



Festival of Ecology: SPG Workshop Report
Ecology for Society: Understanding and Engaging with Policy
Zoom, 16th December 2020



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Introduction

This live online workshop held by the Scottish Policy Group (SPG) formed part of the Festival of Ecology which is the British Ecological Society's (BES) annual meeting. This report will provide a brief summary of the event. The workshop aimed to provide a starting point for scientists who want to engage further with the policy making process. It also aimed to provide a space to network, share experiences and ask questions.

The session was opened and chaired by Sarah McKain, a BES Policy Officer who coordinates the work of the SPG. The workshop was cohosted and facilitated by members of the SPG Committee. We had 90+ people in attendance which makes it the largest event in the history of the SPG!

Introduction to the SPG

The Vice Chair of the SPG and UKRI Fellow Dr Isabel Jones¹ started off the session with an overview of what the SPG does, how it functions and who our Committee Members are. Please see some details of our members below:

Introduction to the SPG

Ecology for Society: Understanding and Engaging with Policy





Ruth Mitchell
Chair
Research Scientist;
James Hutton
Institute



Isabel Jones
Vice Chair
Research Fellow;
Uni. Stirling



Jeanette Hall
BES Policy Committee Rep.
Woodland ecologist;
NatureScot



Chris Pollard
Ordinary member
Social Scientist;
Forest Research



Jess Hogan
ECR Rep.
PhD student;
Uni. St. Andrews



Ellie Wood
Ordinary member
PhD student; Uni. Edinburgh



Hannah Grist
Ordinary member
Knowledge Exchange &
Communications
Manager; SAMS



Chloe Bellamy
Ordinary member
Spatial Scientist; Forest
Research



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Picture 1: Slide from introductory presentation

¹ Dr Isabel Jones is now the Chair of the SPG from 2021.

Guest Presentations

Presentation 1: Bridging Research and Policy: Tips of the trade

Nick Bibby from the Scottish Policy and Research Exchange provided us with some tips of the trade. He encouraged us to see our research from the perspective of others and to ask ourselves some key questions when communicating our work:

- Who am I talking to and what can they do?
- Who is the individual and what is the organization's aim?

Nick also advised that where possible we do some research about the organization and/or individual to find out what their particular interests are and what challenges they face. It is ineffective to just send a paper to or simply email all MSPs. They all work differently and will have different priorities, and we need to work out where our research fits in with those priorities.

Nick asked us to consider whether our research is relevant now. Nick advised us to think about the agencies in Scotland and reemphasized the point that we really need to be specific in the way that we target audiences and consider what they want to know.

Presentation 2: Working with People and Government for Biodiversity in Scotland

Professor Des Thompson is the Principal Adviser on Science and Biodiversity with NatureScot, Scotland's Nature Agency. He has worked closely on the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and provided us with an overview of the very ambitious statement of intent:

"[We will] work closely with stakeholders, and devise innovative solutions and partnerships which bring new voices to the debate, in developing our new strategy...

[The] new strategy will facilitate creation of new, locally driven projects – such as Cairngorms Connect – to improve ecological connectivity across Scotland...

[We] will extend the area protected for nature in Scotland to at least 30% of land area by 2030, and could go even further than this given 37% protection of Scotland's marine environment."

Professor Thompson also provided us with an overview of how the policy cycle works in theory and in practice. You can find his presentation in Annex 2 of this document.

Presentation 3: The role of peer reviewed journals in shaping the science/policy interface

Dr Nathalie Pettoirelli is a Senior Conservation Biologist at the Institute of Zoology, Zoological Society of London. She is also a Senior Editor for the British Ecological Society's Journal of Applied Ecology.

Dr Pettoirelli provided our audience with some insight into how journal submissions fit into the policy world. She explained some of the top tips for communicating and some of the main commonalities and differences between the science policy interface. You can find her presentation in Annex 2 of this document.

Q&A Session

We then moved on to take questions from our audience. Co-host and SPG Committee Member Ellie Wood took live questions from our audience to ask our guest speakers. Please see below the answer to a great question that we couldn't quite get to that came up in the meeting chat:

How do you recommend getting across certainty/uncertainty to policy makers?

The best way to communicate both certainty and uncertainty is to be as clear and simple as you possibly can. It can really help to provide context. For example: are your results certain but is your data set limited? Have you found a clear trend, but only in one specific context? This kind of thing is extremely important to highlight when communicating with policy makers so they can make the best judgement and decision with the information you are providing them.

Make sure the person you are speaking to has all the context to fully understand what you are basing your certainty or uncertainty on. And don't rely on scientific jargon, such as describing the findings as "significant", which can have several meanings beyond its scientific definition. Make sure you explain exactly what you have found in simple terms, and why you make your judgement about the certainty/uncertainty.

Breakout Sessions and Summary

We then broke out into groups to discuss the question: What are the barriers to communicating effectively with policymakers and how do we overcome them?

As this session was held live and very well attended it was not possible to collate notes from every breakout session that we had. However our co-hosts and members of SPG Committee Ellie Wood and Jeanette Hall managed to get some notes on the ideas and questions that came from their breakout session:

Barriers to policymakers

- Imposter syndrome – feeling like no one cares about your work!
- Not knowing the practicalities of how to contact policy makers.
- Who to contact – do you go to the top or not? Which individual in the organisation is best placed or likely to be most interested in your work?
- Does your proposal fit with what policymakers are interested in?
- Not knowing how to change the policy agenda if you think it needs to change!
- It can be hard to just dip toes into policy world if you're a researcher! You have to invest a lot and be quite committed.

How to overcome them

- Think about "policymakers" in the broadest sense when deciding who best to communicate with – government, environmental NGOs, teachers and others.
- Some policymakers hold conferences so look out for these and other events. This information can be found on their website or Twitter for example or signing up to a newsletter. Networking and meeting people can also be quite significant!

Sarah McKain the Policy Officer at the BES provided a short summary of the break out sessions which is summarised in the slide below:

SUMMARY

What are the barriers to communicating effectively with policy makers and how do we overcome them?



BARRIER	SOLUTION
Time limits	Having a strategic approach and keep written information short.
Accessibility	Share your research widely and ensure contact information is easy to find.
Language	Keep written information simple and clear, avoid jargon.
Policy-making is multifaceted	Think of the context, why is my research important?



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How to structure an elevator pitch?

The floor was then handed to SPG Committee Members Dr Hannah Grist and Dr Isabel Jones to take us through how to structure an elevator pitch.

This was a light hearted and informative section of the workshop where we were provided hints and tips as to how we should structure our elevator pitch. Simplicity and keeping it short again came out as a theme to our workshop and key to creating a successful pitch. It was also highlighted that you have to remember that it will always be a work in progress. A key question to consider when you are explaining what you do: Would your family member or a person outside of your profession understand?

My work in 1 sentence

WHY (the point of your work)

HOW (how you achieve it)

WHAT (the actual details)



Dr Grist and Dr Jones also set the audience the challenge of distilling their work into one sentence. Members of the audience were encouraged to post their efforts to social media tagging @BES_ScotPol #MyWork1Sentence. This generated quite a bit of engagement from the audience and highlights it can be quite difficult to do, but practice makes perfect!

Live Feedback and Wrap Up

We then took a moment for the audience to provide some live feedback answering two questions on Mentimeter. See the results below:

1. What have you learnt from today's workshop?

co-production/co-design is a major gap in science-policy interface	Need to consider higher role turnover in policy compared to academia	Find out what your audience actually wants!
less is more	How to put together a useful (and short) elevator pitch!	Work out what your research gives to policy makers
Concise communication takes time.	Differing time demands on civil servants in different countries - impacting ability to interact closely	Telling a story with your research!
Reinforced/reminded me of some things I knew	That policy is very complex and there is no single route to engaging with it	Build the confidence to do it!
Novelty/originality less important for policy than academic publishing	how to sell research to policymakers and stakeholders	Prepare for unexpected opportunities
Approach people personally is the best way to contact policy makers!	Ensure you provide information relevant to a live debate	integrate their perspective in your communication, get in touch whenever possible with politicians
strategies to overcome challenges	Some great ways to practically overcome barriers to engaging with policy makers	There is no single pathway to feed into the science/policy interface, we need to create our own opportunities.
Policy makers don't like travelling to conferences! :o	Sounds easy, is actually hard!	How to better "pitch" my research
Involve policy makers from the start with co-production	Keep it short, no jargon and think about the needs of the policy maker you are approaching	challenges on working with policy makers and how to overcome them, and also how to prepare an elevator pitch

2. Describe the workshop in three words?



Conclusions

The workshop provided an opportunity to discuss ideas regarding the opportunities, and challenges we face when we try to engage with policy. The live feedback session provided some insight into how participants found the experience. Overall the event was a success, with participants taking away some practical hints and tips for engaging with policymakers and finding the experience useful, engaging and informative.

The BES/SPG and would like to thank all the speakers and participants for providing such a stimulating debate and interesting session.

Annex 1: Official Agenda and Speaker Information

OFFICIAL AGENDA

Ecology for Society: 'Understanding and Engaging with Policy'

Zoom, 16th December 14:00 – 15:30



Hosted by the [Scottish Policy Group](#)

14:00-14:05	WELCOME
14:05-14:10	INTRODUCTION TO THE SCOTTISH POLICY GROUP (SPG)
14:10-14:35	GUEST PRESENTATIONS AND Q&A
14:35- 15:00	BREAKOUT SESSIONS
15:00-15:05	SUMMARY OF BREAK OUT SESSIONS
15:05-15:20	HOW TO STRUCTURE AN ELEVATOR PITCH
15:20-15:30	WRAP UP & FINAL QUESTIONS

Guest speaker information, overleaf.

GUEST SPEAKER & PRESENTATION INFORMATION

Ecology for Society: 'Understanding and Engaging with Policy'

Zoom, 16th December 14:00 – 15:30



Presentation 1: Bridging Research and Policy: Tips of the Trade

Nick Bibby is director of the Scottish Policy and Research Exchange (SPRE), which supports and encourages greater collaboration between academics and policymakers. He is a policy engagement professional with a background in journalism and higher education communications. He helped establish SPRE and was appointed as the project's first director at the beginning of 2019.



Presentation 2: Working with People and Government for Biodiversity in Scotland

Professor Des Thompson is Principal Adviser on Science and Biodiversity with NatureScot, Scotland's Nature Agency. Working closely with government to develop the post-2020 biodiversity strategy he was involved in developing the [Edinburgh Declaration on post-2020 global biodiversity framework](#). He has interests in upland and bird ecology, is vice-president (and former Chair) of the Field Studies Council, and is a Fellow of the CIEEM and Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's National Academy.



Presentation 3: The role of peer reviewed journals in shaping the science/policy interface

Dr Nathalie Pettoirelli is a Senior Conservation Biologist at the Institute of Zoology, Zoological Society of London. She is also a Senior Editor for the British Ecological Society's Journal of Applied Ecology.

Annex 2: Presentation Slides

1. Professor Des Thompson: Working with People and Government for Biodiversity in Scotland
2. Dr Nathalie Pettorelli: The role of peer reviewed journals in shaping the science/policy interface