

The Business of Policymaking Podcast

Episode 4 – In conversation with Louise Scott

Speakers: Jana Javornik and Louise Scott

[00:00:00] **Louise:** Think of your impact as an influence in the way you're trying to help policymakers understand this world in which you're an expert. You have a particular lens on that, you have a particular angle on it that nobody else does. It's your key perspective. Don't underestimate how important that is.

[00:00:27] **Jana:** Hello everyone and welcome to this edition of the Business of Policymaking - the new podcast from Leeds University Business School with me, Jana Javornik as a host, and produced by Hannah Preston. In today's episode, we will be presenting the Research Office of the Scottish Government which provides research-based evidence and advice for ministers and governmental officials.

The Scottish Government is the devolved government for Scotland and has a range of responsibilities that include the economy, education, health, justice, rural affairs, housing, environment, equal opportunities, consumer advocacy and advice, transport, and taxation. Today I welcome Dr Louise Scott, a Deputy Chief Social Researcher, and you're about to hear some useful insights into the work of her team and the role academic evidence plays in it.

Good to have you on the show today, Louise.

[00:01:24] **Louise:** Thank you. It's good to be here.

[00:01:26] **Jana:** Louise Scott is a Deputy Chief Social Researcher at the Scottish Government, having previously served as Civil Servant Policy Specialist and Research Officer for many years. The Research Office supports the development, implementation, evaluation of the Scottish Government policies, and your team, Louise, provides research-based advice, but also works with different teams internally, externally, basically to ensure the social and cultural impacts of policies are assessed and integrated into decision-making.

Sounds good so far. This seems like a huge office providing really a range of activities and responsibilities and you've probably covered very different topics. During your tenure at the government, you have worked in different teams, regularly collaborate with academics, as well as actively create opportunities for and invite academic research.

Could you provide some insight into your role, what it is exactly that you do, and what does it mean to be a Deputy Chief Social Researcher at the Scottish Government?

[00:02:32] **Louise:** Yeah. So, I am the Deputy Chief Social Researcher. That means I have really three functions. As a deputy head of profession, my role is to be a champion for social research and evidence informed policymaking. That means that I need to advocate for social research, and I do that both internally among policymakers and other professionals within government who can benefit from the insight that social research can give them, but also externally. I advocate with academics, for example, and other experts to help them understand that we're committed to

evidence-informed policymaking and how they can get their work incorporated and used by the Scottish Government.

In terms of the profession, we've got about 150 social researchers across Scottish Government. They all are embedded in analytical service divisions. That means they work to the devolved functions of government. We might have people working in education, people in transport, people in health, people in education, or children and families.

So, in all parts of devolved government, we have analysts and social researchers there. And the other two aspects of my job, one is to set and assure the standards of social researchers so that we have a consistent approach across government. We set process, we set procedure - this kind of things.

And the third role is to ensure we have sufficient capacity to meet business need and business demands. That can involve recruiting staff where they're needed and making sure staff have appropriate level of skills. We're committed in Scottish Government to providing our social researchers with 100 hours of CPD.

It's my job to ensure that they can identify their skill gaps and that I steer them and support them in upskilling wherever they need them. We don't just recruit new recruits, but we also bring in interns and fellows, interns who may be at the start of their academic career, sometimes PhD students, sometimes master's students.

And also people, academics in particular, external experts who may be much further on in their career as fellows, and they come in through, currently through the UKRI programme.

[00:05:17] **Jana:** That sounds unique, but is it really? Is that organisational unit typical or standard in other governments, do you know?

[00:05:28] **Louise:** Across the UK, we do have heads of profession, heads of the social research profession in many government departments. Generally, because, in Whitehall departments, for example, you'll have a head of profession in, say, the Department for Education, and they will be responsible for researchers in that department.

What's great about the Scottish government and the devolved administrations is that we have a head of profession who's head of profession across the government, the Scottish government, Welsh government, for example, but we then have researchers who sit within the devolved aspects of government. So, it means then that as a head of profession, we get to experience research coming from many different fields, and that's probably more unique. It's just the size and the scale and the way we set up our business in Scotland. In other countries, things operate differently. Some countries will have in-house analysts as we do in Scotland.

In other countries, they may have, the U. S. is a really good example where they have very, very few in-house analysts and actually a lot of the evidence that they need is sought from external experts, external commissions, think tanks, this kind of thing.

[00:06:46] **Jana:** Louise, you worked across departments, you know Scottish Government well, and you were an academic yourself in the past. What are your observations? How does your typical day look like if you make a walk across the different roles you had?

[00:07:03] **Louise:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, it's quite different from my life in academia. Absolutely. I guess my typical day might start with coming in and checking the press. That's the first thing. So, what's happened? What's happened overnight? What's fresh in the media? And you're looking for things that might be relevant to your policy area or might be new to the research field that comes through publications that may be coming through different types of press. Maybe that's the daily press. It might be some of the scientific journals and so on. But what you're looking for on a day-to-day basis is what's hot and whether there's anything that your minister or your policy team might need to know about urgently that may come up in the day-to-day conversations that ministers may be out and about and having on that day. So, they may require a very urgent response - some information or some advice, particularly if it's likely that a conversation will arise. You'll need to provide that advice to private office. You'd be speaking with your policy colleagues as well to ensure that the advice is being fed through consistently and coherently, and that ministers are not overwhelmed with the amount of information that they get in that day for the business of the day.

It might be something that could be a slightly longer term, so you could put more in a submission that could be looked at later in the day, at the evening. And once you've dealt with that, depending on what your work is and what you're doing, you know, you might then go back to your desk and be involved in some longer-term work.

So, you might have, for example, a piece of commissioned work where you might have to go and speak to some field workers or contractors or have a meeting with the advisory group of a piece of work to check on progress and ensure it's happening and delivering.

Or you might be then speaking to the customer for that work, which would be your policy lead, making sure that they are ready for the research to come, that it's going to land well, that you're preparing the ground, so that this evidence doesn't just come out of nowhere, that they remember that that's, you know, what that piece of research is going to provide to them and how that's going to feed into their thinking and at what point.

You may as well be involved in some shorter-term work or some primary analysis or secondary analysis at your desk. Sometimes you might be involved in that kind of work. So, you may be going to do a literature review, you may be working with the library to do that. You may be doing some desk-based analysis of some in-house data, for example.

So, if you're looking, say, at, you know, what's the experiences of teenage mums in Scotland, you could do some analysis of the Growing Up in Scotland study. And that will give you some quite sharp answers and quite quickly to be able to feed into something that might be a shorter-term issue that you're trying to address.

You may be liaising with your legal team. We have legal professionals in government on, say, the aspects of a research contract or working out should we be delivering this as a grant, or should it be a procurement exercise. Can we do this? Are there any legal implications?

You might be liaising with comms and ministerial offices to arrange a date, for example, to get your work published or plan the media around the publication and any ministerial visits that might need to happen around your publication. So yeah, it can be a very busy time. It can be very reactive.

And what you have to try to do is carve out time for some of the more proactive work, for the planning and anticipation of what will be needed longer term. And also to carve out that time for the longer-term delivery of your work. Some work can take some years to get to deliver, but the immediate pressures of the day can sometimes push that aside. You've got to be really conscious of how you spend your time.

[00:11:25] **Jana:** When you mentioned longer-term, could you specify that for our listeners? You did mention that, obviously, some pieces, some work can take years. But what is longer-term in a policy cycle perspective?

[00:11:40] **Louise:** That's a great question. I guess even in a policy cycle, Jana, you know, the time scale of a policy cycle can vary considerably. You know, the policy cycle is - it's almost a conceptual framework to think of the different steps in a policymaking process, but it's often messier than that.

Sometimes you've got to get through that cycle quite quickly, so what you're looking at is designing a policy, working with stakeholders, framing the right questions to ask of stakeholders, so that you can then get the design to work effectively, designing the policy, working again with stakeholders, sometimes the same, sometimes different, sometimes legal teams and so on. Thinking through your theory of change, if you like, you know, your process map, what do we need, what do we want to achieve as an outcome? What are the things that will get us there? What does the evidence tell us is to get us there?

What's going to be the best options? How can ministers look at the options that they have available to them? What can we propose to ministers for them to decide which route to take?

And then, of course, you've got design of the policy, going through the bill process, then implementation once you have the policy approved. And all of that really depends on the policy. It can take many, many years to get through that process.

You can go back to the beginning again, you know, you can get to one step and need to go back to the beginning. For example, you know, I've been very closely involved with the expansion of childcare.

That took many years in Scotland as an initial idea to expand childcare from what was originally provided. But scoping out what that would look like and how it might then be delivered. It's one thing to have an idea, but then the practicalities of how that works in practice. What can work? What's likely to be deliverable? How can we make it work?

And then getting the stakeholders involved in helping us to think that through, to work through the implications of delivery. And then readying the sector to take on board these changes.

So, we started that policy with an initial rollout to 600 hours and then we piloted an expansion of 1140 to some pathfinder local authorities. So, we were going through an iterative process, if you

like, of the policy and constantly feeding back what the evidence was telling us about what we were learning and what, how we could then adapt and modify the policy as we moved forwards.

And 1140 hours was delivered after several years, but it's still an iterative process and we're probably six, eight years on, longer, since we had those original thoughts, ideas for how we were going to move forward on this.

So, some things can be really, really quick. Some things take much longer. The infrastructural changes will take much, much longer. And of course, you've got the cultural changes as well. You know, the outcomes that we're looking for from an expansion of childcare and not just about implementing 1140 hours and having that available, but actually the outcome is enabling parents to use that childcare in a way that works for them, so they can free up their time, to spend their time how they want to, you know, whether that's supporting themselves to get into work, whether it's taking on additional training, whether it's going into work, or with other responsibilities.

And that can be a cultural shift, you know, so we're not going to see those changes overnight. Well, the evaluation for the expansion of childcare is still going and it will continue to go on. So, while the policy design team and the policy team that was there to set that up, the numbers needed to do that have declined.

But interestingly, the timescales for the analysts are quite different. So, we still have a pretty full analytical team who's working on that evaluation, still looking to see what we're learning from that. How are people engaging with that policy? It could take a generation to move some of those people forward.

You know, the policy provision is to try to accelerate that, but we're changing hearts and minds and a culture of how you look after your children. We recognise that this is something that we do need to monitor longer term. This is a policy that we've invested in for the long term to improve the lives of the people of Scotland. We believe in it, we're committed to it, and we want to see those benefits accrue from that. To help others learn from this as well we need a rigorous evaluation process. This was a pioneering programme for the world,

you know, the world hadn't seen the scale of change within its childcare sector and such a massive increase. So, we know that other countries are wanting to learn from this experience. And it's only right that we demonstrate, we have a responsibility to our citizens in Scotland, to our taxpayers, to demonstrate to them how effectively the money is being spent on the policy, how it is working in practice, but we also have a responsibility to share that more widely so that others can learn, as we do from other countries as well, from their experiences when we're trying to scope out new policy areas.

So that's a really long-term evaluation programme and a long-term policy cycle.

You know, we've had the recent experience of COVID, where the policy cycle by necessity needed to be much quicker, absolutely needed to find solutions very rapidly. But what was really interesting for me as an analyst about that time was actually the processes that you go through, the collation of evidence, the way we bring experts in, the way we get insight from a whole host of different fields, from people working in different academic disciplines, in different sectors, getting their ideas on board. Then working with stakeholders to think through how the policy is going to work. Again, stakeholders from many different sectors - the process was still the same.

I think what was different was, thankfully, for technology brought everybody together very quickly. I think the scale of the issue just galvanised hearts and minds and brought everybody together. We could see that there was a clear purpose. You know, there was a very clear idea of what we're trying to address.

And people bought into that very, very rapidly, you know, people had the motivation and the desire to get involved and help however they could. They had the capacity to do that and so lent their support. And this is, I thought, a really great example of how the policy cycle was absolutely shortened, but the machinery and the processes of how you bring evidence into that process, that thinking process as a government was still very much at the core of that decision making.

[00:19:14] **Jana:** It's also useful perhaps for our listeners to understand that you can work with such speed if you have those relationships developed and you've nurtured them over time. Because your earlier example of childcare, I remember we met what, like, 15 years ago around that particular issue.

And you engaged with a huge number of academics around that topic. It was also around shared parental leave at the time. And we've exchanged views and knowledge and all of that. So how does an academic or an academic body of work come onto your radar? When would you consider approaching academics vis-a-vis your in-house analysis or going to your own experts?

[00:20:00] **Louise:** Yeah. It's a good question. I would think of it conceptually rather than a process. I think this is one of the challenges of thinking of policy as a cycle. Policy is ongoing, really, you know, policy intervention might have a cycle, a cyclical nature to it, but actually the policy and the policy area is ongoing.

So, if you're thinking in very simplistic terms, as, you know, when do we use internal analysis? When would we use external, when might we deploy an academic perspective? There are two ways to think of that. There's one of short-term work where, generally, you might need to, in a Scottish Government context, you might need to do a piece of work very, very quickly.

You might need to provide a response to a minister that afternoon, or within the next few days, where they might be appearing before committee, and you're trying to support them and help them to think through some of their ideas. In those circumstances, the time might be limited to engage academics, but, for example, in exactly that situation, I have picked up the phone to experts whom I know and have said, I have a meeting tomorrow. I need to know about X and the benefit of that for me was that it was almost like a tutorial, if you like, 20 minutes on the phone, this is what I'm going to say, this is my latest, this is what I'm thinking, is there anything new that I should be saying, anything different, what's the latest position, what's the literature saying, what are the different perspectives that we need to think about. In that situation, there was no way I could have got the richness of the situation.

It was about capital cities and the finances, the way the finances flow in and out of capital cities, and the financial constraints of being a capital city. I was able to speak to an economic geographer who had some specialism in this area. And that was, it was just invaluable for pointing me to new ideas, a different take on things.

Some of the people who were working in this area, critically, some of the key terms that I could then go away and explore and pick up later, once I'd had my conversation. So, I knew what key terms to look at in the literature, for example, and I knew how to articulate a research question that would then invite people with that area of expertise.

That's an example, I think, where you will need to draw on people quite quickly. There is other work that we do that's much longer term than that, and that might be commissioned work, where it's more complex. So, academics might come onto our radar through a competitive tendering process.

We tend to tender out complex, large-scale projects. An academic, for example, could not come and knock on the door and say, I've got this great idea for a research project, and this is what it will tell you, can you fund me, and I'll go and do it. That's not how it works in government. If that's a viable question for the minister to ask, and they need that as part of the business of government,

that's a legal requirement of the minister, and so we will commission out that work. And that academic would be free to bid for that work, clearly. And may well be in a good position because they feel that they're an expert in that field, but there could well be other people out there with that skill set and that level of expertise. We need to be fair, and we need to open competitive tendering.

So, academics could come on our radar in that way as well, but, I think, probably a really good example of the way in which we try to invest in relationships. As you said, Jana, relationships are key to the way government needs to operate.

And so, rather than think of policy, as I said, in the kind of work that we do in short scale, short term, long term, are we doing commissioned work, non-commissioned, or at what point in the policy cycle might we draw them in, because in all honesty, they'd come in at lots of different places.

I think it's probably good to think of how we create capacity to build those relationships. And as I said, policy is ongoing. We have to invest in those relationships longer term. And there's a few ways we do that. I'll give you a really good example from agriculture, actually, within the Scottish government.

So, there are three types of funding. One is if you think about long term funding for the national good. So, as a government department, we need to invest in the infrastructure of research and evidence for the public good. And that's because there isn't somebody else who will pick up that work, pick up that investment, because it's not in their interest, but it's in the interest of the nation to have this capacity and this resource.

So, for example, in agriculture they fund something called the Underpinning National Capacity Programme, designed exactly to do this, and in that you might find, for example, the National Soils Archives. This is a public good, it has some policy use, so from time to time we will need that capacity, that skill set.

We can't say exactly when we will draw upon it, but we know it's essential for us to have that resource there for us to call upon when we need to, and to have the people who work there with that skill set to maintain those skills and for us to be able to draw on that. So, that's almost an underpinning the infrastructure, if you like, of evidence.

We'll invest also in long term surveys, longitudinal studies, for example, where we know that that's a public good. It's an investment that we can draw upon for the longer term. And if we fail to invest in that, if we have a short-term view of that, then we fail to have that resource there for society - that wider good.

So, in agriculture, they then have a second tier of work. Now, obviously, what I mentioned there was a long-term initiative. This would be they invest in a roughly five-year cycle of a programme called a strategic research program. And what this does then, this sets research questions.

So, big research questions that the government wants to address. There isn't that immediate policy request right now for a policy initiative to draw upon in the next year, month, you know, that short term. But we know we need answers to those questions for us to sustain the long-term answers for policy to draw upon.

So, that sets the research questions, academics can bid and demonstrate how they can use their expertise, their knowledge, their expertise to undertake some work in that area, and they'll be funded to do that. So that helps address the issues for government. It helps to build expertise; it helps to build capability within the academic sector in particular.

Now all that work requires some interaction with government. You have to design that research with the policy interests fully understood, and really tailor your work so that it meets the objectives of a policy customer.

And to do that, you need to be engaging. So, there will be regular catch ups with the policy teams, with the analysts within agriculture, to be able to manage that process.

And then the third area that agriculture invest in are called centres of expertise. And that's where we go a step further. That's where actually academics then help to set the research questions. So, academics are closer to the literature, closer to the academic context. Sometimes the experts outside of academia as well, they can see the gaps within the literature, within the academy, if you like. And they almost bridge the gap or bridge the place between recognising the large policy questions that government needs answers to, but also recognising where the evidence is needed in the academy that will help plug those gaps and build an evidence space.

So, that's an example where government is investing in centres of expertise, working closely with academics, where they help then set the research questions, but actually where we're trying to build the academy so that, again, we have that knowledge base to draw upon for us to be able to design policy that meets the needs of the people of Scotland for whom they're responsible.

All of that requires relationships, engagement, ongoing engagement between government and academia, government and experts. Relationships are at the core of this, but I think that the world of academia and government are sometimes much closer than we imagine.

[00:29:39] **Jana:** So good and so rich. So many top tips for our listeners, I think, to unpick from that answer.

Just coming to our last thoughts, is there anything you want to add? Another top tip for academic listeners in terms of engaging with governmental policy, or Scottish government in particular?

[00:30:01] **Louise:** I think, you know, there are lots of ways in which academics can be engaging with government. I think, sometimes, it can feel as an academic, it can feel demoralising. You can feel unheard. And hopefully from this conversation, I've given you a flavour of how impact or how your influence can come to light in many different ways. So, what I would say is, think of your impact as an influence in the way you're trying to help policymakers understand this world in which you're an expert.

You have a particular lens on that, you have a particular angle on it, that nobody else does; it's your key perspective. Don't underestimate how important that is. So, you know, you may have spent years working on a research project, you deliver a result, you deliver a paper, you publish a book, and you may see a very direct line of sight between what your research has found and what a policymaker then needs to do with your research.

The decision making in government is far more complex than that, and often the research, your piece of research, may point to what you perceive to be as a particular response, but actually the nuances of how decision making is done in government needs to build on a much greater range of evidence and not just from single fields of evidence, but from different places, from different stakeholders.

But let's not forget that government is a political context and ministers need to make political decisions. And so, sometimes it can be disheartening if you think there's a very clear solution with your evidence, but it's not been taken on board. It's not that your evidence hasn't had an impact because that's just not the way; they don't see it in that simplistic way.

Influence doesn't happen like that. Your research will have had an influence. It will have influenced the people you've spoken to. It will influence the analysts who work in government, help them to see things differently, think in a different way. Equally, it will help ministers to understand the context far better as well.

And so, keep going with providing your insight, your research, your evidence, keep talking, keep communicating, because it's in those conversations, it's in the margins of your books, in the discussions that you have around your large piece of work that you're likely to have the greatest influence.

So, keep going, keep talking, keep building those relationships, and if your piece of work is a vehicle to help you to do that, that's great. But remember that it's about influencing people's ideas and concepts, the frame of reference, and it's not just about changing the way a policy might need to operate.

[00:33:18] **Jana:** Invaluable last points. Louise Scott, thank you ever so much for joining me today on the show.

[00:33:25] **Louise:** It's been my pleasure. Thank you.

[00:33:27] **Jana:** You've been listening to the Business of Policymaking podcast from Leeds University Business School. Presented by Jana Javornik and produced by Hannah Preston. If you'd like to get in touch about anything you've heard in this episode, our contact details are in the episode show notes.