10 Guidelines for Writing Policy Recommendations
A policy recommendation is written policy advice prepared for some group or person that has the authority to make or to influence policy decisions, whether that is a minister in the Republic of Ireland (ROI), or in Northern Ireland (NI), a member of parliament, a local authority, parliamentary committee or other public body such as a health or education agency. Policy recommendations serve to inform people who are faced with policy choices on particular issues about how research and evidence can help to make the best decisions. It is about using research to solve a public policy problem or to provide evidence about how a policy is working. Getting a recommendation accepted by policymakers depends on many factors but a recommendation which is based on strong evidence, is cost effective to implement and takes account of international best practice has a better chance of being accepted and influencing policy debates. With this in mind, Conor Breen, CARDI Policy Officer, has prepared a set of guidelines for academics and other researchers for writing policy recommendations based on research.

1. DEFINE THE OBJECTIVE

The first step in crafting a policy recommendation is to decide what the objective of the recommendation is. Is it the introduction of new legislation, or changes to existing laws? Is it a new strategy for government, or change in direction of an existing strategy or to improve an existing policy or service? Or to draw attention to a local issue such as planning or transport services? Setting out a clear objective for a policy recommendation based on research is essential in helping to influence decisions.

2. DECIDE ON A TARGET AUDIENCE

The next step in developing a policy recommendation is to determine the target audience. If it is a planning or local funding issue, the target may be a local authority, city or district council. If the recommendation is to change national legislation, the target audience may be ministers, TDs, MLAs or MPs. If the objective is to influence government strategy, a parliamentary committee or civil servants in government departments will likely be the best audience. It is important to also decide who the key stakeholders are and what influence they can have on the policy decisions, i.e. what NGOs, government departments, businesses, etc. will have an interest in the area and the research that you have produced.
3. SET OUT THE ISSUE CLEARLY

The matter on which a policy decision is required should be defined in as much detail as possible, directly linked to research. It is also important to have a clear outline of the existing situation. Presenting an analysis of the issue will also be invaluable to policymakers, including details of what strategy, legislation or government policy currently applies and why the research evidence indicates a need for change. The recommendations should then be limited to the issue at hand and to the research evidence itself.

4. GIVE OPTIONS WHERE POSSIBLE

If there are several different approaches which policy makers could take to solve the issue, noting the advantages and disadvantages of each approach, based on research evidence, will make the decision easier. This will help in making research more influential and relevant to policymakers.

5. RECOGNISE THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CLIMATE

In the current economic environment in both ROI and NI, government and local authority budgets are highly constrained in the amounts that can be spent. Thus, while research may identify suitable policy directions which could solve issues, if these policy directions incur significant costs, they are unlikely to be taken on board. Recommendations should be cost-neutral where possible, or demonstrate that they are economically feasible, i.e. while money needs to be spent now, it will save large amounts of public expenditure in the future. A policy recommendation that would bring benefits while reducing costs is likely to be very welcome.

6. FIT IN WITH EXISTING STRATEGIES OR LEGISLATION

Overall policy direction in NI and ROI is clearly set out in the Programme for Government and Budget documents. Getting new legislation or a new government strategy adapted is a lengthy and time-consuming process where evidence and political will need to be built up over long periods. Research can contribute to this process by steadily building up the body of knowledge on particular issues, helping to change opinions among the public and influential policy decision makers. However, a policy recommendation may have a bigger independent impact if it can fit in with an existing strategy, programme for government or legislation. Research is best at influencing policy that is currently in development, e.g. the new Positive Ageing strategy in ROI or Older People’s Strategy in NI. A recommendation can influence the development of new policy, in framing recommendations, it is important to be aware of current and future developments in policy in that area.
### 7. USE INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

When making a policy recommendation, it is a good idea to check if a similar approach has been taken in another country, and to outline any successes or drawbacks using real world examples. If another government, local authority, agency, etc. has been particularly successful in handling a policy issue, a recommendation will be made much stronger by reference to international best practice. This is particularly true if the example used is from a similar country in terms of size, demographics and political system and the example is innovative, cost-effective and is a demonstrated success.

### 8. REMEMBER THE AUDIENCE

Academic and technical language should never appear in policy recommendations. They should be presented in clear, readable and simple language; easily understandable to any passing reader with no prior knowledge of the subject area. In general, the audience for policy recommendations will not be interested in methodology other than knowing that the findings are robust. The important thing is to prioritise information for policymakers and a link to the full report or research findings is sufficient.

### 9. SHOW AN IMPACT IN THE REAL WORLD

It is important to write recommendations that present clear arguments as to why the research shows that the recommendation will benefit society, at individual, community and national levels. Practical examples which demonstrate effectiveness in the real world can help to achieve this.

### 10. EMPHASISE THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTION

Policymakers are faced with a large number of issue which require attention and action. Therefore policy recommendations need to convince them that the issue highlighted by research is important, and the recommended course of action will be beneficial to society in some respect if action is taken.
Why should academic researchers consider writing policy recommendations?

The highest quality research can have a hugely beneficial impact on society, the economy and individual lives. It can improve economic performance, increase the effectiveness of public services and public policy, and enhance quality of life and outcomes in areas such as health, education, culture or recreation. Communicating research findings is a crucial part of maximising this impact. Academic researchers should write policy recommendations based on their research so that people in positions of influence can use the findings to enact real change to policy and society. In the UK (including NI), impact will be part of the next Research Assessment Exercise.¹

As a result, influencing policy is a good and worthwhile thing to do, but also funding of research will increasingly depend on it.

¹ The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is undertaken every five years on behalf of the four UK higher education funding councils. The aim is to evaluate the quality of research undertaken by higher education institutions.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

CARDI (2010) Government Structures in Ireland, North and South

CARDI (2010) Stocktake of Ageing Public Policy Initiatives in Ireland, North and South


Quinn, O. (2008) Advisers or advocates?: the impact of state agencies on social policy, Institute of Public Administration