



Strategies and tactics for influencing decision making

Knowing what to do with scientific research outcomes can be tricky. But, by changing how we present research proposals or findings to government and industry, we have a real chance to influence policy making and industry practice.

The CRCWSC [project A3.3](#) *Strategies for influencing the political dynamics of decision-making* examined strategies and tactics for influencing opinion formation and policy making, to facilitate progress towards water sensitive cities. As part of that project, the CRCWSC publication *Scientists and policy influence: a literature review* (Laing, 2015) examined three considerations when we're looking for science to be influential:

- 'expectations of what is rational'. What we expect of policy processes often differs from what actually happens, so we need to transition our understanding of the policy arena.
- 'nature of the influence seeking'. Different policy forums call for different approaches to influencing, so we need to choose the tactics that are appropriate to a sector's prevailing model of influence seeking.
- 'role of scientists'. Scientists can sit both inside (as advisors and even policy makers) and outside (as lobbyists) the policy making process, so we need to be conscious of that position and the accompanying ethical and philosophical questions.

Out of these considerations, the literature review examined three elements common to successful influence seeking:

- 'entrepreneurs'. We need scientific advocates and voices working inside and outside the system to provide the momentum for communicating science and translating it into policy.
- 'networks'. We need change agents to work collectively to challenge the status quo, marshal policy influence, and forge pathways.
- 'timing'. We need to recognise the unique rhythms of policy change, which often reflect significant events. And we need to exploit policy opportunities.

The upshot is that we need to think strategically about moving research into policy spaces, so scientific ideas and findings have greater and broader value.



1. Know what you want to achieve

For scientific research to best effect change, we need to know:

- the better alternatives to the status quo—that is, what is the grand vision, and what does it look like in specific cases? Referring to successful cases in other countries, for example, can be persuasive (Laing & Wallis, 2016, p. 27).
- the means and instruments for changing the status quo—that is, what is within the jurisdiction and capacity of the body that is responsible for change? A lack of understanding of the available policy instruments is a consistent problem with policy proposals (Laing & Wallis, 2016, p. 27).
- concrete and specific recommendations—that is, what are our specific recommendations? A policy proposal is problematic if it does not articulate the specifics of policy implementation (Laing & Wallis, 2016, p. 28).

2. Bring solutions, not problems

While research generally looks to investigate *problems*, government and industry generally engage in applying *solutions*. So, when approaching government or industry, we should try to:

- understand a known and difficult problem, then provide a workable solution. You must understand what a government or business wants to achieve, and provide a way to do it.
- then align research with a government or industry focus. Unless research uncovers problems that have serious risk, or finds major unrealised cost savings, it will have little sway if it does not speak to the agenda of the decision makers.
- work through to solutions. Research that can articulate the feasibility, risks and effectiveness of concrete policy options is highly valued in policy discussions.

Let’s look at this point another way. The popular theory about science–policy interactions has been that research is most effective at informing policy and decision making when it is *credible, relevant and legitimate* (CRELE) for multiple audiences. But, based on experiences in the urban water sector, alternative criteria for effective science–policy interactions are *applicability, comprehensiveness, timing and accessibility* (called ACTA) (Dunn & Laing, 2017). In other words, compared with its credibility and legitimacy, whether science is useful and applicable can be a more important question for policy makers.

If looking to exhibit these attributes, policy proposals need to interpret the audience’s policy needs, understand the relevant business case, cite a diversity of evidence sources, and know the available policy instruments. We should be firm in demonstrating that the means to achieve our policy proposal are practical, and that they fit existing policies (Laing & Wallis, 2016, p. 28).

ACTA—research attributes that appeal to policy makers (based on Dunn & Laing, 2017, Table 2, p. 149)

Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop usable knowledge with the end user in mind • Communicate effectively (e.g. succinct and clear messaging) • Draw out the key message: use analogies, imagery and sound bites. • Avoid jargon and multiple terminologies for similar concepts.
Comprehensiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the decision makers have a broader interdisciplinary perspective of the issue (rather than a narrow and highly specialised perspective). • Contextualise (and advance) ideas within the broad range of considerations that decision makers are likely to face. These ideas should cover risks (pros and cons) and a range of options. • Incorporate the economic and financial impacts of the research.
Timing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align with the cycle of government and business decision making. • When windows of opportunity arise, make the research readily available and promote it.
Applicability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the scientific evidence is applicable to and usable for the problems that current decision makers are facing. • Offer solutions rather than focusing solely on problems. • Guide implementation, not just concepts. • Tailor the research to specific problems and variables (e.g. temporal and scalar relevance).

3. Translate the research

Translation is about converting research into terms that make sense to, and are useful to, other users (such as policy makers). The most powerful impact is when research fits into a bigger picture that key decision makers appreciate and understand. By contrast, we need to watch for 'knowledge brokering': in this case, knowledge may move from one organisation to another, but not be translated or diffused widely enough to affect practice.

4. Find the business case

A business case is a subset of translation—namely, how research findings translate into economic and financial realities. Considerations when crafting a business case for industry or government include (1) the ability to quantify benefits in some way; (b) knowing who benefits from the proposal, and who will own the benefits; and (c) customising the value proposition from the perspective of a range of potential adoptees.

According to Dunn and Liang (2017, p. 179), policy makers need supporting evidence that is robust and credible, as well as integrated and interdisciplinary. So, a business case has to be holistic, accounting for the full range of costs and clearly articulating the economic, social and fiscal rationale of the policy. This approach requires well developed risk analyses, economic impact, and cost estimations, as opposed to broad platitudes without evidence or detailed reasoning (Laing & Wallis, 2016, p. 26).



5. Communicate clearly

How we communicate scientific ideas and package them for different audiences is crucial to our success or failure in influencing policy. When time and information search are constrained in a policy making context, information that is clear and easy to understand (and doesn't rely on expertise) is most valuable and most likely to be used. To communicate more effectively, we need to:

- Avoid always being an expert. Although we must appear competent and knowledgeable, we also need to establish rapport with outsiders and create spaces in which it is okay to ask 'dumb questions'.
- Get to the point, without burying the key ideas within extensive commentary or long justifications. Plus, tailor evidence to the specific context and needs of the target audience.
- Structure reports to convey the *research's implications and conclusions* ahead of its procedural elements.
- Find formats that connect. Concise reports and briefings, lunchtime seminars, and other short-format communications are appealing to those outside the academic community.

In other words, we need to think about *how* we present evidence, not just *what* evidence we present (Laing & Wallis, 2016, p. 28). Integrative approaches are particularly useful, because they can frame disparate information in useful clusters. Such an approach better reflects the complex realities of policy implementation, which is typically fragmented across multiple portfolio areas (Laing & Wallis, 2016, p. 26).

6. Have realistic expectations

We need to be realistic about what we expect from policy and decision makers. While most research projects work intensively on a specific singular problem, policy often synthesises a range of perspectives, to find useful compromises that produce an outcome. So, we need to avoid pushing research to have a policy value that is unreasonable, or underestimating how easily science translates into policy evidence.

7. Understand the policy making context

Decision making in any policy area, particularly political, is highly complex. Many stakeholders and positions are balanced against each other, and science often represents a critical but small aspect of the total decision. For planning influence, we need to know *who* makes the decisions, and *how* they operate (including the laws, stakeholders, responsibilities and jurisdictions in the sector). This knowledge will allow us to identify, for example, the nature and use of evidence that is most relevant to our target audience. We also need to be aware of the agendas of important stakeholders, to foster greater alignment and build effective advocacy coalitions.

8. Find opportunities, and be prepared

We are more likely to influence the policy agenda in certain periods—for example, outside the government's budget season, in the lead-up to elections (when party platforms are being developed), or in the aftermath of government changeovers (when new ministers and government members are looking for ideas). For water policy, the chance to influence depends too on climatic conditions and the news cycle.

These drivers highlight the critical nature of timing. Policy development is always much more fluid and chaotic than scientific research, with less dependable timeframes, and heavily influenced by contextual conditions (Dunn & Laing, 2017, p. 150). So, we must look for opportunity windows—that is, we should seek to make policy breakthroughs when the issue is solidly on the government agenda.

9. Build networks

Influencers know the other actors in the policy sphere, and they identify allies. The 'go to' advisors for ministers and senior bureaucrats in urban water tend to (a) work effectively within policy processes and political spaces, (b) communicate in a way that non-experts understand, and (c) set up networks within government, the public service and business. They invest in relationships beyond the research sphere and into the policy and political spaces.

Adopting a team approach to policy pitches can enhance science-policy performance (Laing & Wallis, 2016). Further, having advocates from government, research and industry sectors helps to contextualise the evidence in a way that is best suited to the particular policy context.

Other ideas ...

- Policy and decision makers often seek clarity and certainty, so they look favourably on unity from the research community. For this reason, would-be influencers from the research sector should seek broader coalitions and consensus if they want to be persuasive.
- Decision makers usually have constrained timelines and limited resources, so an exhaustive search for solutions is not feasible. They must come up with the best fit within limitations. So, definitive recommendations may be exactly what a policy maker wants, even if it is uncomfortable making them.
- Good scientific evidence for policy is often produced out of sync with the policy development cycle, and this mismatch is a major issue when thinking about how science and research can influence policy and decision making. Planning is vital for future proofing a research project so it is responsive when policy makers call for help.

Further information

Laing, M. (2015). *Scientists and policy influence: a literature review*. Melbourne, Australia: Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities.

Dunn, G. & Laing, M. (2017). *Policy-makers perspectives on credibility, relevance and legitimacy (CRELE)*. *Environmental Science and Policy*, 76, pp. 146–52.

Laing, M. & Wallis, P. (2016). *Scientists versus policy-makers: building capacity for productive interactions across boundaries in the urban water sector*. *Environmental Science and Policy*, 66, pp. 23–30.



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<https://watersensitivecities.org.au/content/project-a3-3/>



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