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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There has been increasing interest in Australia over the last two or three years in what has become known as “evidence-based policymaking”. This interest has stemmed from new policy developments in the UK, heralded by the Blair Labor Government. The British Government has been inspired by the international success of the evidence-based approach to health care and is keen to apply a similar approach to the public policy arena. At surface level at least, this appears to be a welcome change both in terms of improving public policy and for social science to make direct and meaningful contributions to policy making. A small number of Australian academicians and policy makers working in education, criminology and social work have begun to examine what is occurring in the UK and also the USA but housing and urban studies has been slower to contribute to the new debates. Could this be because Australian housing studies has not provided a sufficient evidence base for policy development? Is it related more to the policy process itself, or is there a problem in the production and transfer of research evidence? Why are we asking these questions now? This literature review attempts to address these questions by exploring the relevant literature. The review is based on the guidelines produced by the Campbell Collaboration and the Cochrane Collaboration. The review protocol (O'Dwyer 2003a) is available at www.ahuri.edu.au/. The focus of the Final Review is on examining evidence-based policy *per se* and determining its value and relevance for Australian housing policy and research. The research question is:

What is evidence-based policy making and how can it inform the making of Australian public policy, particularly housing policy?

The review has the following objectives:

- To show how evidence-based policy is distinct from other policy;
- To describe how it is formulated and developed;
- To show how the outcomes of academic research are communicated to policy makers;
- To report how policy makers receive and interpret the outcomes of specific types of research;
- To find why evidence-based policy has become prominent in a range of portfolios in other countries, but is largely restricted to health in Australia.

The material under review is largely of a conceptual or theoretical nature rather than empirical research and so the review itself is an amalgamation of the strengths of the narrative review and the systematic review formats. Reviews of the individual papers are presented in Appendices C and D.

Evidence-based public policy is based on research that has undergone some form of quality assurance and scrutiny. This distinguishes it from public policy based on more conventional policy development processes where intuitive appeal, tradition, politics, or the extension of existing practice may set the policy agenda. The assumption that evidence itself is a good thing, that it is meaningful, reliable and trustworthy. A difficulty is that in the social sciences in particular, interpretations of the strength and quality of evidence are fraught with disagreement. Even where there is consensus, the best available evidence may not meet the agreed standard. This has been a major topic of debate although progress has been made toward developing methods of assessing the quality of different types of evidence. The literature is supportive of an evidence-based approach, while those papers that take a more cautious or even negative position draw attention to potential pitfalls that can generally be remedied. The quality of the evidence based policy literature also appears to be higher than that of the more critical papers. Much of the literature on evidence based policy making is located in the “grey

literature". While it may not be peer reviewed, this material is often highly relevant, high quality, up to date and less restricted in content and sentiment as more formal literature may be. Most of the existing recent literature is British.

A key theme is that there are many factors influencing policy making, but this does not mean we should not bother trying to improve the process and its elements. Evidence-based policy making shares many of the features of "ordinary" or traditional policy making but has a number of distinct characteristics. Four basic assumptions are that:

- evidence based policy is a meaningful concept;
- evidence should be available to policy-makers;
- evidence can be interpreted and used to inform policy development;
- policies based on evidence are better than policies that are not based on evidence. (after Reid 2003).

However, evidence may not even be the most important influence on policy. Other factors include:

- Prevailing public opinion;
- Organizational culture
- Incompatible timeframes in policy making and research
- Values and ideology of both researchers and policy makers
- Control of power
- Political goals
- How far new evidence departs from established or accepted knowledge
- How easy it is to change a policy in light of new evidence

It is not solely the use of evidence but the type of evidence used that is important.

There is actually no real evidence that evidence-based policy making is better than "traditional" policymaking. The recency of the evidence-based policy approach, combined with the lengthy timeframes required for most public policies to take effect, and then to be evaluated, can explain this paradox. Meanwhile, the weight and strength of the papers supporting evidence-based policy making suggest that it is at least as effective and beneficial as current policy making methods, and superior at best. There are broadly three types of policy fields which make different uses of evidence and research:

- Stable policy fields (areas where knowledge is reasonably settled; theoretical foundations are strong; governments broadly know what works; there is a strong evidence base and incremental improvement).
- Policy fields in flux (where the knowledge base is contested and there is disagreement over the most basic theoretical approaches).
- Inherently novel policy fields (the newness means there is no pre existing evidence base, e.g. regulation of biotechnology; privacy on the net)

Only in the first of these fields is policy really based on evidence, rather than just informed by it.

The evidence-based policy making literature is a rapidly expanding but somewhat repetitive collection. Most of the literature is positive about the benefits and future of this mode of policy making, but there are several papers making valid criticisms. There is a general consensus about ways to improve evidence-based policymaking:

- clarify the relative strengths and weaknesses of different methodological approaches;
- use of a more strategic approach to creating knowledge;
- disseminate knowledge effectively and promote wide access to it;
- develop ways to improve the uptake of evidence.

The need for agreement on what constitutes evidence in what context for different types of policy/practice questions is urgent.

This review concludes that the concept is worthwhile pursuing in Australian public policy generally but there may be difficulties in applying an evidence based approach to housing and urban policy. There is a need to improve the evidence base itself and to acknowledge that there are other important questions in policy development in addition to “what works”?

1 OVERVIEW

There has been increasing interest in Australia over the last two or three years in what has become known as “evidence-based policymaking”. This interest has stemmed from new policy developments in the UK, heralded by the Blair Labor Government. A number of UK government documents refer to the need to “modernize” government, making greater use of evidence:

This Government expects more of policy makers. More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, better use of evidence and research in policy making and better focus on policies that will deliver long-term goals

Government should regard policy making as a continuous, learning process, not as a series of one-off initiatives. We will improve our use of evidence and research so that we understand better the problems we are trying to address. We must make more use of pilot schemes to encourage innovations and test whether they work. We will ensure that all policies and programmes are clearly specified and evaluated, and the lessons of success and failure are communicated and acted upon. Feedback from those who implement and deliver policies and services is essential too. We need to apply the disciplines of project management to the policy process
(Prime Minister and the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Modernising Government, 1999:<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm43/4310/4310-02.htm>)

There are many other references to evidence – particularly evidence produced by social scientists:

Social sciences should be at the heart of policy making. We need a revolution in relations between governments and the social research community – we need social scientists to help to determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective
(Blunkett 2000, www.dfee.gov.uk/newslist.htm)

The UK Government has been inspired by the international success of the evidence-based approach to health care and is keen to apply a similar approach to the public policy arena. At surface level at least, this appears to be a welcome change both in terms of improving public policy and for social science to make direct and meaningful contributions to policy making. Already within Australia, a small number of academicians and policy makers working in education, criminology and social work have begun to examine what is occurring in the UK and also the USA.

The USA has a longer history of collecting evidence for public policy, particularly through the use of randomized controlled trials and other careful large scale social interventions in the areas of education and criminology, but the nature or system of governance differs substantially from those of the UK and Australia. Although the USA has much to offer on ways to conduct social interventions and models of knowledge utilization, the American policy making processes and political system is less comparable with Australia’s than the British. Indeed, some commentators suggest that the American structure of governance is not conducive to the wider use of evidence in public policy.

While other social sciences have begun to look more closely, albeit tentatively, at what evidence-based policy making involves and what it offers researchers, housing and urban studies has been slower to contribute to the new debates. This is the case for both the UK and Australia. There are many possible reasons for this. One of these is given by Winter and Seelig (2001:17): “there are uncertainties about the nature of the policy making process and the extent to which extent evidence can inform it.” They also

point out that in spite of its obvious importance and role in social justice and social exclusion, housing has rarely been considered a policy priority in Australia. Could this be because Australian housing studies has not provided a sufficient evidence base for policy development? Is it related more to the policy process itself, or is there a problem in the production and transfer of research evidence? Why are we asking these questions now? Is it because it is fashionable (Stone 2003) or is it simply that the time is right? This literature review attempts to address these questions by exploring the relevant literature.

The term “evidence-based policy” has now become the standard term in the literature, obliging most commentators to continue using it. Many do note that it does give the impression of determinism, whereas evidence is not the only basis for policymaking. Preferred terms are “evidence informed” or “evidence influenced”. Other critics of the term prefer “evidence based policymaking” so that it is clear that the term refers to a verb - an action or process, rather than a singular object (e.g. Webster 2002). This term is also occasionally used in the literature. There is relatively no discontent in the literature over the issue of verb or noun, but many writers do make a disclaimer about their use of “evidence-based”. Whether or not writers use the noun or verb form of the term, many use the abbreviation “EBP” instead, and occasionally “EBPP” (evidence-based policy/making and practice) which tends to cover all bases.

The review is based on the guidelines produced by the Campbell Collaboration and the Cochrane Collaboration. The review protocol (O'Dwyer 2003a) is available at www.ahuri.edu.au.

2 OBJECTIVES

The focus of the Final Review is on examining evidence-based policy *per se* and determining its value and relevance for Australian housing policy and research. The research question, forming the basis for the structure of this Review Protocol, is:

What is evidence-based policy making and how can it inform the making of Australian public policy, particularly housing policy?

The review has the following objectives:

- To show how evidence-based policy is distinct from other policy;
- To describe how it is formulated and developed;
- To show how the outcomes of academic research are communicated to policy makers;
- To report how policy makers receive and interpret the outcomes of specific types of research;
- To find why evidence-based policy has become prominent in a range of portfolios in other countries, but is largely restricted to health in Australia.

The identification and quality assessment of relevant papers for the review follows the guidelines set out by the Cochrane Collaboration. Given that the material under review is largely of a conceptual or theoretical nature rather than empirical research with a clearly structured methodology, results and conclusion, the review itself is an amalgamation of the strengths of the narrative review and the systematic review formats. Reviews of the individual papers are presented in Appendices C and D. The material is divided into two main groups based on the author's view of evidence based policy. Each paper is presented in chronological order within its group, summarized and examined in the context of the research question. The strengths and weaknesses of each paper are identified within the text and a concluding comment is given as to the value of the paper in addressing the various objectives of the review. Section 4 then considers the findings of the individual papers as a whole in order to assess if and how evidence-based policy making could be used in Australian public policy making.

3 CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION OF PAPERS

Given that the judgement of only one researcher was involved in the construction of this review, and that the material is not empirical, there is an unavoidable degree of subjectivity in the allocation of quality ratings and thus papers selected, as is the case with any narrative review (see O'Dwyer 2003b).

Papers focusing evidence based policymaking within specific disciplines, such as education or criminology, were excluded from the preliminary reference list but are included if they are Australian, on the grounds that the authors are working within the broader Australian policy environment. However, the evaluative summaries presented in Appendix A for Australian papers should be noted and a small number of Australian studies are rated "B" on the grounds of quality and relevance.

3.1 Quality Ratings

The quality ratings are based on the method used by (Baldwin 2002) and are presented in Table 3-1. It should be noted that in the context of more theoretical or abstract literature, relevance and depth is as important a basis for inclusion as quality and that many otherwise papers which are of high quality in terms of their depth and argument are excluded if the issue of evidence based policy making is given only passing consideration.

Table 3-1: Quality Ratings

Category	Description	Status
Category A	Studies that meet the appraisal criteria well with no or very few flaws, most or all of content highly relevant, sophisticated discussion	Included in Final Review
Category B	Studies that meet all or most of the appraisal criteria but have some significant flaws, content not focused on evidence-based policy making, elementary level of discussion	Excluded, subject to the number of papers in Category A
Category C	Studies that include many and/or serious flaws that have the potential to affect the findings, mostly irrelevant upon reading of full paper	Excluded from review

Source: adapted from (Baldwin 2002) p. 32.

3.2 Ratings of Preliminary Reference List

Seventy-seven papers were identified on the basis of their keywords, field and country of origin. These were all read and rated against a range of criteria (Table 3.2) using the rating scale in Table 3.1. Their ratings and comments made against these criteria are presented in Appendix A. Only the 36 papers rated A were included in the final review. It is emphasized that many of the papers categorized as "B" are of excellent quality and represent a good source of further reading, but were excluded because they were of less direct relevance to the research question.

Table 3-2: Quality and Relevance Rating Criteria

Bibliographic details (ID)	Authors' ideological perspective clear	Considers limits of EBP	Formal or grey literature
Peer reviewed	Clear research question	Considers strengths of EBP	Quality category
Aims	Description of context	Driver of research question	
Background of author	Considers cost effectiveness of EBP vs. other policy	Considers ethical issues	
Conceptual or empirical	Considers alternative bases for policy	Evaluative summary	

3.3 Characteristics of Final Reference List

Table 3-3 shows that much of the literature on evidence based policy making is located in the “grey literature”. While it may not be peer reviewed, this material is often highly relevant, high quality, up to date and less restricted in content and sentiment as more formal literature may be. Most of the existing recent literature is British but there is a great deal of American literature predating this review’s cut off year of 2000.

Table 3-3: Type, Country and Author Background

Type of publication:	Refereed journal article/book	13
	Conference paper	9
	Working paper	13
	Other	3
Author(s)' nationality:	British	27
	American	2
	Australian	7
	Other	1
Author(s)' background:	Government	1
	Academic	32
	Private sector	4
Discipline	Policy studies	27
	Housing/urban	4
	Health	1
	Other social sciences	20
Number of authors with more than one paper		5

* Based on characteristics of individual papers; one author may appear more than once so his/her characteristics will be recorded more than once. With one exception, all of the authors of papers with multiple authors are based in the same country. The authors of such papers may represent more than one discipline

3.4 Potential Sources of Bias

None.

4 DEFINITIONS

4.1 Public Policy

Policy per se is the “translation of government's political priorities and principles into programmes and courses of action to deliver desired changes” (UK Cabinet Office 2001 Modern Policy-Making: Ensuring Policies Deliver Value for Money).

The classic definition of public policy is that it is concerned with “what governments do, why they do it and what difference it makes (Dye 1976:1, in Nutley and Webb 2000:14). It is government action (or inaction) in response to public concerns and problems. It is an encompassing term that includes all areas of policy and the general concepts, processes and techniques involved.

4.2 Policy Making

The policy process refers to “all aspects of what is involved in providing policy direction for the work of the public sector. These include the ideas which inform policy conception, the talk and work which goes into providing the formulation of policy directions and all the talk, work and collaboration which goes into translating these directions into practice” (Yeatman, 1998:9, in Nutley and Webb 2000:14)

4.3 Evidence-Based Policy Making

Evidence-based public policy is based on research that has undergone some form of quality assurance and scrutiny. This distinguishes it from public policy based on more conventional policy development processes where intuitive appeal, tradition, politics, or the extension of existing practice may set the policy agenda.

Definitions of evidence based policy making are generally cited in the following terms:

The Government expects more of policy makers. More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, better use of evidence and research in policy making and better focus on policies that will deliver long term goals.

(Cabinet Office 1999a: Chapter 2 para 6)

The advice and decisions of policy makers are based upon the best available evidence from a wide range of sources; all key stakeholders are involved at an early stage and throughout the policy's development. All relevant evidence, including that from specialists, is available in an accessible and meaningful form to policy makers.

(www.cmps.gov.uk)

A more informal definition is provided by (Pawson 2002):

“Like all of the best ideas, the big idea here is a simple one – that research should attempt to pass on collective wisdom about the successes and failure of previous initiatives in particular policy domains. The prize is also a big one is that such an endeavour could provide the antidote to policy making's frequent lapses into crowd pleasing, political pandering, window dressing and god-acting.”

Similarly, Mulgan describes evidence-based policy in the following terms:

Governments have become ravenous for information and evidence. A few may still rely on gut instincts, astrological charts or yesterday's focus groups. But most recognize that their success – in the sense of achieving objectives and retaining the confidence of the public – now depends on much more systematic use of knowledge than it did in the past." Mulgan (2003)

Understanding of 'evidence-based policy' in the fields of research and policymaking tends to vary but Reid's (2003) study found that most policy makers used the term to imply that policy was significantly informed by evidence. The most common definition was "making significant use of research evidence to inform the development and implementation of your policies."

4.4 Evidence

In turn, "evidence" is defined in the following terms:

In practice, evidence is more plural than research. The Oxford English Dictionary offers as a definition of evidence, 'the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid'¹⁸. So availability and validity are the key issues (Solesbury 2001:8)

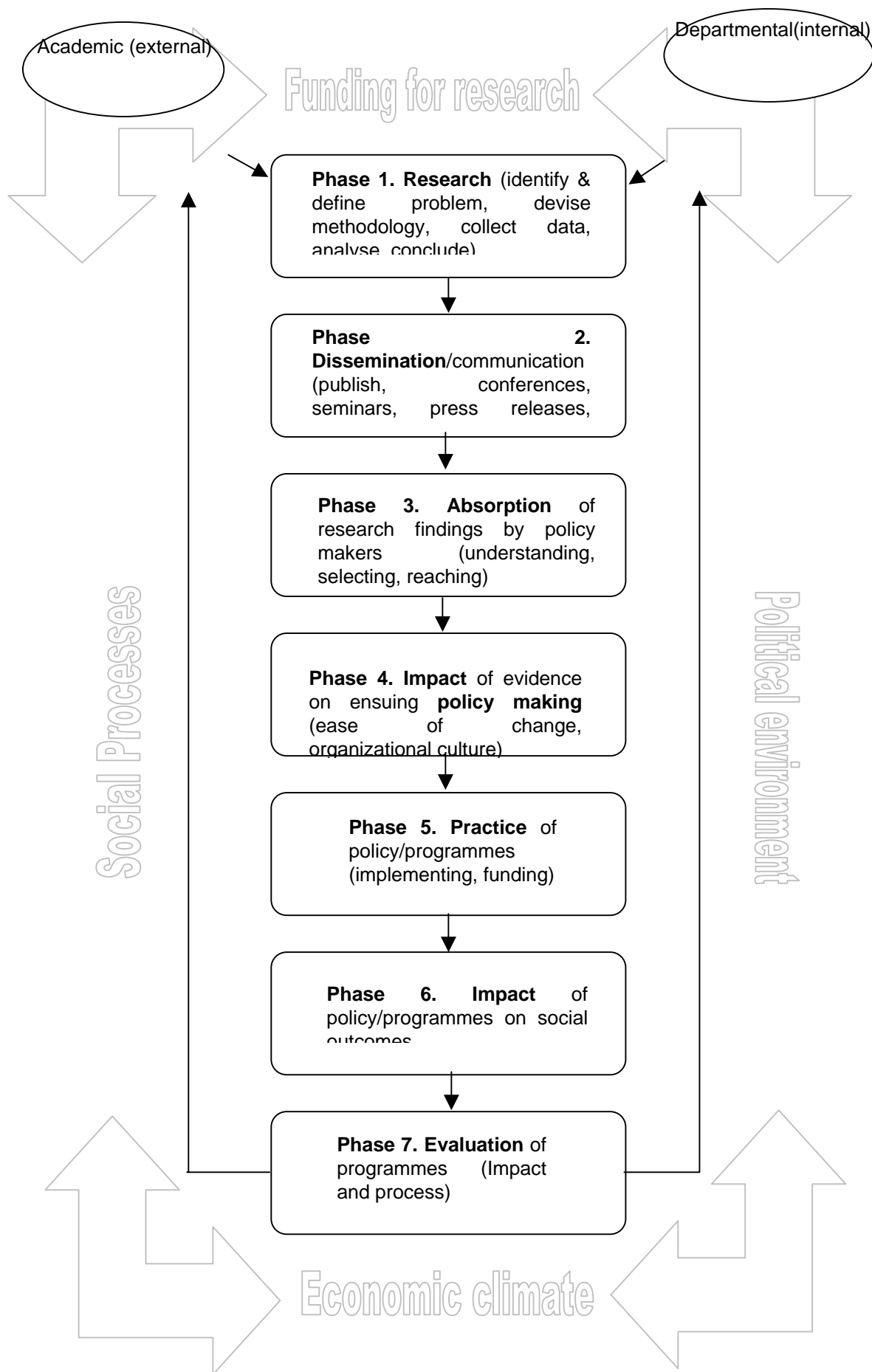
...practitioner knowledge, experience overseas, pilots and commissioned qualitative and quantitative research studies... (UK National Audit Office (2001), drawing together work from the White Paper, the Cabinet Office and the CMPS).

...evidence takes the form of 'research', broadly defined. That is, evidence comprises the results of systematic investigation towards increasing the sum of knowledge...the accepted rules of evidence differ greatly between research cultures.... nevertheless the majority of research evidence considered in this text is the output from more formal and systematic enquiries, generated by government departments, research institutes, universities, charitable foundations, consultancy organizations and a variety of agencies and intermediaries...(Davies 2000)

4.5 The Evidence-Based Policy Making Process

Based on the literature, a simplified summary of the process is presented in Figure 4.1. It is noted that linear models of evidence based policy making depicting neat stages have drawn much criticism in the literature on the grounds of over simplification and so the role of context (political, social, and economic) is emphasized here. While this model may be unrealistically simple, it serves nevertheless to help communicate what evidence-based policy involves to readers unfamiliar with either the term or the process.

Figure 4-1: The Evidence-Based Policy Making Process



5 WHAT IS EVIDENCE BASED POLICY MAKING?

This section summarizes the main findings of the literature review and then relates these where possible to Australian housing policy.

In sum, it appears that there are two main strands in the literature; theoretical arguments for (or critical of) an evidence based approach to policy making; and 2. ways to improve the process. Both of these premises are themselves based on the assumption that evidence itself is a good thing, that it is meaningful, reliable and trustworthy. A difficulty is that in the social sciences in particular, interpretations of the strength and quality of evidence are fraught with disagreement. Even where there is consensus, the best available evidence may not meet the agreed standard. This has been a major topic of debate although progress has been made toward developing methods of assessing the quality of different types of evidence.

On the whole, it appears that the literature is supportive of an evidence-based approach, while those papers that take a more cautious or even negative position draw attention to potential pitfalls that can generally be remedied. The quality of the pro-evidence based policy literature also appears to be higher than that of the more critical papers (see Appendices A and B).

The main conclusion to be drawn from the literature is that there are many factors influencing policy making, but this does not mean we should not bother trying to improve the process and its elements.

5.1 How evidence-based policy is distinct from other policy

Evidence-based policy making shares many of the features of “ordinary” or traditional policy making. However it also has a number of distinct characteristics. Four basic assumptions are that:

- that evidence based policy is a meaningful concept;
- evidence should be available to policy-makers;
- evidence can be interpreted and used to inform policy development;
- policies based on evidence are better than policies that are not based on evidence. (after Reid 2003).

The literature identifies three main groups of players in the policy making process, all of which have slightly different views and goals:

- researchers,
- policy makers
- practitioners.

There are also the lesser roles of

- evaluators
- participants
- people who are affected by a policy.

Most of these groups do not know enough about each other to enable meaningful communication, but the main problem is seen as located between researchers and policy makers, who need to collaborate to get the maximum benefit from an evidence-based approach and to learn more about the other. The role of evaluators in policy making has generally been overlooked in favour of researchers in the rest of the literature, but Sanderson calls for them to be included as participants in the policy discourse. Like Nutley, Davies and Webb (2002), or Edwards and Nutley (2003) in

reference to researchers, Sanderson feels evaluators need to improve their communication skills and use the appropriate media for communication. They should take the role of advocate rather than neutral technician (Jenkins-Smith and Sabateri 1993, in Sanderson 2000:17).

It was not until the new emphasis on evidence based policy in the UK rose to the fore that it became clear why the neglect of more direct use of research findings has been so pervasive. It has now been widely recognized in the literature that evidence is not the only input in policy-making (p. 286). A range of factors in addition to evidence influences policy, and evidence may not even be the most important. Other factors include:

- Prevailing public opinion;
- Organizational culture
- Incompatible timeframes in policy making and research
- Values and ideology of both researchers and policy makers
- Control of power
- Political goals
- How far new evidence departs from established or accepted knowledge
- How easy it is to change a policy in light of new evidence

As for policy making in general, the political environment influences evidence-based policymaking. The UK Cabinet Office (2001:15) reports that policy makers are not entirely convinced about the value of involving outside stakeholders in the design and testing of policy options. This is because during the early stage of formulating a policy a department may not yet be fully committed to it. Involving outside stakeholders may raise expectations or public criticism in cases when a pilot initiative does not work. Fear of leaks and premature publicity may also inhibit the range of consultation with stakeholders that would otherwise be useful.

Weiss identifies “four I’s” which characterize policy making in general:

- ideology (people’s basic values – of policy makers and wider society);
- interests (can be personal or organizational, such as personal career aspirations or maximizing budgets)
- institutional norms and practices (for example the US congress works largely through face to face contact – reading is not part of the norm and so written documents of research findings are likely to be ignored);
- prior information (policy makers already have information from various sources. New information at variance with existing beliefs must be strong enough to change them).

The explicit role of evidence in evidence-based policy as opposed to its implicit use (or non-use) in other models of policy making is obviously a key distinguishing characteristic. It is not merely the use of evidence but the type of evidence used that is important. The attention these two related issues have received from the social science research community (mainly in Britain but increasingly in Australia) suggests that social scientists see this approach as offering more opportunity to inform and influence policy making than other means. However, this can also be seen as an ideology: “The notion that public policy is evidence driven is itself a reflection of an ideology, the ideology of scientism (Doherty 2000:179-180).

