

Top 10 tips for engaging and communicating with policy makers

Getting your scientific research across to those within policy can be a daunting process. Conveying your message not only requires finding the right people to engage with but also using the right tools to do it effectively. We've put together this 'top 10' list of tips, based on advice generated at our 2014 Policy Training Workshop, to provide you with our guidance for how you can get the most out of your interactions with decision makers and communicate your science in an effective and impactful way.

- **Get involved!**
Policy makers are continually looking for trusted sources of evidence. Make yourself known to those who need evidence by using existing platforms and organisations, networking at events which host different stakeholders, and branching out to work with others in different specialisms. Be reliable and willing to engage and, in time, you will begin to be recommended by others.
- **Understand the policy environment and stay up to date**
If you want to be taken seriously and effectively engage with policy makers, you need to be aware of how policy works, who is who and what issues are on their current agenda. Take the time to research the people you'll be interacting with. Wrongly naming the current environment minister or being naïve about the way decisions come about may make you seem uninformed, and could affect the way you and your message are received.
- **Be timely**
To grab the interest of policy makers and make your interactions most effective, get involved with policy and decision making processes early on. Telling policy makers what they should have done or what their options are after key decisions have been made is not a useful use of your time, and it is far less likely they will be willing to listen to you.
- **Plan your approach**
Once you've decided to engage, plan how you are going to do it and what steps you need to take. What do you want to achieve? What issues does your audience care about and what are they motivated by? Different policy makers work at different levels so you will need to tailor your language and message appropriately to connect with them. Planning your move will help focus your efforts as well as understand how to balance doing this alongside your normal workload.
- **Tell a relevant and engaging story**
To make it easy for policy makers to understand and connect to your message, create a narrative to bring your research to life. Create human interest with stories, case studies and graphics that are relevant to them and try to build a connection by linking your message to the issues or areas that they work on - the more recent the better. But, remember to keep your messages clear and concise and reduce or explain scientific jargon.
- **Be a generalist as well as a specialist**
Having a specialism is great and can offer important insight into complex problems, but you need to be aware of the wider developments, problems and current understanding in your field. Policy makers won't necessarily always expect, need or want to know about the minute details of a particular study, but instead the wider areas of your subject. So read around and be aware of what's going on (you probably do this anyway!) and be prepared to talk about this.
- **Rid yourself of imposter syndrome**
You may not feel like an expert, but the fact is, you're going to know a lot more than most of your audience. More importantly, policy makers don't expect you to know everything. If you find this is a problem that stops you getting involved in science policy, find people who can give you advice and support - there are many people who can help.
- **Be certain about uncertainty**
Uncertainty in science exists. Big deal. And the truth is, policy makers know this. It can be difficult but communicating uncertainty in your results, approach or even the known unknowns is essential and you shouldn't shy away from it. Be clear and open, use language that is easy to understand and try not to make it into the big issue you may think it is.
- **Be objective**
You may be asked to provide recommendations or options for a future policy direction. In these situations, presenting a balanced and objective case is essential. Make it obvious when giving your own personal opinion or when using a scientifically informed one. Referring back to what the evidence says can add clarity to your answer and highlight that you are acting as a knowledge broker.
- **Remember, science is not everything**
Policy makers are influenced by a huge array of factors, and will not always take the decision you think they should based on the scientific evidence. Science only forms part of the argument for or against a particular policy and the ultimate decision on a policy is usually a political one. As long as you can convey the message as best you can and give them evidence that can be used to inform their decision, that is all that can really be expected of you.

For more information visit www.britishecologicalsociety.org/public-policy

NB: when we refer to policy makers, this can include (but not limited to) parliamentarians, ministers, parliamentary committees, civil servants, scientific or political advisers and members of regional assemblies and local authorities.