

Evidence-based Policy in UK Housing

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- EBP – origins, definition and attractiveness
- Some critiques of EBP
- Association between EBP and policy trialling
- Examples of EBP in housing and neighbourhood management:
 - Choice-based lettings
 - Countering anti-social behaviour

Where did EBP come from?

- Origins in Evidence-based Medicine (EBM)
- Medical tradition of experimentation, trials and meta-evaluations
- As applied in social policy, part of broader approach involving commitment to experimentation and evaluation
- 'What counts is what works' (Tony Blair, 1996) – post-ideological policymaking
- Portrayed as contrasting with ideologically-driven policies through 1980s and early 90s
- Identified with UK New Labour but not specifically a UK fetish

- A commitment to policymaking supported by research evidence and where policy initiatives are initially trialled and rigorously evaluated
- Different interpretations in different policy areas
- Partly reflects different traditions – e.g. transport vs. criminal justice

Why is EBP attractive?

- Embodies optimism about potential for social progress through application of reason
- From the academic perspective because it apparently elevates influence of rigorous, systematic enquiry
- Implicitly insulates policymaking from lobby groups as well as political influences

Implications of importing EBM model into social policy



- EBM has created industry of systematic reviews which, as imported into EBP, arguably over-emphasize quantifiable data
- Objectives of medical procedures relatively straightforward compared with social policy interventions
- Intervening variables or 'extraneous factors' often v. hard to screen out in attempting to measure social policy impacts

Broader critique of EBP

- EBP is ultimate development of 'rational policy-making model' which mistakenly implies evidence can mechanistically inform policy
- Post-modernist/constructivist view that EBP naively presents 'knowledge' as a neutral objective concept, ignoring its socially constructed nature
- Over-emphasis on causal processes, under-emphasis of institutional and organisational contexts
- In reality, EBP often used to legitimate politically-determined approaches
- Research evidence used selectively only when consistent with pre-ordained political priorities

Evaluating pilots: policy and research implications

- EBP closely associated with 'policy trialling' – pilots widely used in crime prevention, health, employment and housing (e.g. choice-based lettings, local housing allowance - 'shopping incentive' payments)
- Increased official *research funding* emphasis on policy evaluation
- Evaluations more often *formative* rather than *summative* (i.e. in parallel with rather than ex-post) pilot programmes
- Potentially good because absence of baseline data less problematic
- Potentially problematic because:
 - Often too early to realistically assess impacts
 - But researcher/funder relationship more pressurised because clear requirement to demonstrate effectiveness
 - Risk to neutrality from identification with project staff
- Risk that pilots may not be typical of potential roll-out projects

EBP in practice – Example 1: Choice-based lettings in social housing

- CBL replaces a landlord-controlled approach to lettings with a system where home-seekers can view and select from available properties
- Model imported from the Netherlands from 2000
- Government funded 27 pilot schemes 2001-03
- Approx £750K spent on pilot programme evaluation and subsequent 'longer term impacts' study
- Decision to roll out CBL announced mid-way through pilot – official aim for national coverage by 2010
- Longer-term impact study seriously hampered by lack of baseline data – funding leverage un-exploited
- Average funding for pilot schemes approx £0.5M each – hence atypical of subsequent self-funded schemes

EBP in practice – Example 2: Tackling anti-social behaviour (1)



- Rand researchers commissioned by NAO to review effectiveness of ASB interventions internationally
- Limited international evidence (mainly US) suggests effective interventions include parenting training and early childhood programmes
- Programme evaluations meta-analysis showed 'deterrent' or coercive sanctions tended to have *negative* effects on recidivism among young people
- Home Office-commissioned ASBO evaluation contested because findings questioned policy effectiveness – eventual publication via 'unofficial' channel
- But more recent policy swing away from emphasis on ASBOs perhaps implicit recognition of research evidence

EBP in practice – Example 2: Tackling anti-social behaviour (2)

- From 2006 govt endorsement and funding for ASB family project model – as piloted by Dundee Families Project from 1996
- Intensive intervention targeted on 'dysfunctional families' at risk of eviction to address fundamental problems and improve parenting skills
- 2001 evaluation demonstrated strong success rates
- Explicit 2006 Prime Ministerial reference to inspiration of DFP model – justification of new direction as 'evidence-based policy'
- Implication of direct emulation of Dundee approach belied by accompanying 'tough' rhetoric in official policy statements – e.g:
 - *'Sanctions are key: The threat [or use] of sanctions ... provides both a way of curbing bad behaviour and ... a lever for persuading people to accept and co-operate fully with the offers of help'* (Respect Taskforce, 2006)
 - *'To ensure that failure to comply has consequences for families, contracts should identify sanctions that will apply if families do not adhere to the terms'* (RespectTaskforce, 2007)
- Some evidence that policy message reflected in English ASB Family Project practice
- But threats of 'enforcement' action in fact not explicit within Scottish ASB Family Project practice – neither incorporated in support plans, nor cited in interaction with service users

- ***'There is nothing a politician likes so little as to be well-informed; it makes decision-making so complex and difficult'***
– Keynes
- Rhetorical commitment to EBP suggests this is no longer true – but has the reality really changed at all?
- Arguable that public service reform agenda remains ideologically driven – e.g. by the largely un-evidenced belief that consumer choice in drives up service standards
- Compared with the US, enthusiasm for experimentation and rigorous testing in social policy field remains limited
- Apparent greater weight placed on researcher conclusions also places greater stress on funder-contractor relationship
- Prompts renewed debates on whether academics sacrifice independence through involvement in such work

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