern about the erosion of local autonomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Non-departmental public bodies</td>
<td>Nine non-departmental public bodies (east and west of Scotland responses are identical and the three water bodies have subsequently merged) broadly welcomed model policies. Perceived benefits included: a consistent and proactive approach to planning, greater consistency and faster process of plan preparation, improved transparency of policy, savings on duplication of effort and eased anticipation of relevant issues. Responses presented a particular interpretation of model planning policies (i.e., best practice, guidance), how they might be disseminated and how model planning policies should be open to modification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Other public bodies</td>
<td>Two “other public bodies” were sceptical of the potential benefits of model planning policies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Development industry</td>
<td>Six developers (house-builders) responded. All were in support of model planning policies, though with the caveat that they need to be viewed flexibly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mineral operators</td>
<td>The two respondents were strongly in favour due to their perception of the difficulties of applying national priorities at the local level.</td>
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Examination of the detailed consultation responses confirmed that developing a bank of model planning policies means different things in different areas, and that the application of a national policy might reduce a sense of local ownership in policy formulation, potentially reducing commitment to the individual policies themselves. Crucially, for some respondents, the very existence of a model approach might lead to a “ritualistic application” or “aping” of policy, a reduction in local distinctiveness and policy relevance, or simply invite an acritical “cut and paste” approach. A very real fear was that the existence of a model “solution” might inhibit local policy innovation. Nevertheless, whilst the original government consultation paper had suggested a relatively modest indicative list of potential model policies, certain respondents identified a wider range of potential topics. These included: affordable housing, archaeological/ancient monument protection, listed building/conservation areas, nature conservation designations, energy efficiency/renewables, flood risk, green belts, landscape protection areas, sustainable urban drainage and telecommunications. Notwithstanding specific practical caveats, this suggested a very real interest in some quarters in the potential of the model policy idea. Given the objectives of defined planning interests and localised concerns, this was to be expected.
The individual consultation responses were triangulated against primary evidence drawn from a number of focus groups. The focus of each meeting was to probe understanding of the model text idea, interrogate practitioner views on implementation and critically debate the potential of model policies in practice in light of the wider concerns raised. Here, the principles of policy transfer provided a disciplined framework for the discussions. Following Morgan (1996), the focus turned on the practices and attitudes towards the preparation of development plan policies and the potential for incorporating model texts in local plans. The use of focus groups provided opportunities to explore practical benefits and to address concerns relating to the potential interpretation and implementation of a bank of Scotland-wide model policies. Group participants were deliberately mixed and selected on the basis of having responded to the consultation paper, with additional, named contributors nominated by the steering group. A total of seventy-three organizations and individuals were invited, with a maximum of twelve participants for each focus group. Six regionally dispersed meetings and one dedicated session with the Scottish government ensured an appropriate urban and rural balance, with care given to time, place and management considerations. The management of each focus group was designed to ensure consistency of approach through using the same researchers, following the necessary research governance and ethics protocols in relation to anonymity and confidentiality in the presentation of the findings. No meeting exceeded eight participants, giving sufficient time for critical discussion. In aggregate, the focus groups captured the views of thirty different planning organizations involved in development plans. A full spectrum of policy communities was reflected, comprising national, local authority, non-departmental public bodies, development industry, professional organizations, planning consultants and lawyers, voluntary organizations and academic bodies.

The second strand of the study involved a detailed, desk-based comparative analysis of policy wording in published development plans and national policies in Scotland. This involved sampling existing policies from the existing development plans at the time to determine the extent and nature of policy similarity and the potential for further harmonisation. This sampling was restricted to those development plans available online and was agreed upon by the steering group. This also reflected the pragmatic and practical nature of the study. This account points to a number of questions relating to power relations and representation of interests when engaged in government-sponsored research. The composition of the steering group, its perceived responsibility to the needs of government, its advocacy with respect to research design and implementation, and its normative influence on the direction of the study clearly raised important considerations for the academic researchers. Notwithstanding the practice imperative of the client as defined in its normative, solution-oriented approach, the authors argued that there was a need for appropriate definition of terms and concepts, interrogation of the rationale for the approach and questioning of the potential dis-benefits of model planning policies. In essence, an important academic contribution to the government-sponsored study was to ensure a balanced critical perspective so as to avoid potential but unintended consequences. Moreover, the management of the focus groups was undertaken in a way that facilitated discussion of the potential benefits, disadvantages or potential unintended consequences.

**Analysis of findings**

In triangulating the evidence from a theoretically informed and critical perspective, four main points emerged. First, perspectives on model policies were highly differentiated, offering alternative potential benefits to various interest groups. Second, the intended purpose and scope of
model texts varied, depending upon their authority and sponsor. Third, the intended nature, form and format of generic policies, and their relationship to other policy instruments, varied in practice. Fourth, the perceived value of model policies differed according to the user group. In light of this, it became important for the study to present the findings in a way that highlighted these nuances and differences more clearly than the initial advocacy of model policies.

On the one hand, focus group respondents were clear that in certain policy fields any scope for local discretion was severely limited by statutory authority, particularly where the policy sponsor was international, such as the European Union. On the other, policymakers defended the need to generate policies sensitive to place and locality. Consistent with wider debates around international lesson-drawing in planning which caution against uninformed transfer of policies between contexts (Lloyd and Peel, 2007), this perspective reflected a concern that a reductionist approach to policy formulation may prove to be relatively insensitive to context, provenance, capacity and variability. Based on the focus group and consultation data, an analytical matrix to differentiate potential model policy areas was then generated to indicate in what circumstances model planning policies may be capable of generic expression (Table 5.4.3).

Table 5.4.3 suggests that international and national environmental designations could benefit from expression in model form. Such a generic format is unlikely to be appropriate in those contexts where local issues prevail that require greater customisation and specificity in policy expression (Peel and Lloyd, 2006b). The typology served as a sifting mechanism for government to refine the potential focus of topics that could be devised in generic terms.

Specific policy examples investigated were sites subject to the Ramsar Convention, flooding, telecommunications and sustainable urban drainage. These topics revealed some potential for generating partial or full model texts, although testing for local relevance and application remained a critical issue and informed a next-steps investigation (Scottish Executive, 2006). The scoping study was initially disseminated through the Scottish government website by means of a short, easy-to-read research briefing paper (Lloyd and Peel, 2004a) and the full final report (Lloyd and Peel, 2004b). Both followed a standard government template and format and the final contents were subject to scrutiny and discussion by the steering group and the Scottish government. This involved negotiating language, balance and emphasis in relation to an academic

### Table 5.4.3 Stakeholder breakdown of whether model policies should be drawn up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Derivation</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Local</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Legislation/directive</td>
<td>Legislation/strategic policy</td>
<td>Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor</td>
<td>International body/EU</td>
<td>Scottish executive/Agencies</td>
<td>Local planning authorities/bodies/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Protectionist</td>
<td>Protectionist/developmental</td>
<td>Protectionist/developmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Strategic/specific</td>
<td>Strategic/locality-specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan-Scotland?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>Specialist/expert</td>
<td>Generalist/specialist</td>
<td>Generalist/holistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Generic</td>
<td>Generic/specific</td>
<td>Generic/specific/detailed/locality-specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope for departure</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capable of generic expression</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lloyd and Peel, 2004b: 16.
emphasis on the need clearly to articulate the theoretical and critical stance adopted in analysing the evidence.

Based on the initial quantitative analysis of the consultation exercise, model policies might have been rolled out nationally. The scoping study, however, involving a more theoretically informed and detailed, qualitative and face-to-face methodology, questioned the initial conclusion and highlighted the need for a more sensitive approach. A robust policy discipline, drawing on international planning policy experience, allowed for a deductive analytical assessment of the potential for model policies to counterbalance the inductive approach of the consultation exercise. Here, the contribution of a more academic approach can enhance policy thinking in terms of both process and practice and add to a general body of international planning theory. The significance of the research thus extended beyond generating evidence for a particular project and may be understood as an integral component of planning modernisation at large, since it enabled active deliberation around evidence for and against change, and the wider purpose and functions of planning.

**Critical reflections on undertaking government-sponsored policy research**

This chapter confirms that research and information literacy are core skills for planners working in a public policy context. Research engagement potentially involves a spectrum of activities that may be defined as relatively core and leading or participatory and contributory. An increasing emphasis on evidence-based policy working – although contested – extends the breadth and diversity of the research community. Planners may thus be directly involved in undertaking research – through surveys, for example – or they may inform findings as a consultee, interviewee or focus group member, or serve on a steering group. Here, they must be aware of the technical skills required and the political and normative contexts in which the research is being conducted. Based on this experience of undertaking a government-sponsored project, this final section considers the use of research evidence, the associated motivations and intentions underpinning government research programmes, and the practical ways in which governments specify, commission, steer and govern research. It concludes by reflecting on how researchers use theory in applied research and how they might respond to a contract-based research environment.

In general terms, government-funded studies tend to have a practical imperative, driven by a political need to provide solutions to perceived problems through policy recommendations. This must be distinguished from more academic studies, which may be theoretically driven and certainly theoretically informed. Yet experience here shows that government-sponsored research still requires appropriate conceptual grounding alongside rigorous research methods. This is because data can be gathered, analysed and interpreted in different ways. How finely or coarsely grained each analysis is in practice will depend on the data and resources available and the intellectual prism used. The methodology adopted may “open out” or “close down” different viewpoints. The analysis will have implications for how different views of planning are presented and interpreted. The nature of the published findings may be more or less complete.

Planning involves distinct power relations arising from a range of different stakeholders and competing interests. How these are classified and grouped has wider implications as perceptions and standpoints may vary considerably. Identifying and understanding these relationships must be an integral part of any study. In practical terms, open-ended questions can provide large amounts of data which will require condensing and synthesising. How this is done requires considerable sensitivity so as not to lose important nuances in the evidence. Steering groups can be helpful in terms of providing access to data and potential informants, and respecting established
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time frames. Such governance arrangements, however, can also imply a particular set of controls and power relations in terms of achieving project expectations and making recommendations. It is important to establish research parameters at the start of such commissioned work to define terms and concepts, retain researcher objectivity and clarify intellectual property rights. This is particularly important where academic interests may wish to generate scholarly articles from the data generated.

Planning is a political activity and context is all-important. Modernisation of planning in Scotland is ongoing and remains a contested process for the various state, market and civil interests involved. Research is integral to this dynamic process and to informing the spirit and purposes of modernisation. From a pragmatic perspective, this case study scoped the potential of model planning policies as part of the Scottish government’s ambitions to modernise and enhance the planning system, but it also raised questions around democratic engagement and the balance between centralised and localised control (Peel and Lloyd, 2007a).

Undertaking government-sponsored policy research entails a number of fundamental parameters. The motivation for central government to undertake research is highly political, informed by a raft of external and internal influences and requiring prioritisation of funding to support a given policy area or project. In this example, the decision to initiate a programme of research around land use planning was informed by certain criticisms concerning the prevailing system and the opportunities afforded by political devolution to address these. This agenda reflected a wider societal acknowledgement that modernisation of planning was necessary to secure political ambitions around efficiency and effectiveness, and also to facilitate greater public engagement. In operational terms, the political agenda defined the research questions in practical terms of type, number and applicability – that is, questions relating to what and how, rather than why, who and for whom. Following Davoudi (2006), this suggests a tendency to effect and manage instrumental policy research satisfying a perceived response to generating evidence-based policy to meet political objectives.

An initial concern of the researchers in this case study was to define the concept of a model policy at the outset so as to establish a common understanding amongst the steering group and research team. This definitional aspect reflected a concern that the proposed study was being commissioned, managed and directed in a linear, pragmatic way to meet predefined political and administrative objectives. Theories of international lesson-drawing helped to inform this position by reinforcing a resistance to reductionist assumptions about the relevance and application of generic policies in site-specific contexts without due respect to context, relevance and transferability (Wolman and Page, 2001). This questioning of the underlying rationale for the study exposed tensions around attaining an ideal – or “model” – policy environment. In other words, whilst the technical requirements for the study could be met by generating a set of words, normative questions as to the validity of a model policy in all – and highly differentiated – contexts remained. On the balance of the evidence, the authors’ conclusions emphasised the importance of supporting policymakers with a robust and critically reflective policymaking discipline which could support innovative, proactive and relevant policy design, rather than production and maintenance of an archive of model and predetermined policies (Lloyd and Peel, 2004a). This critical contribution tends to be a characteristic of an academic approach to research. Importantly, local government practitioner concerns turned on the potential unintended consequences of creating a one-size-fits-all suite of policies that might potentially serve to stifle policy sensitivity and responsiveness. Designed as a scoping study, this project was able to highlight a number of important qualifications with respect to the anticipated potential of model policies.
Finally, when tendering for and executing government-sponsored research it is essential to be clear about the conceptual foundations of the study, in addition to practical considerations such as time frames, resources, costs and project management. Government research programmes are governed by strict timelines and protocols which tend to involve following prescribed formats and processes to deliver achievable recommendations for action. In this instance, it was the academic researchers’ countervailing assertion of the need to conceptualise, define and justify a model planning policy approach which created a critical strand to the study. Yet advocating a theoretically informed analysis of policy action may challenge the very ideological and normative basis of a study. Taken together, political/pragmatic parameters and critical/conceptual concerns create a particular client-researcher dynamic. The contractualised relationship for executing and delivering the research then presents a research paradox where laying bare potential disbenefits, unintended consequences and caveats may be perceived by the client as undermining consensus for action. The underlying practical expectations of those commissioning research may be challenged, for example, creating potentially uncomfortable research management relations but nevertheless generating robust research findings and providing a better basis for shaping policy practice.

References

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