



The use of evidence in the audit, inspection and scrutiny of government

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Summary

1. The project will analyse the relationship between two important trends in contemporary UK governance:

- the changing demands and role of the audit, inspection and scrutiny functions (AIS henceforth), operating at national and local levels; and
- the commitment to more evidence-informed decision making.

The research will explore empirically (1) how AIS work generates and uses evidence, (2) the extent to which a more or less evidence-informed approach underpins its changing role, and (3) how its use of evidence might be improved. The researchers will work closely with practitioners to enhance conceptual understanding of evidence use in AIS work, and to develop new principles and practices for this work. The research involves the development of eight detailed case studies, each focusing on a specific AIS project in different AIS bodies from across the UK (England, Scotland and Wales).

Objectives

2. The project will focus on four main questions:

- a) What forms of evidence collection and evidence use characterise AIS activities in different settings in the UK?
- b) What impact do evidence-related practices in AIS have on the utility and legitimacy of that work?
- c) What are the key principles and practices for effective evidence use in different situations?
- d) What are the key similarities and differences between the use of evidence in AIS work and the use of evidence by government?

Methods

3. The research will involve in-depth case studies of AIS projects undertaken by eight partner organisations. Each case study will be observed in real time. We will be running a

series of seminars that will provide opportunities for the researchers and practitioners in partner organisations to discuss and learn from the emerging findings.

4. The eight case studies will be drawn from four different contexts:
- the inspection of local public services;
 - the audit and inspection of local government performance;
 - the audit and inspection of central government performance; and
 - the scrutiny of local government services by local scrutiny committees.

This will ensure that the research covers different settings and styles of AIS and different objectives and methods of working. The case studies will also be drawn from three different countries within the UK -- England, Scotland and Wales -- which is relevant given the potential importance of reported differences in the way audit and inspection regimes have developed in these countries since devolution.

5. Agreement in principle to participate in the project has been reached with the organizations shown on the table. There is one more case study (of a scrutiny committee in Wales) still to be identified. Each of the partner organisations will nominate for study an AIS activity that they will undertake during the period of this research project in 2008-2009.

	England (4)	Scotland (2)	Wales (2)
Inspection of a public service	Healthcare Commission	HM Inspector of Education	
Audit and inspection of local government performance	Audit Commission	Audit Scotland	
Audit and inspection of central government performance	National Audit Office		Wales Audit Office
Scrutiny of local government services	LB Harrow scrutiny committee		A scrutiny committee

6. The workplan has 5 elements, as follows:

a. **AIS overviews.** Initially papers will be prepared, drawing on published sources, that sketch the current context of policy and practice for the generic AIS activities that the sample of case studies will cover. Each paper will also focus on the specific type of activity considered in the case studies and cover the differences that may exist between the nations of the UK in the organisation and conduct of this activity. These papers will provide a basis for contextualising the chosen case studies.

b **Project profiles.** A standard profile of each case study will be prepared to cover its background, genesis, objectives, management, methodology and intended outputs.

c. **Fieldwork.** As each case study progresses, the nature and uses of evidence within it will be identified and analysed by a mix of document analysis, observation, and interviews. These findings will form the basis for a report on each individual case study. An agreed framework for the fieldwork and a common format for the reports will be developed. The

framework is likely to include the following detailed questions about the nature and uses of evidence:

- What data and evidence are used at different stages in the AIS process?
- What is the balance between measurement and observation in data gathering?
- What is the process for moving from data to evidence and on to judgements and evaluations?
- What is the balance between reasoning conclusions from evidence against debating its meaning and importance?
- Is performance assessed independently of the subject or do they work together to seek an agreed assessment?
- What tests of rigour are applied and at what stages in the process?
- What are the roles of service users, citizens, professional experts and lay inspectors in the evidence gathering and judgement process?
- How is evidence used in the development of diagnostic accounts (directed to future improvement) and in what ways is this different to evidence use in the assessment of past performance?
- How are issues relating to consistency and transparency addressed?
- How are any disputes about data and the interpretation of data resolved?

The initial impact of the AIS case study will be investigated via interviews with key stakeholders.

d. Seminars. The researchers and practitioners from the partner organizations will reflect jointly on the findings in the case study reports (c. above) in a series of seminars through the latter half of the work programme. The AIS overviews (a. above) and the project profiles (b. above) will provide important background for these discussions. The first set of eight seminars will focus on the eight case studies; seeking a shared assessment of whether and how evidence contributed to the utility of that AIS activity. The second set of four seminars will bring together people from the paired projects (e.g. Audit Scotland and Audit Commission) and here the focus will be on comparing the assessments and beginning to articulate general principles and practices for the use of evidence in AIS work. The final seminar will draw together all case study teams to extend the discussion of comparison and contrast and to seek to more fully elaborate the main principles for the use of evidence in different situations and the important characteristics of the evidence used for different purposes.

e. Final report. This will distil the common themes and general conclusions from the case studies.

Confidentiality

7. The data collection will include interviews and observations of AIS staff and access to confidential and sensitive documents held by AIS bodies. A protocol setting out agreements on issues of confidentiality and the way in which findings are used will be agreed with each partner organisation. We anticipate anonymising the details of the eight specific AIS case studies. All participants (interviewees and subjects of observation) will be able to give their informed consent for their involvement in the research and material will be reported on a non-attributable basis.

Timetable

8. The research project will run for 18 months, from January 2008 to June 2009. The chart below provides an indicative work timetable.

Task	Month	J 08	F 08	M 08	A 08	M 08	J 08	J 08	A 08	S 08	O 08	N 08	D 08	J 09	F 09	M 09	A 09	M 09	J 09
Set up with 8 partners		■	■																
(a) AIS overviews			■	■	■														
(b) Project profiles				■	■	■													
(c) Fieldwork				■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■						
Project reports										■			■	■					
(d) Seminars										■			■		■		■		
(e) Final report																	■	■	■
Dissemination and follow up													■			■	■	■	■

Dissemination

9. Presentations of the findings will be offered to the fora in which AIS bodies meet to exchange experiences, such as the Audit Forum. A programme of joint activities with the Centre for Public Scrutiny (www.cfps.org.uk) is also planned. CfPS provides support and advice to many of the AIS bodies covered in the research. CfPS will distribute outputs of the research project to AIS practitioners and facilitate discussion with practitioners around the development of new practices based on the project's findings.

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