

JPI Urban Europe Policy Brief Guidelines



Version

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1. Initial consideration

- Why do we want to write policy briefs?

JPI Urban Europe’s projects produce a wealth of insightful data. However, we need to make sure our findings are channelled into actions which create tools for practical measures. Policy briefs are one of the tools we can use to influence policy towards more sustainable and liveable cities. We aim to present our briefs to both our project partners and government actors at every level. Our briefs will be presented at key events such as urban research forums and conferences as well as being given directly to policy actors when appropriate.

- What is a policy brief?

A policy brief aims to take research findings and use them to inform government policy at a national, regional and, municipal level. A good policy brief presents research which captures the attention of a policy maker by informing them concisely of an existing problem, how it came to be, how important it is, and then presents them with feasible policy options to tackle the problem. A good brief would be concise, around 1,000 words in length (including illustrations), yet nuanced enough to allow a policy maker to separate areas of policy which are less pressing from those which require more policy focus.

Remember a policy brief is not a fact sheet: whilst a fact sheet aims to present the findings of research projects as they are, a policy brief aims to go a step further by suggesting concrete steps which should be taken based on the findings of the research.

- What should a policy brief do?

It is very important that our policy briefs validate our research by showing how our projects really work in the field. Our briefs should convey, what problem our research faced, what our approach to this problem was, and how this was practically effective. If we do not present our evidence convincingly then the strength of our briefs will be undermined. You should not get wrapped up in explaining complex methodologies; most policy makers only want to understand methodology in relation to comprehending the results. You should use analogies when they are easy to understand but do not oversimplify the methods you have used. JPI Urban Europe’s research is concerned with complex societal issues therefore it is important that we communicate that our research results have led to a

variety of insightful findings. However, when writing a policy brief it is critically important that you clearly state a problem and then offer concrete recommendations to the reader.

The more interest you generate for your brief, the more likely it is to have an impact, however, be aware there are no guarantees since policy making is a complex activity. In the case where your recommendations are not directly accepted they shall still contribute to a policy maker's body of knowledge and will affect the modification of existing policy in diffuse ways.

- **Who is your audience?**

JPI Urban Europe is aiming to write for a generalist audience. Since urban research is multi-sectoral and concerns a range of actors we must consider our audience in the broadest possible terms. We are targeting three types of actors. The first group is those with broad policy reach, such as government ministers and European community policy makers. The second group are local actors such as city governments, local administrators and local politicians. The third set are actors who are interested in creating dialogues and debates with the policy makers and researchers.

- **When should you write a policy brief?**

Knowing when it is best to publish a policy brief can be quite a difficult decision as a number of considerations must be taken into account. Writing a policy brief soon after research is completed has the advantage that the findings and policy recommendations are still relevant. However, a researcher must also consider the climate in which the research is being published. For example, if the political climate and objectives of the government do not align well with the study's findings then the policy brief may not get a reading. Conversely, if the subject of research has received media attention or is a topic of public discourse then it is likely that policy makers would be more receptive to the research. Always consider how likely it is that your research can be misrepresented or politicised.

Objective briefs versus advocacy briefs

When looking through the literature on policy briefs a researcher will find terms such as 'advocacy brief', 'evidence brief' and 'objective brief.' However, these titles can be misleading. All policy briefs are subject to bias and an underlying agenda.

What is usually meant by 'advocacy briefs' is that they clearly propose one particular solution to a given problem, whilst briefs which present themselves as 'objective briefs' tend to offer a range of possible actions.

However, it is important to remember the range of options offered in these briefs are still limited by the intellectual framework of the researcher, and other factors such as institutional culture and funding partners. It is therefore good practise for policy briefs to be clear and transparent about their funding and support.

2. What elements should a policy brief contain?

- Title

The main title should not exceed 12-15 words. If this is not possible, you should consider using a main title which is compelling and a subtitle which captures the more precise meaning you wish to convey. The aim is to make the title short yet eye catching. However, do consider the possibility of whether your chosen title is vulnerable to sensationalism.

- Summary

One way of clarifying what the brief entails is to have a small summary box which contains 3-4 bullet points which highlight the main points of the article. They should aim to convey the gist of the article whilst instilling a desire to read further.

- Recommendations

Recommendations are frequently presented in one of two ways. One way is to highlight them on the first page. Another way is to highlight them at the end in a separate and clearly defined section.

- Introduction

The introduction should aim to highlight the problem and why it is important. The best way to demonstrate importance is by placing the problem within an understandable context for the reader. You should convey the precise causes of the problem if it is known and give clear examples. You should also have in mind how these effects concern the policy makers priorities.

- The body

Each paragraph should focus on an aspect of the problem, what the research reveals about it and what kind of intervention was taken or was necessary. Then consider how these could be implemented on a policy level. Since JPI Urban Europe's research projects are conducted in multiple urban locations the findings could be extremely useful from a policy perspective.

You should focus on whether the research is strong enough to recommend generalised urban policy proposals. Even if it is not, perhaps it could give insight into national or local issues which merit further consideration. Even with JPI Urban Europe's strong research base it is important to place these policy recommendations within the scope of existing academic research, as policy proposals are strengthened when they fit within a larger body of research.

- Policy Implications

In this section you will convey in more detail what effects your policy recommendations will have and how precisely they would work. If you have suggested multiple policy options this would be the section to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. I would strongly recommend you do not use a separate conclusion section as the policy implications and recommendations fulfil this role between them.

- **References and further reading**

For a policy brief you should not produce a full list of references as you would do for an academic article. There simply is not space as you will only have 2 pages to write with. However, you should put in 4-6 key references. These should be displayed at the bottom of the second page. This is also where any further reading would be highlighted. Hopefully you have motivated the policy maker to read further from your brief.

- **Contact details**

This should be highlighted at the end of the second page. Contact details should be clearly defined in their own section and should emphasise the organisation. The author's contact details may be listed in small print directly below the end of the text and above the references.

3. Illustrating research findings: graphics and extra information

- **Side Boxes and sidebars**

You should use these for information which is considered useful but would break the flow of reading. For example, definitions which the researcher must use but require elaboration. These would also be a great location to put in killer facts which are eye catching.

- **Cases**

We can use in text boxes and sidebars to demonstrate specific case studies. For example, a living lab experiment which was run with unambiguous results which is related to the policies being proposed within this proposal. However, the cases should be presented succinctly.

- **Tables**

If tables are to be used, then they should be simplified as much as possible (preferably a maximum of four columns and six rows). Any boxes which you want the policy maker to compare should be placed adjacent to each other. Any cells that require specific attention should be highlighted in a different shade which catches the eye of the reader.

- **Graphs**

If you use a graph, then make sure there is only one per page. Graphs are incredibly important tools for researchers as they are frequently the first thing to capture the eye of the reader. Graphs should use colours which are clearly distinguishable from one another. Relevant scales, labels, and sources must be attached to any graph. Also consider, does this scale mean anything to the policy maker?

- **Photographs**

If you plan to use a photograph it is important that it is a high-resolution picture for which you have permission to use. Also make sure that if the photograph contains people in it that it does not perpetuate any stereotypes and is gender balanced if appropriate.

4. Know your audience: communication strategies

Referring back to part one of these guidelines, the first step in effective communication is considering who you are communicating to: who is your audience, what do they want, and what do *you* want them to take away from your message?

This section will firstly present a few key considerations concerning the audience you are formulating your policy brief for, and will then continue with concrete communication strategies that can guide the process of writing clear policy recommendations.

Who is your audience? In the shoes of a policy maker

- Consider how much your readers know about the topic under study, and preferably assume they know less, rather than more than expected. Try to make your research engaging, without assuming that this will spark further reading or study of this particular research area. Provide two or three key sources for interested policy makers to read, but assume that your brief may be the only thing they will read concerning this topic.
- Consider that policy makers are by no means a homogenous group and may be driven by a variety of different (intrinsic and extrinsic) motivations such as personal convictions, party affiliation and available resources.
- Public opinion matters to policy makers, keep this in mind when suggesting policy changes.
- Policy decisions are subject to extensive scrutiny. Your message therefore needs to be convincing.
- ‘We need more research’ is not an appropriate message for a policy brief. You are writing a policy brief to recommend policy changes based on the current body of available data.
- Communicate that uncertainty is an inherent part of scientific research, and does not equate to flawed science.
- Finally, perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that policy makers are not interested in science per se. Extensive notes on methodology or the theoretical framework of your study are of no interest to your reader.

1. One message

Although the results of academic research are often complex and nuanced, try to narrow your key message down to a few sentences before writing your policy brief, and keep this key message in mind when writing your policy recommendations. This key message should have a clear focus and purpose.

2. The ‘first line’ rule

Every first sentence of every paragraph should summarize the contents of the paragraph, and each paragraph should have *one* key topic. Essentially, policy makers should be able to receive your key message by reading only the first sentences of all paragraphs in your policy brief. The remainder of the paragraph can present more detailed and nuanced explanations of the key message.

3. No jargon

Try to avoid academic jargon, and instead opt for speech that is more colloquial where possible. When in doubt whether a word is jargon, the [Up-Goer Six Text Editor](#) is a useful tool that can tell you how commonly used a particular word is in 'normal' language.

4. Clear language, short sentences

When writing a policy brief, imagine explaining your research to a very intelligent 14-year-old. Keep your language clear and your sentences preferably short, rather than very long.

5. Careful use of details

In policy briefs, too much detail and nuance can confuse readers, and can dilute the strength of your key message. Use detail only if it is used to make a clear point, or when it is necessary to introduce doubt (e.g. in case of conflicting results).

6. Selective use of results and factual information

Although research results and facts are of course the cornerstone of any policy brief, be selective in the factual evidence that you provide to your reader. Each presented fact should have a clear purpose.

Summarizing: poorly written policy briefs...

- Have no clear message
- Are jargon-heavy
- Have an unclear structure
- Are not written for an appropriate audience
- Are too detailed or include too many facts

Checklist: Are my recommendations SMART?

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Timely

5. References

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- Fast Track Impact. (2017). *Fast Track Impact*. [online] Available at: <http://www.fasttrackimpact.com/single-post/2015/12/19/How-to-make-a-policy-brief-that-has-real-impact> [Accessed 16 Nov. 2017].

6. Checklist

	Check?
General	
Have you considered how the political/ media climate affects receptiveness of the message?	
Are potential funding or sponsorship relations clearly stated?	
Structure, does your policy brief contain...	
A compelling title of 12-15 words	
A summary of 3-4 bullet points at the beginning of your policy brief	
Recommendations are concisely summarized either at the beginning or end of the document	
Introduction that compellingly presents the problem under study	
A body that presents the research and recommendations in more detail...	
...consisting of paragraphs that each contain one clear topic/angle to the problem	
A section that explains the implications of each recommended policy	
A reference section with key references for further reading	
Contact details	
Graphics, did you use... (optional)	
Side boxes and bars for key facts/information and explanation of key definitions	
A specific case study that supports your recommendations (in a separate text box)	
Simplified and clear table(s) of no more than four columns and six rows	
Clear graphs, max. one per page	
Photographs that are gender-balanced, do not contain stereotypes and have a high resolution	
Communication strategies	
Did you keep in mind the wishes/considerations of policy makers (see box on p. 4)?	
Does your policy brief convey one message with a clear focus and purpose?	
Is this message tailored to the audience of policy makers you want to reach?	
Is the key point of every paragraph summarized in the first sentence of the paragraph?	
Does your policy brief not contain any jargon?	
Did you use clear language with short sentences?	
Are all details mentioned in the policy brief relevant to your recommendations?	
Are all facts and results mentioned in the policy brief relevant to your key message?	