

Undertaking research

Introduction

Making a compelling case for changing public policy, or even just for changing the way that a public policy is implemented, requires that there is excellent evidence to support the argument – and that implies the need for excellent research. Too often, business associations rely on emotion or patronage to sway policy makers but this is not sustainable. Decisions not rooted in solid evidence are easy to overturn by the next person to gain the ear of the policy maker. And, increasingly, it is not just one or two policy makers who need to be convinced, but a range of Ministers, Parliamentarians and civil servants and often other players such as NGOs or trade unions. This all requires well researched and well presented evidence.

You should review existing research, and perhaps do some research amongst your members, before you decide to commission more detailed research. A separate fact sheet covers commissioning research.

Researching the issues

The objective in undertaking the research is to ensure that you have a full understanding of the issue, the impact and the implications. Research tests, assumptions and observations to ensure that the evidence really does support the arguments. So relevant research might include, for example, assessing the regulatory costs (for example, the cost of a licence or levy) and compliance costs (that is, the administrative cost to the business of complying, including staff time, etc) imposed on a business; it might also require an understanding of how much money the government makes as a result or whether perhaps there is a cost to government.

For existing regulation, it might be sensible to consider the potential implications if it didn't exist (especially if it is possible to measure in financial terms and better yet if there might be an increased tax take for government because businesses are more profitable).

- Research the issues that are important to members, and to businesses in the sector who are not members;
- Research the scale of impact of the issues (that is, how many businesses are affected);
- Research the depth of impact of the issues (that is, the financial impact on businesses).

Prioritisation will not require detailed research, but knowing the likely impact can help you to choose between issues.

- Research the history and rationale for the public policy and understand the cause of the issue(s);
- Consider possible solutions to the issue(s) and research the implications;
- Research the decision making processes for the specific issue;
- Research the current opinions and attitudes of policy makers.

Structure your research

Define the problem clearly

- ▶ **Who else is interested?**
 - What research material already exists? Can you get hold of it?
 - Who is researching this topic?
 - Who is/ should be interested in the topic? What information can they provide?
- ▶ **What do you know?**
 - What are the gaps in your knowledge?
 - What extra information do you need?
 - What has happened in other countries?
- ▶ **What is the impact on business of the current position?**
 - How many businesses are (or will be) affected?
 - How are they affected? If there is a cost to the business, then what is the cost? How could the cost be ameliorated?
 - Is there an administrative burden imposed on the business, for example, a requirement to complete paperwork or to stand in a queue to obtain a licence? What is the additional cost of the administrative burden? Could the burden be reduced?

Develop responses

Whilst developing a response to the research is really step three of the five step approach, it will be necessary to start thinking about possible options whilst you are undertaking the research, so that you can begin to think about the implications – for both the private and public sectors – of what you are proposing.

- Will your proposals reduce the cost to business?
- Will your proposals make it easier to do business?
- Will other groups be disadvantaged in any way by what you are proposing?
- Will government lose potential revenue? Is there an alternative way in which this could be recouped?

When government is making proposals for new regulations, or you are making proposals to abolish or reform existing regulations, try to think about the 'unforeseen consequences'.

Writing a report

Once you have gathered all your data, you will need to pull it altogether into a report, even if it is only for your own use, so that you have all the data and information – and the implications – at your finger tips. You may choose to publish the research findings, or you may wait until you have developed your policy proposal and simply include the data as appropriate evidence to support your case. There is a big advantage in publishing the research report earlier than your proposals. Others might try to pick holes in it, in which case you will have a chance to do more research to bolster your case. Others may come forward with additional information which supports your conclusions. Early publication may also give an opportunity for everyone to agree on the facts – thus leaving you only to argue about the conclusions that follow. Your research report requires that you:

- Adopt a logical structure which takes the reader through the material in a way that the information can be easily understood
- Write succinctly
- Set out current position with data

- If you have already begun to think about responses, then you could also set out your ideal future position backed up with data

It can help to prepare a draft and then submit to peer review, at least amongst your members, but potentially also amongst supporters and research institutions. Ask yourself whether the report is clear? Could it be clearer? Is it compelling? What are the likely objections? Have you addressed the objections?

Using statistics

You will be including statistics within your research report, so you need to take special care over what statistics you use and how you present the information. If you quote from secondary sources, then you should state the source. If you have undertaken primary research, then you should state your sample size. Bear in mind that the sample needs to be large enough to be significant.

Take care to explain how you have interpreted the data. Be careful with the use of words like 'average' – use mean or median instead. Take particular care with percentages.

You will want to select facts that are relevant to your argument, but don't (inadvertently or deliberately) hide facts that counter your argument. Giving complete information is more likely to earn the trust of your readers; being open will potentially add to your credibility. If others discover that you have hidden data, then you will be undermined; it is better either to do more research to show that the original findings are inconclusive, or else to argue that in fact the data does not contradict your assertions. Choose carefully the data to emphasise in your argument and you will add to the persuasive qualities.