Seminar Papers

New Labour and Evidence Based Policy Making

Peter Wells
Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research
Sheffield Hallam University

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Dr Peter Wells, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR)
Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield S1 1WB
Tel: 00 44 (0)114 225 4522; Fax: 00 44 (0) 114 221 2197
email:p.wells@shu.ac.uk

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Comments also welcome

We will be a radical government. New Labour is a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology. What counts is what works. The objectives are radical. The means will be modern. Britain will be better with new Labour.

Tony Blair, Labour Party Manifesto for the 1997 General Election

This Government has given a clear commitment that we will be guided not by dogma but by an open-minded approach to understanding what works and why. This is central to our agenda for modernising government: using information and knowledge much more effectively and creatively at the heart of policy-making and policy delivery.

David Blunkett, Speech to the ESRC (2 February 2002)

Introduction

‘What counts is what works’ and ‘what works and why’ have been important elements of New Labour’s approach to government and in particular to the implementation of large social and economic development programmes. The 1997 Labour Party Manifesto and the speech by David Blunkett closely associate an agenda of evidence-based policy making (‘understanding what works and why’) with a central element of New Labour’s political strategy: namely the modernisation of government and the wider apparatus of the state. The notion that policy-making should be ‘evidence-based’ rather than based on unsupported opinion is difficult to refute. However, it also poses a considerable number of normative questions, for instance, how should evidence be collected, what evidence should be used and how should that evidence used. More broadly, evidence based-policy making, superficially at least, appears to deny a role for traditional factors in policy-making, namely, power, people and politics (Parsons 2002). For some this has been interpreted as a return to a technocratic style of policy-making (Sanderson 2002a).

However, modernisation should not be equated with a return to the technocratic state. New Labour’s agenda of modernisation is wider ranging and has been interpreted in a number of ways. Ideologically, at least for the first part of the first term of the New Labour government, it has been equated to ideas for a ‘third way’ of state, society and economic development (Giddens 2001) which would be far more inclusive of and responsive to, citizens and users of public services. Equating most closely with technocratic notions of policy-making, modernisation can also be seen as a managerialist project (Burnham 2001) in which preoccupations of new public management around performance management, target setting and audit come to the fore. However, it can also be seen as a reassertion of the central state, and in particular core executive, control over policy-making (Flinders 2002). Each of these has some merit, the terms are not mutually exclusive and more broadly they reflect the tensions in the modernisation project (6 and Peck 2004).
As with modernisation, there is no single unifying account of evidence-based policy making. It is used in different ways across the policy and academic worlds. The Deputy Chief Social Researcher, Philip Davies, has argued that a ‘problem for evidence-based policy is the uncertainty of social scientific knowledge, and the different status of different fields of knowledge’ (Davies 2004). Mulgan suggests different fields of social and economic knowledge run along a ‘continuum from fields of knowledge that are well established and almost like “normal” science’ to those where knowledge is inherently novel, such as global governance, regulation of biotech and e-government’ (Mulgan 2003; cited in Davies 2004, p. 4). This is reflected in the rapid growth of literature across academic disciplines on evidence-based policy making (see for example Davies et al 2000, Sanderson 2002a and 2002b, Campbell 2002, Packwood 2002) and within the evaluation (Pawson 2002), statistics (Smith 1996) and public finance (Nutley and Davies 1999) communities. These literatures reflect the traditions of different areas of social and economic policy making but also the different epistemological, ontological and methodological approaches to social and economic research. The different theoretical and methodological underpinnings of evidence-based policy making is explored by this paper and in particular how specific forms of ‘evidence’ have gained greater increasing influence.

Despite these different conceptions of evidence-based policy making it is also apparent in both research and policy making (Cabinet Office 2004) that the term is used with varying degrees of rigour. This is illustrated by an announcement by Alun Michael (as Rural Affairs Minister) in 2002 that the ‘decision on hunting with dogs [was] to be evidence-based’ (DEFRA 2002). Although the policy-making process would undoubtedly draw on scientific evidence, this decision is one that would eventually be taken by parliament. Such a decision would undoubtedly draw on issues of political allegiance and values as well as the evidence provided by the Minister. This example highlights most starkly, as have previous similar ministerial announcements over the health risks of ecstasy, BSE/CJD, and foot-and-mouth disease, and the ongoing debates over GM foods and crops, that the use of ‘evidence’ must be understood both in relation to issues of power and politics but also the factors that condition policy making, namely contingency and expediency.

This paper has two central themes. Firstly, and more broadly, it argues that evidence-based policy-making should not solely be understood within a perspective of instrumental rationality (Sanderson 2002a 2002b) which stresses the managerialist and technocratic understanding of the state. Instead it should be understood through different theoretical perspectives on governance both in relation to the analysis of the state as a co-ordinator of actors and interests (Flinders 2002) but also in terms of the broader societal co-ordination of a complex array of organisations (Kooiman 2000). Secondly, and more narrowly, the paper argues that issues of governance, for instance networks, social co-ordination, ideas and power, are often underplayed or even ‘designed out’ of individual pieces of policy research and evaluation. In some cases this may be justified, but the paper argues, this can severely limit the understanding of how different policies operate.

The paper draws on three policy evaluations to illustrate these arguments. Each policy reflects a particular element, or preoccupation, of the New Labour government. These are: joined-up government; civic renewal and civil society; and centre-local relations. Using results from an evaluation of the horizontal priorities of gender equal opportunities and protection of the environment in EU regional policy, the first study is used to illustrate the problems of joined-up government and how policy formulation and making can vary markedly from policy implementation. The second study draws
on the evaluation of a Home Office initiative to increase levels of volunteering and can be seen to be emblematic of the government’s concern with *civic renewal and civil society*. The final study draws on an ongoing evaluation of local Community Strategies to illustrate changing *centre-local relations*. In each case data from the evaluation are used to illustrate the ‘evidence-base’ for each policy but also how each policy should be understood in relation to wider issues of political and social coordination.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first considers the rise of evidence-based policy making under New Labour, its different guises and meanings, and its role within a wider agenda of modernisation. The second section reviews different theoretical accounts of evidence-based policy making. It seeks to identify gaps in the different accounts of evidence-based policy making. The third section of the paper draws on either completed or ongoing evaluations to illustrate the three different elements of the New Labour government outlined above. The conclusion to the paper reflects on the prospects for evidence-based policy making, in terms of seeking an ‘evidence informed society’, but also in demonstrating that a closer understanding of governance relationships and factors in explaining different policy outcomes is required.

### 2. The Rise of Evidence Based Policy Making

The *Modernising Government White Paper* (Cabinet Office 1999) outlines range of reforms to improve the functioning of government. The White Paper places considerable emphasis on joined-up government, a focus on meeting a diversity of customer needs and demands in the delivery of public services, the effective use of information and communications technology, local discretion in service delivery, and the use of use of targets and measures focused on results rather than inputs. However as Wyatt (of the Government’s Centre for Policy and Management Studies) highlights ‘much of the White Paper can be seen as a continuation and development of programmes of reform and change that had been implemented in the UK through the 1980s and 1990s’ (Wyatt 2002, p. 15). Moreover, many of these challenges facing government date back much further to the 1950s and 1960s (Flinders 2002).

Evidence-based policy making was recognised as a central element of New Labour’s plans for the modernisation of government. For example, the White Paper states that:

‘... policy decisions should be based on sound evidence. The raw ingredient of evidence is information. Good quality policy making depends on high quality information, derived from a variety of sources - expert knowledge; existing domestic and international research; existing statistics; stakeholder consultation; evaluation of previous policies ...’ (Cabinet Office 1999, p. 31).

Moreover, the rationale for evidence-based policy making is set out as: ‘evidence-based policy helps people make well informed decisions about policy, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation’ (Davies 2000, p. 366; cited in Wyatt 2002, p. 25).

As the White Paper acknowledges evidence can take different forms. Although not acknowledged by the White Paper, it is also recognised that there are other influences on policy and that these include: experience, expertise and the judgement of policy officials and Ministers; values and ideology; available resources; habits and tradition; lobbyists, pressure groups and the media; and the pragmatics and
contingencies of everyday political life (Davies 2004, p. 21-23). Davies also highlights that ‘the driving force for evidence in government tends to be the type of question being asked, rather than any particular research methods or design’ (Davies 2004, p. 21). However, research-based evidence is also generated in different ways reflecting both the inherent nature of different policies but also the differing epistemological and ontological bases of different professions.

For example, the use of evidence in medicine, the rise of experimental designs over observational research designs to test treatments, and the growing importance of evidence-based medicine (Davies and Nutley 2000), is very different from areas of transport policy, and its use of cost benefit analysis, and regeneration, and its use of mixed qualitative and quantitative research designs. The relationships between communities of policy officials and Ministers and their related research communities will clearly vary across policy areas. It is therefore overly simplistic to have a singular conception of evidence-based policy making based on a single epistemology (Davies, Nutley and Smith 2000).

The focus of this paper is very much on the rise of evidence-based policy making in areas of social and economic policy, including regeneration initiatives and employment interventions, and the mechanisms through which these policies are delivered. For example, the involvement of voluntary and community sector organisations in public service delivery or the role of partnerships in designing programmes. In these areas of policy most of all, ‘New Labour proclaims the need for evidence-based policy, which we take to mean that policy initiatives are to be supported by research evidence and that policies introduced on a trial basis are evaluated in as rigorous a way as possible’ (Plewis 2000 p. 96; cited in Sanderson 2002, p. 62).

The first term of the New Labour government included the launch of a series of major social and economic programmes. These included the New Deal for Communities, the employment New Deals, On-Track, Sure Start and the Children's Fund. These programmes are subject to large scale evaluations. These programmes had a strong focus on delivering the government's strategy for social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal (Social Exclusion Unit 1998). These interventions have also been interpreted (Annesley and Gamble 2003) as reflecting a new approach to the delivery of welfare policies in the United Kingdom and a shift away from the provision of a universal system of welfare to one which is closely targeted on specific groups and areas, and on those of working age who are not active in the labour market. Moreover, the rationale for these interventions is based on addressing the ‘wicked issues’ of policy making and seeking to join-up policies and agencies to address deep-seated social and economic problems.

The evaluations commissioned to examine these programmes have a wide range of objectives. Most include, formative elements seeking to provide ongoing feedback to government and the organisations and partnerships delivering the initiatives, as well as an more longitudinal assessment of the impact of the programmes. However, a strong emphasis is placed on identifying ‘what works' and seeking to inform delivery, the design of other programmes and mainstream service provision. This approach to evaluation in the United Kingdom is not necessarily novel, for example the Conservative government commissioned major evaluations into its urban policies and programmes such as the Single Regeneration Budget. However, there has been a methodological shift in evaluation design away from a focus on value for money considerations and to understanding how and why programmes work in different contexts. This issue is explored in more detail in the following section.
The commissioning of major multi-annual programme evaluations has been a major component of the government's approach to evidence-based policy making. This approach is reflected across government departments, but in particular in the evaluations commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister including the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education and Skills. However, the approach towards evidence-based policy-making is also evolving and gaining a new focus. This is reflected in a series of recent publications and policy developments. Many make reference to the Modernising Government White Paper and collectively represent a reflection on evidence-based policy making. The also indicate the future directions for the collection and use of evidence by government. The documents include, Adding it Up (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000), Getting the Evidence - Using research in policy making (National Audit Office 2003), Trying it Out: The Role of 'Pilots' in Policy Making (Cabinet Office), The Magenta Book: Guidance Notes for Policy Evaluation and Analysis (Cabinet Office 2003) and Quality in Qualitative Evaluation (Cabinet Office 2003). The government has also, through the ESRC, established the UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy, based at Queen Mary, University of London. This centre is intended to share and develop good practice in evidence based policy making but also to act as a focal point for the systematic collection of evidence.

The Adding it Up report represents a review of evidence-based policy making across government. The implementation of the report’s recommendations, it claims, would provide ‘a key step towards the commitment to evidence-based policy making' made in both the Modernising Government White Paper (Cabinet Office 1999a) and Cabinet Office paper Professional Policy Making (Cabinet Office 1999b). The paper highlights the variation in the use and type of evidence across departments. However, running through the report is an emphasis on quantification, for example, 'individual departments should ... redress any bias against quantification and analysis' (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000). Chapter four of Adding it Up is entitled Analysis in an Ideal World in which it states that 'the United States ... provides a benchmark for best practice' (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000). The basis for this claim it argues is that in the United States there is: ‘a strong willingness to invest in gathering the necessary data; outside expertise is transmitted easily to government; and there is a richer environment for analytical debate' (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000). Although the United States does provide the standard for many forms of evidence-based policy making and the use of particular methods, not least the use of randomised control trials, Adding it Up highlights the primacy of particular forms of (quantitative) knowledge over other (qualitative) forms. Davies (2004) acknowledges however that evidence-based policy making and the use of experimental and quasi-experimental techniques must be understood within the wider context of the United States’ political system. Nevertheless the use of evidence in the US and in particular the use of randomised control trials is seen as the ‘gold standard’ for evidence-based policy making by the Cabinet Office.

Two other themes emerge from the reports and from the creation of the UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy (or Evidence Network as it is now called). These are the use of pilots and demonstration projects, and the use of systematic reviews. The report Trying it Out outlines that pilots ‘play a highly constructive role in promoting innovation ... and in helping fine-tune policies and their delivery mechanisms in advance of their national roll-out. In short, policy pilots have become an indispensable tool of modern government' (Cabinet Office 2003, p. 34). The report also recognises that policy pilots can have a number of ethical, methodological and political pitfalls and drawbacks. This reflects the limitations of running randomised control groups in the UK, the problems of using quasi-experimental methods which
use some form of control group, and that obtaining robust research results can take much longer than the time available within political time-horizons. Sanderson (2002) and Chitty (2000) have also suggested that pilots are much better suited to understanding how and why initiatives work rather than in providing an assessment of their impact. Moreover, 'evaluation is as much about identifying good practice as about identifying the "counterfactual"' (Chitty 2000, p. 13; cited in Sanderson 2002, p. 13). This reflects inherent problems in pilot projects associated with both halo and Hawthorne effects.

Systematic reviews were first used in medicine and are associated with the rise of evidence-based medicine, most notably in the United States, and the development of the Cochrane Collaboration to collect and validate evidence. The development of systematic reviews within medicine is primarily focused on the synthesis of quantitative evidence of the effectiveness of different healthcare interventions. Much of this evidence is based on experimental and quasi-experimental research designs. Unfortunately for the advocates of this particular use of systematic reviews in policy making, the social world is far more complex and more difficult to model in such a way. Pawson and Tilley (1997) who take a realist approach to evaluation suggest that much of the available evidence on social programmes fails to provide the basis for a theoretically-grounded understanding of transferable lessons about what works and why (Pawson 2002, p.179). For Pawson and Tilley, the understanding of programmes must be situated in an understanding of how the mechanisms of programmes operate in relation to specific contexts to produce an array of different outcomes. The implication of this for systematic reviews is that they should be focused much on contextual variables. Despite this, they are likely to become an increasingly influential part of evidence-based social and economic policy making. A perceived benefit of systematic reviews is that they potentially offer substantial cost savings to government.

The New Labour government has placed considerable emphasis on evidence-based based policy making. However, its attitude to evidence-based policy making has also evolved from seeing it as an integral component of flagship social and welfare policies to one where it is used in a more focused and selective way with greater attention being given to quantitative analysis. This highlights that there exist different theoretical and methodological accounts for understanding how evidence-based policy making operates. The following section sets out these different accounts beginning with the notion that evidence-based policy making is part of a technocratic project of instrumental rationality and concerned primarily with identifying information on 'what works' rather than developing an understanding of 'what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why' (Pawson and Tilley 1997).

3. Theoretical and Methodological Accounts of Evidence Based Policy Making

Young et al (2002) set out a descriptive and historical account of evidence-based policy making. They identify the following five models. The first model is a knowledge-driven one whereby the expert is 'on-top'. This model reflects most closely the technocratic interpretations of policy development. Examples include 1950s and 1960s technology policy where scientists were able to shape and lead major programmes of investment, such as in the fields of nuclear energy and supersonic civil aviation. The second approach is the problem-solving model whereby the expert is 'on-tap'. This model reflects government departments commissioning approach to research. The third approach is the interactive model whereby academics cross between academic and policy communities. This is seen to resemble some accounts of United States evidence-based policy making whereby,
in comparison to the United Kingdom, academics more often spend time in government departments, but also the caricature of expert advisory committees in the United Kingdom as ‘good old boys sitting around talking turkey’ or GOBSATT (Davies 2000; cited in Davies 2004, p. 10). The fourth approach is the political/tactical model whereby policy is the outcome of a political process and social science is politicised. The final approach to evidence-based policy making is the enlightenment model whereby research stands aloof from policy-making and that policy is evidence informed, rather than evidence based (Nutley et al 2003). These accounts of evidence-based policy making are essentially static heuristic descriptions and they sit somewhere along the continuum set out by Solesbury (2001, p.9) as: ‘emphasising the role of power and authority at the expense of knowledge and expertise in public affairs seems cynical; emphasising the latter at the expense of the former seems naive’ (Solesbury 2001, p. 9).

Examples of each of these models can probably be found to some degree across government in the United Kingdom. However, this would be to deny the existence of a dominant model of New Labour’s approach to evidence-based policy making. Sanderson (2002 p.5) argues that it is a project of instrumental rationality in which, citing Schwandt (1997, p. 74), ‘... policy makers seek to manage economic and social affairs “rationally” in an apolitical, scientised manner such that social policy is more or less an exercise in social technology’. Furthermore, Sanderson argues that this model is predicated on a series of assumptions relating to: ‘the nature of knowledge and evidence; the way in which social systems and policies work; the ways in which evaluation can provide the evidence needed; the basis upon which evaluation is applied in improving policy and practice’ (Sanderson 2002, p. 5). Policy making by instrumental rationality Dryzek argues is more akin to the ‘policy sciences of tyranny’ than to democracy (Dryzek 1989, p. 98). Lasswell made this same point in the 1950s in his critique of technocratic policy making (Lasswell 1951). Moreover, evidence-based policy making can be seen as a managerialist and mechanistic way of thinking about policy making.

Parsons (2002) makes a similar to critique to Sanderson. Using the Schönian (Schön 1979) metaphor of the policy swamp, he argues that ‘knowledge for EBPM is a means of controlling the mess, and draining the swamp’ (Parsons 2002, p. 45). Moreover, this explanation of EBPM marks a ‘return to the quest for a positivist yellow brick road ... from which government can exercise strategic guidance’ (Parsons 2002, p. 45). In the model of instrumental rationality, evidence-based policy making is closely tied to the politics of a strong central state, of centralisation, and of command and control. Evidence based policy making is therefore closely aligned to the modernisation agenda themes of audit, inspection and monitoring rather than to the themes of learning, improvement and involvement.

The conceptualisation of evidence-based policy making can be criticised from a range of perspectives. From a constructivist viewpoint ‘knowledge of the social world is socially constructed and culturally and historically contingent’ (Sanderson 2002, p. 6) in which policy delivery is seen as a ‘process of deliberation under conditions of multiple frames for the interpretation and evaluation of the world’ (Dryzek 1990, quoted in van der Knapp 1995 p. 202). Alternatively under alternative post-positivist analyses of policy making, greater emphasis should be given to factors such as policy networks, policy transfer networks and the way in which ideas can shape policy-making (Mazey 2000).

Similarly, evidence-based policy making has also been interpreted as a part of reflexive policy making and practice. For example (Nutley et al 2002) argue that much greater emphasis should be given to how evidence informs policy and how
both policy makers and practitioners learn and reflect. Jessop describes this as ‘reflexive monitoring and dynamic learning’ (Jessop 1997, p.111). Parsons, reflecting arguments on complexity and networks (Mulgan 1998; Chapman 2002; Bentley and Wilsdon 2003) argue that the state should not be seen as a bureaucratic monolith, and that command and control are unsuited to the ‘unpredictable demands of contemporary organisational life’ (Parsons 2002, p. 50). Instead the challenge for Parsons, Mulgan and Jessop is that public institutions and governance regimes should be recreated as ‘open, porous and decentred systems which can thrive on diversity, adapt to radical innovation and still remain coherent purpose to progress’ (Parsons 2002, p. 50). This reflects arguments the position that 'traditional ways and means of governance are no longer adequate ... traditional structures of authority and problem-solving have failed' (Kooiman 1993 pp. 249-50).

The emphasis placed on learning, on the role of networks and on the extent of reflexivity in the policy making process appears to ignore that contexts and settings which may shape the operation of these processes. Evidence-based policy making places too much emphasis on the role of causal processes in improving policy effectiveness and insufficient emphasis on the institutional and organisational context in which policies are made and implemented. In contrast new institutionalism (March and Olsen 1989) would posit that informal values, norms, interests and ‘taken for granted beliefs’ shape policy making and provide an informal organisation in which policy making is played out (Lowndes 1997). This informal organisational setting Sanderson argues provides the ‘informal rules in interpreting meaning and providing guidelines for action for organisational agents within a social network’ (Sanderson 2002, p. 67).

The preceding discussion has focused on understanding evidence-based policy making and how evaluative evidence may be applied to informing policy and practice. It has not considered the inherent nature of that knowledge and evidence, and for instance, and the epistemological and methodological basis of that information and knowledge. Previous sections of this paper have highlighted how these may vary across policy areas. For instance, with sharp divides drawn between approaches to medical and social research. However, these differences also play out within individual policy areas and lead to various paradigm wars, such as the dichotomy between the positivist and phenomenonologist bases for generating knowledge.

Within social policy evaluation this has been captured in disputes between so called method-based evaluation (MBE) and theory based evaluation (TBE) (Armstrong et al 2002; Weiss 1995, 1998). MBE, Armstrong et al argue, is closely resembles established methods for evaluation set out by the Treasury (HM Treasury 1997) for determining the success of publicly funded investment programmes. These methods for evaluation have a number of common features. Firstly, there is a strong focus on quantifiable measures of success (such as employment and wealth creation). Secondly, a clear distinction is drawn between gross effects of an intervention and the net effects of policy initiatives. The estimation of net effects is commonly understood to be the counterfactual: that is what would have happened if the intervention, or another intervention, had not taken place. This typically involves the estimation of deadweight, displacement, and the measurement in the case of economic interventions of supply chain and income linkages. In social interventions, this might include the estimation of the unintended effects of an intervention. Thirdly, MBE often involves the application of a range of methods. In the case of an economic development programme these may include econometric techniques, the analysis of monitoring data and local area economic data and the use of survey and case data. The use of different methods is intended to serve as a crosscheck on the
accuracy of different methods and to provide secondary insights into the operation of different interventions.

Exponents of TBE argue that MBE focuses on too few simple and easily quantifiable outcomes and above all that it fails to illuminate the processes by which the initial activities associated with an initiative result, step-by-step, in responses by the recipients of assistance (Weiss 1995, p. 2). TBE rests on the surfacing of the ‘latent theories’ held by both programme officers and policy makers as well as those charged with the delivery of interventions (Weiss, 1998, p. 61). On the other hand, ‘surfacing latent theories’ is sometimes made easier by the fact that the policymakers have what Rossi et al (1999) call an ‘articulated theory’, whereas in other cases the task is harder since the theories are implicit (or ‘tacit’).

TBE nevertheless presents significant challenges in terms of articulating theoretical assumptions and hypotheses, measuring changes and effects, developing appropriate tests of assumptions and hypotheses, and in terms of the generalisability of results obtained in particular contexts (Weiss 1995). Methodological problems abound with TBE and at best TBE can only offer small incremental improvements as to why programmes succeed or fail (Weiss 1998). Majone (1989 p.149) is more critical and suggests that this stance to evaluation is a ‘rationalist fallacy’.

A variant of TBE is the realist approach to evaluation (Pawson and Tilley 1997), which argues that it is the interaction between programme mechanisms, and local contexts that determine the effectiveness of programmes. The basis of the realist approach to evaluation is therefore ‘what works, for who, in what circumstances, and why’. However, this approach also risks providing a strategy for evaluation which becomes entirely context-bound. That is, local conditions matter above all else and policies from one area will work differently elsewhere. This is probably the case, but the focus of this approach is also linked to how evidence is used: it is much more concerned with learning, innovation and demonstration, that with measurement of effectiveness. This approach can therefore sit uneasily with a instrumental rationality approach to evidence-based policy making.

Armstrong et al (2002) argue that evaluation debate has tended to pose a dichotomy between orthodox MBE and TBE. A stark contrast is typically drawn between ‘the dominance of positivist assumptions such that the “general logic” of evaluation privileges the notion of objective, value-free knowledge derived through quantitative social science methodologies’ (the dominant rationalist-modernist paradigm), and ‘phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions ... providing growing credibility for qualitative approaches’ (Sanderson, 2000, p.436). Armstrong et al. (2002) argue that this is a false dichotomy since MBE and TBE are perhaps best seen as complementary approaches to evaluation since they essentially seek different types of evidence and operate within differing understandings of evidence-based policy making. The more relevant question is which form of knowledge is more dominant in New Labour’s use of evidence-based policy making and what implications does this hold for governance and democracy.

4. Evaluating New Labour

The project of the New Labour government is wide ranging and involves reform and modernisation across policy areas. It has placed considerable emphasis on new ways of delivering policies that acknowledge benefits of involving the private sector in certain areas but also in configuring service delivery in new ways to better to the needs of citizens. Although the subject of considerable debate and consideration
through prospective policy studies in government, these issues are rarely the subject of specific policy or programme evaluations. In part this is because they are seen to deal with issues that cross-cut traditional policy domains or have a greater focus on intermediate or process outcomes rather than impacts. This section draws on research to illuminate evaluation and evidence-based policy making issues around the following three aspects of the New Labour project: joined-up government, civil society and civic renewal, and changing centre-local relations. Each example outlines the core findings from the evaluations, drawing on different theoretical debates around governance to outline what a constructivist interpretation of the same evidence suggests, and what alternative evaluation and policy questions should be asked in the future.

**Joined-up government**

Joined-up government is seen as a cornerstone of the modernisation of government (Flinders 2002). The discourse of joined-up government reflects shifts from government to governance. At its heart joined-up government reflects an unease with the traditional functional organisation of the modern state and a concern that discrete policy domains, whilst providing organisational efficiency gains for planning purposes, do not reflect complex and multiple social realities in the contemporary world. At an extreme, some have argued that such social complexity requires us to look beyond a traditional organisation of government and move towards 'holistic governance' (6 et al. 1999).

To some extent, joined-up government represents a compromise as it rejects the transformation of the modern state and instead seeks to coordinate, join-up and adapt pre-existing structures. Pierre and Stoker argue '...Joining-up government is an ambitious commitment. It rests upon controlling complexity [...] the idea of governance failure should not surprise us since both the "state" and the "market" are known to fail to some degree' (Pierre and Stoker 2000 p. 43; cited in Flinders 2002, pp. 71-72). Allen (2003) suggests that the thinking behind this joined-up policy making has two interrelated aspects. Firstly, on the surface it represents a 'systemic move' to fill gaps in governance and welfare stemming from a lack of coordination between 'vertical' policy domains (or 'silos'). Secondly, at a deeper level, this lack of coordination is also characterised by a distribution of policy and welfare knowledge that is increasingly inefficient and inappropriate for tackling the problems of modern society. This implies that joined-up policy should also involve an 'epistemological move' to integrate knowledge - and hence reassert power - across a wider spectrum of domains.

This section draws on evidence from an evaluation of EU regional policy, namely the Mid Term Evaluation of the South Yorkshire Objective 1 Programme (Wells, Gore and Hanson 2003), and in particular evidence on the implementation and effect of the programme’s ‘horizontal themes’ for promoting equal opportunities between men and women, and the protection of the environment. These themes were intended to cut across the programme’s structures – for example aiming to increase representation of women and environmental interest groups on partnership bodies – and also the delivery of projects. Although EU regional policy clearly falls outside the direct influence of the UK government, the study nonetheless illustrates some of the problems of effecting joined-up government. Nationally and internationally, horizontal priorities have emerged, such as social inclusion, community cohesion, civic renewal, information society, equal opportunities, sustainability and environmental sustainability, which seek to corral existing policies to more effectively meet complex and often pernicious challenges facing society and development.
The evaluation used a range of methods to assess the progress of the horizontal reviews. This included an analysis of baseline data – on changing female participation in the labour market in particular, through interviews and workshops with agency stakeholders and interest groups, and through a survey of all project managers. The interviews and workshops highlighted the different progress that had been in developing various support structures to promote the horizontal priorities. The evaluation examined this through eight factors to determine whether: the horizontal priorities were formally outlined in the programme strategy; a manager had been employed to promote the theme; a cross-agency task group had been established; there were major projects to promote the theme; specific tools had been developed; targets had been set; and if data was collected and monitored against the targets. The findings suggested that protection of the environment had only been fully addressed in three of eight of these criteria (guidance had been prepared, targets set and monitoring data being collected) while gender equal opportunities was being addressed by four out of the eight criteria (a manager was in post, a task group had been formed, a person appointed to champion gender issues on strategic partnerships and targets had been set). This evidence suggested that processes were reasonably well established for addressing cross-cutting policy issues although less progress was being made across the Programme as a whole in the area of protection of the environment.

However, responses from the project manager survey provided a very different picture of effectiveness. When asked whether the horizontal priorities had made any difference to the design of projects, 90 percent of respondents (n = 112; response of 40 percent) said ‘no’. This would appear to suggest an overwhelming policy failure or implementation gap (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). When asked if projects would affect the design of future projects, 72 percent responded ‘no’. This finding is obviously slightly more positive and highlights that horizontal priorities are complex and can take time to be rolled out in implementation. The evaluation also attempted to gauge whether there had been any mainstreaming of the horizontal priorities into the wider practices of the organisation. The response to this question was a slightly more positive 69 percent (n = 108).

Evidence produced in other Mid Terms Evaluations of Objective 1 programmes in the United Kingdom (West Wales and the Valleys, Cornwall and Merseyside) produced similar evidence on the processes, although none included comparator questions in their surveys. This is should be of a major concern to assessing how robust the evaluation conclusions area.

Changes in baseline data in South Yorkshire showed that female participation rates had converged with those of males. However, given the project manager survey findings it is highly probable that this is the result of wider changes in the economy – for instance the growth in call centre and retail employment over this period – than due to European Union regional policies. Two quotes from a survey of forty stakeholders in the programme illuminate the problems of progress but highlight the wider effects the horizontal priorities (also termed cross-cutting themes) bring in the long term:

Integration of the environment cross-cutting theme has been poor. There is little sign that it has affected the Priorities.

The cross-cutting themes have been useful in raising the profile of long-term issues and avoiding short-term decision making with respect to individual projects.
The evaluation did not systematically consider the programme in a longer term or wider context, nor did it consider how policies for the horizontal priorities may have developed, and the role policy actors may have played in this process. However, research on gender mainstreaming and environmental sustainability at the EU level (Braithwaite 1999; Jordan 2002; Mazey 2000; Pollack & Hafner-Burton 2000) highlight a number of governance causal factors. These include the role of non-governmental interests in strategically framing issues around a dominant neo-liberal economic agenda of the EU (increasing female participation rates or business opportunities of eco-design), the independent action of senior political actors within the European Commission and European Parliament, and the networks formed between these different actors to outflank more dominant interests within the Council of Ministers.

Similar forces appeared to explain the process of implementing the themes at a local level. Interviews with stakeholder organisations highlighted that local political actors and community organisations were able to steer and shape the development of the horizontal priorities locally. However, there was also found to be considerable variation between the two horizontal priorities, with far greater political importance and administrative resources being dedicated to gender equal opportunities than to the protection of the environment. This was probably due to more effective political mobilisation around gender issues than the environment. Other analysis has also shown that regional policy networks can be highly programme specific, non-transferable and vulnerable to the policy flux of caused by the end of programmes (Wells et al. 2004).

The case of the horizontal priorities highlights two central problems at the heart of debates on joined-up government: that policy implementation may not necessarily follow policy design and that this may be compounded by issues of complexity and time (standard questions of evaluation); and that understanding political agency, albeit within specific institutional settings and constraints, is critical to understanding how policies work. Wider questions that should be considered in future assessments of horizontal priorities include: the balance between regulation (such as equal opportunities legislation) and coordination (such as mainstreaming approaches); how political agency and different political levels works to form policies; and how particular policy agendas gain political significance over others.

Civic Renewal and Civil Society

The involvement of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in public service delivery crosses traditional policy domains. Under the current government, the VCS has been ascribed roles in such disparate policies as: employment and competitiveness, local government modernisation, New Deal for Communities and the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, health and welfare provision. However, cutting through these policy areas appear to be a number of common threads: a belief that involvement of the VCS will bring control of service delivery closer to the end-user, that the VCS offers an alternative delivery model to both the public and private sectors, and that delivery through VCS organisations will help to underpin the achievement of cohesion and social inclusion goals. For example, this last thread is reflected in the Home Office Active Community Unit’s PSA target to increase the number of volunteers in England by five percent between 2000 and 2005. More recent policy developments, such as the Treasury’s Futurebuilders (HM Treasury 2003) seek to make investments in the sector’s capacity to deliver services.
Debates on civic renewal and civil society are closely tied to the discourse of the New Labour project to address social exclusion and a recasting of the traditional focus of the Labour Party away from reducing poverty and increasing equality. With a shift to ‘equality of opportunity’ the focus has moved away from simple measurable objectives such as poverty reduction towards a broader notion of inclusion as citizens with various rights and responsibilities. Whereas equality was traditionally seen as an (utopian) outcome, inclusion is seen as a process by which the multi-faceted causes of social exclusion are addressed. According to the Social Exclusion Unit it is ‘a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown’ (Social Exclusion Unit 2001).

However, the essence of social inclusion is not simply about material deprivation but about a broader conception of citizenship. For example, in line with Etzioni’s communitarianism (Etzioni 1995), Giddens (1998 p. 65) argues that ‘the prime motto of the new politics is “no rights without responsibilities”’ (cited in Powell 2000, p. 47). The emphasis for Giddens and others is on individual responsibilities and that these will often be undertaken at a local level. This also marks a significant departure point from traditional arguments about welfare and the role of the state. In particular, communitarianism restrikes the relationship between individuals and the state and both shifts responsibilities away from the state to the political community (at different territorial levels) but also moves away from a principal-agent (state-citizen) relationship to one that is far more complex. Under these conditions, social networks and formal partnerships come to the fore as providing the mechanism through which social exclusion (and inequality of opportunity) is addressed. As Frank Field stated in 1997, ‘I want to make one point crystal clear: the redrawing of boundaries between the state and individual responsibility is not simply an exercise in downsizing state responsibility, [but] crucial to the recreation of a civil society based on a partnership between individuals, organisations and Government’ (cited in Powell 2000 p. 50).

This section draws on the evaluation of the Home Office’s Capital Modernisation Programme to invest in voluntary and community sector infrastructure (Wells and Dowson 2004). The Active Communities Unit within the Home Office coordinated the Programme. Projects involved at least one of the following activities: the construction or refurbishment of sites for volunteer support agencies, typically either local Councils for Voluntary Service (CVSs) or Volunteer Bureau; the merging of different local support agencies to better integrate volunteer support; and investment in new integrated communications technology to modernise volunteer support services. A total of 44 projects were funded from a budget of nearly £8 million. The intention of the projects was in part to be experimental and for them to act as pilot activities for future support by the Home Office and HM Treasury. The evaluation was undertaken just after the capital projects had been completed. The two main research methods employed were the analysis of monitoring data supplied by projects to the Home Office and fourteen in-depth case studies of projects.

The timing of the evaluation, just after projects had been completed, limited the possibility to undertake a full cost-effectiveness assessment of the project and in particular to estimate the net change in volunteer numbers as a result of the programme. For example, through using a before-and-after evaluation design. The nature of the voluntary and community sector and volunteer activities suggests that attribution of change to a single investment is difficult and moreover the change can take a long time. The evaluation was therefore more formative in nature and considered contextual issues in more detail. It therefore took a realist perspective.
Analysis of volunteer data over a period of about twelve months showed limited change in volunteer numbers for most sites. However, the data did reveal significant variations in the socio-economic characteristics of volunteer numbers. Using local area data from the UK Census 2001 this showed in many cases that the make-up of volunteers broadly reflected characteristics of the local population, particularly the numbers of volunteers from black and minority ethnic groups. However, there were exceptions to this with one local area appearing to have an over-representation of BME groups. Explanations for this included: the targeting by the project of BME populations in the locality, the targeting of disadvantaged groups (which include disproportionate numbers of BME residents relative to White-British residents), a relatively low propensity to volunteer of White-British people in the area, that White-British people in the area find volunteer activities through other channels or in neighbouring areas, or that Census data at local authority level masks significant small area variations. These issues clearly warranted further investigation but highlight how local contextual factors can shape the delivery of projects.

Although most projects covered local authority district areas, variations were still significant and reflected the differing local rationales of projects, rather than contextual factors. For example, the average age of volunteers ranged from 27.5 years in to 48.5 years across the case study sites and the number of volunteers in each site with physical disabilities or mental health problems ranged from three percent with disabilities to 36 percent. The use of case study pilot approaches was therefore useful in exploring differences in the implementation of a common funding stream.

The research design also allowed for the operation of voluntary and community sector in different local settings to be explored and contrasted. It found that three broad models of partnership working had emerged. Firstly, some volunteer and community organisations, particularly VCS and Volunteer Bureau had, with the assistance from the Home Office, been able to become more established partners in local strategic partnerships and clarity was beginning to emerge as to what role the VCS could play locally. Secondly, and in direct contrast, other partnerships remained far more contested, with the voluntary and community sector relying on a continual series of bilateral and negotiated relationships, typically around funding. Thirdly, some VCS organisations had opted out all together from local partnerships. The final model, given the financial dependency of the VCS on the public sector, would appear to be least sustainable.

Although the evaluation provided a range of evidence on the operation of the Capital Modernisation Fund other issues appear to have been left unanswered because they were outside its scope. These have implications for how New Labour’s promotion of civil society is to be understood. Firstly, there are problems in defining the VCS. It is a sector which is often defined very broadly and comprises all organisations which are formal, non-profit distributing and significantly voluntary. However, the breadth and diversity of the voluntary and community sector is difficult to capture with simple definitions. It spans the well-known non governmental organisations (e.g. Oxfam) which operate internationally to local and community level organisations with limited resources (e.g. area based development trusts or tenants associations), but also far more informal groupings of individual people. In many respects these last uncrystalized groups work at the boundary between informal networks of people in wider society. How the VCS is defined clearly has implications for how the public sector engages with it for service delivery.

Legitimacy of partnership representatives also play a critical role both in ensuring accountability to, and trust from, communities and wider constituencies, but also in
ensuring the necessary credibility from the established statutory bodies on partnerships. However, as Atkinson (1999) highlights, partners sometimes add a veneer of legitimacy while the reality is that the voluntary sector is marginalized. VCS involvement in partnerships should not be dismissed, despite the problems of accountability, representation and legitimacy. However, it must be recognised that community representatives (however chosen – election, nomination or external selection) will tend to be drawn from a layer of activists. There is also a tendency in community partnerships for particular groups to be under-represented. These often include representation from BME communities (although there are exceptions to this), young people and those who are the most economically excluded. The culture of partnerships may also exclude residents of communities as they have an implicit tendency to include community experts rather than include individuals who may have experiential knowledge of exclusion.

The diversity of the voluntary and community sector, the wide range of local contexts in which the sector operates and the array of policy domains which identify a role for the sector, suggest that its role is complex and multi-faceted. Such complexity raises questions as to whether a more nuanced analysis of the sector is required when it is the subject of evaluation. This not only raises questions as to the role of the sector in the delivery of public services but how it is understood within normative questions of its role within the ideas of associative democracy, communitarianism and civil society.

**Changing Centre-Local Relations**

As part of the wider modernising government agenda, the 1998 Local Government White Paper *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (DETR 1998) set out an overarching framework for the modernisation of local government. At its core was the need to bring change in three areas: to modernise the structures and systems of local government; to bring about a bigger say for local people; and to bring about a better deal for local people in terms of cost effectiveness and service delivery. The White Paper recognised the diversity of local government, in terms of size, geography and the extent to which modernisation had already commenced. Substantial components of the White Paper became law through the 1999 and 2000 Local Government Acts.

The original objectives for 'modern councils' set by the White Paper were as follows: be in touch with the people; provide high quality services; give vision and leadership for local communities; improve the quality of people’s lives, and act more quickly, responsively and accurately to meet the needs and aspirations of the community. Subsequent research commissioned by the DTLR (now within the ODPM) has set new objectives for modern local government and reflects extensive consultation, especially of the Local Government Association: achieve a mixed economy of provision; and convince stakeholders that local authorities are the legitimate arbiters of their local area of all issues of concern in the local self-government of the community.

The Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA), signalled in the 1998 White Paper includes a wide-ranging package of reforms and initiatives for local government. These can be grouped under the following themes of the LGMA:

- **Service improvement** – Best Value, Beacon scheme, Electronic Service Delivery
- **Community leadership** – power of wellbeing, LSPs, Community Strategies
- **Democratic renewal** – new council constitutions, improved local election, referendum and voting arrangements, citizen and user engagement
- **Freedoms and flexibilities** – LPSAs, single capital pot, freedoms to give council tax discounts and exemptions, freedoms to trade and to charge, reductions in statutory plans, CPA
- **Partnership working** – LSPs, Community Strategies, IEG pathfinders
- **Improved financial framework** – RSG reform, asset management plans, capital prudential scheme, rate reliefs

Together, the reforms represent probably the most significant single attempt to change local government in England. At the heart of this package is the changing relationship between central and local government.

This section draws on an ongoing piece of research commissioned within the overarching evaluation of the LGMA. The research is a three year evaluation of Community Strategies and Plan Rationalisation. The Local Government Act 2000 places a duty on councils to prepare Community Strategies for promoting or improving the well being of their areas. Such documents have four key components: a long-term vision, an action plan, shared commitment to improvement, and arrangements for monitoring and implementation. There is no prescribed date by which an authority is required to have completed its Community Strategy. However, most local authorities have already developed these: in February 2001, an LGA survey of local authorities found that 79 per cent already had a community strategy in place, or expected to have one by March 2002. The remaining 21 per cent intended to have developed a strategy by March 2003.

A review of local authority statutory and non-statutory service and planning requirements published by the ODPM (then DTLR) in early 2002 set out the plan or strategy requirements imposed on local authorities. This research considered 66 different plans but recognised that there are more that are discretionary, and that many plans have underlying requirements, for example statistical returns. The various plans rest on a spectrum between statutory and non-statutory. They can vary considerably in their length, frequency of reporting and function. The intention was that by 2005/06 local authorities would only be required to prepare six plans, in addition to the Community Strategy and Best Value Performance Plan. These include: Housing Strategy; Local Development Documents (as part of a Local Development Framework); Single Education Plan; Strategy for Children and Young People; Local Transport Plan; Civil Contingencies Plan.

In contrast to the other examples of evidence based policy making outlined above, the Community Strategies and Plan Rationalisation evaluations are a far more integral part of the policies themselves. They are being undertaken at the same time as these policy areas are developing. As a result the focus of the research is very much on formative and process issues with the long-term objective of the research to develop a framework for measuring the impact of these two areas of policy. Another contrast to the other examples of evidence based policy making is that they have at their heart a series of governance issues. This is as would be expected for a policy which is looking at government change and restructuring.
Recently completed scoping research has identified four broad dimensions which may be emerging in Plan Rationalisation and Community Strategies. These include: changing centre-local government relations to better deliver central and local objectives; a shift from a planning central-local relationship to one characterised by audit and inspection, guidance and differentiated approaches; development of new sets of local relations based on community leadership and stronger community involvement; and increased local flexibility to allow stakeholders to more effectively address the (identified) needs and opportunities of current (and future) of local residents. The scoping research also identified three aspects which appear to cross-cut these dimensions: how central government objectives can be achieved following the removal of plans and full introduction of Community Strategies, new ways of working both in central and local government, and the emergence of new forms of performance management.

The research to be undertaken will look at various inter-related aspects Community Strategies. These will include: the use of mainstream funding and services, engagement of local people in policy development and, the inclusion of the public, private and voluntary sectors. The evaluation will also consider the impact of central government policies that sit outside the LGMA, for example community cohesion, sustainability, rural proofing and multi-tiered governance.

Results of the scoping research suggest that the evaluation will have strong contextual as well as generalised aspects. For example, it will seek to determine the existence of key fault lines or differentiating factors in explaining relative performance of different localities. Such factors include urban-rural differences, issues with two-tier and unitary working and, more broadly, issues of capacity and leadership. As with the example of civic renewal and civil society identifying what works will be highly context specific but that it will be possible to identify patterns of practice across local government in England.

5. Conclusion

This paper has shown that evidence-based policy making varies across areas of government, reflecting past practice and its institutional setting, professional practice, as well as the different epistemological bases of different policy areas. Within economic and social policy, the paper argued that the dominant mode of evidence-based policy making is one of instrumental rationality. Sanderson (2002, p 19) argues that ‘a focus on reflexive learning is required to resolve the paradox of late modern society: that while increasing complexity of social systems progressively undermines the notions of certainty in social knowledge it simultaneously raises the stakes in relation to rational guidance of those systems.’ Although true it is also doubtful to what extent the reformist projects of the adaptive and reflexive state can achieve can be achieved.

Debates between how knowledge is generated and evaluative methodology have also been explored and there is not a simple choice between positivist and phenomenological approaches but rather that they are complimentary and should be used as such. There is a need for an understanding of both policy effectiveness but also for an understanding of how policies work. However, there is an increasing towards using evidence-based policy making to gauge effectiveness, and this is reflected in the support of systematic reviews and an emphasis on quantitative approaches. Evidence based policy making should also be more closely linked with policy implementation and in particular with reflexive practice and learning.
The development of evidence-based policy making in the United States over several decades does appear to provide a direction to take. However, attempts to emulate the United States neglect both resource discrepancies in terms of evidence-based policy making between the United Kingdom and United States, but also that it a system which has a specific political, institutional and constitutional setting which is very different to the United Kingdom. Moreover, the prioritising of the United States over other countries, or previous practice in the United Kingdom, appears to be based on weak foundations. Other models both in other countries and from international institutions, such as the European Union, should also be considered and may be more congenial to the ‘learning’ mode of evidence based policy making which appears better suited to the complexities of the social world.

It has also been shown how social and political agency shape policy implementation, and that these issues are often neglected by evaluative research. It was shown that social and political agency can have considerable explanatory power but also provide policy makers and delivery bodies with a deeper and richer understanding of how policies work. Understanding the institutional and historical setting in which policies and programmes are implemented, and how these channel social action and ideas appears crucial and is often neglected by the ‘effectiveness’ mode of evidence based policy making.

Finally, evidence based policy making is only one component of the policy making process. Ideas, values, political strategies and previous practice are probably, and rightly so, of greater significance. However, as the review of different areas of policy has shown, evaluative research undertaken with an understanding of political ideas, institutions and contexts provides for a richer basis on which to inform policy, and equally, practice.

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