

# Policy-Research Interface

**Social Science Research and Policy Making:  
Bridging the Divide**

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# Bridging the Gap!

- Academics and the problem of ‘blue skies’ research
- Policy makers and the problem of ‘little effects’

# Evidence-based Policy

- “This Government expects more of policy makers. More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, **better use of evidence and research in policy making...**”

Cabinet Office, 1999, White Paper, para. 6

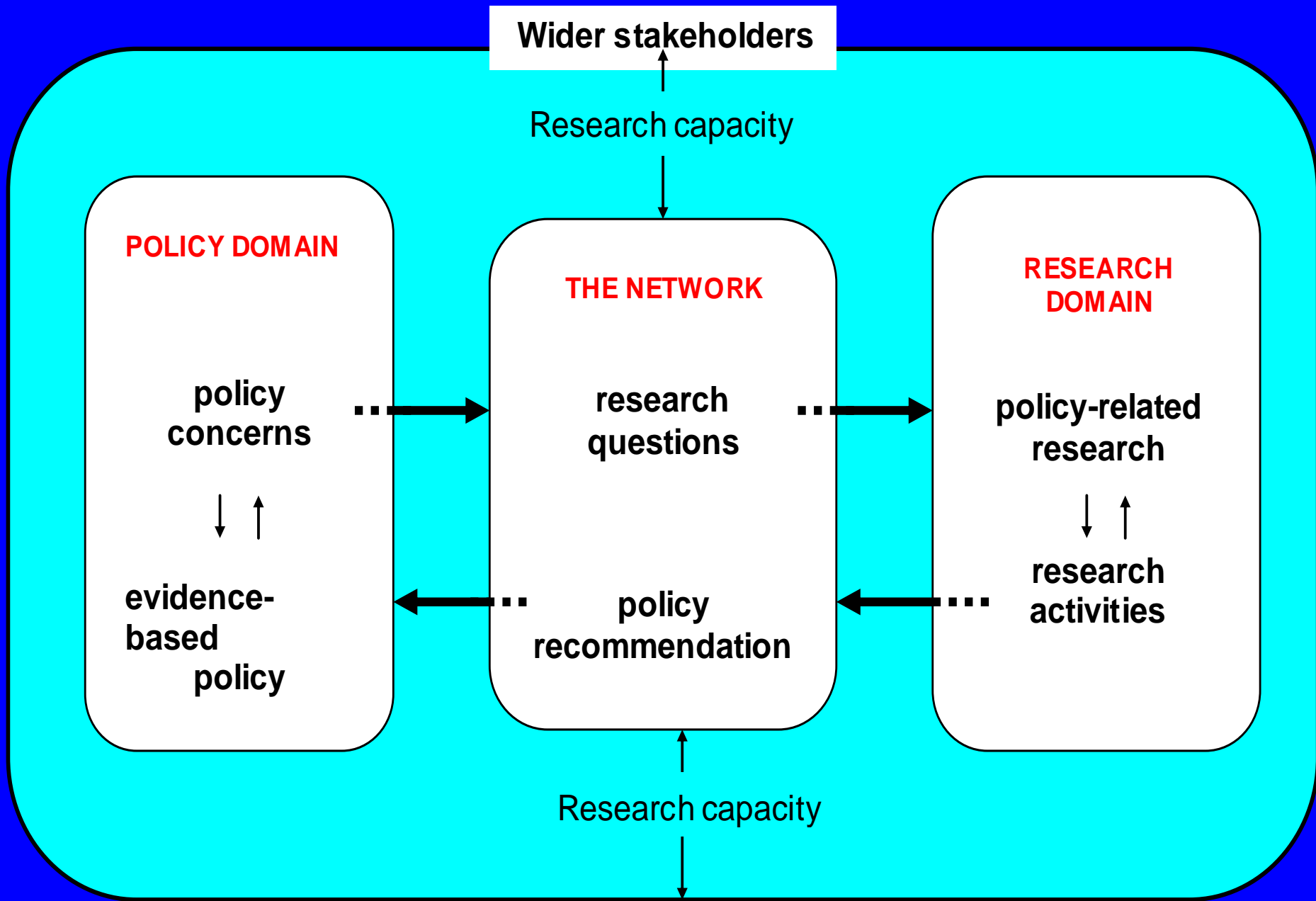
Department for Communities and Local Government



## Planning Research Network

- The aim of the network:
  - To advise the government on its planning research priorities
  - To facilitate knowledge exchange between researchers and policy makers

# Planning Research Network



# Instrumental view of policy-research interface

Assumes that the relation between policy and research is unproblematic, linear and direct:

- **Expert ‘on top’ model**



- Research *leads* policy, policy is research-driven

- It contains an element of scientific inevitability

- **Expert ‘on tap’ model**



- Research *follows* policy, research is policy-driven

- Research is shaped by policy concerns

# The 'expert on tap' model

- Evidence has to be timely, intelligible , digestible and available on demand
- 'What matters is what works' mantra
- Research has to be not only 'useful' but also 'useable'

# The enlightenment view

- The benefits of research are indirect and sometimes take longer to be realised.
- The aim is to illuminate the landscape within which policy decisions are made
- The emphasis is on **evidence-informed** rather than **evidence-based** policy

# Much of the drive for evidence-based policy is rooted in the utilitarian view

- Underpinned by 3 interrelated misconceptions:
  - Policy making is a rational process
  - Evidence can only be generated through positive science
  - Experts are apolitical, value free; and know best

# The mismatch between:

- How we think policy process should work, and how it actually works, which is:
  - messy, uncertain, unstable and essentially political

(Young et al, 2002)

- Policy making is a matter of '*bricolage*' rather than consistent principles
- Most policies are compromise hit and miss affairs.

(Ball, 1998)

# Having access to all information doesn't necessarily make policy-making easier!

- “... there is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult”

(John Maynard Keynes in: Skidelsky, 1992:630).

## **How research is used depends on the context within which it is used!**

- Practical, institutional and political factors can lead to ‘problem of little effect’:
- “Little of the research commissioned by departments or other academic research was used by policy makers”

(Cabinet Office, 1999:36)

# Research is not the only contender for influencing policy

- There are other powerful competitors, such as:
  - Ideology
  - Interests
  - Institutional norms and practices

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(Weiss, 2001)

# Ideology

- Basic values and underlying belief systems
- These shape and, sometimes, determine policy outcome

# Influence

- ...of institutional traditions, culture and capacity to absorb, comprehend and verify multiple claims to evidence.
- ‘Intelligent users’ of research
- Demand for ‘quick fixes’ may discourage the commissioning or use of long term strategic research
- Finding the right answers for the **wrong questions!**
- Information overload

# Interest

- People's & organisations' self-interests and expediencies
- Research agenda is politically driven
- Cherry picking evidence

**“Cracking the Nutt Case”**

BBC News Headline, 11/11/09

# Contrary to the instrumental view...

- **“There is more to policy and practice than the disinterested pursuit of truth and wisdom”.** (Solesbury, 2002: 93)
- Engaging with policy makers requires a sound understanding of the socio-political nature of policy making process.

# Shifting the emphasis

- Narrow instrumentalism curtails imagination and creativity
- It is based on fragile assumptions about policy-research interface
- Less emphasis on ‘evidence-based policy’ and more on ‘**evidence-informed society**’

For more details see:

- Davoudi, S., 2006, **Evidence-based Planning: Rhetoric and reality**, *DiSP*, 162(2):14-24