



LONDON  
SCHOOL of  
HYGIENE  
& TROPICAL  
MEDICINE

# Challenges and opportunities in developing new researcher-policy maker relationships at national level

Nicholas Mays

Professor of Health Policy  
Department of Health Services Research & Policy  
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

*Presentation to Health Services Research and Pharmacy Practice  
Conference, University of East Anglia,  
5-6 May 2011*



# Outline

- What is 'policy'?
- What is 'evidence'?
- Different types of use of research in policy
- Use/impact of HSR/PPR
- What are the obstacles and facilitators?
- How to reduce the obstacles?
- What is the Policy Research Unit in Policy Innovation Research trying to achieve?
- What are the challenges and opportunities?
- What can we learn from early experience?

# Ian Sanderson's 7 propositions about use of evidence in policy



1. Need for a clearer understanding of the way evidence is used and its impact in different circumstances and a clearer articulation of the rationale for strengthening its use
2. Tendency to underestimate extent to which government *is* informed by evidence
3. Research can rarely provide the definitive word on an issue
4. Many researchers are equivocal about trying to have an 'impact'

# Sanderson's 7 propositions about use of evidence in policy



5. Policy process is not always evidence-friendly and can be evidence-averse
6. 'Players and processes' are more important than 'products'
7. Greater openness and transparency are crucial to enhance the prospects for more 'intelligent government'

# What is 'policy'?



According to Peter John (1998):

*'the interplay between institutions, interests and ideas.'*

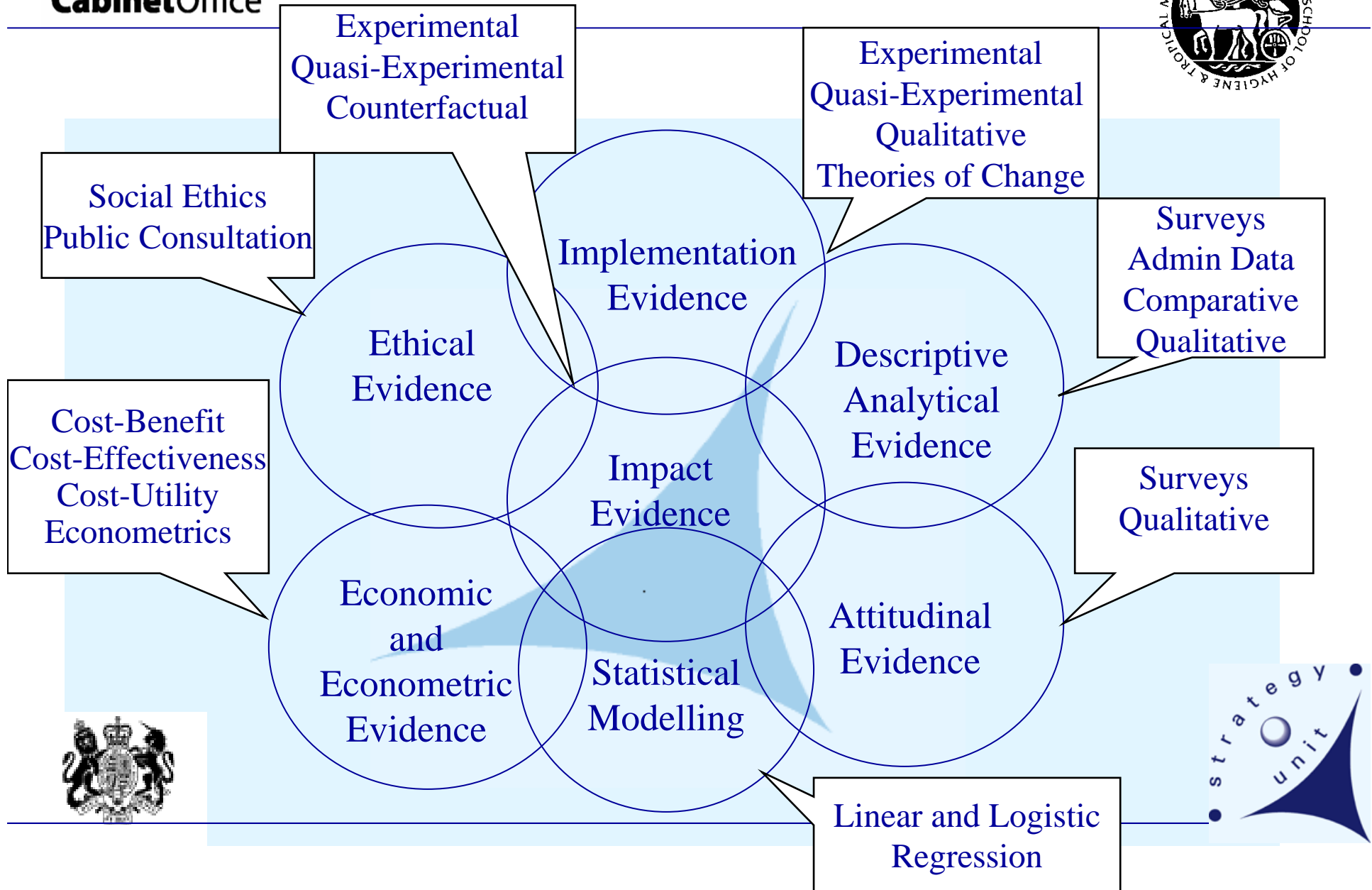


## Prime Minister's Strategy Unit



# Many Types of Evidence Potentially 'Used'

CabinetOffice



So, it's not surprising that researchers worry about their 'impact'



*Yes, it's quite a noise - but are we having any impact?*



# The different types of use of research (including HSR/PPR) in and for policy



Research may strive to have immediate and recognisable impacts, but this may not be the main indicator of “success”!

# A research use continuum



CONCEPTUAL USE

INSTRUMENTAL

Knowledge &  
understanding

Attitudes,  
perceptions, ideas

Practice & policy  
change

Awareness



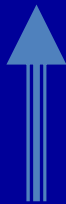
1. Knowledge

2. Persuasion

3. Decision

4. Implementation

5. Confirmation



The "enlightenment" role of research (Weiss)

# Some common 'uses' of evidence

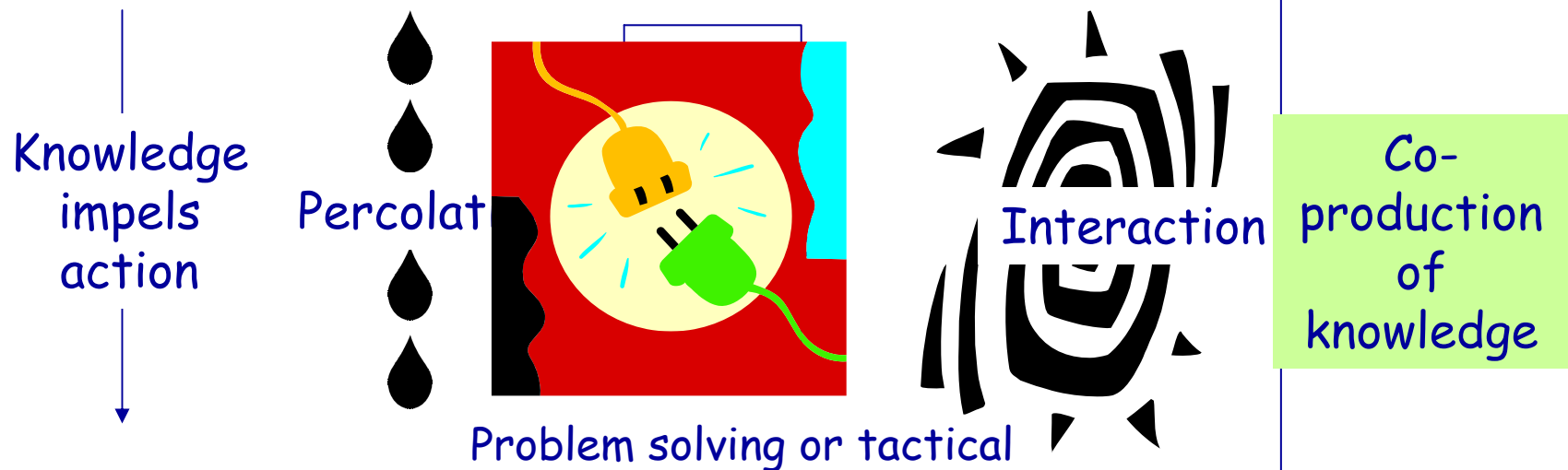


- Can help bring an issue nearer to, or onto, the policy agenda
  - that something is a 'problem' worthy of attention
- Can contribute to the stock of ideas on possible responses
  - In both these cases evidence owes its influence to its ability to be turned into *arguments and advocacy* rather than its ability to reveal uncontested 'truth'
  - Often used to boost persuasiveness of argument (Stevens, 2011)

And can have its impact through different mechanisms



## The Academy: stocks and flows of research-based knowledge



Policy, organisational and professional environments, and the media and society at large



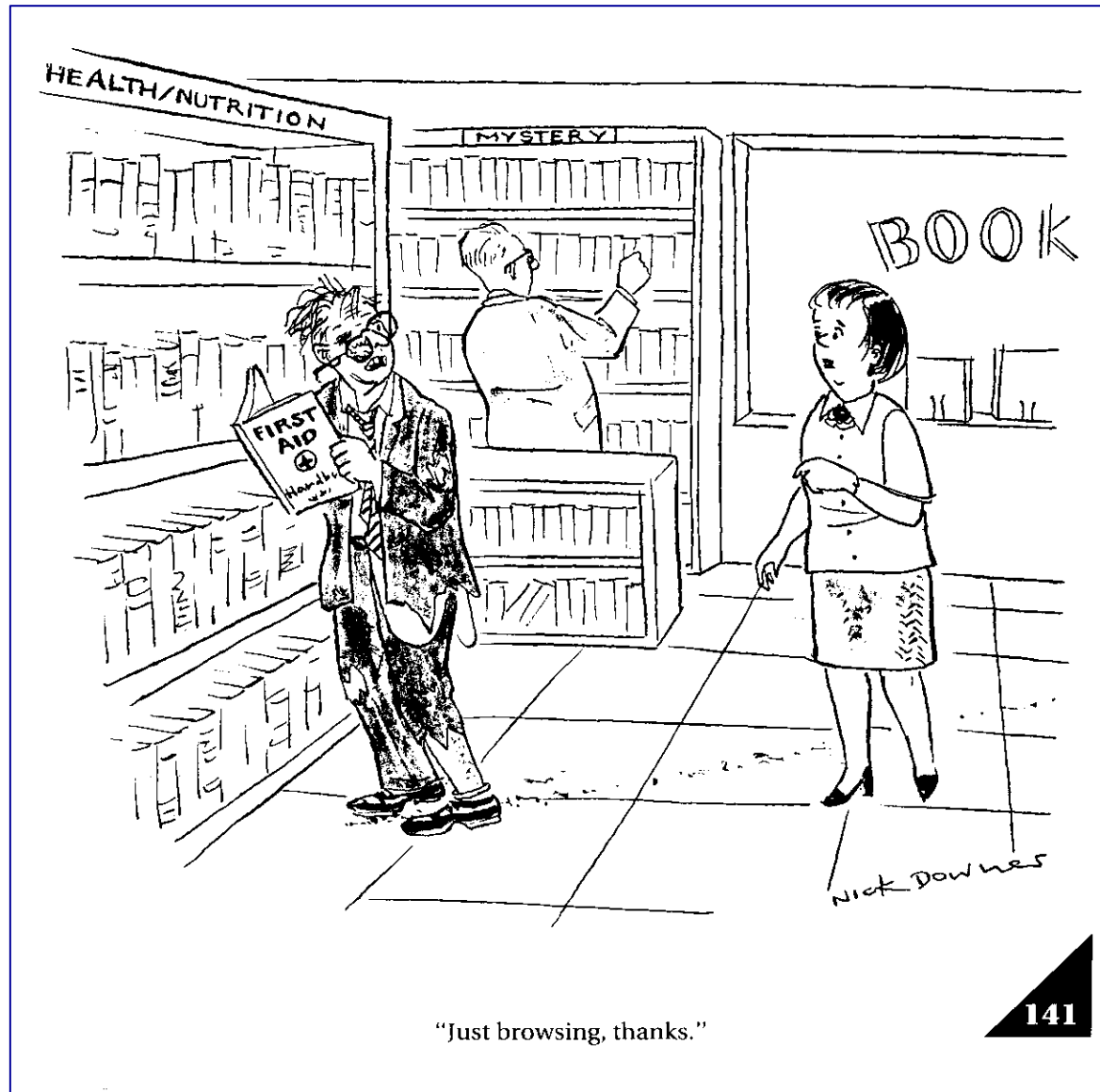
# Examples of HSR/PPR use and impact

# Scientists do want to make a difference!



"I didn't even know there was a union of unconcerned scientists."

And policy makers do want to know!



"Just browsing, thanks."

# Assumption altered: Interventions are effective



- 1970s
  - McKeown – medicine played only a minor role in decline of infectious diseases
  - Cochrane – the need for experimental evidence (RCTs) of effectiveness
- 1990s
  - Cochrane Collaboration – systematic reviews
  - McMaster University – clinical epidemiology
- Manifest today: clinical guidelines, National Service Frameworks, evidence-based medicine

# Assumption altered: Care is organised around needs of patients



- 1960/70s
  - Goffman – adverse impact of institutionalising long- stay patients
- 1970/80s
  - Cartwright, Stacey et al - patients' experience: excessive time spent waiting to see doctor; early waking (consultant's round); delayed discharge; routine outpatient follow-up
- Manifest today: care in the community, appointments system, outreach services, clinical pathways

# Assumption altered: Care is of good quality



- 1970s
  - Outcome measures (effectiveness)
  - Patient experience questionnaires (humanity)
  - Risk adjustment models - APACHE
- 1980s/90s
  - Comparison of providers
  - Quality improvement: public disclosure, incentives, education, re-engineering services
- Manifest today: regulation (Healthcare Commission), clinical audit databases, 'World Class Commissioning', NHS Atlas, PROMs



# Obstacles and facilitators to researcher-policy maker relationships and use of research



Innvaer S, Vist G, Trommald M, Oxman A.  
Health policy-makers' perceptions of their use  
of evidence: a systematic review *J Health Serv  
Res Policy* 2002; 7:239-244

Review of 24 studies that asked over 2000  
policymakers what facilitated or prevented their use  
of research evidence

- Facilitators
  - Personal contact between researchers and policy makers
  - Timeliness and relevance of the research
  - Research that included a summary and clear recommendations
  - Good quality research
  - Research that confirmed current policy or endorsed self-interest
  - Community pressure or client demand for research
  - Research that included effectiveness data

Innvaer S, Vist G, Trommald M, Oxman A.  
Health policy-makers' perceptions of their use  
of evidence: a systematic review *J Health Serv  
Res Policy* 2002; 7:239-244



- Barriers
  - Absence of personal contact between researchers and policy-makers
  - Lack of timeliness or relevance of research
  - Mutual distrust, including perceived political naivety of scientists and scientific naivety of policy-makers
  - Power and budget struggles
  - Poor quality research
  - Political instability and high turnover of policy-making staff

# Other barriers to use of research findings



- **Practitioner/policy maker factors** – difficulty of maintaining currency, involving research too late, risk aversion
- **Organisational** – shortage of analytical skills and lack of involvement at all stages of policy
- **Social** - media influences



# Downplayed factors in understanding use of research for policy



- Lack of conclusive, definitive evidence for decision
- Political climate, political will and government culture
- Conducive or resistant contextual factors such as institutional processes, interest groups and policy 'networks', including desire of policy makers to maintain the status quo
- Complex, messy, conflictual nature of some policy making, touching on deeply held values and beliefs
  - extent of polarization on problem, priority & solution of an issue affects use of research
  - low issue polarization allows scientific argument



# Ways of reducing obstacles and encouraging 'use'



Researchers and policy makers: two separate communities?



How apt a metaphor?

# Approaches to linking research to policy and overcoming barriers (Lavis et al)



- Knowledge Transfer & Exchange' defined as
  - ‘... an interactive process involving the interchange of knowledge between research users and researcher producers.’ (Kiefer et al, 2005)
  - involving *Push*, *Pull* and *Exchange* activities
- *Producer push (by researchers)*
- *User pull (by potential users)*
- *Exchange (bi-directional)* e.g. Knowledge brokering
- *Integrated processes ('co-production')*

# Some current approaches to building researcher-policy maker relationships



- Building receptivity and demand for research of policy organisations (systems and culture change)
- Collaborative identification of research questions
- Including decision makers in research processes
- Inter-personal contact of various types to build trust (e.g. longer term networks, partnerships, briefings)
- ‘Knowledge brokers’ (intermediaries between researchers and policy makers)

# Current orthodoxy in maximising impact of research on policy



- ESRC's Strategic Plan 2009 –2014: Delivering Impact through Social Science, p23, section on Maximising Impact argues that:
  - Engaging with the potential users of research at the earliest stage of the research process is a key factor in helping the findings to be taken up and exploited
  - Sustained contacts with users is one of the most important determinants of policy impact
  - The flow of people, researchers and users between sectors is one of the most effective mechanisms for knowledge exchanges and facilitating dialogue to develop connections and understanding



A national level initiative to  
develop new researcher-  
policy maker relationships in  
the DH Policy Research  
Programme



# DH Policy Research Programme

- A national programme of research to provide evidence for policy making to DH Ministers, directly and through policy directorates in the Department
- Based on simple ‘customer-contractor’ model
- Three main modes of funding:
  - programmes, usually for 5 years, in Policy Research Units;
  - initiatives, consisting of linked groups of commissioned projects;
  - single commissioned projects

# PRU in Policy Innovation Research brief



‘This Unit is designed to improve the Department’s capability for evidence based policy making (EBPM). Its role will be to strengthen the use of evidence in the initial stages of policymaking, rather than to evaluate the impact of policies once made. It will do this in particular by supporting, or undertaking, the evaluation of policy pilots or demonstration initiatives. The Unit’s core expertise will thus be methodological, rather than topic specific, of relevance to all aspects of the Department’s policy activity.’

*DH PRP Policy Research Units Research Brief: Stage 1,  
Annex 3, p13*

# Definition of success from DH's perspective



- Evidence scanning and review become an integral part of the policy development process
- A more proactive use of scientific evidence and methods to ensure the new policies have evaluation of their effectiveness built into them from the start



# Some specific PIRU activities I

- In the early stages of policy innovation, undertaking, or commissioning, rapid evidence syntheses
- Advising on the need for and feasibility of evaluation
  - e.g. to help identify which problem the innovation aims to address, clarify the theory about how the intervention works, clarify the nature and extent of uncertainty surrounding the intervention, estimate the likely scale of intended and unintended effects
- Advising on the commissioning and management of specific ‘early stage’ policy pilot evaluations, including the selection of appropriate designs, methods and measures
- Advising on implementation and further refinement of pilots



## Some specific PIRU activities II

- Supporting learning from pilot evaluations
  - e.g. to guide ‘roll out’
- Modelling and simulation
  - e.g. to estimate likely effects ex ante and impact of roll-out
- Administrative data linkage and warehousing
  - to enable more rapid, lower cost evaluations
- Capacity building
  - e.g. providing DH staff with opportunities to participate in policy evaluation and receive more formal training in evidence-informed plus methods of policy evaluation

# Developing new researcher-policy maker relationships



- Emphasis on ‘co-production’ of evidence to inform early stage innovative policy
- Attempt to break down conventional sequence in which consideration of evaluation tends to follow policy development
  - aspiration to early involvement in all steps from horizon scanning, through innovation design and development, to implementation and evaluation, and including both policy advice and research
  - secondments and exchanges with DH (we hope!)



# Challenges for PIRU staff

- Very early stage policy engagement needed
  - Researchers need to be aware of initiatives at the earliest possible stage and be trusted with confidential information
  - Requires good formal & informal relationships that take time to build and regular contact to maintain
- Wide ranging expertise in evaluation and policy development/implementation, research use
- Ability to balance conflicting requirements
  - independence, rigour, criticism/challenge, flexibility, close involvement in policy process, credibility, trust
  - ‘impact’ versus academic performance indicators



## Challenges for DH

- ‘A mechanism will be established to embed the work of the Unit effectively within the ‘strategic hub’ of the Department’
- But how, given organisational turbulence and downsizing?
  - Cuts in headcount & running costs
  - Change to remit with establishment of NCB
  - High levels of staff turnover and job change



## Challenges for DH II

- Success of PIRU depends on willingness of DH to explore new ways of carrying out early stages of policy making
  - scope of DH to alter its processes (e.g. greater openness) may be limited by politicians' imperatives (e.g. speed of action)
  - policy officials may not believe sufficiently in challenge value of evidence or appreciate the risks of not basing choices on evidence
  - incentives may be too weak (e.g. Capability Reviews)

# Challenges for those developing and managing pilots/innovations



- (Lack of) incentives to plan evaluation in from the start
  - time required to engage with evaluation given action orientation
- Understanding of design issues, case for experiments, need for fidelity, cost of different designs, etc.
- Trade off between optimal design and number of participant sites

# Implications for HS/PP researchers to influence at national level I



- Identify degree of likely issue polarization affecting influence of research
- Don't under-estimate the value of conceptual use of research and role in problem definition
- Pursue multiple means of influence
- Develop good understanding of institutional processes ('how we do things round here') in key agencies
- Work with analytical and policy staff in key agencies

# Implications for HS/PP researchers to influence at national level II



- Identify (and decide how/whether to affiliate with) 'coalitions' within wider 'policy communities'
- Recognize that policy influence takes time and is likely to depend on more than one research project
- Ask not just what you can do for policy makers but what the official policy agencies need to change to make the best of research
- Be aware of trade-offs between academic outputs and policy impact