CREATION
For evidence to be useful for policy makers and practitioners, it must be reliable. While this point may initially seem obvious, it is worth emphasising, especially for topics such as crime reduction, which do not have the same history of rigorous experimentation that can be found in areas like medicine.

In practice, this means the use of randomised and quasi-experimental evaluation methods wherever possible, as such techniques produce the least equivocal findings.

TRANSLATION
A key point that Shepherd emphasises is the importance of evidence that is not only fit for purpose, but also easily translated into practice. For the most part, policy makers, commissioners and practitioners are unable to engage with research because of its complexity. Moreover, it is no secret that scientific research as it is presented in academia is often wilfully impenetrable and overly focused on caveats that, while important to academics, are far less relevant to others. This obfuscation means that evidence is far less likely to be translated into practice.

Shepherd concludes that wrapping up useful evidence in layers of caveats and limitations actually does more harm than good, because it discourages policy makers and practitioners from seeking evidence at all.

Successful translation relies on clarity: the outcomes and implications of research need to be clear, actionable and relevant. Furthermore, prior knowledge and ease of implementation play major roles in the uptake of new processes; that is to say, practitioners are more likely to make changes if they are easy and do not challenge their own preconceptions.

With regard to traditional journal formats, Shepherd suggests all articles begin with structured abstracts that include clear conclusions sections – a move that should make them more immediately comprehensible to lay
A HEALTHIER ECOSYSTEM

The Shepherd’s report is the result of a project that employed three principal methods to produce clear guidance as to how evidence-based policy making can be better implemented in a sector-specific manner. These methods were:

1. Using the analogy of the petrochemical industry supply chain to represent the evidence ecosystem for each sector, and comparing the two processes. “This serves as a useful comparison because evidence is often referred to as flowing through ‘pipelines’ (eg. from evaluator to What Works Centre to commissioner), just as oil and its refined products flow from well to refinery to gas tank,” Shepherd explains. “Like fuel, evidence needs to be generated, synthesised and turned into usable products that can be marketed and used.”

2. A systematic review of published evaluations of interventions designed to improve implementation of evidence (adoption of What Works by services and policy makers).


WHAT WORKS

This initiative constitutes the first attempt by any government to implement a national approach to the use of evidence in policy making. Sectors falling under the auspices of the What Works Centres are education attainment, ageing better, local economic growth, crime reduction, health and social care, and early intervention – all key service sectors that, when improved, could generate tangible benefits for the UK population. In future, Shepherd’s report should be used by these Centres to collaborate with national organisations responsible for service quality to increase the traction applied research has in their sectors.

IMPLEMENTATION

When it comes to the implementation of evidence, the report provides an exhaustive analysis of the available methods. Some were identified as being less useful in bringing about change. The production of written guidelines, for example, or even educational outreach by experts in a particular field, were both found to be of little use. While these methods may serve to inform, they do not overcome some of the biggest barriers to change. More effective methods included:

- **Local innovation leaders** – high-performing practitioners whose commitment to evidence-based policies means they function well as ‘evidence advocates’

- **Mass media campaigns** – increasing awareness among members of the public can in turn drive practitioners to implement change

- **Financial incentives** – understanding of any negative cost implications for decision makers can be very effective in changing behaviours

- **Interactive meetings/workshops** – educational meetings that include some element of interaction tend to be more effective than simple didactic approaches

Shepherd champions the implementation of specific interventions and programmes, depending on context, and notes that, ultimately, the most effective means of ensuring behaviour change is implementing carefully targeted strategies. Such strategies consider not only the intervention, but also the unique barriers that need to be overcome; for example, eye specialists will face different challenges than police commanders.

In addition, the report highlights the importance of research assistants to aid in the effective dissemination of evidence in all sectors, as well as small, local, face-to-face meetings between professionals to create an environment of evidence implementation. The role that What Works Centres can play in working towards a culture of evidence-based practice is stressed throughout, and the practical, informed suggestions offered provide hope for a future in which evidence is placed at the heart of UK policy decisions.

readers, policy makers and commissioners. As for effective communication avenues, his report suggests several:

- **Targeted social media** – especially Twitter and LinkedIn

- **Publications produced by occupational organisations** – eg. institutions at the heart of the professions

- **Letters columns in broadsheet newspapers**

Key players in the translation of evidence are those individuals whose roles span both creation and implementation of evidence, such as university medics with careers in research and practice. The report therefore also states that opportunities to develop these roles further and adopt them in all sectors should be explored. For example, Shepherd recommends that teachers who are appointed as academics should continue to teach in the classroom.