SPIRAL Briefs
SCIENCE POLICY INTERFACES: RESEARCH, ACTION & LEARNING

Recommendations for improving science-policy communication for teams

The brief in brief

In this brief we suggest recommendations for how to improve science-policy communication in teams interested in or connected with science-policy interfaces (both in research and policy departments and agencies) [1].

Why look at the team-level?

It is obvious that the actions and commitments of individuals across science and policy are essential for improving science-policy communication, whilst organisational factors can shape their opportunities to get involved in communication. However, on a day-to-day basis, whether in policy or science, much of the work is carried out in teams of individuals working on specific projects. Planning communication strategies in teams can help to ensure that a mixture of approaches are integrated, and play to the respective strengths of individuals.

Recommendations for teams in science

Teams are well placed to use multiple methods to encourage communication linked to certain projects or topics. Every method has pros and cons. For example, press releases may translate into news that reach a wide general audience but are untargeted. By contrast, policy briefs can be very useful for reaching more specific audiences. However for briefs to actually be read, they need to be effectively disseminated and shared, by linking to sources of information and news feeds that relevant policy sectors read, emailing briefs to personal contacts in policy sectors, and taking hard copies to relevant meetings. Ideally, different communication strategies are linked: so for example, a twitter feed can link to a policy brief, which links to a clearly written website which displays more detailed sources of information and summaries, as well as links to related topics and individual academics. Although there is often a reliance on textual outputs, using personal contacts and practical experiences can be a very good way to encourage engagement. If possible and relevant, teams may consider organising a field trip or practical demonstration. As well as engaging with a variety of learning styles, these events can also allow building of personal contacts and trust, which aid communication. To encourage policy understanding and engagement, this should start early in projects (even before a project begins), and continue throughout, evolving where appropriate. If the team members are experienced in interdisciplinary work, insights from these experiences may help with science-policy communication. Enquiring proactively with policy about desired communication strategies may help to refine communication strategies, so although communication should be carefully considered before a project starts, flexibility must be fostered to allow plans to adapt.

Recommendations for teams in policy

Project teams in policy and public agencies can help scientists plan and identify communication opportunities, by clearly and proactively flagging the topics and plans they are working on. Just as researchers are encouraged to clearly capture their knowledge and ideas, it can be helpful for policy teams to do the same. Being transparent about questions, and expected needs for current and/or future knowledge, and explicitly writing this into a briefing note for researchers can be a helpful starting point for discussion. At the same time, and linked to this, compiling a list of relevant science teams and academics can be a useful resource. Of course, doing this requires time for at least some members of the team, but investing time in identifying and making links with relevant scientists can be invaluable for supporting later communication and ensuring institutional memory when team members move on. When policy teams wish to pose specific questions to scientists, it is helpful to be as transparent as possible about the rationale behind the question and the use to which answers will be put: for example, this will allow scientists to identify knowledge areas which the policy-makers may not have considered, and 'acceptable' levels of uncertainty. Teams should also expect and welcome questions and conversations about these questions and problems: academics are trained to be critical and may have whole areas of knowledge or awareness of new emerging issues that are relevant to shaping existing and new policy areas.

[1] The information in this brief is based on interviews carried out with science and policy actors in three case studies: the UK NEA, the implementation of the WFD, and deer management in Scotland. This information was complemented by discussions in a workshop held in June 2012. For more information on each of these case studies, please see other SPIRAL briefs.

Overview of recommendations for teams

Science	• Discuss plans and outputs throughout projects, and from the design stage, not just at the end. • Allow communication strategies to evolve and be flexible. • Learn from experience in interdisciplinary research. • Proactively seek out ways to present research and its implications to different audiences. • Preface all reports with accessibly-written executive summaries. • Write policy briefs but also disseminate and link to other communication outputs.
Both science and policy	• Plan projects and budgets to spend time and resources on science-policy interfaces and communication. • Explore the use of scenario-building and other tools as a process for building shared understanding. • Provide directories of experts /subject-specific contacts. • Consider the merits of cross-reviewing: for example in addition to academics reviewing academic papers (peer-review) and policy-makers reviewing policies, explore the merits of academics reviewing policy, or policy-makers reviewing academic outputs. • Plan topic-focused events that allow mingling with those with different backgrounds. • Organise field trips to bring together researchers and stakeholders across levels (e.g. from policy to land-manager).
Policy	• Be transparent about questions, and expected needs for current and/or future knowledge. Putting this into a briefing note for researchers can be a helpful starting point for discussion. • Welcome conversations about defining questions or problems. • Consider developing a list or network of scientific experts and researchers to help you. • Provide space and resources to allow teams and individuals to learn and to build contacts beyond the policy sphere.

Recommendations applying across science and policy

The most important point is that all teams should plan projects and budgets that allow time and resources for building science-policy interfaces and communication. However, it is also useful to consider specific initiatives that allow science and policy teams working on linked topics to communicate and learn about each others' views and knowledge. These may include the use of scenario-building, or seminar events and field trips focused on certain topics, or cross peer-review that involves academics reviewing policy documents and policy-makers reviewing academic outputs.

Looking for more information on science-policy interfaces?

For more SPIRAL results, see companion SPIRAL briefs at http://www.spiral-project.eu/content/documents

This brief is a result of research and interactions within and around the SPIRAL project. This brief was written by Kerry Waylen (JHI) and Juliette Young (CEH).

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