



Defining and understanding your policy 'problem' to identify research and evidence needs

Evidence into Policy Guidance Note #2

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Purpose

The Evidence into Policy Guidance Notes are a series of short briefs introduced through the Research and Evaluation Unit's Evidence into Policy Programme (EiPP), a dedicated resource to support and work with DCYA policy units in driving the research-to-policy cycle. These guidance notes provide advice and information on key stages of the research to policy process, in support of evidence-informed policy making.

Evidence into Policy Guidance Note 1 set out 'The Need for Research' and why it is important for providing information on your policy 'problem'. This note provides guidance to define and understand your policy 'problem' by 1) thinking about the root causes, scope and scale of the problem; 2) reflecting on the type of policy problem you have; and 3) identifying any policy concerns arising. Defining and understanding your policy problem will help you identify your research and evidence needs for that problem.

Key messages

- Take time to identify the root causes, scope and scale of your policy 'problem', and key issues arising.
- Reflect on and consider the three dimensions of your policy problem: its 1) technical, 2) 'political' and 3) 'operational' aspects.
- It is useful to clarify the 'type' of problem you have according to the level of certainty you have in each of the three dimensions of the problem.
- Identify what you can do about your 'type' of policy problem.
- Defining and understanding your policy problem through this process will help to identify your research and evidence needs.

1. What is (or what do you think is) your policy ‘problem’?

Albert Einstein reputedly said ‘*If I had an hour to solve a problem I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions*’.¹

The path to the ‘right’ research should begin with a reflection on the root causes of, and the scope and scale of, your policy problem. It is also important to consider from the start broader contextual information that may identify additional issues or constraints in respect of your policy problem. You won’t necessarily know everything about the ‘problem’ – including whether it is really a ‘problem’. You are likely to have more questions than answers. But taking time to define and identify key issues around your policy problem will help to inform which and in what way these issues may need to be examined through research. This brief describes three ways that can help you examine your policy problem. You may wish to use some or all of these approaches: looking at the root causes of your problem, examining the scope and scale of your problem and engaging with broader contextual information.

What are the root cause(s) of the problem?

There are several techniques and methods to help you think systematically about the root causes of your policy ‘problem’.² The ‘five whys’ approach is one useful approach.³ This is a process by which you first describe what you think the problem is (‘why is it happening’); then, working with your team and with as many inputs as possible, ask ‘why’ that problem exists. Then successively ask again ‘why’ the previous step is the case. Case studies using the 5 Whys process suggests that by the fifth ‘why’ you will have uncovered the root causes of the problem (for more complex issues, you may need a few more ‘whys’). By digging down into your initial problem statement (‘what problem is happening’), this process can help you to focus

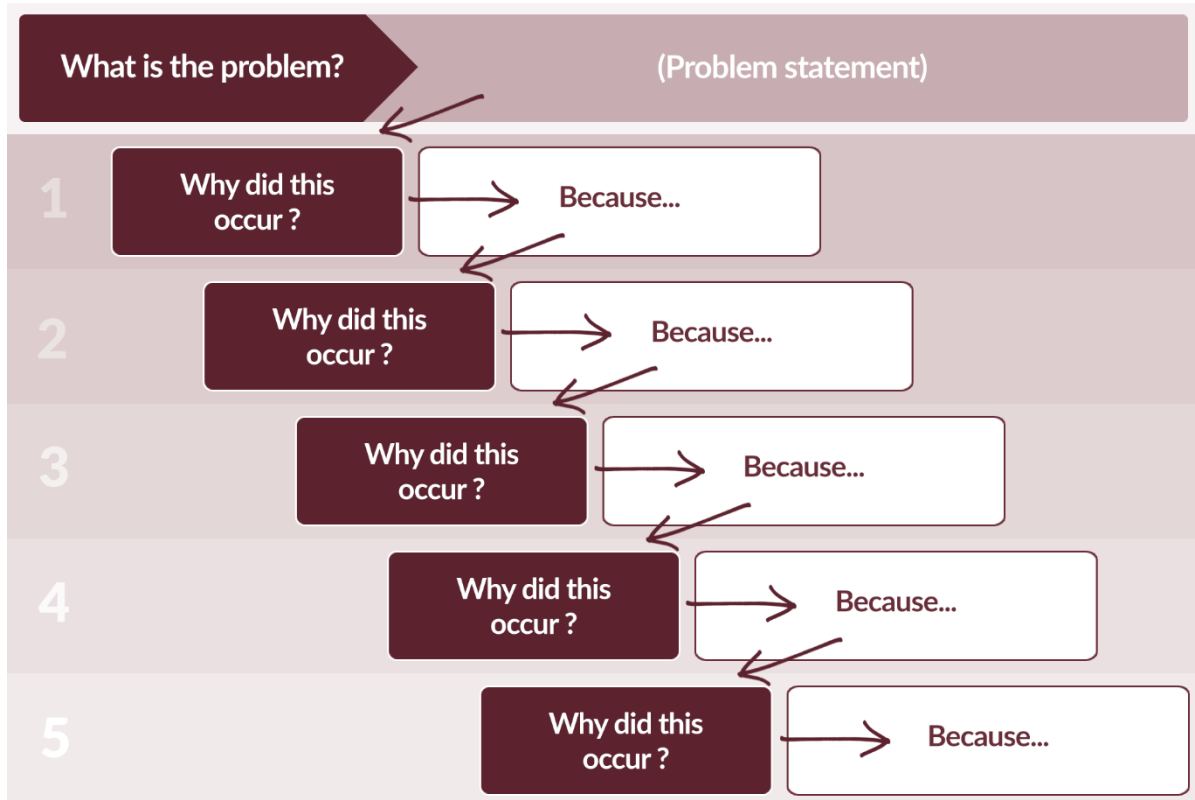
¹ As quoted in DeLeeuw, E. and Peters, D (2015) ‘Nine questions to guide development and implementation of Health in All Policies’, *Health Promotion International* 30(4) pp. 987-997.

² See for example, Open University (2018) *Problem Definition*, <http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2213>; Strangman, L ‘Defining the research problem’ [available here](#); California State University, Long Beach ;Verifying, defining and detailing the problem’ <https://web.csulb.edu/~msaintg/ppa670/p&sch4.htm>; Cairney, P. ‘Problem definition; What does it take to turn scientific evidence into policy’ <https://paulcairney.wordpress.com/tag/problem-definition/>; accessed 11th June 2019.

³ See, for example; ‘5 Whys: The Ultimate Root Cause Analysis Tool’, <https://kanbanize.com/lean-management/improvement/5-whys-analysis-tool/>; ‘Learn about the Five Whys Technique’, <https://kanbanize.com/lean-management/improvement/5-whys-analysis-tool/>. Free templates are also available, see for example www.hqontario.ca/Portals/0/Documents/qi/5-whys-tool-en.docx; <https://www.augusta.edu/ie/projects/lean.php> accessed 16th May 2019.

and refine your understanding of the 'problem'. This process can help to uncover, for example, whether is it a 'problem', the gaps in your knowledge of the 'problem', what the effects of the 'problem' are, or other core issues that are contributing to the 'problem'.

The 5 Whys Method⁴



Scope and scale of the problem

As well as interrogating if and 'why' a problem exists, it is useful to reflect on the scope and scale of the root cause of a problem. This additional thinking helps to nuance your understanding of an identified policy 'problem', by raising questions such as: how persistent and wide-spread is it? How many people does it affect and in what ways? What are its effects? Existing material (briefing notes, PQs, legislation, etc.) is a good starting point for teasing out these issues, but as with the 'five whys' process, it is often useful to gather additional inputs and information where possible. Useful questions for thinking about the scope and scale of your problem could include:

⁴ For an interactive '5 Whys' worksheet see '5-whys-root-cause-analysis-worksheet-sampledocx-curriculum jordandistrict' available at <https://www.pdfFiller.com/en/catalog/root-cause-analysis-template>

- Are there corroborating sources of information (e.g. consultations, feedback from service providers) to help confirm your understanding that there does seem to be an actual ‘problem’ occurring in the lived experiences of citizens?
- In what ways does it affect those lived experiences?
- Which people, how many; and for how long are they affected by the problem?
- Is the problem likely to affect more or less people going forward?
- What might be the impact of global, demographic, social, political, economic, labour market, etc. changes on the problem over the short-, medium- or long-term?
- When and where are people affected by the problem? For example:
 - people of a certain age
 - those in certain geographic areas/neighbourhoods
 - at key transition points (e.g. moving from primary to post-primary; into the world of work)
 - at certain times of the year
 - due to economic cycles
 - due to structural barriers.

Broader contextual information

A third approach is to gather broader contextual information. Such information can identify additional issues arising in respect of your policy problem, identify new/emerging issues, and highlight conceptual, implementation or related challenges/opportunities in respect of your policy problem. Gathering this information may also identify broader constraints that can limit your influence over the policy problem, and which in turn may affect your ultimate choices for the ‘right’ policy-relevant research.⁵

2. What type of ‘problem’ do you have?

*A policy problem is the deviation between what is and what ought to be.*⁶

When dealing with complex policy problems, and in the context of broader constraints, you may have to be pragmatic about what is achievable in respect of your policy ‘problem’. Being clear about what type of policy problem you are dealing

⁵ See, for example, <http://politicsandideas.org/understanding-policy-problems-and-their-implications-in-your-research-decisions/> accessed 21st May 2019

⁶ Paraphrasing Hisschemöller, M. (1993). *De Democratie van Problemen. De relatie tussen de inhoud van beleidsproblemen en methoden van politieke besluitvorming* (The Democracy of Problems. The Relationship Between the Content of Policy Problems and Methods of Political Decision-Making). Amsterdam: Free University Press.

with can help you to decide what you can (and cannot) do about the policy problem, which in turn can influence your choices for the 'right' research.

Very broadly speaking, key thinkers suggest that the definition of any policy problem will have the following dimensions.⁷

1. 'Technical' aspects: How much you know about the root causes, scope and scale of the problem (the available and relevant knowledge you have on the policy problem);
2. 'Political' aspects: the values, norms and broader contextual constraints around your problem.
3. 'Operational' aspects incorporate a shift in focus to 'solving' or addressing a defined policy problem. This dimension considers the degree to which the problem can realistically be addressed in whole or in part by you/your team, and the level of influence you have for possible policy change. It is, therefore, an important element to consider in determining the 'types' of policy problems you might have.

These three aspects provide a means of generating a number of different 'types' of policy problems that can be further structured according to the degree of 'certainty' you have about any given aspect.⁸ Technical 'certainty', for example, means that you have all the relevant and available information about the root causes, scope and scale of your policy problem. Political 'certainty' means that there is broad agreement on the norms and values around your policy problem, and/or there is a clear mandate that lessens constraints or drives consensus to address your policy problem. Operational 'certainty' means that you have the resources for and direct control/influence on the policy changes needed to address your policy problem. Conversely, 'uncertainty' in any of these three dimensions means that your policy problem is *unstructured* along that uncertain aspect (for example, technical uncertainty means you don't have all the information you need about your policy problem).

⁷ See Thomann, E., Trein, P. and Maggetti, M. (2019) 'What's the Problem? Multilevel Governance and Problem Solving' *European Policy Analysis* Vol. 5(1), pp. 37-57 for a comprehensive review of approaches to structuring; dimensions; and attributes; of policy problems. See also Geva-May I. (1997) 'Problem Definition in Policy Analysis', in *An Operational Approach to Policy Analysis: The Craft*. Springer, Boston, MA; Hoornbeek, J.A. and Peters, B.G. (2017) 'Understanding policy problems: A refinement of past work' *Policy and Security* Vol. 36(3): 365-384 and Hisschemöller, M. and Hoppe, R.(1995) 'Coping with intractable controversies: The case for problem structuring in policy design and analysis' *Knowledge and Policy* 8, pp. 40-60.

⁸ Drawing from Hisschemöller and Hoppe (1995) and as further elaborated by Ordoñez and Echt (2016), <http://politicsandideas.org/understanding-policy-problems-and-their-implications-in-your-research-decisions/>

Imagine then a continuum of discrete ‘types’ policy problems, as structured according to levels of certainty across the three dimensions of technical, political and operational aspects:

‘Types’ of Policy Problem by Levels of Certainty

| | High (Certainty on all 3 dimensions) | Moderate (Certainty on 2 dimensions) | Low (Certainty on 1 dimension) | None (No Certainty on any dimension) |
|----------------|---|---|--|--|
| Type | Structured Problem | Moderately Structured Problem | Moderately Unstructured Problem | Unstructured problem |
| Example | Road Maintenance (technical, political and operational certainty) | Corporate Tax Rate (political mandate and operational certainty but technical uncertainty in terms of quantified benefits?) | Addressing Youth Unemployment (political mandate, technical and operational aspects uncertain) | ‘Wicked’ Social Problems Child Poverty Climate Change (technical, political and operational uncertainty) |

3. What are the concerns arising from your policy ‘problem’?

In working through the process of defining, understanding and categorising your policy problem, at this stage you will have identified policy concerns arising for which you may have research and evidence needs. The statements below are illustrative examples that bring together possible policy concerns arising with some ideas about what you might need to do (or what you can do) about your defined policy problem.

1. We need to demonstrate that this does not seem to be problem despite public perceptions.
2. We are not sure this is a problem.
3. We have information to suggest this is a problem but we don’t really know why, or who is affected, or how many are affected, or what the effects are.
4. We need to know more about why this problem exists.
5. We need to know whether and how this problem does/does not change over time or over space.
6. We think this is going to be a policy problem in the medium-term.

7. We have to get more information to help us decide how and in what way we're going to address this problem.
8. It's not possible to address the problem right now (because, for example, it is too costly or because of broader constraints).
9. We have information to suggest this is a problem and we have some ideas how it might be addressed. Are these ideas feasible in an Irish context?
10. We need to find out if the identified policy problem is being addressed by current initiatives.
11. We need to find a solution to the identified policy problem.
12. We need to find out what is working, or not working, in addressing this identified policy problem.
13. We need to find out why, for whom, by whom, where and when something works (or doesn't work) to address this identified policy problem.
14. We need to find out what might happen if we introduce policy/practice/services changes to address this identified policy problem.

These statements illustrate that there may be several steps between specifying exactly what your policy problem is, identifying what concerns need to be addressed, establishing how you might address these, and testing initiatives that have been introduced. That is, they set out some deliberative thinking of what you might do about your problem according to technical, political and operational aspects (and needs), and the type of problem you are trying to address.

Formulating some idea of what you might want to, or can, do about your policy problem can further inform what role research can play to meet your policy needs.

By successively working through the process above to understand and define your policy problem, you will have identified the aspects and issues within your policy problem that need to be interrogated, which in turn identifies your research and evidence needs.

Evidence into Policy Guidance Notes



EiPP Guidance Note #1

The Need For Research

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Would you like more information?

Contact the REU team on dcyaresearch@dcya.gov.ie.