

Sense about Science Inquiry into the non-publication of government research

A note from David Walker, head of policy, Academy of Social Sciences

1. This follows the conversation I had with Sir Stephen Sedley and Prateek Buch about the inquiry Sense about Science is considering on publication of research commissioned by government
<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/news.php/455/pages/a4e.html>.
2. Is the ambit of the inquiry Whitehall (central government departments where research is commissioned by civil servants) or does it extend to the devolved administrations, arm's length bodies, the NHS and other public bodies such as the National Audit Office? These notes apply mostly to Westminster government. The picture in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast may be different. The Scottish government emphasises openness
<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Research/About/Social-Research>. Local government also commissions research.
3. Within Whitehall not all 'research' is commissioned by or with the knowledge of research specialists (eg members of Government Social Research). What ministers may understand as research may be supplied by consultants or thinktanks. Note that work done by consultants does not fall under the publication protocols supervised by Government Social Research because 'consultancy' is separately classified.
4. Another category that embraces research is 'evaluation'. Government employs its own staff to carry evaluation of policies; it also commissions such work externally, from self-identified research institutes, universities and consultancies. This work is not much covered by protocols though the UK Evaluation Society (www.evaluation.org.uk) plays a role.
5. We lack data. Whitehall does not regularly aggregate spending on research by departments. Spending through Business, Innovation and Skills on research under the Science Budget is separately accounted; the governance of 'scientific research' is under review.
6. Since 2010 social research spending by Whitehall departments has been under pressure but (anecdotally) spending by departments may have recovered and in some (international development for example) remains buoyant. The non-commissioning of research may be a greater worry than non publication of commissioned work. Similarly there are worries about the

nature of 'research'. Expensive surveys may be replaced by cheaper case studies.

7. The provision of research (aka 'evidence') is one thing; how it is used by civil servants and ministers is another. Despite the volume of commentary on 'evidence', there is little empirical study of how decisions are made in departments and the cognitive basis on which public business is transacted. Social science is sceptical of the simple view (sometimes heard in STEM circles) that government 'should use more evidence' – a) because this misunderstands the nature of political and policy decision making; b) because it misunderstands the applicability of the class of 'evidence' derived from academic research; c) because it threatens accountability by privileging expert over political judgement.
8. The departmental landscape is variegated. Some departments have strong chief scientists with a clear line of sight over research commissioning and publication. Departments' interest in knowledge, evaluation and analysis is not stable or predictable.
9. Some departments have built scrutiny into their research processes. There is much to consider here with some exemplars - for example DFID, which is held to account through the Independent Commission for Aid Impact.
10. Professional networks also vary. The Government Statistical Service embraces civil servants in departments and in the Office of National Statistics. Their professional head is a substantial figure and statistical publications are regulated under a code, supervised by a statutory body, the UK Statistics Authority. The Government Economic Service has a professional head who is located in the Treasury and functions as the government's chief economic adviser; within its knowledge economy are the Office for Budget Responsibility, which publishes its own research and the fully autonomous Institute of Fiscal Studies. Government Social Research has a part-time professional head who is located in BIS. None of these social science research networks are connected directly with the apparatus supplying 'science advice' to government through the Government Office for Science and the Government Chief Scientific Adviser who, like the Chief Medical Officer, have 'extra-departmental' expectations of access to the Cabinet and prime minister.
11. The Cabinet Office is the site of commitments made by the Coalition and the Conservative governments to 'open policymaking' and open data – but as a department it has no direct responsibility for or interest in how and whether departments commission and publicize research.
12. Government Social Research has a code requiring publication of commissioned research within a set time <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service-government-social-research-profession>. Its enforcement depends on permanent secretaries, departmental science and research professionals and the capacity

of the professional network to reach inside departments and insist on adhering to the code.

13. Formal commitments on the timing of research publication are in practice negotiable. Freedom of Information is important: non civil servants (who may or may not be tipped off) and suppliers of research have the option of requesting publication of reports under FOI.
14. These points emerge from soundings by the AcSS among government social researchers. Academics may confuse commissioners' misgivings about the quality of research with 'suppression'. 'Over zealous' departmental press officers may produce press releases that do not adequately reflect research findings; they may lobby researchers over perceptions of 'damaging findings'. Press officers and special advisers may be concerned about the timing of release and seek to shift publication dates. Evidence is anecdotal; it does not point to a systemic problem. Much depends on the character and determination of a department's research professionals. Non- or delayed publication is deemed 'more an irritant' than a major issue in social research. Delays have good causes – for example conducting peer review. Proximity to elections leads to risk-averse behaviour. Research was held up for several months before the May 2015 general election then further delayed when, afterwards, incoming special advisers and ministers reviewed the material. In most instances it was finally published. We were told: 'a bigger issue is failure to use research effectively in policy development. This includes not commissioning research in the first place, not doing it in time, or not waiting for its results before making decisions. This is less to do with lack of resources and much more to do with lack of foresight and planning for future information needs.'
15. These points emerge from soundings by the AcSS among suppliers of research to government. Often they are left in the dark about reasons why a completed report does not issue as a departmental publication – they may be innocuous (to do with staff shortages or rotation) but suspicion grows. One view is that research is rarely 'suppressed' but more commonly 'quietly shelved, kicked into the long grass or ignored. There are a myriad of tactics and practices to this end.'
16. Several respondents regretted the lack of coherent archiving of social and economic research commissioned by government.
17. Several respondents wondered if social and economic research might be subject to protocols similar to those supervised by the UK Statistics Authority. But this could bring rigidity to the business of developing and commissioning research.