# POLICY-RELEVANT EVIDENCE MAPS

## *A method to inform decision-making in the public sector*



## WHAT IS AN EVIDENCE MAP?

Evidence maps are an evidence synthesis tool that allows decision-makers to rapidly access a body of evidence relevant to their policy questions. Based on a rigorous and transparent research methodology (i.e. systematic review), they collect, organise, and appraise different forms of policy-relevant evidence (e.g. evaluations, case studies, surveys, government reports). This evidence is then mapped against a policy framework and visualised on an interactive evidence interface to allow public servants to interrogate and engage with the evidence.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF EVIDENCE MAPS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR?

Evidence maps aim to facilitate the use of evidence by public officials. In this, they present a method to inform decision-making using the best available evidence. By appraising all policy-relevant evidence on a policy question, they ensure that decision-makers engage with evidence that is trustworthy. They also make the use of evidence less labour-intensive and more engaging. Decision-makers who wish to use evidence have a repository of the available evidence at hand that they can tailor to their own needs and access only the type of evidence they require and trust. Evidence maps thereby encourage public servants to consult a variety of evidence when making decisions rather than consulting individual studies and reports, or selected experts and consultants.

## WHEN IS AN EVIDENCE MAP USEFUL?

Evidence maps are most helpful when a Department is engaging in the formulation of new policies or is proposing a review and potential shift of existing policies. At such policy moments, the need for evidence to inform change is greatest as well as the opportunity for its use and receptivity by decision-makers. The evidence map can then provide guidance on what policy proposals have been well researched and trialled; whether there is supporting evidence for the policy proposal; what challenges could be expected during implementation; etc.
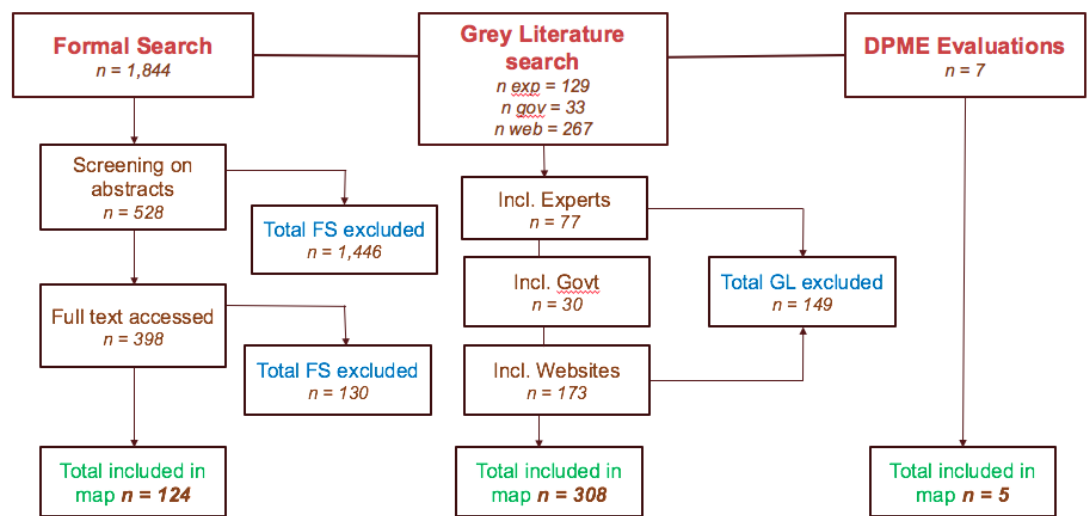
## A DPME EVIDENCE MAP IN HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

DPME undertook a pilot Evidence Mapping exercise in 2015/16 in response to a critical policy moment in the human settlements sector in South Africa generating a high demand for policy-relevant evidence. Decision-makers in the public sector expressed a need to take stock of and engage with the body of evidence available to support the transition from housing policy to human settlements policy. Therefore, an appropriate research methodology was required that seeks to source, appraise, and synthesise all types of relevant evidence to inform policy analysis and to summarise what works, why, in what context, and for whom. Due to a lack of responses following the procurement of intellectual services and further driven by a need to adapt evidence synthesis to the needs of public servants, DPME decided to undertake the production of policy-relevant evidence synthesis in-house. In this effort, local as well as international researchers joined the Departmental team to adapt and innovate the research synthesis methodology. The multi-disciplinary team of technical and content policy experts, methodologists, and human settlements researchers reviewed, modified, and transformed the research methodology (i.e. systematic review) into a decision-making tool in the public sector producing a policy-relevant evidence map in the human settlements sector.
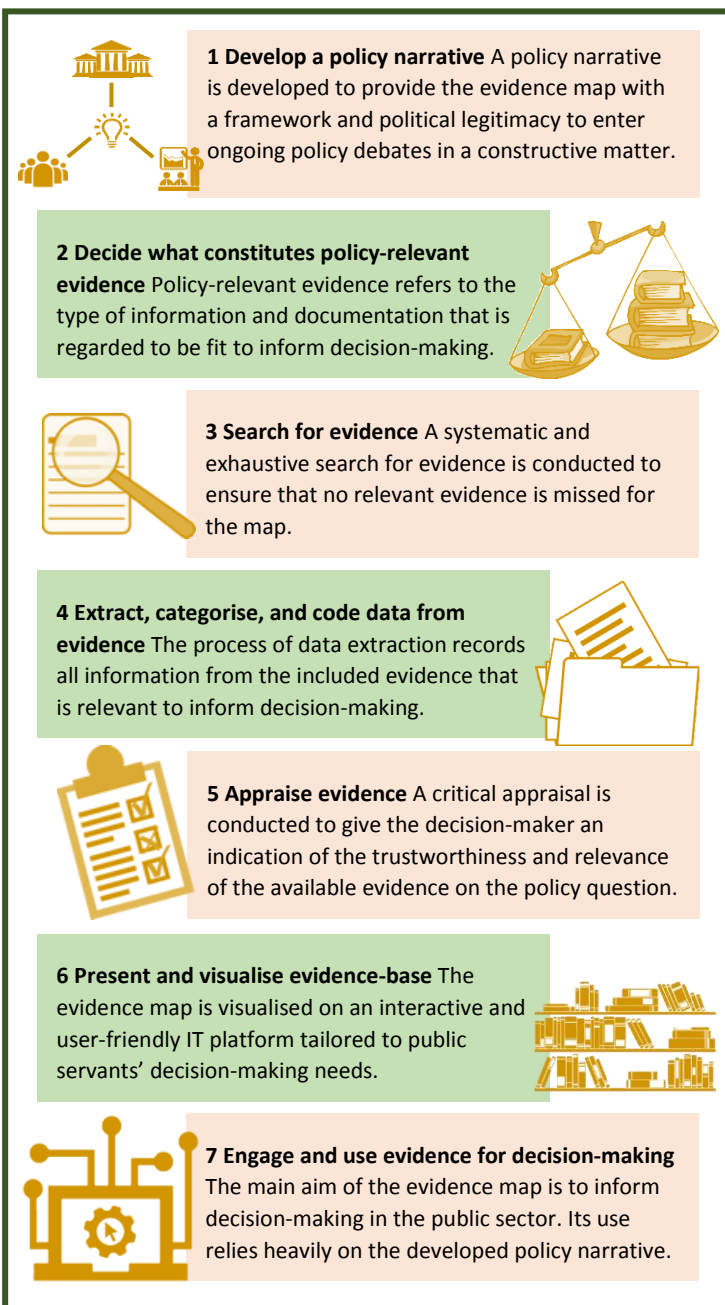
## SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

The evidence map was produced over nine months by a team of eight policy-makers and researchers. IT experts and data capturers built and programmed an interactive evidence interface to host the evidence map which is owned by DPME. The team collected and screened 2,280 pieces of evidence, including 437 different studies and reports on the evidence map. Seventy-three human settlements researchers in the country were contacted and contributed evidence to the map.

Each included piece of evidence relevant to human settlements policy-making in the country was appraised for its trustworthiness and summarised for decision-makers. The programmed evidence interface allows decision-makers to search and filter the 437 included studies and reports according to several key characteristics.

**Formal Search** n = 1,844 → **Screening on abstracts** n = 528 → Total FS excluded n = 1,446; → **Full text accessed** n = 398 → Total FS excluded n = 130; → **Total included in map n = 124**

**Grey Literature search** n exp = 129, n gov = 33, n web = 267 → **Incl. Experts** n = 77; **Incl. Govt** n = 30; **Incl. Websites** n = 173; **Total GL excluded** n = 149; → **Total included in map n = 308**

**DPME Evaluations** n = 7 → **Total included in map n = 5**

## INNOVATION IN PUBLIC & RESEARCH SECTOR COLLABORATION

DPME applied a range of new mechanisms in the production of the evidence map to support collaboration between the public and the research sector. First, the Department conceptualised an explicit **match-making** procedure in which each internal team member was matched with an outside expert in order to transfer and sustain capacity to DPME following the completion of the project. Second, the Department implemented a process of **embedded engagement** in which internal and external stakeholders were involved from the onset shaping the scope and direction of the project. Third, the Department engaged in a **team mentoring** on evidence synthesis skills with the University of Johannesburg. Fourth, in collaboration with Department of Human Settlements (DHS), DPME developed a **policy narrative** for the evidence map identifying a custodian for it and outlining its potential contribution to the new White Paper. Fifth, the project was embedded in the wider **good governance framework** of the South African government. In sum, these mechanisms allowed the Department to lead the adaptation of a research methodology in order to suit the decision-making needs of public servants as well as to **co-produce** a policy-relevant evidence synthesis in the human settlements sector.

**1 Develop a policy narrative** A policy narrative is developed to provide the evidence map with a framework and political legitimacy to enter ongoing policy debates in a constructive matter.

**2 Decide what constitutes policy-relevant evidence** Policy-relevant evidence refers to the type of information and documentation that is regarded to be fit to inform decision-making.

**3 Search for evidence** A systematic and exhaustive search for evidence is conducted to ensure that no relevant evidence is missed for the map.

**4 Extract, categorise, and code data from evidence** The process of data extraction records all information from the included evidence that is relevant to inform decision-making.

**5 Appraise evidence** A critical appraisal is conducted to give the decision-maker an indication of the trustworthiness and relevance of the available evidence on the policy question.

**6 Present and visualise evidence-base** The evidence map is visualised on an interactive and user-friendly IT platform tailored to public servants' decision-making needs.

**7 Engage and use evidence for decision-making** The main aim of the evidence map is to inform decision-making in the public sector. Its use relies heavily on the developed policy narrative.

## STRENGTHS OF EVIDENCE MAPS

⊕ They map available evidence against a policy framework set by public servants.

⊕ They are based on an exhaustive search for evidence of different types and critical appraisal of evidence for its trustworthiness.

⊕ They feature an interactive evidence interface to allow direct engagement with and tailoring of the evidence (decision-makers can create their own maps).

⊕ They facilitate multi-purpose application in the public sector including short-term and long-term decision-making needs, supporting organisational structures and processes, stakeholder engagement, and more.

⊕ They are led and co-produced by public servants for public servants.

⊕ They facilitate debate and discussion between different policy actors and institutions.

## ABILITY OF THE EVIDENCE INTERFACE

The interactive evidence interface allows decision-makers to directly engage with the sourced and appraised evidence. The evidence is organised according to a policy framework ensuring that decision-makers' needs are covered and can easily locate relevant evidence. Having identified relevant bodies of evidence, decision-makers can then access 2-page summaries of each study or report, as well as the full-texts of these through the interface. Decision-makers can also search for individual pieces of evidence and filter and sort the map according to their desired evidence characteristics (e.g. context, trustworthiness).

## DIFFERENT APPLICATIONS OF EVIDENCE MAPS TO INFORM DECISION-MAKING

A **scoping tool** to set policy objectives and outline policy direction, background, and evaluation.

A **decision-making tool** to inform policy design and implementation.

An **engagement tool** to facilitate policy conversations with different actors from a mutual basis.

An **organisational tool** to raise awareness for evidence-based policy-making and to facilitate its process.

A **knowledge management tool** providing a repository of easily accessible and policy-relevant evidence tailored to decision-makers' needs.

A **research tool** to identify gaps, coverage, and patterns in the available evidence on a policy question.

An **accountability tool** to record the evidence behind a decision and the construction of different evidence-bases and narratives for future decisions.

A **research commissioning tool** to target funding for new primary and secondary evidence.

# POLICY-RELEVANT EVIDENCE MAPS
## *A Departmental Guidance Note*

**PUBLICATION FOR NOVEMBER 2016**

DPME and the University of Johannesburg have produced a Departmental Guidance Note on the production of policy-relevant evidence maps. The Guidance Note introduces evidence mapping as a tool to inform decision-making in government. It guides prospective users on how to develop an evidence map and the methodological requirements associated with the approach. It introduces to evidence mapping a wider audience interested in developing and learning more about the tool. Prospective users of the Guidance Note are assumed to be those who wish to understand what policy-relevant research methodology entails, those who want to undertake evidence mapping themselves, and/or those who will need to commission this type of work. Following peer-review, the Guidance Note will be published by DPME in November 2016.

## Five parts

The Guidance Note comprises five distinct parts to familiarise users with evidence mapping methodology. Part 1 provides an overview of evidence mapping and how DPME contextualised the method for the public sector. Part 2 covers the preparatory work in conducting an evidence map. Part 3 guides users through each step in developing the map. Part 4 discusses how the produced evidence map can be analysed and used to inform decision-making. Part 5 captures reflections and lessons-learned from the first pilot evidence map.

## Step-by-step guidance

The Guidance Note outlines detailed step-by-step guidance to users who intend to commission or produce an evidence map. This step-by-step guidance covers the policy tasks (e.g. developing a policy narrative, stakeholder engagement), the research tasks (e.g. search for evidence, critical appraisal), and the IT tasks (e.g. platform development, data capturing). Each task is further divided in sub-steps. The Note also features advice on requirements before moving from one step to the next as well as explicit milestones associated with each step.

## Lessons-learned

The Guidance Note includes a full chapter on the lessons-learned and reflections from piloting the evidence mapping methodology in the South African policy context. Here, the more informal insights from the pilot evidence map are recorded to explain what challenges the project team encountered and how these were overcome. This chapter is tailored to South African policy-makers and researchers and provides a rich discussion of contextual factors and how these affect the evidence mapping methodology.

## Practical tools

The Guidance Note features a range of different practical tools applied in the evidence mapping process. These are provided under Creative Commons and can be used and adapted for further evidence maps. Tools featured include: a policy framework template; a theory of change; inclusion criteria templates; data extraction and critical appraisal tools; a terms of reference template; an assessment of bids template; a project tasks outline; a stakeholder mapping tool; and a list of further guidance resources.

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