Integrating Evidence and Public Engagement in Policy Work: An empirical examination of three UK policy organisations

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Abstract:

Alongside efforts to improve evidence use in policy, grassroots demands and governance-driven democratisation are informing an ever-increasing range of public engagement processes in UK policy. This article explores how these simultaneous efforts intersect within three policy organisations working at different levels of UK policy: local (Sheffield City Council), regional (Greater Manchester Combined Authority) and national (devolved) (Scottish Government). Employing documentary analysis and 51 interviews with individuals working in these organisations, we argue there are organisational similarities in approaches to evidence and engagement, including: conceiving of both 'data' (statistics tracked by internal analysts) and 'evidence' (external analysis) in primarily quantified terms; and a tendency to limit the authority of publics to advising and consulting on predefined issues. Yet, we also find growing interest in more in-depth understandings of publics (e.g. via 'lived experiences') but uncertainty about how to use these qualitative insights in settings that have institutionalised quantitative approaches to evidence. We identify four distinct responses: (1) prioritising public engagement; (2) strategically using public engagement and evidence to support policy proposals; (3) prioritising quantified evidence and data; and (4) attempting to integrate these distinct knowledge types. Surprisingly (given the organisational importance afforded to metrics), we categorised most interviewees in Cluster 4. Finally, we explore how interviewees described trying to do this kind of integration work, before reflecting on the promise and limitations of the various mechanisms that interviewees identified.

Keywords:

Evidence use; democratic; public engagement; citizens; evidence-based policymaking; policymaking; UK; EBP

1. Introduction

The past two decades have seen a resurgence in participatory visions of democracy alongside efforts to strengthen the role of evidence in policy. Yet, there have been surprisingly few attempts to explore how these potentially competing developments intersect within real world policy settings (Stewart et al, 2020). This is an important gap since both developments are intended to shape (ideally, improve) policy. Academic research is yet to explore how people working in different policy settings try (or not) to balance or integrate these diverse types of knowledge. In this paper, we aim to address precisely this gap, exploring how individuals working within three organisations at distinct levels of UK policy, describe using evidence and data, on the one hand, and insights into from public engagement, on the other.

First, we describe each organisation's approach to evidence and data, and to public engagement, arguing that there are strong similarities across organisations. Next, we explore how individuals dealt with the potential tension between these types of knowledge, identifying four distinct clusters:

(1) those who prioritise public views and experiences; (2) those who use both types of knowledge strategically, to progress policy proposals; (3) those who prioritise (usually quantified) evidence and data; and (4) those seeking to integrate these different knowledge types. Within our sample, we categorised the majority of interviewees in Cluster 4, and identify key challenges to this ambition for knowledge integration. Finally, we examine the mechanisms that interviewees described using to overcome these challenges.

The importance that most interviewees attached to knowledge integration, and the limitations of existing mechanisms for achieving this, point to a need for further work in this space. Those with expertise in collating or synthesising these different types of knowledge could usefully work with policy organisations to enhance, test and refine options to support this crucial dimension of policy work. Until such mechanisms are institutionalised, people working in policy organisations are likely to continue to face the kinds of challenges our interviewees described, making it challenging to ensure that analytic work to support policy proposals is both evidence-informed and democratically robust. That the underpinning literatures are barely connected (as we demonstrate in the next section) adds further challenges to those working to integrate different insights from evidence and public engagement.

2. Two islands of scholarship: mapping literature promoting evidence use and democratic engagement in policy

The past two decades have seen the international re-emergence of two extremely persuasive ideas: (1) that policy decisions should be 'evidence-based' (or 'evidence-informed'); and (2) that policy decisions should be supported by democratic engagement beyond structures of representative democracy. Although both ideas rest on claims (sometimes explicit, often implicit) to improve policymaking, they have developed almost entirely separately. In this section, we briefly summarise these two bodies of literature, from our perspective within the UK.

From official government commitments to 'evidence-based policy' (Cabinet Office, 1999) in the (1997-2010) New Labour era of UK policymaking, to more recent claims that the UK's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was 'led by the science' (Evans, 2022), examples of initiatives to strengthen the role of scientific evidence in UK policy abound. These efforts have stimulated a wealth of studies explicitly concerned with better understanding the relationship between research (or scientific expertise more broadly conceived) and policy, as evidenced in the pages of journals such as *Evidence & Policy* and *Implementation Science*. We suggest this literature can be categorised into three genres. The first examines the factors that enable, or prevent, the use of evidence in policy (e.g. Oliver et al, 2014; Contandriopoulos et al. 2010; Innvær et al. 2002; Mitton et al. 2007) and commonly conclude that strengthening relationships between research producers and users (e.g. via co-production) is key to increasing the use of evidence in policy. The second genre critically examines policy outputs against available evidence to assess the extent to which policies reflect evidence. Such assessments tend to find policy use of evidence is highly selective (e.g. Katikireddi et al, 2011; Naughton, 2005; Smith, 2013). For many, these findings reflect the primacy of politics in policymaking (e.g. Bambra, 2013; & Pawson, 2006), though accounts of what 'politics' constitutes are often lacking. The third genre examines how evidence and data are used in practice within policy settings (e.g. Maybin, 2016; Stevens, 2013), highlighting that evidence is often conceived of in much broader terms within policy than academia, and emphasises the importance of politics in shaping how evidence is advocated (e.g. Qureshi, 2012) and received (e.g. Stevens, 2013). There is some overlap with broader political science / policy studies analyses of policy systems and processes, experts and interest groups (e.g. Dunlop, 2014; Haas', 1992; Smith, 2013). A sub-strand within this genre, aligned with the sociology of science, emphasises the dominance of quantified data (e.g.

Steven's (2013) accounts of 'killer graphs' and Bandola-Gill's (2022) assessment of 'governing by indicators').

The second area of scholarship arises from a concern that elections provide only a limited democratic basis for policymaking and are a blunt tool for assessing public preferences about specific policy issues (Escobar and Elstub, 2019). This is on the basis they occur infrequently, cover multiple issues and are mediated by party politics, individual personalities and media coverage. These concerns have contributed to long-term fluctuations in what Warren (2009) describes as 'governance-driven democratisation'; I.e. the use of additional channels for policymakers to hear from and, less frequently, cede decision-making to, wider publics. This body of work involves studying such supplementary forms of public participation. This work has historical foundations, with Escobar and Elstub (2019) tracking a contemporary resurgence (since the 1990s) back to John Dewey in the 1930s, via a notable revival in 1960s (Pateman, 1970). This resurgence is marked by more discursive forms of participation (Escobar and Elstub, 2019), a concern with democratic legitimacy in the context of inequalities between the 'politically rich' and the 'politically poor' (Dalton, 2017) and, for some, a focus on the emancipatory potential of participation and deliberation (Lafont, 2019; Hendriks, 2012). Important critiques to consider in this area of work come from the examination of individual public participation mechanisms, including participatory budgeting (Cabannes and Lipietz, 2018), citizen juries (Smith and Wales, 2002), and other so called 'democratic innovations' (Bennett et al, 2021). Critiques include (i) a perceived failure to engage a sufficiently wide range of people (Abelson et al, 2003); (ii) requirements that participants adopt a system-oriented perspective without acknowledging the validity of their experiential expertise (Stewart, 2016); and (iii) a concern that the views of publics may run counter to available evidence (Hillier, 2003; Few et al, 2007). All three concerns are relevant to this paper but we are particularly interested in the third.

The parallel development of these two literatures is rooted in complex sub-disciplinary differences and, at the core, they reflect alternative conceptions of 'good' decision-making; one technocratic, and one democratic (Stewart et al, 2020; Henrik, 2012; Sager and Mavrot, 2021). These goals - desire to use the best available evidence in policy, and to make policy more responsive to public views and preferences - are also potentially in tension, as highlighted in Geoff Mulgan's assertion (made while he was working as a Prime Ministerial advisor) that politicians and the people they represent both 'have every right to ignore evidence' (Mulgan 2005 p.224). Growing public distrust in science further underlines the democratic challenges surrounding the fundamental idea of 'evidence-based policy' (Saltelli and Giampietro 2017 p.63; Head and Banerjee 2020). Despite apparent shared concerns, these bodies of scholarship seem not just unconnected, but potentially in conflict.

3. Methods

This paper explores these (dis)connections, drawing on a larger collaboration in which researchers are working with policy organisations to understand the interdependencies between health and economic policies, with the aim of developing decision-support tools that take a complex systems approach. Our nested qualitative project examines: (i) the role and value of different types of evidence within diverse policy settings; and (ii) existing mechanisms for understanding public views within the same policy settings. In this section we describe the three case study policy organisations and provide an overview of our methods.

3.1 Case study organisations

The policy organisations in our sample reflect three levels of policy making within the UK; local authority, mayoral combined authority and national (devolved) government. The organisations vary by size, policy powers and geographical scope, thus presenting an opportunity to explore different policy contexts in which evidence, data and public engagement are utilised.

- Sheffield City Council is a long-standing local authority which, since 2013 has been responsible for the public health of the local population as well as housing, transport, adult education, children and families and local business strategy. It was led by the left-of-centre Labour Party from 2011-2021 but the recent election resulted in a co-operative administration, led by Labour and the Green Party.
- The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) was established in 2011, formalising existing policy coordination between the 10 local authorities in the area. In 2013, the so-called 'Devo-Manc' deal was signed, which devolved key powers from Whitehall (London) to GMCA (Kenealy, 2016). In 2017, Andy Burnham (Labour) was the first Mayor was elected, he was re-elected in 2021. Areas of responsibility include transport, housing, planning and policing.
- The Scottish Government is a national government with powers that have been devolved by the UK government, from 1999 onwards, which include health, education, transport and, increasingly, some areas of the economy and social welfare. The Scottish Government has been led by the Scottish National Party since 2007, and entered a power-sharing agreement with the Scottish Green Party following 2021 elections.

There are notable (intersecting) health, social and economic inequalities within each of these populations which all three organisations have made commitments to reducing (e.g. GMCA, 2022; Scottish Government, 2021; Sheffield City Council, 2021). Our research is part of a larger project, therefore, while the focus of this paper is on policy perspectives on public engagement and evidence use, broadly conceived, interviewees were primarily working on specific policy areas summarised in the fourth column of Table 1.

3.2 Data collection

The paper reports an analysis of 51 semi-structured interviews, 37 of which were conducted between October 2019 and February 2020 (Round One), with a further 14 taking place between October 2020 and January 2021 (Round Two). Of these, 41 interviews were undertaken by author 1 and 10 by author 2.

Table 1: Number of interviews per policy organisation

Policy Organisation	No. of round 1 interviewees (No. of people approached)	No. of round 2 interviewees (No. of people approached)	Policy Areas
Sheffield City Council	13 (14)	4 (5) 1 follow up, 3 new	Health
			Transport
Greater Manchester Combined Authority	8 (9)	4 (9) 3 follow up, 1 new	Employability and Skills
			Planning
Scottish Government	16 (21)	6 (12) 3 follow up, 3 new	

Total	37 (44)	14 (26)	Economic development
	51 (70) *interviews with 44 individuals (including 7 repeat interviews)*		

The interviewees represented a range of policies areas (see table) and levels of seniority, there were a variety of specific job roles that included research, policy and analysis. None of the interviewees had the specific remit of public engagement within their work. To supplement our analysis of these interview data, authors 1 and 2 both undertook short placements at GMCA and SCC (plans for a placement at the Scottish Government were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and so additional interviews were undertaken instead), during which time they compiled fieldnotes. Author 1 examined the interview data and fieldwork notes to identify the various public engagement mechanisms being used, and author 3 checked and supplemented this information via online searches. We were able to categorise public engagement mechanisms, using a framework we describe below (see Table 2).

3.3 Data analysis

All interview transcripts were read by author 1, who drafted a thematic coding framework, further refined after discussion with author 2. The full transcripts were coded to identify multiple themes relating to the broader project. For the purposes of this paper, this was followed by more focused analysis of the data relating to codes concerned with views of public engagement and, separately, evidence use. In this way, the analysis combined both inductive and theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) and from this process we formed a preliminary hypothesis that there would be three clusters of views. We tabulated individual responses to assess the data to explore our hypothesis and, working separately, authors 1 and 2 identified a fourth type and categorised each individual to a 'type' before meeting to compare results. There were high levels of agreement and we were able to discuss and find consensus on areas of disagreement.

To analyse the public engagement mechanisms we used a predefined analytical framework, informed by existing work, summarised in table 2 (Fung, 2006; Elstub and Escobar, 2019; Rowe and Frewer, 2016). Combining these approaches allowed us to represent the full variety and range of all parts of the processes we identified.

Table 2: Analytical Categories used for coding public engagement mechanisms

Category	Options
Which citizens?	self-selection, sortition, purposive selection, election or hybrid
Which knowledge?	service user, general public, stakeholder (ie aggregated specialist knowledge)
Mode of participation	observing, listening, discursive expression, voting, survey response, deliberating
Response mode	Open (including narrative) or closed
Policy process	Agenda-setting, proposal appraising (eg where options presented), evaluative (feedback)

Decision Making	no decision required (advisory), decision via aggregation of preferences, decision through bargaining, decision through deliberation, hybrid
Authority and Power	communicative influence, advice & consult, co-governance, direct authority
Timescales	One-off/snapshot, defined time period, standing/permanently ongoing
Relationship to policy organisation	Direct, indirect

4. Findings

We begin by describing organisational approaches to evidence and data, and to public engagement. Given the differences between the three policy organisations (see above), we anticipated that we would identify distinct organisational approaches. However our analysis instead suggested similar key features across the three organisations, but with important differences arising between individual interviewees. Therefore, in section 4.3, we conceive of clusters of individuals who take similar approaches across distinct policy settings. The language we use throughout this findings section reflects that of our interviewees. Hence, although public engagement can generate quantitative data, and 'evidence' and 'data' can be qualitative, there is an assumption within our data that insights from public engagement tend to be qualitative, while 'evidence' and 'data' are primarily conceived of in quantitative terms. We revisit these assumptions in the concluding section.

4.1 The primacy of quantitative methods and the value of endorsement

Ideas around 'evidence' and 'data' were driven by the value and prominence given to quantitative methods, data and analysis. This was evident across the interviews and in author 1's fieldnotes, written while on placement in GMCA and SCC:

> In both settings I was overwhelmed by the amount of quantitative knowledge, jargon, discussion there was. At one point I overheard (though didn't understand!) a well-meaning but slightly heated discussion about various analyses that could be run and the pros and cons of each. On another occasion there was loud discussion across the open plan office about a public health article that had just been published. It seems that no one in the office was very impressed by the way the authors had 'run the numbers' and suggested that if you looked hard enough you could make the numbers say whatever you want. […] In both policy settings, it seems that numbers and stats are key. There was lots of talk, both formally and informally, about the importance of quantitative indicators. […] The development of particular frameworks and dashboards to track changes and assess progress is an endeavour that is taken very seriously.

The above extract describes the way that knowledge and language was shared, analysed and debated across the organisations. While on placement, we often had to ask clarifying questions regarding terms, acronyms and assumptions to understand this kind of tacit policy knowledge, revealing organisational approaches that institutionalised a primarily quantitative conceptualisation of evidence and data. This has been described by Lorenc et al (2014) as a 'culture of evidence'. This

was elucidated in the ways that interviewees frequently referred to quantitative evidence and data, even though our questions had not specified a quantitative focus, as the following extracts illustrate:

> *'Very helpfully, my colleague who sits next to me has got her finger on the pulse of all things data and produces a quarterly economic monitor, economic updates. So they review all the latest statistics and use ONS and various other datasets. So they then write a report about direction of travel, things that have gone up or down and how we're performing relative to other places.'* (Interviewee 7, Sheffield)

> *'[T]he larger scale something is with more of a kind of sound evaluation framework around it, the more likely I am to believe it… so something that's got a decent… sample size. Ideally somewhere where there's some kind of counter factual if at all possible.'* (Interviewee 19, Greater Manchester)

> *'I mean labour market stats […], they've all been through a tremendously rigorous process before they publish them. […] In terms of data, you're always looking for something that has some kind of quality safeguards… attached to it.'* (Interviewee 41, Scotland)

Further, we noted that 'data' was generally used to refer to routinely collected quantified data that weres analysed *internally,* while 'evidence' tended to denote *externally* produced/sourced analysis of quantitative data. 'Data' were continually tracked by policy analysts, to the extent that one interviewee in GMCA described '*data dashboards'* as *'the new bible'* within GMCA (Interviewee 17, Manchester), whilst 'evidence' was often only actively sought to address gaps in policy knowledge:

> *'There's discussions that take place where people will say, 'well, that's great but what about the impact on x or y?' And I know officers will then have to go and find further evidence or information to support that…'* (Interviewee 11, Sheffield)

When considering the role and value of evidence, it was clear that endorsement aided policy traction. In some cases, endorsement was symbolic in that it was evidence from sources perceived to have high organisational credibility, whereas other examples involved analytical colleagues vouching for the quality:

> *'[T]here are some think tank sources which we'll probably go to [gives examples], [which are] doing quite authoritative reports on key issues. So I tend to use those as well, where they're recognised accredited sources...'* (Interviewee 10, Sheffield)

> *'So there's that dynamic around about, the question around about the credibility of the evidence base that sits underneath that [external evidence] […] If we could look at the data sources that have been used and using our own analysts…'* (Interviewee 40, Scotland)

4.2 Quantitative public engagement and the need for qualitative insights

A key feature of the way in which the three policy organisations undertook public engagement was a tendency to focus on mechanisms where the authority and power given to public engagement is limited to that of advice or consultation on a pre-defined issue (see appendix 1), positioning the policy organisations as open to public views, while ensuring they retain decision-making powers (Fung, 2006; Elstub and Escobar, 2019). This reflects our interview data in that many interviewees valued public engagement as a way to ensure that they could gain the support of the public on particular decision in order to advance particular policy options, rather than to set the policy agenda:

> *'You can't underestimate how important that [public engagement in the policy process] is. I think that for a variety of reasons, not least because if it's not supported or if it's not*

something that people believe we should be doing then we're not going to get anywhere.' (Interviewee 11, Sheffield).

'we don't have legislative powers in this area. So even if we thought that was a good way of making change happen, […] we can't do it. So [...] apart from using our... convening powers of government and our spending power, all of the kind of change has got to come from other people making changes […] So it's absolutely essential that we have a dialogue with the public around what we're trying, yeah, where policy is heading.' (Interviewee 28, Scotland)

The lack of power given to the public can also be viewed more strategically, with one participant reflecting that public bodies *'can at times be guilty of using it to kind of justify a course of action already decided on.'* (Interviewee 18, Greater Manchester).

A second feature was a reliance on surveys for gaining insights into public views (see Appendix 1). Surveys tend to be tightly controlled formats focusing on quantity, rather than quality, of responses (Rowe and Frewer, 2005). This is unsurprising given the organisational preoccupation with quantitative data and evidence (see 4.1) however, our data capture dissatisfaction with depth of insights provided by these commonly used tools of public engagement, and a desire to gain more qualitative insights (e.g. interviewees made references to the value of 'lived experiences'):

'I also am a great believer in the fact that numbers don't tell us everything, so actually I spend a lot of time trying to get actual real life experiences of people. And I think if you only focus on numbers you don't get the real life - this is how it is' (Interviewee 8, Sheffield)

However, whilst lived experiences were seen as powerful sources of information, there was uncertainty around how these kinds of qualitative insights could be integrated in policy analysis, in settings in which evidence and data were primarily thought of as quantitative.

'I think there's an interesting question around what counts as evidence […] So we're hearing a lot just now in health and elsewhere around lived experience and the importance of lived experience in developing collaborative interventions. But what counts as evidence for lived experience? So I don't think you would disagree with the principle of it, but I'm not sure that our methodologies are equipped, you know, I'm not sure that we're equipped to do that in a way that we're confident about.' (Interviewee 32, Scotland)

Interviewees' reflections on the limitations of commonly used forms of public engagement, combined with their sense that it was difficult to integrate qualitative, lived experience data into institutionalised organisational approaches to evidence, perhaps explain why all three policy organisations had begun to experiment with alternative forms of public engagement. As we discuss later (in section 4.4 - see also Appendix 1), this included more deliberative forms of public engagement, bringing members of the public into conversation with researchers and policymakers offering the potential to facilitate dialogue between insights from evidence and insights from public engagement.

4.3 Balancing evidence and engagement: Four clusters of views

Beyond the high-level organisational approaches described above, we found variations in individual preferences for navigating this potential divide. Our analysis led us to identify four clusters of approach, informed by the analytic categories in Table 2. The following paragraphs describe each cluster in turn. As described in the methods section, these were distinct groupings and it was clear how each individual aligned with a specific cluster. As context, Figure 1 shows the number of interviewees in each cluster, distinguished by policy organisation. Our sampling prevents us from

extrapolating the findings to insights about the extent to which individuals may shift between clusters depending on their specific organisational roles or policy decision being made. However, it is clear from Figure 1 that cluster 4 was the most common across all three organisations and was particularly prominent in the Scottish Government.

Figure 1: Distribution of interviewees by cluster and organisation
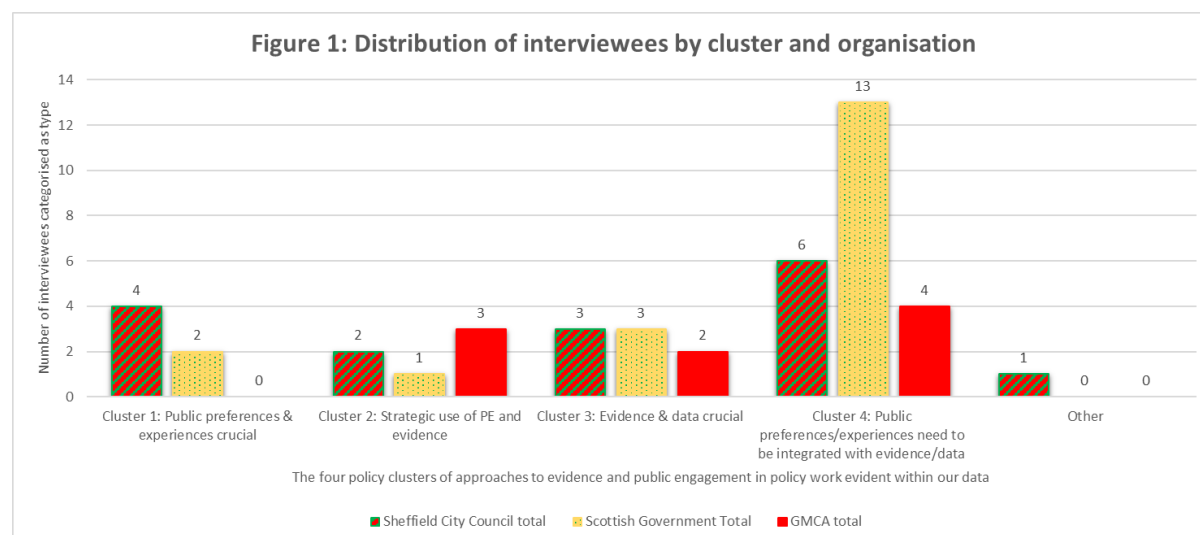
4.3.1 Public Engagement as foundational

The individuals we placed in Cluster 1 described public engagement as foundational to policymaking, a matter of principle and a means of improving the quality of policies. One interviewee, for example, claimed that policies informed by strong public engagement were '*invariably stronger, better thought through and more likely to be executed*' (Interviewee 6, Sheffield). This cluster particularly valued public engagement mechanisms that incorporated deliberative modes of participation, appeared to be keen on public engagement across the whole policy process, and often came across as committed to ensuring different (especially lesser heard) voices were captured. For example:

> '*We've got to speak to individuals with lived experience of how the labour market is operating, because as civil servants we have a, the nature of our job is very different to how most people experience work - it's very secure, there's lots of progression opportunities, pay is very transparent and this is not generally, for lots of people that's not their experience. So it's important that we're hearing that from individuals*' (Interviewee 28, Scotland)

Several Cluster 1 interviewees provided examples of public engagement challenging policy assumptions and informing decisions to change plans (e.g. insights from rural communities leading to a particular policy proposal being dropped). Others gave examples of policy decisions that they felt could have been improved with more public engagement (e.g. what to prioritise in the context of austerity cuts).

Within the context of organisations that primarily value quantitative evidence and data, several Cluster 1 interviewees described their efforts to develop public engagement as 'personal' commitments, rather than organisational responsibilities. One interviewee described their role as '*banging the drum internally*' (Interviewee 6, Sheffield) to challenge organisational practices they viewed as tokenistic to promote deeper forms of engagement, involving the public much earlier in decision-making processes. Another had been supporting members of their team to spend time

working in, and getting to know, different parts of the community and said that an ideal working scenario would involve a 'mobile office', to normalise community immersion.

Cluster 1 (who were, after all, working within organisations in which quantitative data are valued) described using quantitative evidence and data in their day-to-day work, albeit with an eye to potential limitations:

> *'The quantitative stuff is useful if I need to… evidence something at a high level […] but if we were saying, right, we want to do a project around supporting vulnerable people on the street, then we wouldn't find what we needed in that national stuff'* (Interviewee 5, Sheffield)

4.3.2 Strategic use of public engagement, evidence and data

In contrast, Cluster 2 interviewees gave accounts of policymaking that suggested they were primarily politically and strategically orientated. For these interviewees, public engagement, credible evidence and data were viewed as vital tools that could be deployed to build consensus, educate and persuade publics, stakeholders and policy actors about the merits of particular proposals:

> *'[It's about] tapping into public sentiment, but it's also about encouraging it and it's also about helping create a consensus that that is the way that we need to go […] It's trying to actively maintain a political consensus.'* (Interviewee 21, Greater Manchester)

Cluster 2 interviewees described adapting their use of evidence and data for different audiences, or curating multiple sources to stories that would be compelling to diverse audiences. For example*:*

> *'[You have to] have a conversation with different audiences, you have to present that data or evidence in a different way depending on what it is and what perspective they're coming from. […] It's just about understanding and taking a step back and asking the question, 'what will these people be asking? What's in it for me?' You know, and then just think that way. It's almost like psychologically profiling the organisation or the group beforehand to understand, what it is that's going to be ticking their boxes?'* (Interviewee 23, Greater Manchester).

> *'You learn the art of persuasion, I suppose, but in a subtle way. If you go in and say, 'you must do this and the evidence says you have to,' you'll just get the door slammed in your face. It doesn't work like that: you have to go around it, you have to go under it, you have to find more subtle ways. It's how you use it… it's how you frame it. It's why I said before, it's not just the numbers, it's how you then tell the story of that and make it, it's about making it compelling,'* (Interviewee 1, Sheffield)

In light of this, Cluster 2 interviewees valued having a wide range of public engagement, data and evidence from which to draw. Their accounts reflect Weiss' (1979) 'political model' of research utilization, with public engagement serving as an educative process with no authority or power. These interviewees were keen to highlight that policy developments which did not achieve (or maintain) adequate support were destined to fail:

> *'You can't underestimate how important that [public engagement] is. I think that for a variety of reasons, not least because if it's not supported or if it's not something that people believe we should be doing then we're not going to get anywhere.* (Interviewee 11, Sheffield)

> *'[I]t's… about helping create a consensus that that is the way that we need to go, otherwise it's gridlock'* (interviewee 21, Greater Manchester)

4.3.3 Quantified evidence and data as vital

Cluster 3 individuals were clear that quantified evidence and data are the ideal basis of policy. Individuals in this cluster recounted working to produce the best possible syntheses of available evidence and data to inform policy discussions and decisions in an instrumental way:

> '[W]e integrate data into that to show the impact of different options and therefore help [members] understand why we are recommending or highlighting a particular option […] In terms of […] [specific policy strategy] we had a big trawl for evidence to build the evidence-base in a library to underpin that strategy. […] I'm not suggesting [members] would necessarily look at the evidence, that's kind of our job to do that, to synthesise that so that […] they can then adopt, amend or otherwise.' (Interviewee 3, Sheffield)

Cluster 3 interviewees acknowledged the political nature of policymaking and evidence use but made a clear distinction between their objective work to analyse and synthesise data, and the politically informed nature of the decisions made by others. Some interviewees in this cluster questioned the role and value of public engagement in terms of the validity and relevance of the information generated, with one interviewee offering an example of insight from public engagement that was deemed not useful as it appeared to ignore a necessary trade-off:

> 'I guess a preference would be for low taxation […] but people also want great services, fantastic NHS, great schools and stuff. These two can't be reconciled, they just can't. So there has to be a much more robust, I think, approach [than public engagement]' (Interviewee 41, Scotland)

Questioning the value of public engagement is evident in adversarial approaches (Greer et al 2020) and agonistic modes of participation (Dean 2019), in which there is significant distrust of participation processes. For many Cluster 3 interviewees, distrust stemmed from a concern with generating 'robust' data in line with organisational approaches to evidence and data.

4.3.4 Integrators of public engagement, evidence and data

Finally, the interviewees we categorised in Cluster 4 described working to integrate quantified data and evidence with qualitative insights from public engagement. Their accounts of the ideal approach to developing policy involved being able to combine robust, up-to-date data for key policy indicators with information about public views, drawn from public engagement processes. For example:

> 'I think we need to fundamentally move away from just looking at data to really building in qualitative evidence as well, building in those stories, people's experiences and really understand why those data looks the way it does and actually start using a combination of both for that and I think that's the place where we need to be.' (Interviewee 26, Scotland)

> 'I think that combination of public voice and engagement alongside having that robust evidence base is where we will always start...' (Interviewee 10, Sheffield)

Across all three organisations, there were interviewees who suggested that the push to do more public engagement and to provide deeper and more useful insights, was being promoted at a senior level of the organisation and Cluster 4 interviewees were supportive of this shift. For example:

> 'I think public engagement is really important and isn't necessarily built into everything that we do in a meaningful way. I think it's one of those things where there was always a desire to do more of it, but... my sense is that the Mayor [Andy Burnham] has really pushed it.' (Interviewee 19, Greater Manchester)

> *'[W]ithin any policy space [public engagement is] essential. […] So in terms of the design, this is a philosophy, a government thing about what we're here to do. But I think if you're going to be doing things, you should be doing it with people for people, rather than doing it to people. And I think you'll get better results. Again, where a lot of things really fall down is [a] really good idea, but they don't think about how it actually plays out in reality. [...] So by taking that partnership approach what we're trying to do is manage that, at least get a dialogue.'* (Interviewee 29, Scotland)

Multiple reasons were given for ensuring policy decisions were informed by public engagement, from understanding the how implementation was likely to impact different groups (as above) to the acknowledging that 'soft power' can only be deployed if *'you engage with the public or at the very least the world outside of the public sector'* (Interviewee 17, Greater Manchester). In many ways, the accounts of Cluster 4 interviewees overlapped with those within Cluster 1 but with two important distinctions. First, Cluster 4 interviewees' accounts of the reasons for undertaking public engagement were generally more pragmatic (in contrast with Cluster 1 interviewees who viewed public engagement as a foundational principle of policymaking). Second, Cluster 4 interviewees consistently placed a strong emphasis on quantified data and evidence in their policy work, a characteristic that was more pronounced in Round 2 interviews, as a result of the COVID-19 context, as the following extract illustrates:

> *'Data's been the world for the last few months. You know, there's constant flows of case numbers, how many people are in hospitals, through to broader metrics around how many people are off ill in local authorities, how many bin collections have taken place on time, wider things as well. I think we've seen a real value of having data and having a sort of dashboard of key metrics around.'* (Interviewee 17, Greater Manchester)

The major challenge articulated by Cluster 4 interviewees, as we explore further in section 4.4, was identifying ways of effectively integrating the qualitative insights from public engagement work with the more quantified evidence and data they were utilising.

4.4 Efforts to integrate qualitative insights with quantified data

All three policy organisations were considering ways to integrate insights from public engagement with more commonly used quantitative evidence and data. This was often described in terms of a desire to close the '*separation between the qualitative and the quantitative*' (Interviewee 5, Sheffield, Cluster 1). There was also a consistent theme around the need to identify ways to make the best possible use of both types of insights. For example, Interviewee 6 (Sheffield, Cluster 1) expressed concern as to '*whether we are routinely using [public engagement mechanisms] and making the best use of the evidence that comes out of the back end of that*', reflecting, *'I'm not always sure we're good at triangulating all of that stuff and making sense of it all, because that's quite a skill really*.'

Of the four clusters outlined above, both Clusters 1 and 4 articulated a desire for ways of better integrating quantitative evidence and data with qualitative insights generated through public engagement work. This was by far the majority of interviewees overall and a clear majority within two of the three organisations we examined (see Figure 1). In this section, we describe the various ways in which each organisation was attempting to improve integration, including more recent experimentation with new approaches.

The most common approach in our data was to undertake public engagement and evidence analysis separately but to try to bring the results together within single outputs (e.g. reports and briefings).

This relies on different knowledge types being sufficiently aligned for single outputs to be able to make sense of any differences arising. In some cases, interviewees suggested that this could be incredibly powerful. For example:

> '[T]he thing that makes the most difference is, you've got good quantitative data, you tell a really compelling story and it fits with what your local politicians want, full stop. If you can tick those three, you're quids in.' (Interviewee 1, Sheffield)

> 'You'll meet people who... all they're interested in is saying, 'give me the bottom line, tell me about the finances, the numbers behind it'. You'll... also meet others who are more interested in the narrative behind it. I think there's something here about, I see my role throughout about trying to find that balance between the two of them.' (Interviewee 44, Scotland)

However, where quantitative evidence and data and public insights were not in agreement, or where these two sources explored different dimensions of an issue, interviewees suggested bringing these contrasting knowledge types together in a single output was not necessarily useful.

A second approach focused on finding ways to make the quantified data and evidence being used in policy settings accessible to members of the public:

> 'We're also trying to put more of that evidence onto a website so that people can access it more easily. So we're not just about just tracking against our early years metric, but actually somebody who's a resident or an interested party could go on and see how we're doing on early years and find that information more easily. So I feel like that's quite important for people to get more accessible information. [...] I think it is really important that we have that public facing offer as well.' (Interviewee 22, Greater Manchester)

This approach, while aligning well with a broader push for more 'open government data' (Attard et al, 2015) is limited since it disseminates data but does not (in itself) generate dialogue with public views.

A third approach involved making use of methods that are well-established within economics to quantify public preferences (e.g. Lanscar et al, 2020). This data can then inform future orientated policy analysis, such as scenario and economic modelling, both of which were being used in the organisations we studied. The following interviewee was unusual within our data in being particularly enthusiastic about this approach:

> 'We have to have an understanding about what the public think we should be doing. So [specific research project working to translate public preferences into quantitative data] is really important - understanding how people think about wellbeing, what trade-offs they might be willing to make, given that we know the different things that we might be able to do will involve trade-offs and opportunity costs.' (Interviewee 11, Sheffield)

A more common view from Cluster 4 interviewees was hesitancy about quantification noting that this approach fails to provide the insights into lived experiences that many were seeking. For example:

> '[Q]uantification is a huge challenge in that [...] ultimately, if you want to make a real conversation you need to be comparing apples with apples. And I think if we made a broad as possible understanding of the economy, it's not just apples and oranges, it's apples, oranges, bananas, pears, grapefruit, etc. And also some of it just isn't quantifiable. Some of it

is about lived experience and how it feels, which you just can't put a number on. And that is, I think, a challenge.' (Interviewee 2, Sheffield)

The fourth approach involved creating (and sometimes facilitating) dialogue between different stakeholders in ways that draw in a wide variety of evidence and deliberative forums. One example that was cited several times was the Poverty and Inequality Commission, set up by Scottish Government and consisting of academics, third sector practitioners and people with lived experience of poverty and inequality. The Commission committed to using both statistical and testimonial evidence to 'inform, scrutinise and monitor' (Poverty and Inequality Commission, 2022) and was described by an interviewee as *'quite a powerful group,'* able to *'hold our feet to the fire'* (Interviewee 37, Scotland). Other examples included forums that allow policy organisations to take data and *e*vidence driven proposals to publics for discussion and deliberation. For example, at the time of the interviews, Sheffield City Council were hoping to convene a citizen's assembly (plans subsequently disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic) and there was hope that this would bring an *'evidence based, dialogue based technique'* to the complex policy issue of climate change (Interviewee 6, Sheffield). The prospect of running a citizens' assembly prompted reflections on how to use evidence and data to enable meaningful public engagement whilst retaining a sense of robustness:

> *'[T]his is about trying to get information that is shareable, open source, that we can use in the Citizens' Assembly […] but the flip of that is that if people are then saying, 'well, come on, show me the real data,' so that we can go behind it and actually we've got the detail […] And then when we've done that and if they've made that choice, [...] we can go to choice B and say, 'right well, behind all of this we've got the more detail around what we need to do, and we can quickly then move that into implementation'.' (*Interviewee 11, Sheffield)

The above interviewee described giving significant thought to the types and presentation of data that might work best to inform assembly discussions. Similarly, in Scotland the climate assembly (which presented their report to Scottish Government in June 2021 (Scotland's Climate Assembly, 2021) had prompted reflections on the potential learning from this initiative:

> *'[T]here's a lot of learning, first time Scotland's done that, so certainly not got it all right the first time […] But I think there's again quite a lot of interest in the ways in which citizens assemblies or mini publics can be used more for a range of issues. And there's, and I think civil servants also are really recognising that the traditional tools of working in hierarchies, rating policy, isn't what's needed to address some of the issues going forward. So there's recognition that the role is changing and much more engagement with stakeholders and communities. So I think this is an area of work that will certainly grow and will need an academic and theoretical basis to make sure it doesn't grow into a post-truth type of activity with lots of individual stories being taken as the basis for making decisions.'* (Interviewee 32, Scotland)

The above extract presents a common concern: while there is a clear desire to facilitate public engagement, and to create dialogue around quantitative evidence and data, there remains a concern about what to do where public views and other forms of evidence disagree. The same interviewee also described Assembly outputs as providing a new, *'under-utilised set of data and evidence that needs to be integrated with the other sorts of intelligences that we have'.* In other words, deliberative forums did not necessarily result in integration in the way that Cluster 4 interviewees hoped. Despite concerns about the time and resources required (King and Wilson,

2022), there is clear support within our sample to continue exploring dialogue-based approaches to integration of different forms of data and evidence.

The key challenge to integration described in interviews, is how ideas about qualitative insights from public engagement appear in tension with embedded assumptions about what constitutes 'science', 'evidence' and 'data'. For example, in the following extract an interviewee describes a creative method of public engagement but seemed uncertain how to use the outputs:

> '[I]*t's not a sort of robust data gathering exercise but we will bring back what people have told us. So we take out maps of Scotland and get people to draw how they expect the future to look or where the development opportunities are or... where they want to see stuff built in the future. And we do that with young people, we did it with Youth Parliament […] We did take all the maps as well, basically hand drawn maps, and then hand drew kind of a synthesis of the maps as well. And we were able to show hand drawn maps and then what our strategy map was and sort of tell the story of that. It's not a science, it's more of an art. It's not an exact quantitative analysis in any way*.' (Interviewee 43, Scotland) [Our underline]

Overall, our findings suggest that all three policy organisations are trying to develop ways to meaningfully connect qualitative insights about public views, with more commonly used quantitative data, and the majority of interviewees were supportive of this. However, while each of the approaches we identified offer distinctive benefits, we did not identify a means of integration that was considered sufficiently 'robust', given the organisational priority given to quantitative data that occurred alongside efforts to better understand 'lived experiences'. This reflects findings from other studies (Smith-Merry, 2020) and points to the need for further experimentation.

5. Concluding discussion

Efforts to improve evidence use in policy have developed simultaneously to an ever-increasing range of public engagement processes within UK policy. While these parallel movements ostensibly have a shared goal of improving policy, both existing scholarly literature and the data described in this paper, suggest that the integration of knowledge from public engagement and from traditional evidence is an under-explored practical dilemma for policy actors. In this paper we explore how these simultaneous efforts intersect within three policy organisations in the UK. We describe organisational approaches to evidence and data, on the one hand, and public engagement on the other, arguing that there are marked similarities across the three organisations. These similarities involve conceiving of evidence and data in primarily quantitative terms, while seeking to gain more in-depth, qualitative insights into public views. These two approaches do not align easily and our findings show that individuals are often keen, but uncertain, about approaches to combine these different knowledge types.

The challenges of working at the intersection of these two approaches is reflected in the associated academic scholarship concerning evidence-based policy making and public engagement, which also sit separately, each with its own philosophical foundations, empirical insights and practical tools (Stewart et al, 2020). Despite these challenges, most of the interviewees in our sample were actively seeking to better integrate qualitative and quantitative insights within policy processes. Our analysis suggests that this is a complex challenge. As others have demonstrated, the qualitative outputs of public engagement work are often judged using hierarchies of evidence more suited to quantitative research, leading to concerns about rigour and validity (e.g. Pallett, 2020). There is further complexity caused by the definitional conflation of public engagement with qualitative data whilst also relying on surveys and closed approaches to public engagement (as illustrated in appendix 1).

Our data suggests that none of the approaches cited appear to be working well for the majority of interviewees. Hence, there is a clear and promising avenue for future research to further explore (and even develop) mechanisms to support the integration of these two forms of knowledge. This is likely to involve bringing together, and learning from, the separate literatures and practices that have developed around efforts to strengthen public policy via evidence and data, on the one hand, and public engagement on the other (Stewart et al, 2020). This paper posits the existence of two distinct epistemic communities in this area, with foundational differences in internalised goals and preferences. For example, Hendriks [2012] identifies the "intensification" of politics where participatory evaluation is undertaken: likely to be deeply uncomfortable to those trained and experienced in more technocratic styles of policy work. Ideas of co-production may be of use here, but given the variety of ways this term is used across disciplinary fields (Bandola-Gill et al, 2022) there needs to be targeted efforts to understand and bridge the significant differences that are likely to limit integration of learning emerging from either community. While no simple task, the potential rewards of reconciling policy grounded in robust evidence of effectiveness, with policy that is responsive to the views of the population it services, are considerable.

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Appendix: Table to show analytical categorisation of public engagement mechanisms within policy organisations

Policy organisation	Mechanism	Which citizens?	Which knowledge?	Mode of participation	Response mode	Policy process	Decision making	Authority and power	Timescales	Direct/ Indirect
SCC	The Big City Conversation	Self-selection	General public	Survey	Unclear	Agenda-setting	No decision required	Advice & Consult	One-off/ Snapshot	Direct
SCC	Equality Hubs Network	Purposive selection	Stakeholder	Discursive expression	Open	All	No decision required	Advice & Consult	Standing	Direct
SCC	Citizens Assembly	Hybrid	General public	Deliberating	Open	Agenda-setting	Unclear	Unclear	Defined time-period	Direct
SCC	Sheffield Business Response Survey	Purposive selection	Stakeholder	Survey	Unclear	Agenda-setting	No decision required	Advice & Consult	One-off/ Snapshot	Direct
SCC	Consultations Hub	Self-selection	All	Survey	Unclear	All	No decision required	Advice & Consult	Mixed	Direct
GMCA	Deliberative workshops on Bus Franchising	Purposive selection	General public	Deliberating	Open	Proposal setting and Evaluative	Unclear	Unclear	One-off	Indirect
GMCA	Youth Combined Authority	Purposive selection	Stakeholder	Discursive expression	Open	All	Unclear/ Varied	Unclear/ Varied	Standing	Direct

GMCA	Consultations Hub	Self-selection	All	Survey	Unclear	All	No decision required	Advice & Consult	Mixed	Direct
GMCA	Good Employment Charter- co design	Self-selection	Stakeholder	Discursive expression	Open	All	Unclear	Advice & Consult	Defined time-period	Direct
SG	Citizens Assembly	Purposive selection	General public	Deliberating	Open	Agenda-setting	Unclear	Unclear	Defined time-period	Direct
SG	Consultations Hub	Self-selection	All	Survey	Unclear	All	No decision required	Advice & Consult	Mixed	Direct
SG	Poverty Truth Commission	Purposive selection	Stakeholder (lived experience)	Discursive expression	Open	All	No decision required	Advice & Consult	Defined time-period	Indirect
SG	Poverty and Inequality Commission	Purposive selection	Stakeholder (including lived experience)	Unclear	Unclear	All	No decision required	Advice & Consult	Standing	Indirect
SG	Engagement in relation to planning policy	Self-selection	General public	Discursive expression	Open	Agenda-setting	No decision required	Advice & Consult	One-off	Direct