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# Evidence Exchange:

Learning from social  
policy across the UK

Jim McCormick



# Acknowledgements

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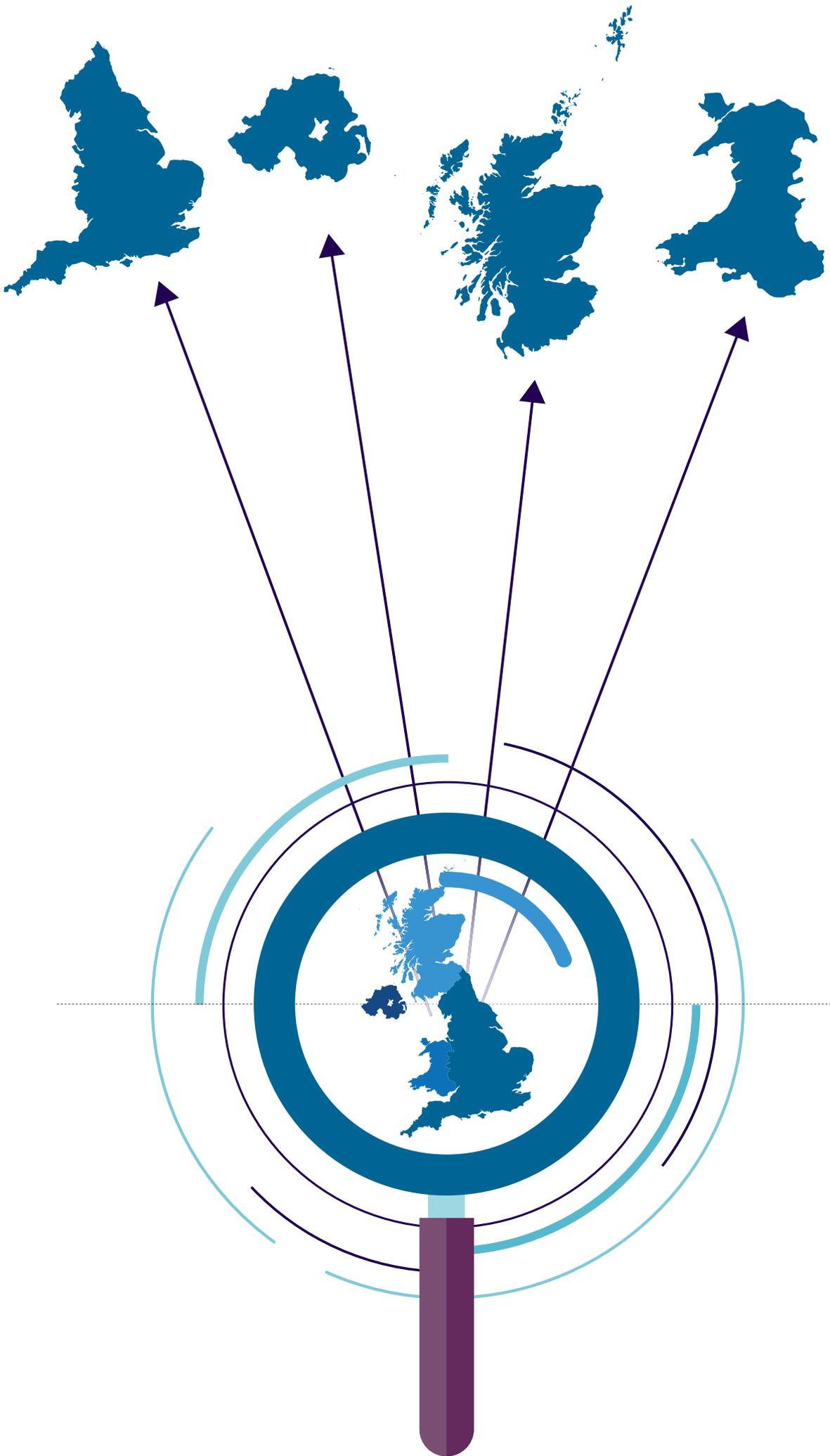
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# Preface

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Devolution provides Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with the flexibility to adapt important aspects of social policy to the circumstances of each country. Almost 15 years since powers were devolved from Westminster, numerous examples of divergence have occurred from England and from each other. These have been the result of conscious choices, as well as sticking with policies which Westminster governments decided to change in England. The pros and cons of particular policies are debated and compared increasingly with other approaches in Europe and beyond. But there has been strikingly little in the way of thoughtful exchange on social policy and practice between the four countries within the UK. High-quality evidence tends to stay within narrow policy silos and also within the countries. To date, it has failed to travel well between near neighbours which retain strong similarities and face common issues, as well as having distinct challenges.

Our purpose with the *Evidence Exchange* project has been to test out whether there is demand for better evidence sharing across the UK and, if there is, to consider how we might best go about responding and stimulating further demand. Findings from a survey for the project demonstrate the case for doing more in this area is proven. But the response needs to be crafted with care. Practitioners express a great deal of interest in learning more about social policy evidence from other parts of the UK (as well as further afield), as long as it is sifted for quality and relevance, is timely and of practical use.

Our organisations wish to take the next step towards acting upon these findings – not by establishing a new institution, but by working alongside partners with the necessary commitment and know-how. These will include the emerging What Works centres and the

Alliance for Useful Evidence and, we hope, others who share our sense of purpose. We very much welcome your comments on this paper and ideas for further action.

**Martyn Evans,**  
Chief Executive,  
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**Julia Unwin,**  
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November, 2013

# 1. Introduction

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The process of devolving greater powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the last gasp of the 20th century was seen as a tremendous opportunity to learn from these ‘laboratories of democracy’. Many welcomed devolution as an opportunity to compare and contrast different approaches to social policy.

However, there has been very little evidence of cross-jurisdictional learning. With the notable exceptions of the ESRC-IPPR *Devolution in Practice* series<sup>1</sup> and a Joseph Rowntree Foundation project on the impact of the first decade of devolution on poverty<sup>2</sup>, social policy is largely developed by governments with little reference to activities in the other jurisdictions. Where comparisons are made, these are usually with England which dominates UK press coverage on social policy. Comparisons between the countries of the UK are rare and simplistic. Foundations and think tanks are more likely to look to continental Europe or the USA for inspiration than look closer to home.

The Carnegie UK Trust believes that the time is now right to develop stronger cross-jurisdictional research, policy and practice analysis, to ensure that each part of the UK can understand and learn from its nearest neighbours. Each country faces significant challenges from an ageing population and a sharp reduction in public spending. If those are the shared risks, we also share the potential to carve out a new ‘social contract’ between the state and citizens and the opportunities of the digital revolution to change the way we live and work. The solutions each country adopts may be different, but learning from each other, given our shared history and similarity of cultures, provides rich potential to

explore and share ‘what works’. This is about social policy learning – for practitioners with various interests as much as for governments and parliaments – not policy transfer.

In this report, we consider evidence from a survey of almost 500 policymakers and practitioners on how evidence is currently used, demand for more and better evidence and levels of interest in learning more from their counterparts in other parts of the UK. The recent move to establish a series of thematic What Works Centres, including one in Scotland in 2014, offers a rare opportunity to improve the quality of evidence available. Our focus will be complementary – *to support an outward-looking culture of evidence exchange* – to ensure this potential is realised.

We cannot afford to be starry-eyed about this kind of endeavour: better evidence, supported by such a culture of evidence sharing, is clearly not enough to ensure better decision-making. Other influences matter as well: politics, media and public opinion, legacy funding and the hard choices involved in disinvesting from approaches that may be unproven but nonetheless popular. Yet, it is also the case that progress is unlikely to be made without a clearer focus on practice-led evidence exchange. The key question is not whether but how we take up this challenge.

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1 Schmucker, K and Lodge, G (2012) *Devolution in Practice 2010* London: IPPR

2 McCormick, J and Harrop, A (2010) *Devolution's impact on low-income people and places* York: JRF

## 2. Methods

The first phase of the scoping exercise was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It involved discussion with 20 respondents spread across the UK and Ireland (face-to-face, by phone and e-mail). Most of these took place in May/June, 2012. Respondents were sent an outline of Carnegie UK Trust's rationale in advance. An initial report set out emerging themes covering issues of function (five possible roles) and form, and identified some of the potential partner organisations suggested by respondents. The five roles considered were:

- Intelligence hub – a repository
- Initiator – a catalyst
- Influencer – stimulating how others think and act
- Interpreter – improving understanding
- Investor – resource allocation

While opinions varied in part reflecting the context of each jurisdiction, most respondents said that: some additional capacity would be useful; it should focus mainly on drawing together high-quality, relevant evidence in a format that could be accessed easily; it should be pro-active by facilitating a modest amount of face-to-face contact where this was otherwise neglected; and it should not be a separate entity with any additional investment role, but rather seek to build on Carnegie UK Trust's own established reputation.

To explore the extent and nature of interest in this kind of capacity-building, the second stage involved a survey of Carnegie UK Trust's database of contacts in March/April 2013<sup>3</sup>. This report presents a summary of findings and concludes with some options for Carnegie UK Trust, JRF and other potential partners to consider. With the establishment of ostensibly UK-wide What Works Centres and dedicated activity in Scotland and Wales, we believe there is now a momentum behind the search for high-quality, useful evidence which simply wasn't there when we started this work in spring of last year. This creates a genuine window of opportunity for the concept of UK-wide evidence exchange.



<sup>3</sup> This was supplemented by other networks including membership of the Alliance for Useful Evidence

## 3. The place of evidence

A total of 484 respondents took part in the online Evidence Exchange survey (April-May, 2013). Responses are not intended to be representative of the wider population of UK policymakers and practitioners, but they are likely to be broadly reflective of Carnegie UK Trust's contacts across the UK with an element of self-selection among those more interested in social policy and practice issues.

### The geographical spread of responses

Responses are clearly biased towards those working in the devolved countries. More than one in three are based in, or include, Scotland in their work, while Wales (10%) and Northern Ireland (8%) are also strongly represented. One in seven (14%) are based in, or cover, London. The categories are not exclusive<sup>4</sup> since respondents may work across more than one country or English region, or have a whole-UK remit<sup>5</sup>. While half (51%) work within one country of the UK, almost a quarter (23%) span more than one country and one in six (16%) have a remit beyond the UK. A similar proportion (17%) is responsible for a single area or authority (eg a council area or city). Some of these categories are not exclusive either – some respondents work across the UK and on international issues.

**Table 3.1:** Area of UK covered (per cent)

	Per cent
Scotland	36
Greater London	14
Wales	10
Northern Ireland	8
North-East England	5
South-East England	5
Yorkshire & Humberside	4
North-West England	3
West Midlands	3
East Midlands	3
East of England	3
South-West England	3

**Table 3.2:** Geographical scope of work responsibility (per cent)

	Per cent
	Per cent
Within one country of the UK	51
In more than one country of the UK	23
A single area or authority	17
Beyond the UK	16
More than one area or authority	12

- Total is over 100 as multiple responses given

### The thematic interests of respondents

Looking at the main thematic interests of respondents, the largest group (14%) have a broad public policy remit, while at least 8% cover education, economy, health or environment issues (Table 3.3). Respondents cover a very wide set of social policy issues – and indeed some challenged the definition of social policy by urging a focus on the social impact of economic and environmental policy decisions.

**Table 3.3:** Main policy and practice themes in work (per cent)

	Per cent
Public policy – generic	14
Education	9
Economy	9
Health	9
Environment	8
Social enterprise	7.5
Children and young people	7.5
Employability	7
Social care	7
Charitable funding	7
Public finance	5
Others	5
Consumer affairs	2.5

### Current use of evidence

Seven in 10 respondents said they place a great deal of importance on the use of evidence to inform their work (69%) while almost everyone

<sup>4</sup> However, the figures do add to 100% since they are shown as a proportion of all responses (taking account of multiple responses).

<sup>5</sup> The survey asked respondents where they work in the UK, not where they are mainly located. This allows us to consider the breadth of geographical coverage relevant to each respondent.

else says they put a fair amount of emphasis upon it (Table 3.4). Their colleagues are viewed in similar terms: six in 10 believe they also place a great deal of importance on using evidence. They are viewed in relatively more positive terms than the sectors they work in – about half think evidence is highly valued overall, but less than one in 10 feel that not much importance is placed on evidence across the professions they identify with. How does this picture compare with the recent past? Is austerity putting pressure on respondents to ‘follow the evidence’ more tightly when it comes to making decisions? Or do other factors (eg pressure to make short-term cuts) take on greater significance? The picture compares favourably with retrospective views of five years ago. Hardly anyone thought that evidence has a less important role, either in their own work or the wider sectors they are in. The majority (two-thirds) said more importance is attached to using evidence than in the past, with a further third noting little change (Table 3.5).

**Table 3.4:** How much importance is placed on using evidence to inform current job? (per cent)

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	None	Total
Your own work	69	29	2	0	100
The work of your colleagues	59	36	3	0	100
The sectors you work in	51	40	8	0	100

• Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding

**Table 3.5:** How much importance is placed on using evidence to inform compared with five years ago? (per cent)

	A lot more	A little more	About the same	A little less	A lot less	Don't know	Total
Your own work	33	33	29	1	0	3	100
The work of your colleagues	31	32	31	2	0	5	100
The sectors you work in	31	33	28	2	1	4	100

• Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding

## 4. Access to evidence: channels

The survey looked at channels of access to evidence as well as sources (which are discussed in section 5). The most frequent ways of accessing evidence to inform work are by searching on-line, reading newspapers and watching the news (Table 4.1). At least two-thirds use these frequently for this purpose. At least half meet frequently with sector/professional networks, read research/evaluation reports and read sector/trade press (newsletters, magazines, e-bulletins). Just under half are frequent users of social media

to access evidence for work. While Twitter, in particular, has committed followers who access research links in this way, more than a quarter of respondents rarely or never use social media (at least not for this purpose). Less than one-third frequently attend conferences and seminars in their own part of the UK, although more than half are occasional participants. The least frequently-used route is attending such events in the rest of the UK, although a sizeable minority (45%) do this at least occasionally.

**Table 4.1:** How often evidence is accessed to inform work by channel of evidence? (per cent)

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Don't know	Total
Searching the internet	81	18	1	0	0	100
Reading newspapers	74	20	5	1	0	100
Watching broadcast news (eg BBC, ITV, Parliament Channel)	66	25	8	2	0	100
Meeting professional/sectoral networks	63	31	5	1	0	100
Reading research or evaluation reports	59	34	6	0	0	100
Reading sector/trade press (newsletters, magazines)	56	33	10	1	0	100
Using social media networks (Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook)	48	25	18	9	0	100
Other(s)	42	21	11	3	22	100
Attending conferences & seminars in own part of UK	31	55	13	1	0	100
Using anecdotal evidence	28	49	19	4	0	100
Attending conferences & seminars in rest of UK	8	40	45	7	0	100

• Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding

We can also look at responses in terms of where respondents are based or cover within their work remit. Table 4.2 shows how often respondents attend events in the rest of the UK<sup>6</sup>. Few do this frequently although almost half of respondents are at least occasional participants. There is a hint that those based in, or covering, London and Yorkshire/Humber get out and about more often, but the differences appear to be small. Those working in Scotland and Northern Ireland are least likely to be frequent event-goers outside

their own jurisdiction although six in 10 in the case of Northern Ireland attend events in Britain at least occasionally. In fact, it is Scotland that brings the proportion down – almost 60% of respondents who cover Scotland or are based there say they rarely or never do this. In contrast, two-thirds of those based in, or covering, the North of England manage to attend events outside their region occasionally. This may not be very demanding in travel terms (eg between Newcastle/York or Manchester/Sheffield).

**Table 4.2:** Percent of respondents who attend conferences & seminars in rest of UK

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Total
Scotland	6	37	50	8	100
North East	11	49	40	0	100
North West	12	46	37	4	100
Yorkshire	14	52	31	3	100
Northern Ireland	6	54	36	4	100
Wales	10	40	42	8	100
London	14	42	41	3	100
<b>All</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100</b>

• Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding

<sup>6</sup> Geographical comparisons throughout the paper are based on the devolved countries, the three regions in the North of England and Greater London. Respondents who work in or include in their work the other English regions (West Midlands, East Midlands, East of England, the South-East and South-West) are included in all other tables.

Which ways of accessing evidence are of most value to the work respondents do? We asked to what extent these channels are directly useful, since motivation to carry on accessing evidence in specific ways will be related to their perceived value. Contact with sector networks, reading research/evaluation reports and internet searches are regarded as the most useful – at least two-thirds say these are always or usually of value (Table 4.3). Attending events in their own part of the UK and keeping up with sector/trade news are next most useful, although fewer than half say this applies ‘always or usually’.

Accessing the news – either in print or broadcast – is considered as less useful relative to how often this is done. About one in three can usually find something of relevance to their work. Social media and events in other parts of the UK are more hit-and-miss affairs. About one quarter of respondents say these usually generate direct benefit, but similar proportions say this is rarely or never the case. For the other channels of evidence, a majority say access is at least occasionally useful.

**Table 4.3:** Usefulness of channels of accessing evidence (per cent)

	Always or usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Don't know	Total
Meeting professional/sectoral networks	69	28	2	0	0	100
Searching the internet	66	32	1	0	0	100
Reading research or evaluation reports	66	30	3	0	0	100
Attending conferences & seminars in own part of UK	42	48	9	1	0	100
Other(s)	42	21	8	0	29	100
Reading sector/trade press (newsletters, magazines)	40	50	8	1	0	100
Reading newspapers	36	54	8	1	0	100
Watching broadcast news (eg BBC, ITV, Parliament Channel)	31	53	14	1	0	100
Using social media networks (Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook)	27	45	16	8	4	100
Attending conferences & seminars in rest of UK	26	48	19	4	4	100
Using anecdotal evidence	20	53	23	3	1	100

• Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding

Next, we can compare how often sources are used with how far they are considered useful. The difference between them might be considered as a broad measure of net benefit derived or ‘return on effort’ in terms of accessing useful evidence (Table 4.4). For example, more respondents say that meeting their peer networks is usually of direct use than say they do this frequently. The last column in Table 4.4 shows a 6% difference. Similarly, more say that reading research/evaluation reports and attending events both in their own area and in other parts of the UK are directly useful than do these things frequently. Closing these gaps – turning to useful sources of evidence more often – might increase the practical value of evidence.

On the other hand, some sources are consulted frequently, but offer less value to respondents, at least in terms of searching for useful evidence. This is most true of reading newspapers and watching the news, where other motivations are likely to be important eg catching up with what’s happening in the world, relaxing, finding out about an issue that has no real bearing at work. These are only ‘less efficient’ than other sources in the sense that a great deal of information needs to be filtered to spot useful leads. More targeted searches for evidence on-line or through sector/trade news fare better, but still offer less benefit relative to frequency of use.

**Table 4.4:** Comparing evidence channels: frequency and usefulness

Channels for evidence	Frequently used	Always or usually useful	Difference
Attending conferences & seminars in rest of UK	8	26	+18
Attending conferences & seminars own part of UK	31	42	+11
Reading research or evaluation reports	59	66	+7
Meeting professional/sectoral networks	63	69	+6
Other(s)	42	42	0
Using anecdotal evidence	28	20	-8
Searching the internet	81	66	-15
Reading sector/trade press (newsletters, magazines)	56	40	-16
Using social media networks (Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook)	48	27	-21
Watching broadcast news (eg BBC, ITV, Parliament Channel)	66	31	-35
Reading newspapers	74	36	-38

## 5. Sources of evidence

Turning to who generates the evidence, we asked how often various sources are used and how far they are trusted. A majority of respondents are frequent users of evidence produced by governments and/or their agencies. A total of 60% are frequent users of evidence generated by the Scottish Government, Welsh Assembly Government or Northern Ireland Executive, while just over half are frequent users of UK government evidence (Table 5.1). Even taking into account the clear geographical skew towards respondents whose remit covers the devolved countries, this represents a high level of use. A further 30% are occasional users. The survey does not support the hypothesis that the social policy sector may have fragmented along national lines,

with users of evidence ignoring the multiple layers of governance across the UK.

Third sector sources of evidence are next most frequently used (by just under half), followed by think-tanks and universities (a third of respondents are frequent users in each case). Independent funders of research and business networks are least frequently used.

Breaking out the responses by geographical coverage shows those connected to the devolved countries are the most frequent users of evidence produced by devolved governments – most clearly for Scotland (more than 70% are frequent users) followed by Northern Ireland (61%) and

**Table 5.1:** Use of evidence produced by sources (per cent)

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Total
Devolved Government/agencies	60	30	7	2	100
UK Government/agencies	53	40	7	0	100
Third sector networks	47	44	8	0	100
Think tanks	36	42	19	3	100
Universities	35	48	15	2	100
Others	33	17	12	5	100
Local authorities	26	47	22	4	100
Independent research funders	20	56	19	4	100
Business networks	20	47	28	5	100

• Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding

Wales (57%) (Table 5.2). Of the English regions shown, a majority of respondents are at least occasional users of evidence produced by these other governments, with almost one-third of those linked to London and the North-East being frequent users. Less than one in 10 (9%) associated with the North-West say they rarely or never turn to these sources. The pattern is reversed when it comes to the UK Government as a source of evidence. Proximity to Westminster/Whitehall may explain the frequent gravitation to UK government sources for respondents associated with London, but those in the North-West and North-East are also very frequent users (Table 5.3). In contrast, barely half of those associated with Scotland are frequent

users of UK government sources, fully 23% less than for the Scottish Government. However, those based or working in Wales and Northern Ireland show little difference in frequency of using UK evidence relative to that generated closer to home (2-4% lower).

Table 5.4 looks at frequent use of the other evidence sources by areas of operation across the UK. While we should not read too much into the exact figures due to small numbers of respondents in some of the English regions, a major range in figures within a category might be significant. For example, the figures show likely significant differences in the use of think-tank evidence – almost 60% of London

**Table 5.2:** Use of evidence produced by devolved governments and their agencies (per cent)

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Total
Scotland	72	24	3	0	100
Northern Ireland	61	35	4	0	100
Wales	57	40	3	0	100
London	30	47	19	3	100
North-East	29	51	14	6	100
North-West	22	69	9	0	100
Yorkshire	18	64	14	4	100

• Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding

**Table 5.3:** Use of evidence produced by the UK Government and its agencies by geography (per cent)

UK Government and its agencies	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Total
London	72	24	4	0	100
North West	70	30	0	0	100
North East	68	32	0	0	100
Yorkshire	61	32	7	0	100
Northern Ireland	57	39	4	0	100
Wales	55	41	4	0	100
Scotland	49	41	9	0	100

• Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding

respondents are frequent users compared with 25% in Northern Ireland, reflecting the glut of think-tanks serving the London policy community and the dearth of such capacity elsewhere. The North-East is the only area where a majority of respondents regularly turn to think-tanks, a likely reflection of IPPR North's established presence in Newcastle. Those associated with Scotland appear to be the most frequent users of both local government and the business sector as sources of evidence, with Yorkshire and Northern

Ireland/London having the fewest frequent users, respectively. Those linked to London are also the most frequent users in the UK of universities (42%) and independent funders of research (28%).

**Table 5.4:** Use of evidence produced by devolved governments and their agencies (per cent)

	Third sector	Think-tanks	Universities	Councils	Independent research funders	Business sector
Scotland	47	29	32	29*	16 (x)	23*
North East	46 (x)	51	27 (x)	22	19	19
North West	48	43	30	17	22	9
Yorkshire	54*	39	36	14	21	7 (x)
N. Ireland	48	25 (x)	31	13 (x)	22	14
Wales	47	31	31	14	19	14
London	47	59*	42*	13 (x)	28*	13
ALL	47	36	35	26	20	20
<b>Range, high-low</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>16%</b>

\*denotes highest frequency use per source  
x denotes lowest frequency of use

## 6. Trust in evidence

We have a picture of how often these evidence sources are used. We then asked to what extent they can be considered trustworthy. The concept of trust is not straightforward. Some will interpret this as reliability, consistency or credibility, or base their view on overall reputation or some other element of trust. We, however, felt it was a sufficiently clear concept to help gauge overall views of each source.

Table 6.1 shows that three sources of evidence are always or usually trusted by a clear majority of respondents. These are universities (68%), UK

Government (60%) and devolved government (57%). Third sector networks stand in the middle with just under half saying they trust them always or usually. Next, around one-third say the same about independent research funders, think-tanks and local authorities, with around half saying these are trusted occasionally. Business networks fare least well on this measure: one in five say their evidence is usually to be trusted, but most are willing to do this occasionally. Even here, only a small proportion (13%) say they are rarely or never to be trusted.

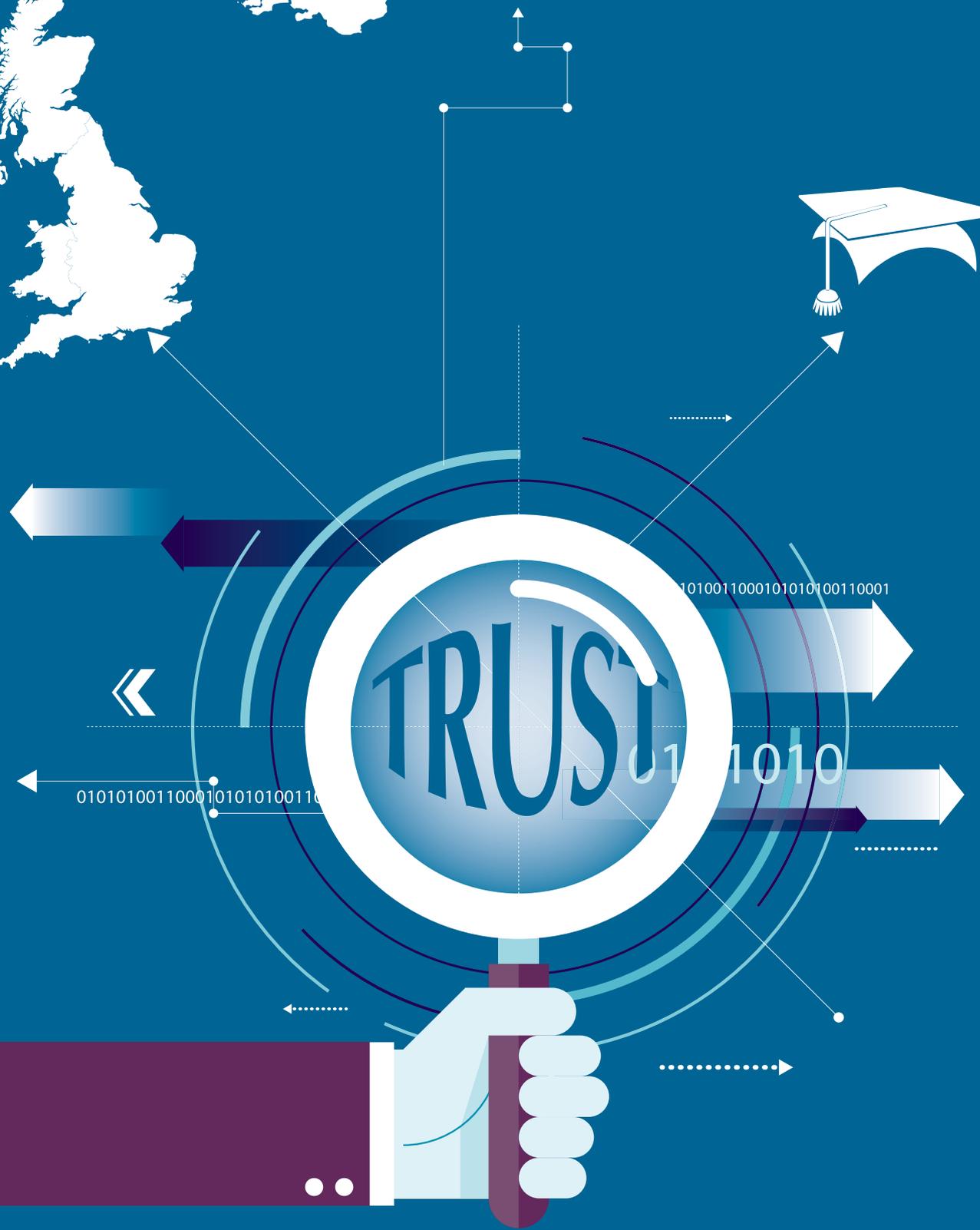
**Table 6.1:** Trustworthiness of sources of evidence (per cent)

	Always or usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Don't know	Total
Universities	68	29	2	0	1	100
UK Government/agencies	60	38	4	0	1	100
Devolved Government/agencies	57	34	3	0	6	100
Third sector networks	45	50	4	0	1	100
Independent research funders	35	49	6	0	11	100
Think tanks	34	54	7	0	4	100
Local authorities	34	51	8	0	6	100
Business networks	21	56	12	1	10	100
Others	18	28	5	1	48	100

\* Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding



TRUST



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The figures on trust are disaggregated by geographical remit across the UK in Table 6.2. The final column showing the range of scores is based on those saying they usually or always trust an evidence source. The range is largest for devolved government, from Scotland (65%) to Yorkshire/Humber (34%). Although it might be tempting to think of this as a ‘false reading’ – since respondents linked to Yorkshire might not be expected to consult evidence from the devolved countries very often – it is worth looking at the figures again: four out of five say they are at least occasional users of this evidence.

The range is next biggest for the third sector, spanning from more trusting stakeholders in Yorkshire to more sceptical ones in London. The UK Government receives its highest trust score

from those linked to Scotland (significantly above the proportion using its evidence frequently) and is lowest among respondents associated with Yorkshire. Meanwhile, London respondents express the most trust in think-tanks (Yorkshire respondents the least) and universities (North-East respondents the least). The range in trust scores is narrowest for independent funders of research, but a 12% variation between the North-West (most) and Northern Ireland (least) may still be significant. Looking across all sources, respondents linked to Scotland express the highest trust score on four occasions while those linked to Yorkshire express the lowest trust score on four occasions.

Comparing these scores on trust to the earlier figures on how often each source is used enables

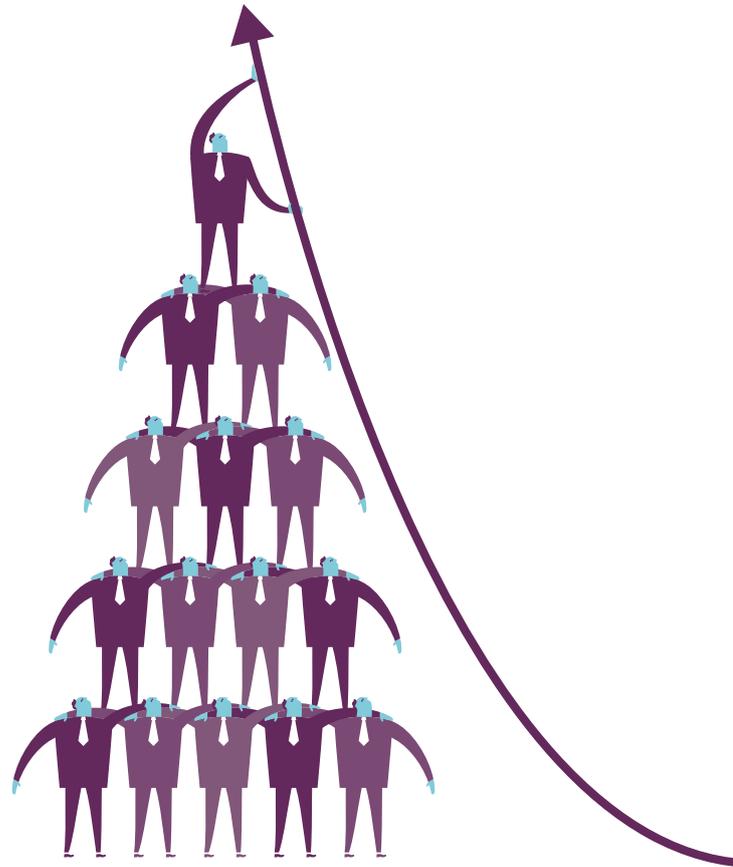
**Table 6.2:** Trustworthiness of sources of evidence by geography (per cent)

	Uni-s	UK Govt	Devolved Govt	Third Sector	Ind. funders	Think tanks	Councils	Business
Scotland	67	60*	65*	49	34	32	34*	21*
Wales	65	50	53	45	32	28	30	18
N. Ireland	64	50	51	42	25 (x)	27	21 (x)	17
North East	54	51	39	43	35	32	32	19
North West	62	46	37	50	37*	29	33	4 (x)
Yorkshire	52 (x)	41 (x)	34 (x)	55*	31	17 (x)	34	10
London	69*	52	41	35 (x)	34	34*	28	13
Range	17	19	31	20	12	17	13	17

\*denotes highest trust score per source  
x denotes lowest trust score



us to derive a measure which we can describe as ‘value of effort’ – similar to the previous frequency/usefulness measure. For example, if a highly-trusted source of evidence is only consulted rarely, or if a source which isn’t trusted as highly is nonetheless used often, practitioners can take action to improve their use of time and effort. Table 6.3 compares the two measures and shows a net score combining frequency of use and degree of trust. A striking figure appears: almost twice as many respondents express a high degree of trust in universities as consult them frequently to find evidence. In addition, independent research funders fare much better in terms of trust than in attracting frequent users (+15), while local authorities (+8) and the UK Government (+7) also fare relatively better.



**Table 6.3:** Frequency of use by degree of trust: value of effort (per cent)

	Frequently used	Always or usually trusted	Net difference in use/trust
Universities	35	68	+33
Independent research funders	20	35	+15
Local authorities	26	34	+8
UK Government and agencies	53	60	+7
Business networks	20	21	+1
Third sector networks	47	45	-2
Think tanks	36	34	-2
Devolved Government/agencies	60	57	-3
Others	33	18	-15

## 7. Is the evidence good enough?

Being able to trust those who produce social policy evidence is just one element in weighing up if it is ‘good enough’. The survey asked about seven other elements. As Table 7.1 shows, at least seven in 10 respondents agreed that the evidence they make use of is: relevant (79%); easy to access (77%); practically useful (75%); and up-to-date (69%). But relatively few agreed strongly, suggesting each could be improved. Just over half agreed the available evidence is typically of good

quality and sufficient relative to needs. However, one-third chose the ‘neither’ response for quality, which many defined in open comments as ‘sometimes’ or ‘depends on context’; and around a quarter did the same on sufficiency. Only a quarter agreed that the evidence inspires them – closer to half said ‘neither’ (on this, it really does seem to depend on whose evidence is used and how it is communicated) while one in five disagreed.

**Table 7.1:** Characteristics of evidence available (per cent)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Easy to access	14	63	13	10	1	100
Relevant	10	69	16	4	0	100
Useful in a practical sense	8	67	16	7	1	100
Up-to-date	8	61	20	10	0	100
Typically of good quality	5	51	32	11	0	100
Sufficient for needs	5	48	23	21	2	100
Inspiring	3	24	47	22	2	100

\* Totals may not be exactly 100 due to rounding

**Table 7.2:** Agreement with statements about the evidence that informs respondents work by geography (per cent)

	All	Scot	Wales	N. Ire	NE	NW	Y&H	London
I can distinguish good quality evidence from the rest	<b>90</b>	92*	86	84	92*	87	83(x)	91
A lot of the evidence is interesting but not very practical	<b>74</b>	75	72 (x)	79	82	83	89*	72 (x)
I learn a lot from evidence about developments in the rest of the UK	<b>73</b>	74	86	86	87	100*	97	68 (x)
There isn't enough time to make good use of the evidence in my work	<b>67</b>	70	69	68	73	83*	76	58 (x)
There is enough good quality evidence to inform the work I do	<b>58</b>	59	47 (x)	58	66*	58	54	55
I can take action to address key gaps in evidence	<b>50</b>	44 (x)	52	64*	60	62	58	62
Rest of UK evidence is interesting but not very relevant	<b>22</b>	21	13 (x)	23	24*	21	14	20
I don't have time to consider evidence from rest of UK	<b>21</b>	24	14 (x)	19	24	29*	21	15

Eight other statements were included. Large majorities agreed with three of them. First, respondents said they are able to spot good quality evidence from the rest (90%). Second, much evidence falls into the category of being interesting but not very practical (74%). This 'second check' question contrasts with the previous finding that a similar proportion say the evidence is useful in a practical sense. It is likely that respondents distinguish between (i) the evidence they use (or they know is available) to inform their work which may take for granted a sifting process of relevance/credibility and (ii) the much wider, un-sifted body of evidence. Third, and significant for the concept of an Evidence Exchange, almost three-quarters (73%) say they already learn a lot from evidence in the rest of the UK. This might mean another region within England rather than cross-border learning, and we might view this figure with a degree of scepticism in light of later findings, but it still reflects a positive orientation towards learning beyond the local 'patch.' The figures suggest stronger agreement in the North of England and slightly less influence upon those linked with London.

Two-thirds of respondents (67%) agree that time is a constraint when it comes to applying the lessons from evidence. Again, due to relatively small numbers for some of the English regions, we should be wary about reading too much into variations across the UK. Nonetheless, there appears to be a major difference in how stretched respondents feel in this regard: the figure peaks at 83% in North-West England and falls to 58% in London.

A majority said – as shown in table 7.1 – that the available evidence is typically of good quality. But is there enough of it to inform their own work? Around six in 10 (58%) said yes, but there is a sizeable gap between those

linked with Wales who are least satisfied in this regard and the North-East of England (who are more persuaded).

Can respondents do anything about gaps in evidence? Half said they can, referring to in-house monitoring and evaluation work, as well as commissioning research and external impact studies. Northern Ireland's respondents fared best on this measure, Scotland's least well.

Finally, two of the statements received much less support. Around one in five say that evidence from the rest of the UK is interesting, but not very relevant to them (with rather few differences across the UK) and that they don't have time to consider such evidence. On this last point, respondents linked to Wales and London are least likely to agree, while those associated with Yorkshire are relatively more likely to agree. A further set of questions about defining the quality of evidence was included in the survey. Table 7.3 shows that:

- The reputation of who has produced the evidence – which might extend equally to who has published it – was regarded as the most important feature: two-thirds regard this as a very important issue.
- This was twice as important as who pays for the evidence to be produced – 30% said this was very important in weighing up quality.
- Direct relevance to own work was the next most important element of quality: six in 10 think this is very important. A similar proportion say statistical validity is very important in their view of quality. Others may seek quality evidence from non-empirical evidence. And just under half agree that the closely-related issue of sample size is very important.
- Various differences across the UK can be seen in the table. Few of them can be easily explained and may not be significant. However, 'home-

grown' evidence seems to matter much more to those associated with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than in England.

- In contrast, no more than one in 10 respondents regard evidence generated in the rest of the UK as a very important part of determining what's 'good enough' (suggesting only a small proportion is actively engaged in using this

kind of comparative evidence); and a similar proportion say that evidence of innovation is very important.

**Table 7.3:** Importance of features of 'good enough' evidence (per cent stating very important)

	All	Scot	Wales	N. Ire	NE	NW	Y&H	London
Reputation of who has produced the evidence	<b>64</b>	62	72	72	71	75	72	64
Direct relevance to own work	<b>59</b>	62	62	53	60	58	54	57
Statistical validity	<b>56</b>	53	70	57	42	54	48	62
Sample size used	<b>47</b>	48	55	47	34	42	38	44
Other issues	<b>42</b>	44	40	50	36	43	50	52
Reputation of who has funded production	<b>30</b>	34	28	30	26	42	34	31
Evidence generated in own part of UK	<b>29</b>	35	34	28	10	12	0	10
Innovative approach used	<b>11</b>	13	6	15	11	12	10	5
Evidence generated in other parts of UK	<b>8</b>	8	10	13	10	8	4	4



## 8. Interest in learning from the rest of the UK

A core feature of the Evidence Exchange project is to gauge the nature of demand for learning about social policy evidence across the UK – and possibly beyond<sup>7</sup>. The survey asked about three components of learning: current knowledge, current influence and future interest. These were measured for various evidence sources. Not surprisingly, the strongest knowledge comes from the professional sector(s) which respondents are part of in their own part of the UK: 40% say they have a great deal of working knowledge of social policy evidence arising from these circles ‘close-to-home’ and a further 50% say they have a fair amount of knowledge.

This falls by half (to 20%) when it comes to these same professional sectors in other parts of the UK, although a clear majority (58%) say they have at least a fair amount of knowledge. Note that the survey did not specify other countries of the UK, so this response will include North/South learning within England for example. Fewer than 10% know a great deal about comparable places to the ones they work in (eg cities, local authorities) elsewhere in the UK or beyond the UK. It is worth noting that respondents with a working remit in Northern Ireland don’t express any greater working knowledge of evidence from beyond the UK. Its near-neighbour in the Republic of Ireland may simply have diverged too far to provide a good reference point, at least in social policy terms.

However, those whose work spans more than one country of the UK or beyond the UK express higher levels of working knowledge in each case. For example, those working on a cross-country (or whole of UK) basis are almost twice as likely as all respondents to know a great deal about evidence emerging in their own sector in other parts of the UK. At below 40% though, there is presumably a

lot of scope to improve levels of knowledge – if there were also interest and need/demand.

**Table 8.1:** Per cent who report a great deal of knowledge by geography

	All	Works in more than one country of UK	Works beyond the UK
Own sector(s) own part of UK	40	49	48
Own sector(s) in other parts of UK	20	38	34
Other comparable places (rest of UK)	9	16	18
Other European countries	5	8	13
Rest of the world	5	8	13

Figures on how much influence these sources of evidence have on the work of respondents show a similar picture.

**Table 8.2:** Per cent who report evidence has a great deal of influence on their work by geography

	All	Works in more than one country of UK	Works beyond the UK
Own sector(s) own part of UK	47	49	44
Own sector(s) in other parts of UK	22	38	36
Other comparable places (rest of UK)	10	19	20
Other European countries	7	12	24
Rest of the world	7	12	28

Thinking about the future, the survey asked how much interest respondents would have in being

<sup>7</sup> Carnegie UK Trust’s work covers the Republic of Ireland as well as the UK.

able to access more evidence from these sources. More than half have a great deal of interest in drawing upon more evidence from peers in their own part of the UK, followed by a sizeable minority (41%) who say the same about peers in other parts of the UK. This rises to half of those whose work spans cross-country or wider than the UK. About 30% are keen to know more about comparable places in the rest of the UK, other European countries and the rest of the world. The strongest interest of all is expressed in the rest of Europe among those whose work (fully or partly) spans wider than the UK.

At the other end of the scale, some say they have little or no interest in accessing more evidence at any level. They emphasise the current volume of evidence, the effort involved in sifting it for the relevant ‘nuggets’ or call for better evidence rather than more of it. About 12% of respondents express not much or no interest in extra evidence from the rest of the UK, rising to 28% for the rest of the world.

Are there any important differences on this measure of future interest among respondents across the UK? At least half of respondents working in every part of the UK shown in the table express a great deal of interest in learning from peers where they already work. Appetites appear to be strongest in Wales. Those keenest to learn from peers in other parts of the UK are in Wales and Yorkshire, with Scotland expressing relatively less interest on this measure, in comparable places in the rest of the UK and in other European countries. In fact, respondents based in or covering Wales express the greatest degree of interest at each level (except ‘the rest of the world’).

**Table 8.3:** Per cent who report a great deal of interest in learning from evidence sources: those whose work spans cross-country or beyond

	All	Works in more than one country of UK	Works beyond the UK
Own sector(s) own part of UK	<b>54</b>	56	57
Own sector(s) in other parts of UK	<b>41</b>	50	52
Other European countries	<b>31</b>	41	59
Other comparable places (rest of UK)	<b>29</b>	32	39
Rest of the world	<b>28</b>	37	51

**Table 8.4:** Per cent who report a great deal of interest in learning from evidence sources: those whose work spans cross-country or beyond

	All	Scot	Wales	N. Ire	NE	NW	Y&H	London
Own sector(s) own part of UK	<b>54</b>	57	66*	60	50 (x)	56	61	50 (x)
Own sector(s) in other parts of UK	<b>41</b>	41 (x)	56*	52	50	52	56*	46
Other European countries	<b>31</b>	29 (x)	42*	38	30	35	40	37
Other comparable places (rest of UK)	<b>29</b>	26 (x)	51*	42	37	35	39	31
Rest of the world	<b>28</b>	27	40	50	36	43	50	52

\*denotes highest level of interest per source

x denotes lowest level of interest

### Respondents who work on a cross-country basis

What else do we know about those respondents whose work spans more than one country of the UK? These make up just over one in five survey respondents (22%). Compared with respondents as a whole, they are:

- Much more likely to attend events in the rest of the UK at least occasionally
- More frequent users of various evidence sources including UK government, universities and think-tanks, but not devolved governments
- More likely to be able to take action to address gaps in evidence
- Less likely to say they don't have time to consider evidence from rest of UK
- Less likely to agree evidence from rest of UK is interesting, but not very relevant
- More likely to work in independent, charitable or private sectors
- More likely to have generic public policy roles or to cover environment themes
- By location/coverage: more likely to be linked with London or South-East England; and half as likely to be linked with Scotland or Northern Ireland.

### Respondents who are keenest to learn from rest of UK

What else do we know about those four in 10 respondents who express a great deal of interest in learning more from professional peers in other parts of the UK? Compared with respondents as a whole, they are:

- A little more likely to attend events in the rest of the UK at least occasionally
- A little more likely to see most of the evidence sources as trustworthy
- Less likely to say they don't have time to consider evidence from rest of UK
- Less likely to agree evidence from rest of UK is interesting but not very relevant
- More likely to already have a great deal of knowledge about their own sector(s) in rest of UK
- No different in terms of their areas of expertise or the sectors they work in
- By location/coverage: few differences from respondents as a whole, but the keenest-to-learn are slightly less likely to have a Scotland connection and slightly more likely to be linked to Wales.

## 9. Conclusion

The case for an evidence exchange for social policy has been tested and refined over 18 months. This report of scoping stage activities leads us to conclude that there is clear evidence of interest in learning more from policy and practice evidence across the UK, on a wider and deeper basis than occurs at present. We believe levels of interest are close to expressions of demand – that potential users of an evidence exchange role can be identified – and that the timing is right for such an approach to be developed more fully, primarily due to emerging What Works Centres (see Annex) and related initiatives across Britain<sup>8</sup>. Survey findings backed by interview evidence provide important clues as to what the next stage should and should not look like and how potential users might be targeted:

- The concept and values behind the evidence exchange can be expressed in practical terms without a separate institution. Rather, Carnegie UK Trust and its partners can play a leadership role in mobilising others with a strong stake in this agenda to look outwards and improve the quality of learning through UK-wide networks.
- The single, most important task is to help with the ‘sifting’ process – to enable user networks to identify high-quality, relevant and practical evidence and to improve accessibility, amid the large volume of evidence available. This can be compared to amplifying the signal and reducing the background noise.
- Respondents understand the importance of evidence in their work, but many need support in translating it into practical tools. The main focus of the evidence exchange might thus be in working with *practitioners within thematic networks but across the UK* including support for feedback mechanisms which improve communication with those who commission, pay for and produce research and evaluation.
- Practitioners have a rounded view of what counts as ‘good enough’ evidence and most believe there is enough of it to meet their needs, but access is an issue (eg from academic sources) and sources vary in how far they can be considered as trustworthy. As well as defining the scope and implications of a social problem, respondents are seeking evidence to inspire them – positive change arising from well-evaluated approaches.
- About four in 10 say they have a great deal of interest in learning from policy practice in the rest of the UK within their own professional sectors. This rises to half of those whose work spans more than one country of the UK or includes an international remit. A significant minority of these respondents say they already know a lot about what happens in the rest of the UK or that it influences their work, but it is worth noting that *twice as many overall express a desire to learn as say they already have knowledge about the policy and practice environment elsewhere in the UK*.
- Satisfaction with the amount and quality of evidence is lowest in Wales and interest in learning from others is highest there as well, from Europe and the rest of the UK. There is evidence of interest in parts of the North of England as well. Respondents working in, or covering, Scotland appear to have relatively lower levels of interest, although four in 10 express a great deal of interest. About one in three wishes to learn more about *comparable* places to the ones they work in the rest of the UK.

### Next steps

The Carnegie UK Trust, working with other trusts and foundations, will seek to engage with the new What Works Centres where our thematic interests are aligned. We believe we can make a distinctive

<sup>8</sup> Potentially GB/UK-wide thematic centres, a Prevention/Public Service Reform centre in Scotland and a Public Policy Institute in Wales, though no dedicated centre as yet in Northern Ireland.

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contribution by ensuring that these developing networks of evidence users:

- function across the jurisdictions of the UK
- are driven by practitioner interest and demand
- are responsive to distinctive needs and interests in different parts of the UK
- are growing over time
- are enabled to provide feedback to those who commission, fund and produce the evidence
- are pro-active in terms of identifying evidence gaps as well as responsive to existing evidence.

In taking this forward, we will work with the Alliance for Useful Evidence (see Annex). As an independent network of policymakers and practitioners, it can generate ideas for improving the evidence-to-practice cycle in the UK without being limited to the thematic interests or operational approaches of the What Works Centres. As a recent creation, the Alliance is not yet well-known outside London policy circles, but it has held events in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, published on the Welsh context<sup>9</sup> and we are supportive of its plans to establish a base in Scotland.

We believe that, building on these two initiatives, the concept of an Evidence Exchange can be further developed. It should build on the reputation of Carnegie UK Trust and partners like the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to serve as a catalyst, meet demand where it is evident and helps to stimulate demand over time – through existing networks and with partners who bring the capacity and authority to work on this agenda.

We have identified various organisations which stand ready to help disseminate the findings of Evidence Exchange activity, or who have an interest in undertaking research and evaluation

on a cross-country basis. But there are relatively few with a primary focus on improving both the quality and utility of evidence and the foundation for comparative learning.

During 2014, the Carnegie UK Trust, working with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, What Works Centres and Alliance for Useful Evidence, will explore a test-phase for the Evidence Exchange. This would enable us and our partners to learn more about effective (and cost-effective) approaches to dialogue and dissemination; and to influence decision-making by governments and other funders in a part of the policy landscape which now has significant momentum.

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<sup>9</sup> Megan Mathias (2013) *What Works Wales: A Discussion paper for the Alliance for Useful Evidence* <http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/What-Works-Wales-discussion-paper-English-Welsh.pdf>

## Annex: What Works centres

### What Works centres

Over the past few years, there has been much discussion about how we can improve the use of evidence in decision making. This has led to new initiatives, such as the Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as calls for new institutions and ways of working. These discussions have now led to action. In March, 2013, the UK Government, the ESRC and the Big Lottery Fund, announced plans to create a new network of 'What Works' evidence centres.

In summary, these are some of the anticipated key features of the 'What Works' initiative:

The What Works centres will improve the links between the supply of evidence, and the demand and use of evidence, across key policy areas, including: active and independent ageing, early intervention, policing and crime, and local economic growth.

The What Works centres will provide systematic assessment and synthesis of relevant evidence, develop 'common currencies' for each sector to enable the selection of interventions, rank interventions where possible, and make recommendations based upon the strength of the evidence, advise commissioners on the evaluation of new programmes, and present and disseminate findings in an easy-to-understand form to enable it to be easily acted upon.

The What Works centres will be supported by a central function consisting of a chair, advisory council, and an analytical team.

The What Works centres will aim to be demand led, that is to say they will be useful to their target audiences and those for whom the evidence is relevant, and will work hard to develop easy-to-understand outputs.

The What Works centres will be completely independent from government, but close enough to have an impact.

The work of the centres will complement the rapid progress being made in opening up public data, and administrative data, allowing for greater accountability and faster insights into how different areas of policy are working.

*Source: Geoff Mulgan and Ruth Puttick (2013) Making evidence useful: the case for new institutions, NESTA: London*

## Annex: Alliance for Useful Evidence

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### Alliance for Useful Evidence

The Alliance champions the use of evidence in social policy and practice. It is an open-access network of individuals from across government, universities, charities, business and local authorities in the UK and internationally. The Alliance provides a focal point for advancing the evidence agenda, developing a collective voice, whilst aiding collaboration and knowledge sharing, through debate and discussion. It is funded by the BIG Lottery Fund, the Economic and Social Research Council and Nesta. Membership is free.

*Source: [www.alliance4usefulevidence.org](http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org)*

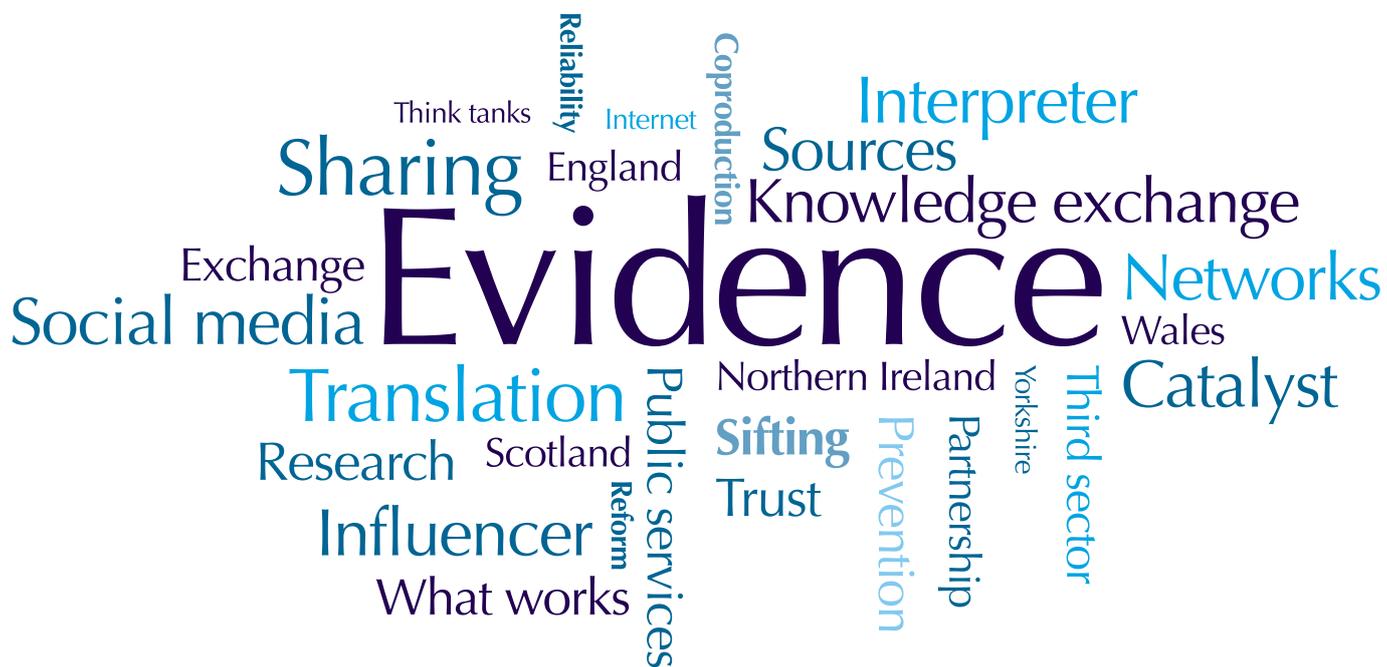
The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913 and we are delighted to be celebrating our centenary in 2013.

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