

Be clear, concise and direct

When communicating evidence, findings and recommendations should be clear and concise ([footnote 1](#)), with discussion kept short to avoid overwhelming the audience with information and complexity ([footnote 2](#)). Language used should be selected to match the knowledge base of the audience and common terms and phrases should be prioritised over jargon ([footnote 3](#)). Many recommendations suggest evidence generators aim for the “general but not ignorant” reader ([footnote 4](#)). Providing quick summaries and take-aways can aid comprehension ([footnote 5](#)). A closely related principle is to be visual. Evidence users get frustrated with the use of jargon, inaccessible language and impractical length. If documents are long you should include an executive summary and consider creating a short briefing version, or other accessible format.

Depending on the kind of formats you decide to present your evidence in, you might want to consider employing the services of a professional editor along with professional design services to improve the clarity of your message.

“It’s incredibly important when speaking with community groups on the ground that evidence generators are clear and concise and able to communicate effectively in layperson’s terms. This can be very powerful in getting the message across.” – Business and Community Leader

“Guidelines and evidence tend to be boring and complicated.” – Foodbank Manager

Another frustration is inconsistent and/or indirect findings. Some users also feel that evidence would be easier to understand, as well as perceived as more credible and less conflicting, if evidence generators (and specifically academics) were more direct about results and recommendations. For example, when asked a yes or no question such as ‘should we eat locally’, they should provide a yes or no response rather than providing too much subjectivity and detail. However, this is challenging when evidence addresses complex topics, or where the evidence base is not yet established, and some users may prefer findings to be kept neutral, rather than generators advocating for a particular conclusion or course of action.

Clarity on Definitions: the case of Sustainable Diets

An illustration of the challenge of providing clear, concise and direct evidence is sustainable diets. While the health dimension of healthy sustainable diets is broadly agreed, there is no single definition for what it means to have a ‘sustainable’ diet. Defining sustainable diets is addressed in Appendix C. For evidence users this is a big barrier to adoption; they want more clear, decisive evidence on what is meant by a ‘sustainable diet’ and how to achieve this. Clear guidance and actions for how to achieve sustainable diets and shift consumer choices are also considered a barrier to action: for example, how do you measure the complex issues of sustainability (for example, carbon footprint, water consumption, soil degradation, pesticide use, etc.) as a whole and how do you effectively communicate that information to the consumer? ([footnote 6](#))

Make practical actions obvious

To ensure your evidence is adopted to change practice, being clear about what practical actions need to happen is fundamental. These actions may appear blindingly obvious to an evidence generator who has spent months researching a topic and thinking about how it could have policy ‘impact’, but not to the evidence user themselves. Recommendations around ‘more evidence is

needed' are often viewed as unhelpful. If more evidence is needed, be specific about what evidence and how it will help. Making practical actions explicit is particularly important when providing evidence to practitioners, who want clear recommended actions on what to do here and now (backed up with evidence on why the recommended action should be taken). For example, dieticians reading the 'One Blue Dot' resources on healthy and sustainable diets from their professional body, the British Dietetics Association, wanted to see practical resources such as meal swap ideas, inexpensive plant based meals, and fast food/takeaway options. Developing these kinds of recommendations requires understanding the user.

Making policy recommendations: a fine balance between demonstrating relevance and demonstrating naivety

Researchers should be cautious about uninformed or naive recommendations. In a paper reflecting on how scientists can provide the most effective policy advice, the UK Chief Medical Officer and former departmental chief scientist Sir Chris Whitty says researchers should not feel the need to spell out policy implications, arguing that "this may sound counter-intuitive, but many good scientific papers are let down by simplistic, grandiose or silly policy implications sections". This sentiment is echoed in the evidence reviews on what works for bridging research and policy, which recommend researchers are "humble, courteous, professional, and recognise the limits to their skills when giving policy advice" ([footnote 7](#)).

"Policymaking is a professional skill; most scientists have no experience of it and it shows. In DFID, (the Department for International Development) we stopped asking people undertaking commissioned systematic reviews to write a 'policy implications' summary of their review. This was because the understanding of the real policy questions were usually poor even when the review was itself very well done and therefore undermined the paper. Worse, trying to work up to a policy position can unconsciously bias scientists towards trying to get a neat policy narrative from a complex picture, or downplay inconvenient facts. Therefore, in general, the data collection and analysis process and the policy process are best kept separate. If you feel it is useful to give your policy analysis based on your data be modest: few papers underestimate their policy importance, many substantially overestimate it and many do not provide the social context." – Chief Medical officer, and Former Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Chris Whitty

Upstream solutions enable adoption

Commercial evidence users are keen that generators recognise the importance of government standards and regulations to them taking action toward healthy and sustainable diets. Large retailers describe how regulations help to create 'a level playing field' in which the additional costs did not immediately mean they had to sacrifice competitive pricing.

Translating evidence to enable users to influence on the ground citizens

Another consideration you may wish to reflect on and address is how your evidence can be translated by users to citizens on the ground. Complex evidence and messages can be challenging to translate. Thinking about how an evidence user may do this, and offering ideas along with your evidence, may enable your evidence to be actioned more successfully.

"It would be really helpful for practitioners if academic journals had a requirement that each paper had to write a section on managerial implications of this research to practitioners. This would be most welcome for us." – Food Retailer

Practical examples: clear, concise and direct communication

The following are examples of clear communication on healthy sustainable diets, and ways to achieve it:

- the National Food Strategy Independent Review was published in 2021. It contains an extensive review and synthesis of the evidence on food and its associated challenges for health and sustainability, and analysis of that evidence, presented with the use of accessible language and infographics and other design devices. “The National Food Strategy Plan is a really good example of clear accessible writing which I prefer. I have wondered for several years what a food system lock-in refers to and in the Plan they are referred to as system traps, I get it now!” – Local Government Representative
- the Centre for Food Policy’s Rethinking Food Policy series of briefs involved working with a professional editor. The editor provided valuable expertise to the academic authors, both in terms of the clarity of message and the presentation of the briefs overall.
- one Blue Dot is the BDA’s Environmentally Sustainable Diet Project created to help make its Sustainable Diets Policy a reality. It includes a toolkit of information, graphics, tools and links to help practitioners improve their understanding of environmentally sustainable diets and discuss these with patients or clients.

Checklist

- does the language you have used match the knowledge base of the audience?
- has any jargon, or specialist terms, been translated into common terms and phrases?
- is the length of your document as short as possible, without losing important detail?
- would your materials benefit from input from a professional editor?
- have you made your evidence conclusions or recommendations as direct as possible while acknowledging complexities or uncertainties?
- have you been clear which practical actions should result from your evidence?
- have you been specific about what further evidence is needed and why?
- if giving policy advice, are your recommendations informed and sensible?
- have you considered the role of upstream government standards and regulations in commercial practitioners adopting evidence?
- can you help users to translate your evidence to benefit citizens on the ground?

1. Sources: Bazalgette, L. (2019) [Supporting evidence-informed children’s social work: Creating a What Works toolkit](#), Gov.uk [Blog]; Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) [‘The dos and don’ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics,’](#) Palgrave Communications, 5(21); Phoenix, J. H., Atkinson, L. G. and Baker, H. (2019) [‘Creating and communicating social research for policymakers in government,’](#) Palgrave Communications, 5(98); Dovidio, J. F. and Gaertner, S. L. (2007) [‘Communicating basic behavioral science beyond the discipline: reflections from social psychology’](#) in [Handbook on Communicating and Disseminating Behavioural Science](#), p. 93-109.
2. Phoenix, J. H., Atkinson, L. G. and Baker, H. (2019) [‘Creating and communicating social research for policymakers in government,’](#) Palgrave Communications, 5(98).
3. Sources: OECD (2021a) [‘Making better policies for food systems: Executive summary,’](#) OECD iLibrary; Bazalgette, L. (2019) [Supporting evidence-informed children’s social work:](#)

[Creating a What Works toolkit](#), Gov.uk [Blog].

4. Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) [‘The dos and don’ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics,’](#) Palgrave Communications, 5(21).
5. Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) [‘The dos and don’ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics,’](#) Palgrave Communications, 5(21).
6. For example, Feeding Liverpool (2022) [The good food plan](#) OR Foresight (2011) [The Future of Food and Farming Report](#). Gov.uk.
7. Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) [‘The dos and don’ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics,’](#) Palgrave Communications, 5(21).