

Government and academia

How government can better engage with researchers



About this report

The UK's world-leading research sector produces a lot of evidence and expertise that can support the government's policy priorities, but this does not always reach those working within government.

This report provides a fresh perspective on the relationship between government and academia in relation to researcher engagement. It sets out how there has been a notable increase in activity among research institutions and the different mechanisms within government that provide routes for academic engagement. It also makes a case for how government can go beyond these mechanisms to improve its approach to researcher engagement.

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Summary

Openness to external evidence is crucial to good policy making. Academia in the UK produces a lot of valuable evidence, insight and analysis, and researchers have, in recent years, been increasingly eager to share them with policy makers. But more activity from the research community has sometimes led to confusion and duplication, and government has not always succeeded in capturing all of this expertise and feeding it into decision making.

The mechanisms that central government uses to bring in academic evidence to inform departmental work – ranging from areas of research interest to secondments and What Works Centres – have remained broadly the same since the Institute for Government's last report on how government can more effectively work with academia, which was published in 2018.¹ In many cases, they have matured and become more embedded, with some instances of new and innovative developments taking place.

A stronger suite of mechanisms is certainly positive: we know more about how to build the right tools to leverage the UK's world-leading research sector. But in too many cases, departments have not been clear about what they want from researcher engagement. Ad-hoc initiatives from government have doubled uncoordinated efforts from academia, leading to ineffective use of resources, missed opportunities for join-up and a landscape that is difficult to navigate for time-poor officials.

Overall, there is more appetite from universities, research councils, learned societies and others to support academic-policy engagement since our report in 2018. And central government departments have developed increasingly sophisticated routes to bring expertise and evidence in-house. Civil service leaders should build on this momentum, but to do so they need to be clearer about what they want.

Departments need to develop researcher engagement strategies

Different engagement mechanisms can be used to satisfy a wide variety of evidence needs. But to use them effectively, departments should develop **researcher engagement strategies** that clearly outline what they want from academia.

These strategies should inform:

- how engagement mechanisms are developed and how they **join up**
- how researcher engagement is **evaluated**
- how initiatives can draw on existing **best practice** from across government.

Strategies do not need to look the same across government, but they do need to provide an opportunity for departments to do internal thinking about their evidence needs and capacity for researcher engagement.

Implementing and maintaining engagement strategies will require **dedicated capacity** – departments will need to devote staff time and resources to institutionalise points of contact between government and academia. But a relatively small investment in staff resources can have an outsized impact.

A more strategic approach to researcher engagement will require a **clearer articulation of responsibilities** so that individual leaders can be held to account for delivering these strategies. At present, leadership and oversight for researcher engagement are fragmented, with responsibilities split between different departmental leaders. There is no one-size-fits-all approach here, but being more explicit about ownership can make the system easier to navigate and drive accountability for delivering on engagement strategies.

More broadly, civil service leaders need to act to shape civil service **culture** as well as the **incentives** officials have to engage more consistently with external evidence. The following could be valuable steps in the right direction:

- including researcher engagement in **career progression criteria**
- providing more **space and cover** for officials to interact with academics and build their own networks
- encouraging **greater data and evidence transparency** where possible.

Substantial progress has been made in bringing policy and research closer together since the Institute for Government's 2018 report on how government can work with academia more effectively. If departments can succeed in bringing more coherence to this ecosystem, they will see substantial improvements in how evidence gets fed into, and deployed in, decision making, with better policy that more effectively serves citizens.

Introduction

To meet the challenges that modern government faces, policy makers need high-quality evidence on what works and detailed specialist knowledge across a range of fields, from the natural sciences to the arts and humanities. No government can expect to be able to generate all the expertise it needs on its own. So openness to external input is crucial for good policy making.¹

One key source of external expertise, insight and evidence for policy makers is academia. The UK higher education sector is world leading. UK universities are consistently ranked highly in international rankings, and UK-based researchers have produced path-breaking insights across a variety of disciplines. Successfully tapping into this rich source of expertise would mean better-informed government that delivers more effectively for citizens.

Since the Institute for Government's previous research into how government and academia can work better together,² there has been more activity on both sides. The Covid pandemic brought the importance of high-quality science and expert advice to the fore and led to a more robust institutional architecture for researcher engagement. This was built chiefly around the Government Office for Science (GO-Science) and the network of chief scientific advisers. Growing numbers of researchers have also become interested in engaging with policy makers, supported by increasingly active and better-resourced university policy engagement functions.

But more activity does not necessarily mean more effective knowledge exchange across the policy–research divide. Building on previous research, as well as more than a decade of Institute for Government work supporting academics in engaging with government,³ this report looks at how the policy–research interface has changed in Whitehall in recent years and what government can do to ensure that policy making is made better by access to the best evidence and expertise available as and when it needs it.

Our findings, based on desk research and interviews with more than 30 former and current senior officials, academics and knowledge mobilisers, suggest that the proliferation of initiatives coming from academia, which government has not always been able to capitalise on, has sometimes led to ineffective use of resources as well as duplication and confusion among officials. The ad-hoc nature of some government schemes has meant that opportunities for co-ordination, join-up, evaluation and lesson learning have been missed across the civil service.

While central government departments use areas of research interest (ARIs) to signal their evidence needs, they should be much clearer about what they want from academics and how researchers can best meet these needs. To ensure interchange between officials and academics delivers the most it can for all parties involved, departments need to develop coherent strategies for academic–policy engagement

that join up different mechanisms and build on best practice from across the system. This would mark a shift from what is still, in parts of the civil service, an ecosystem dominated by disjointed initiatives that do not serve officials' evidence needs as effectively as they could.

The system is already filled with examples of successful programmes that have brought officials and researchers closer and generated more robust decision making. The civil service should capitalise on cross-government structures, from GO-Science to the Evaluation Task Force, to share best practice and support continued innovation and iteration in how government engages with academia.

Because we recognise that departments are different, we do not advocate a one-size-fits-all approach for allocating responsibility for researcher engagement. But a more strategic approach to bringing academic expertise into policy making will require more clearly delineated lines of accountability among senior civil service leaders at the departmental level. Strong, visible leadership within departments is needed to ensure that strengthening the links between policy and research remains a priority.

Finally, a civil service that seeks to engage with academics more effectively also needs to change its internal culture as well as incentives for those in the system. More openness towards external challenge and transparency around data and evidence use where appropriate could help create the conditions for better policy making.

This report explores the genuine progress that has already happened in improving the policy–research interface. It also highlights how this progress has sometimes been uneven, and how it can be expanded to encompass greater swathes of UK central government. Our collection of explanatory **deep dives**, published alongside this report, looks in greater detail at five specific researcher engagement mechanisms:

- [advisory groups](#)
- [areas of research interest](#)
- [expert networks](#)
- [secondments](#)
- [What Works Centres](#).

Together, they offer an account of what has changed in the relationship between government and academia, as well as what needs to change to make that relationship more systematised and effective.

How academia's relationship with government has changed

In recent years, universities, research councils and learned societies have made substantial investments in building capacity for policy engagement. For example, Research England awarded £3.9 million to the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) project, which ran from 2020 to 2024, with a further £6m matched from university partners.¹ Similarly, Research England has awarded the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) £5.9m and UPEN has secured additional funds from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (£300,000) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) (£582,000) across 2025–28.² Increased funding and attention are also visible across regional academic–policy engagement initiatives, resulting in a more professionalised and better-connected research–policy landscape that is increasingly geared towards producing policy-relevant outputs and sustaining relationships, rather than relying too heavily on ad-hoc opportunities for outreach.

Several factors have driven the increased focus on policy engagement, including the annual allocation of Research England's Policy Support Fund, which provides time-limited funding to universities seeking to strengthen academic–policy engagement.³ Another significant lever for encouraging academic–policy engagement has been the Research Excellence Framework (REF),⁴ which is designed to assess research quality.⁵ Because higher REF ratings translate directly into greater recurrent research income,⁶ universities have been incentivised to allocate resources to research that meets the government-defined 'high impact' criteria. In REF 2029, 25% of the assessment will be assigned to the 'engagement and impact' element, shifting from a sole focus on impact in previous rounds. This approach will look not only at end products (such as a research project), but also at how researchers build relationships with external stakeholders, including policy makers.⁷

However, academic institutions and networks still face challenges in ensuring that the supply of policy-relevant evidence maps on to departmental needs and is accessible to decision makers at the right time. While policy engagement efforts continue to grow in academia, the civil service has not always been able to keep pace – this is a missed opportunity. Government should focus on leveraging the growing volume of policy-facing research to foster better-evidenced, more robust policy making.

Research institutions have improved the infrastructure required to engage with policy makers

More research institutions have set up policy engagement infrastructure, such as dedicated units or teams. These teams provide training and support for academics to enable them to:

- produce policy-relevant outputs
- convene policy-focused events
- translate research for non-academic audiences
- broker relationships with policy makers.

A mapping exercise published in 2022 identified at least 46 university policy engagement bodies across the UK and, since then, more have been set up.⁸ Beyond allocation of impact-related research funding and a growing sense of universities' civic mission, better funding to establish academic–policy engagement initiatives and greater collaboration between research institutions and government have helped facilitate this expansion.

National-level collaborations have helped create longer term infrastructure and shared learning. The CAPE project played an important role in evaluating capacity-building approaches and testing mechanisms at scale, with its learning subsequently embedded into sector co-ordination efforts.⁹ UPEN, set up in 2018, has continued to grow as a central forum for academic–policy engagement, now including more than 120 UK institutions and running programmes focused on professional development and place-based engagement practice.¹⁰ More recently, the Evidence Exchange (EvEx) consortium, which the Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP) at the University of Cambridge leads, was launched in 2026, with the ESRC awarding it £3.75m to make access to research expertise and evidence easier for officials, including by creating policy-to-research exchange opportunities for civil and public servants.¹¹

Regional infrastructures have also expanded, adding place-based capacity that can be tailored to local policy contexts, including through UPEN's 'place' work and the CAPE project's report looking into models for and challenges in regional engagement.¹² For example, the Yorkshire & Humber Policy Engagement & Research Network (YPERN) operates as a 'network of networks' across Yorkshire universities, embedding policy fellows to support evidence flows between universities and local and strategic authorities and aligning with the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP).¹³ Similarly, Insights North East (INE) brings together universities and regional partners (including local government and NHS bodies) to translate academic research into policy, convene networks and build capability through training and fellowships aligned to regional priorities such as health, climate action and inclusive growth.¹⁴ Also notable are the Health Determinants Research Collaborations of the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR). These are funded partnerships between local authorities and academic institutions that build research

capacity within local government to generate and apply evidence on the wider factors affecting health, supporting more effective, evidence-informed policy making to reduce health inequalities.¹⁵

Knowledge mobilisation has also become a bigger priority. Universities – including University College London (UCL) through its Knowledge Broker Academy,¹⁶ the University of Oxford through its Oxford Policy Engagement Network (OPEN)¹⁷ and the Universities of Manchester,¹⁸ Bristol¹⁹ and Edinburgh²⁰ among others, through dedicated teams – are developing knowledge mobilisation capacity. Beyond national- and regional-level networks, dedicated knowledge mobilisation organisations also serve as useful intermediaries. Despite varied labels (such as knowledge brokers, evidence intermediaries and boundary spanners),²¹ they all act as a ‘transmission belt’ between research and policy by developing close working relationships with decision makers in government.²²

The increase in policy engagement activity has sometimes led to duplication and confusion

While the growth of policy–research engagement is, overall, a positive story, it has also made the landscape more crowded and complex. Competitive drivers within higher education institutions, including the desire to drive innovation and secure institutional advantage, have fed into the proliferation of initiatives. Engagement infrastructures operate at different levels and because many of these bodies do similar things, their offers can overlap, and visibility can be uneven across institutions and policy areas. While getting access to relevant available research is important, there is a risk that some engagement efforts are simply designed to push existing research for the sake of boosting the profile of a specific researcher or institution, some of which may not be entirely relevant for policy makers.

For government, a fragmented engagement landscape with a “rudderless mass of activity”²³ can create confusion for officials who want clear entry points to academia and may struggle to identify the most relevant entry routes and contacts. Some duplication in researcher engagement is inevitable and even necessary where place, policy area or capability needs differ. But where it reflects a lack of co-ordination rather than purposeful tailoring, it can make the system harder to navigate for both academics and officials.

There is already evidence of work being undertaken to co-ordinate activity, especially through UPEN. Future efforts should prioritise clarity and co-ordination, including better signposting, defined points of contact and increased alignment across initiatives. Given risks that funding pressures and competing priorities may, in the future, lead to a decline in resourcing for policy engagement initiatives in higher education institutions, focusing efforts on more co-ordinated and streamlined programmes would be especially beneficial for the wider landscape.

The Covid pandemic and AI have sparked more interest in rapid evidence synthesis

A major shift in the past decade that cuts across the whole landscape is the rising demand for rapid, policy-ready evidence – particularly since the Covid pandemic, when decision makers needed timely evidence synthesis rather than 'long-form research'.²⁴ This has reinforced research institutions' move towards placing more emphasis on producing accessible outputs and enabling quicker evidence flows between researchers and officials.

New and evolving collaborations are increasingly oriented towards this need for speed and usability. For instance, the newly set up Evidence Exchange (EvEx) consortium aims to create a shared 'digital campus' and national infrastructure that makes policy-to-research exchange opportunities more visible and joined up, while introducing co-creative problem-solving formats such as policy labs and collaborative hackathons as well as intensive and cross-disciplinary discussion forums to facilitate collaboration between researchers and policy makers.²⁵ Similarly, UPEN's 'connect' programme includes experimentation with a rapid-response offer designed to support tight-deadline evidence synthesis and to develop shared practice in knowledge mobilisation.²⁶ Together, these initiatives signal a shift towards building a service layer that helps turn academic capability into outputs that officials can use under tighter timelines.

The artificial intelligence (AI) boom has accelerated interest in whether evidence synthesis itself can be made faster and scaled. Globally, the \$126m investment into AI-enabled evidence synthesis to accelerate progress on the United Nations' sustainable development goals – which the Wellcome Trust and partners of the Evidence Synthesis Infrastructure Collaborative (ESIC) Funders Interest Group fund – has recently championed developments on this front.²⁷ Another prominent example is the Mobilising Evidence Through Artificial Intelligence and User-informed Synthesis (METIUS) consortium, backed by investment of £11.5m from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), which aims to develop open-data infrastructure to deliver faster, policy-tailored summaries of current knowledge and evidence to policy makers.²⁸ Similarly, the innovation agency Nesta is developing an AI tool called Policy Atlas, which aims to enable policy users to research, access summaries and visualisations of policy evidence and conduct simulations of policy interventions.²⁹

These examples are part of a broader pattern where funders and networks are increasingly exploring technology-enabled synthesis approaches that can keep up with expanding volumes of research and evidence and tailor them to policy makers' needs. But it is worth noting that even as AI-supported tools develop, they will not remove the need for closer engagement between researchers and policy makers to define the right questions, interpret findings appropriately and ensure outputs and actions are credible.

Universities' and funders' higher level of investment has undoubtedly helped increase the accessibility of research for those in government, particularly for rapid policy making. But these improved conditions do not automatically translate into better evidence use if government lacks the capacity to absorb and apply it effectively.

The next chapter examines existing government mechanisms for researcher engagement and opportunities to further strengthen knowledge exchange in line with policy demands.

How government's relationship with academia has changed

While government efforts to improve researcher engagement have not always successfully kept up with the size and scale of policy engagement initiatives from research institutions, government structures that leverage evidence and expertise have become more prominent in recent years, especially since Covid. The role played by GO-Science, which works with external partners to promote opportunities for researchers to engage with government, has become more sophisticated.¹ GO-Science has helped co-ordinate internal civil service networks, developed guidance for officials and promoted a more consistent approach to various mechanisms for researcher engagement based on best practice. Chief scientific advisers are also now present in all departments,² although they are not always an external appointee³ and they still vary in how much clout they enjoy.⁴

Government has different options for how it can encourage greater engagement with researchers and better use of external evidence. One approach is to develop mechanisms that provide a clear route for officials to access expertise in evidence and a framework to underpin these engagements. Another approach is to set expectations for officials about engaging externally and give them explicit permission to do so. However, too often, incentives for officials are geared towards the minimisation of potential risks over external engagement.⁵ In reality, both of these approaches are worthwhile and reinforce each other.

At a departmental level, the mechanisms that are used to facilitate academic–policy engagement in recent years have remained broadly the same.⁶ But in some cases they have matured and become more embedded with new schemes and approaches evident across the piece. A stronger suite of mechanisms is a positive development, but there is more that departments can do to improve their effectiveness.

In the sections that follow we provide a summary of how these departmental mechanisms for researcher engagement have developed and set out outstanding issues that weaken their efficacy. The individual mechanisms are explored in much greater detail in a series of **deep dives** published alongside this report.

The ARI story is broadly positive, but it is not always clear what ARIs are for or what kinds of academic–policy engagement they enable

Areas of research interest (ARIs) are documents designed to flag areas where the commissioner is seeking evidence through a series of questions looking at the medium to long term. ARIs have proliferated across government in recent years. All major Whitehall departments have now published ARIs, although some have become outdated, and arm's-length bodies, devolved governments and parts of local government have also adopted the model.⁷

GO-Science has led efforts to make ARIs more consistent and robust across government, and some departments are reframing their ARIs around cross-government priorities.⁸ For example, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) and the Department for Education (DfE) have published ARI questions that align with the Labour government's missions.⁹ Some departments are being clearer about the kinds of responses they want from ARIs and are developing a more robust suite of follow-up activities. DfE signals the range of methods and disciplines it is interested in to attract more diversity in responses,¹⁰ while the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is running a series of 'ARI roadshows' to drive engagement across the country. There have also been efforts to break through departmental silos that can be built into the documents:

- the Clean Energy Superpower Mission ARI lists 10 departments that were consulted as part of the commissioning process¹¹
- GO-Science has sponsored a central ARI database bringing together live ARI questions in an accessible format¹²
- the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) has established an online hub for ARIs within and beyond central government departments.¹³

There is still some confusion about what ARIs are for and how they can be used to address evidence needs. This often centres on timescales – ARIs can be used both to service immediate evidence needs and to create a pipeline of evidence for the medium to long term by influencing research generation. They have often been marketed as 'conversation starters', reflecting their potential to generate further researcher engagement.¹⁴ A 2024 study that sought to identify alignment between ARIs and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) grants found that 81% of ARIs correlated to at least one existing UKRI grant.¹⁵ There is clear scope to use ARIs to leverage existing research, but policy makers and researchers alike are not always clear about whether departmental ARIs should be used as such. Furthermore, in some cases, departments may be less willing to be open about more immediate or politically sensitive evidence gaps, relying on ARIs to inform longer term evidence needs.

Departments should have clear goals in mind when publishing ARIs. For those seeking to build a longer term evidence base, facilitating engagement on live policy issues is less important. But for those who want to use ARIs to create more timely interactions, they need to be explicit about what they want from the process and how they want researchers and officials to engage with the ARIs. Some departments are starting to be clearer about what they want to see from ARI engagement. For example, DfE's ARIs have moved beyond problem definition to signal the kinds of policy outcomes that they want ARIs to contribute towards.¹⁶ If departments fail to state clearly what ARIs are for and what outcomes they want to see, there is a risk that they are seen as intangible and process-orientated.

Secondment opportunities have become more frequent – but relatively few departments manage and run dedicated schemes

Secondment schemes where researchers are loaned to a government department – usually on a part-time basis so that they can continue their academic or research responsibilities – have proliferated in recent years. Through these schemes, researchers have been used to address capacity gaps, upskill officials or bring particular specialisms and skills into government. Policy-to-research secondments, where officials spend time at research institutions, are also becoming more prominent. The Evidence Exchange (EvEx) project, which has been funded to develop policy-to-research infrastructure across a consortium of research institutions, attests to this.

While secondments have become more common, they take different forms within government. Some are part of permanent structured schemes, while others are opportunistic one-off initiatives. External bodies manage many secondments, such as the UKRI policy fellowship, and these schemes provide a less onerous option for departments that wish to draw on existing structures to host researchers. But some departments have also developed their own secondment infrastructures. For example, a dedicated group of officials in the Expert Exchange Programme (EEP), launched in 2023 following a successful pilot, manages the DSIT fellowships.

For secondments to work well for secondees and the host organisation, there needs to be clarity about what the secondee is there to do and dedicated support to help embed them within the department and to manage change over the course of the placement.¹⁷ Interviewees highlighted how, in some cases, opportunistic secondments can be less effective precisely because secondees do not have the support that comes with more structured schemes – in such cases, the effectiveness of the placement can be limited for both the secondee and the host organisation.

The existence of departmentally owned infrastructure helps alleviate the problems that can beset secondments and align them to departmental priorities. The EEP provides induction training and events, with the secondment itself being based around a problem statement, with explicit expectations that secondees co-develop projects with policy makers. It provides a strong bureaucratic infrastructure and a centralised point of contact and expertise within the department. Because such schemes are more than a 'one off', officials who manage them are better placed to evaluate their effectiveness and implement improvements over time. Another example is the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO's) Research Commissioning Centre, launched in 2023, which tracks the performance of its secondment programme against key outcomes and impacts against an alphabetic grading system.¹⁸

While the growth of secondment opportunities is positive, more can be done to ensure that such initiatives benefit both the secondee and the host organisation. Departmentally owned infrastructure is still relatively rare, but this approach can create more stable and impactful placements. To ensure that secondments are robust and closely aligned to their priorities, departments should assign responsibilities for managing and developing secondment opportunities to dedicated officials or teams and consider setting up their own dedicated schemes.

The 'What Works Centres' landscape remains heterogeneous, for better and for worse

Set up in 2013, the What Works Network – made up of 12 evidence centres “committed to increasing both the supply of and demand for evidence in their policy area”¹⁹ – has collectively designed and delivered more than 500 evaluations of interventions and programmes, as well as engaging in extensive collaboration with government departments, public service leaders and front-line staff to ensure cutting-edge evidence informs policy making and service delivery.²⁰

What Works Centres (WWCs) continue to be seen as a key component of the evidence ecosystem in and around government. They enjoy a high degree of prestige and legitimacy across the system by successfully maintaining a ‘balancing act’ of preserving their independence without excessively ‘rocking the boat’ and placing their funding streams (often coming from government) under threat.²¹ WWCs vary substantially in policy focus, funding model, incubator organisation(s) and the types of evidence they tend to work with. While this creates some complexity, it is also a reflection of the diverging needs and resource requirements in different policy areas.

There has also been variation in the evidence centre landscape over time. Of the nine WWCs listed in our 2018 report on how government can work with academia more effectively,²² two no longer exist, one has been subject to a merger and a further five have been set up. In 2023, following the recommendations of the independent review of children’s social care, the Early Intervention Foundation and What Works for Children’s Social Care merged to form Foundations – to avoid duplication and sending diverging signals to the system.²³ What Works Wellbeing closed in 2024 after its funding had dried up due to a lack of sustained ministerial sponsorship for a diffuse remit with no clear departmental home.²⁴ And in January 2026, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) launched a joint funding opportunity of up to £15m for the creation of a new What Works Centre for Local Employment Support.²⁵

The Evaluation Task Force (ETF) acts as the secretariat for the What Works Network, is in charge of the network’s strategy,²⁶ playing the role of convenor for centres and championing the ‘what works’ approach across government. The network’s goals in the near future include more strongly advocating for the long-term funding and independence of WWCs, which, despite the generous endowments that some (such as the Education Endowment Foundation) enjoy, remain key concerns for most WWCs in a tight fiscal environment. Showing impact and effectively evaluating WWC activity as knowledge mobilisers also remain a challenge, which both WWCs and the ETF are alive to.²⁷ As with the other mechanisms for improving government–academia engagement, a more coherent approach to WWCs, supported by the ETF and rooted in clearly identified departmental evidence needs, would help mitigate some of the risks that WWCs face.

Advisory groups come in different shapes and sizes – and departments need to choose wisely

Advisory groups, councils and committees remain one of government's most direct routes to academic expertise, offering a readily accessible source of scrutiny and specialist advice without the delays of formal commissioning. But the landscape is often unstable as advisory bodies are liable to being reshaped, absorbed or wound down as departmental priorities and structures change. While this is sensible, to ensure that advisory bodies remain fit for purpose as the policy landscape around them evolves, it also makes it important for departments to prioritise building institutional memory and sustaining relationships with experts over time.

There is no one-size-fits-all model. Departments use advisory structures for different purposes and on different timelines, for example:

- standing committees that provide ongoing support – such as the Social Security Advisory Committee
- time-limited groups that focus on a particular topic – like the HM Treasury and the Bank of England's CBDC Academic Advisory Group
- crisis-activated forums that come to the fore in emergency situations – for example, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE).

A notable development has been the emergence of colleges of experts, which are flexible pools of specialists that can be drawn on as needed, helping departments widen participation and respond faster to emerging questions. The model's flexibility – often enabling remote engagement – also supports broader geographic and institutional representation, and can be designed to recognise time commitments through payment where roles require more intensive input. Some departments are beginning to join this model up more effectively with other engagement mechanisms, such as by linking recruitment to ARI-aligned activity or by bringing former departmental policy fellows into their college of experts.

The onus is on departments to choose advisory arrangements deliberately, based on the problems they are trying to solve. That means being clear about the advisory body's primary function – whether it is horizon scanning, rapid advice, scrutiny or methodological challenge – and designing governance, ownership and support accordingly (including ensuring there is a clear internal lead and routes into decision making). It also means building disciplinary breadth into small groups: advisory structures should reflect the reality that many policy problems require contributions from across disciplinary fields, and that diversity of method, seniority and background can strengthen the available evidence base.

Officials working at pace benefit greatly from extensive expert networks, but access to them continues to be uneven

Expert networks – whether in the form of institutional directories, contacts accessed through external research networks and learned societies, or informal personal contacts – are one of the most valued ways for officials to access timely and trusted academic advice, particularly when policy is being developed under pressure. They reduce the costs of reactively searching for credible specialists and create space for exploratory conversations that help teams frame problems and test assumptions before engaging in more formal work.

In recent years, much of the momentum around setting up expert networks has come from academia. Government efforts to systematise expert networks have grown more slowly, but some departments are taking steps to make access to external expertise easier through knowledge exchange activity and funded partnerships.

A long-standing example is the Department of Health and Social Care's (DHSC) use of policy research units in the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), which combine longer term research with rapid evidence and maintain dedicated liaison officers to support evidence flows.²⁸ The Home Office's support for the ESRC-administered Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) similarly illustrates how departments can use externally managed networks to access specialist expertise and build capability over time.²⁹

Knowledge exchange formats organised by government can also help. Officials cite regular events and seminars as a practical way to expose teams to research, identify new contacts and build informal networks. An example is DWP's ongoing ARI roadshows and its monthly link seminars – a knowledge exchange series run by a volunteer team of analysts.³⁰ The Evidence and Partnerships Hub in the Ministry of Justice, which convenes a large academic network and runs regular seminars aligned to departmental priorities,³¹ similarly shows how a dedicated function can institutionalise connections and knowledge rather than leaving them to individual initiative. There is also evidence of more cross-cutting governmental efforts in this space through the Open Innovation Team and the Evaluation Task Force.

Building broader, more diverse networks – and giving officials time and permission to maintain them – would make it easier to access expertise quickly when it matters most. But access remains uneven and more could be done to make these networks efficient and sustainable. Steps could include:

- embedding a system of rapidly obtaining priority baseline clearance for academics when needed for a particular project
- supporting an organisational culture that values and rewards institutional relationship building
- maintaining access to networks that can be leveraged as needed.

Policy reviews and commissioned research continue to play an important role in the academic–policy engagement landscape

Previous Institute for Government research has already delved more deeply into other researcher engagement mechanisms. In 2025, we published a report about independent policy reviews,³² looking at how government can learn from past experience to more effectively and strategically commission reviews and deploy them in the policy making process. Ensuring that reviews have the required capabilities, that they receive enough support from officials, and that they are commissioned and conducted in ways that are systematic and predictable, is central to their success. It is also instrumental in making it easier for academic researchers, and other external experts, to offer their input.

Government also continues to use commissioned research to help service some of its evidence needs, particularly for areas requiring highly specialised external insight. But there is an emerging preference in many departments for building internal analytical capacity and eschewing over-reliance on external commissions. While part of the rationale behind this move may be about containing costs, a recognition that government procurement can be too slow and cumbersome is also driving it. Government frameworks, such as GO-Science’s Futures Procurement Framework,³³ go some way to addressing this challenge by providing officials with pre-cleared lists of suppliers and removing the most significant administrative hurdles normally associated with public sector procurement. There is space for expanding the number of, and participation in, these procurement frameworks, and including more academic institutions on them.

There are alternative routes for commissioning shorter, specific pieces of research from experts. Some of the most effective examples of this are joined up with other academic engagement mechanisms available in government. For instance, the Evaluation and Trial Advice Panel (ETAP), which the Evaluation Task Force (ETF) manages, allows teams across the civil service to acquire targeted, time-bound expert input into evaluation projects while bypassing onerous procurement processes.³⁴

The story of individual mechanisms for researcher engagement is broadly positive. While the mechanisms have remained largely the same, in some places they have matured and become more embedded, with examples of best practice emerging across government. But this is not a consistent picture and, in some departments, less thought appears to be given to how mechanisms can be set up, drawing on best practice or what outcomes they are designed to deliver. One of the takeaway messages is the importance of clarity and strategic thinking – departments need to think about what these mechanisms are being set up to do and how this aligns with existing evidence needs and priorities. There is a risk that researcher engagement structures bear more of a resemblance to a group of ad-hoc initiatives rather than a cohesive and strategic ecosystem.

How government can engage with academia more effectively

Alongside a spurt of activity from research institutions, learned societies and funding bodies, government is creating more opportunities for researcher engagement. But existing mechanisms are not enough on their own to create effective and cohesive researcher engagement systems. Expanding researcher engagement initiatives may yield positive results, but more activity is not always better activity and an uncoordinated approach can take up resources that could be better allocated.

To improve outcomes from researcher engagement, departments need to be strategic in how they use limited resources. This means being clear on why they are engaging with researchers and what they want to get out of it. When departments can articulate what they want from academia, they can create routes for engagement that help fulfil these objectives. As part of this, departments also need to think about how engagement mechanisms can be joined up and who has responsibility for the research engagement agenda. To this end, departments need to:

- create their own researcher engagement strategies
- provide clear, visible leadership to ensure the policy–research interchange is sustained
- align culture and incentives to give officials the resources, permission and space needed to access the most up-to-date evidence available and feed it into decision making.

Departments need strategies to articulate what they want from academic input

Different departments will have their own reasons for seeking academic input and researcher engagement needs to cater to departmental contexts. But proactive thinking about *how* academic input can meet these objectives is not always evident across government.

Box 1 **Contexts for academic input**

Government departments use different researcher engagement mechanisms for specific reasons. Some contexts where researcher engagement could improve evidence use and support robust policy making include the following:

- **Developing and testing ideas:** Officials developing new ideas and policies may wish to tap into their expert networks or approach departmental advisory groups such as a colleges of experts.
- **Creating an evidence base:** When departments want to assess their longer term knowledge capabilities and promote the development of research relevant to the department, they can publish areas of research interest (ARIs) or direct research by making data more accessible to researchers. Alternatively, they may decide to set up or fund a What Works Centre to address a particular policy area.
- **Aiding rapid policy making or a crisis response:** When departments are engaged in rapid policy making (where government develops policy under compressed timelines and heightened pressure)¹ or when they are involved in responding to a crisis, they may rely on expert networks or standing bodies such as advisory groups, which can provide fast-paced feedback.
- **Addressing a short- to medium-term evidence or knowledge gap:** When departments have identified an evidence or knowledge gap that cannot be answered internally, they may rely on commissioned research from researchers or commission a policy review (which an academic could chair or feed in to). Alternatively, a secondment could be arranged to bring a relevant expert in to complete a piece of work in-house.
- **Challenging established ways of thinking:** By engaging expert networks, hosting secondees or setting up advisory groups, departments can subject their work and use of evidence to expert scrutiny as a check on quality.
- **Upskilling staff and building internal expertise:** By setting up secondment schemes, departments can introduce officials and analysts to new methodological approaches or support training initiatives.

While specific officials, teams or directorates should have the scope to create their own networks and localised initiatives, the development and deployment of researcher engagement infrastructure at a departmental level – which can include ARIs, secondment schemes, What Works Centres, advisory groups or expert networks – require more resources and should be developed with broader goals in mind. Departments need to articulate more clearly why they are engaging with researchers and identify the routes and mechanisms that can best attract evidence to meet their varied needs.

Academic literature points towards the positive impacts that engagement with researchers can have on policy making.² There is an emphasis on building a stronger pipeline of evidence into government from external research organisations through an expansion in engagement initiatives, but the ecosystem is varied and can be confusing.³ If departments are not clear about what they want from researchers and the routes that officials can use to access external evidence, then already time-poor officials will be less likely to engage with external researchers. A messy ecosystem coupled with a lack of clarity from departments means that the government is not extracting as much value from the UK's world-leading research system as it could.

To this end, departments should develop researcher engagement strategies. These should set a clear direction from senior leadership about what the department wants to get from researcher engagement. The strategies do not need to follow one template strictly and different departments will have different approaches. But they should inform how mechanisms for researcher engagement are developed, or reformulated, to meet the department's goals, while clearly setting out the department's priorities for engagement to external researchers and knowledge mobilisers.

The ARI commissioning process should already bring departmental leaders with responsibility for evidence and engagement together to identify and disseminate their department's research requirements. This could provide a starting point for carrying out a wider needs assessment, which can underlie researcher engagement strategies. There are already examples, such as at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), where ARIs are being used to co-ordinate a wider academic engagement strategy. Some departments, such as the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ), also engaged broadly with other parts of Whitehall as they developed mission-specific ARIs. Such examples of best practice in co-ordinating across government should be applied to the process of creating the kind of researcher engagement strategies we are advocating for – identifying overlapping evidence needs and synergies in the mechanisms used to service them.

There is a risk that orientating researcher engagement strategies around tightly defined outcomes does not take into account the kinds of unexpected insights and connections that academic-policy interactions can generate.⁴ Strategies should therefore set the direction of travel, with defined outcomes sitting alongside broader goals such as exposing officials to new approaches or introducing a challenge function.

Strategies for researcher engagement need to explain how different mechanisms join up

A coherent system for academic–policy engagement needs to be more than the sum of its parts. We heard many examples where mechanisms have been developed in an ad-hoc way, where they exist in parallel with other engagement routes, rather than as part of an integrated system within a departmental evidence ecosystem. The result is unwieldy and overlapping routes for engagement. This can lead to duplication and hamper the development of longer lasting collaborations.

‘Joined up’ can mean a lot of things. In this context it means that the different mechanisms within a department are designed to take account of the existing researcher engagement offering and, where possible, directly interact with each other to promote positive outcomes. For example, engagement with a department via ARIs could lead to interactions that feed into expert networks, or to commissioning a piece of research. The aim is deeper and more sustained relationship-building between researchers and policy makers through the full suite of routes available, rather than isolated one-off interactions.

There is some evidence that newer forms of engagement have already been designed with greater join-up in mind. The college of experts, for instance, is a relatively new and flexible advisory group structure. We heard examples of secondees being invited to join a department’s college of experts, or of the structure allowing departments to commission pieces of research from its members. Taking part also includes using their profile “in order to improve two-way communications within their respective stakeholder communities”, suggesting that the colleges can also be used as a mechanism for building expert networks between a department and the research community.⁵ There is a strong case for having a similar model in other departments.

Government has an important role in creating the conditions for academic–policy interactions and evidence flows through the development of engagement mechanisms that have a range of beneficial impacts. To maximise these benefits, thought needs to be given to how these mechanisms operate and interact with one another, as creating a joined-up system requires co-ordination and planning. Getting this right will help generate a more cohesive and coherent evidence ecosystem and create more impactful interactions. Strategies for researcher engagement provide an opportunity for departments to work out what mechanisms they need to meet their evidence needs and how these should join up.

Clear leadership is needed for government to engage more strategically with academia

We found many individual examples where strong leadership has helped develop researcher engagement efforts. But as highlighted in our previous report on how government and academia can work together more effectively,⁶ departments often lack a leadership structure with clear lines of accountability for researcher engagement. Oversight of researcher engagement and evidence use is fragmented, with responsibilities falling with different senior departmental leaders, from permanent secretaries to CSAs, heads of analysis or policy profession leads. This has

held back the development of more strategic researcher engagement strategies. The result is an uncoordinated system characterised by ad-hoc initiatives, where officials do not necessarily know when or how to leverage academic expertise. This means that opportunities where researcher engagement may have helped improve policy outcomes have not been seized.⁷ Responsibilities should be more clearly delineated at the departmental level so that individual leaders can be held to account for delivering researcher engagement strategies and that they have the authority to reorientate the existing engagement structures in ways that align with strategic goals.

A one-size-fits-all approach to how responsibilities are split among senior leaders will not suit different departmental contexts. Departments will lean on researcher engagement mechanisms for different reasons and some departments – such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) – already have mature evidence and engagement systems in place.⁸ The ability of different actors to lead researcher engagement efforts will also depend on the structure and status of relevant roles within departments. While some chief scientific advisers have carved out a prominent role – for example, the chief scientific adviser at Defra sits on the executive committee and is director general for science, data and analysis – previous Institute for Government research found that some chief scientific advisers had less access to resources, staff and clout within departments and this appears to still be the case.⁹ There is also a risk that where chief scientific advisers adopt senior civil service grade responsibilities, their challenge function is diminished.

Regardless of how responsibilities are split in particular departments, senior civil servants running academic engagement schemes should receive adequate resourcing to ensure they can effectively co-ordinate the activity happening within their department.

Evaluating researcher engagement is not easy – but departments can do better

Alongside being clearer about what they are creating engagement mechanisms to achieve, and who is responsible for driving that through, departments can be more intentional in evaluating whether they are achieving their goals.¹⁰ What evaluation is currently carried out tends to be informal and in departments with sufficient capacity. It is also worth noting that there is a distinction between evaluating how mechanisms are operating and the wider impact of researcher engagement. The former ensures that schemes are run effectively – and there is scope here to collaborate with knowledge mobilisation experts and learn from a growing body of academic literature assessing the effectiveness of different mechanisms in practice.¹¹ But as we noted in 2018, to evaluate the success of engagement mechanisms, departments should collect relevant data such as the number of genuine responses to ARIs or secondments.¹²

The types of mechanisms in place today are similar to those flagged in previous Institute for Government research, but in many cases, evidence for best practice is not being implemented across departments.¹³ This is a missed opportunity that a greater focus on the evaluation of existing mechanisms could address. As departments iterate engagement routes or set up new ones, they should draw on what has worked well

across government. GO-Science has led efforts to share best practice, which has led to more consistent ARI documents across departments, rendering them more accessible to researchers and providing clearer standards about what makes ARIs effective. A dedicated ARI team at GO-Science, the establishment of a cross-government ARI officials network and the publication of guidance have facilitated this.¹⁴ GO-Science should carry on developing guidance and convening networks for researcher engagement across government.

Impact evaluation is more complex. Although departments should be much clearer on what they want from researcher engagement, it is crucial to note that positive impacts from researcher engagement on policy spill out beyond defined outcomes. It is difficult to capture and measure such benefits and these cannot be sacrificed for the sake of a restrictive approach to evaluation that may privilege linear research to policy outcomes. But the importance and value of evaluation in this space are increasingly recognised – GO-Science has been developing internal tools that departments can use to begin monitoring and evaluating the impact of their engagement activities.

There is a tension between orientating researcher engagement structures towards defined outcomes and creating space for benefits to cascade through the system in ways that can be difficult to anticipate. How departments decide to evaluate the researcher engagement system will contribute towards this tension. We argue that an expansive approach to impact evaluation should be prioritised. The Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC's) approach to evaluating impact could provide a model of best practice for capturing the range of outcomes that researcher engagement can produce. The ESRC defines research impact as the contribution that research makes to society and the economy and lists three broad kinds of impact:

- **"instrumental impact** – influencing the development of policy, practice or services, shaping legislation and changing behaviour
- **conceptual impact** – contributing to the understanding of policy issues and reframing debates
- **capacity building** through technical and personal skill development".¹⁵

At a minimum, departments should be collecting data consistently, even if impact metrics or processes have yet to be fully developed, so that they can better understand how researcher engagement has an impact on policy making (within and beyond defined objectives) in a departmental context. Evaluating the effectiveness of researcher engagement will require new tools and staff time. Central engagement co-ordination units in departments, along the lines of the Evidence and Partnerships Hub in the MoJ, may be best placed to lead on this.

To create effective engagement, departments need to institutionalise points of contact – this will require staff time and resources

The work of co-ordinating engagement mechanisms and evaluating them effectively will not happen unless departments dedicate time and resources to it. While external research institutions have tried to make policy engagement less ad hoc by developing roles with relevant expertise (such as knowledge mobilisers), departments do not always have corresponding knowledge mobilisation functions. This makes it more difficult to create deeper interactions between researchers and policy makers. In many cases, there is a strong desire to engage with researchers, but departments lack the capacity to absorb and use all the available evidence.

Departments can do more to actively work with external knowledge mobilisers, by inviting (or seconding) them into the department to build networks that facilitate subsequent engagement activity. But to move beyond the ad-hoc approach that has characterised researcher engagement within government, departments need to embed and institutionalise points of contact. Part of this is about being clear about whose job it is to manage, develop and evaluate engagement mechanisms. Some departments, such as the MoJ, have already made moves to create dedicated structures with clear responsibility for managing researcher engagement.

Box 2 The Evidence and Partnerships Hub at the Ministry of Justice

The approach to researcher engagement strategies does not need to be monolithic across departments. One example of a successful approach can be found at the MoJ. The Evidence and Partnerships Hub, set up in the analysis directorate of the MoJ in 2020, “reflects MOJ’s commitment to working in partnership with academics, research networks and funders to enhance our decision-making”.¹⁶ In the first phase of its activity, the hub identified uncoordinated activity taking place in the department before building a strategy for researcher engagement through a consultative process that went alongside the department’s first areas of research interest (ARIs) commissioning process. This created the foundation for the second phase of its activity, which focused on developing key partnerships with external stakeholders, such as funding bodies and knowledge mobilisation organisations.¹⁷ The engagement impacts following the publication of the 2020 ARIs have included:

- setting up an academic network with more than 400 experts across relevant research areas
- running a monthly ARI seminar series within the department
- leaning on external bodies to set up secondments for academics at a range of career stages.¹⁸

A small team of civil servants who sit under the chief social researcher manage the activities of the hub. This shows how a relatively modest staff cost can facilitate more sustained engagement with researchers.

An alternative approach is DHSC's use of the now 20-strong policy research units of the NIHR – university-based teams providing both longitudinal research and rapid evidence across specialisms.¹⁹ Beyond publishing, policy research units engage in knowledge exchange through workshops and seminars with DHSC officials, and each unit has a dedicated liaison officer to manage evidence flows between the department and the unit.²⁰ To ensure that researcher engagement is properly embedded and sustained, departments should create dedicated knowledge mobilisation functions by setting up evidence units, employing dedicated knowledge mobilisers or by including such responsibilities as part of existing roles.

Government should be more targeted in its researcher engagement efforts, but bringing many voices in remains important

Government is generally understood to be better at bringing in academic expertise, insight and evidence from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields than it is at drawing on knowledge from the social sciences or the arts and humanities. This is because the 'hard' sciences enjoy more political clout, and the evidence infrastructures built around them are more mature, more complex and used more consistently.

Hierarchies also seem to persist among social sciences, humanities and arts for people and the economy (SHAPE) fields. Economics and behavioural science have, for instance, become more firmly established as analytical professions in government, compared with other SHAPE disciplines.²¹ There is also a continued preference for quantitative over qualitative evidence²² – even when this is not always justified.

One way to combat these disciplinary hierarchies is to carve out more space among civil service leadership for champions of SHAPE research, and ensure that they have the resources and standing to effectively advocate for the use of evidence and insight from non-STEM fields. The increased diversity in chief scientific advisers' professional backgrounds is a welcome development in this sense.

Even within the same discipline, opportunities for engagement are not spread equitably among academics. There is a risk that government tends to engage predominantly with more senior researchers from more established institutions. There are understandable reasons for this: more established academics are easier to access and have had the time and resources to develop networks in government. But it is in officials' own interest to cast the net as widely as possible when engaging with academics – to get a comprehensive picture of the existing evidence and ensure they are exposed to a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives. A more streamlined approach to researcher engagement would make it easier for other researchers to get their 'foot in the door'.

There are examples of best practice in this space. For instance, the Knowledge Exchange Unit in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) has carried out extensive consultation activities with key stakeholders outside government to identify barriers to engagement for researchers from under-represented groups and it has set out various changes to the way it conducts academic engagement to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to take part.²³ As in other areas of academic–policy engagement, government departments could do worse than learn from parliamentary practice.

Box 3 **Academic engagement with parliament**

Parliament has a long-standing tradition of engaging with researchers through a distinctive set of mechanisms. These are often viewed as more transparent, and easier to navigate, than routes to engagement with the civil service.

Giving evidence to select committees, both in writing and orally, stands out as a particularly easy ‘way in’ for researchers looking to achieve policy impact. Although not available exclusively to academics, it offers them particular advantages. Chief among these is the ability to claim credit for engagement. Having their evidence cited in select committee reports is a straightforward way for academics to show policy impact, with relatively low costs in terms of time and resources, to their institutions and funders. Engaging with the civil service does not always offer the same benefits – responding to ARIs or feeding into government policy documents often does not carry the same levels of acknowledgement, while more formalised forms of engagement (such as fellowships and membership of advisory councils) can be less accessible (though forthcoming guidance from GO-Science aims to ameliorate this).

POST has also been actively involved in brokering greater interchange between parliament and academics.²⁴ It provides analysis informing the work of parliamentarians through research briefings, rapid evidence assessments and horizon-scanning activities,²⁵ which are done with the assistance of doctoral students and academic fellows.²⁶ It has also worked with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) to create a network of thematic research leads,²⁷ first piloted in 2022,²⁸ with the intention of further expanding in-house analytical capabilities at the heart of parliament. POST’s Knowledge Exchange Unit also offers accessible guidance to external experts on how to feed their insight into parliamentary work.²⁹

Additional avenues for engagement with parliament include working with the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries on their research reports, and relationship building with all-party parliamentary groups (APPGs) with shared interests.

Changing civil service culture requires more opportunities for officials to spend time with researchers

Some aspects of civil service culture continue to inhibit researcher engagement. This is not a challenge unique to the UK – government and academia have long been understood as two communities with different cultures and diverging norms and expectations in and around the work they do.³⁰ Although there is evidence that sizeable proportions of public sector bureaucracies are more strongly aligned with the research community than might be expected,³¹ more can still be done to overcome remaining cultural barriers between government and academia.

Across the civil service, there is a lingering perception of academic research as being of limited use to policy makers because it is often too theoretical, not focused enough on practical recommendations or unwilling to engage with the constraints and trade-offs of government – or otherwise because there is a 'skills gap' among academics in communicating research findings.³²

This perception often compounds other institutional or system-level barriers that inhibit interchange between academia and policy makers, such as differing timescales for research and policy work, and the lack of consistent lines of communication.³³

This perception is, of course, not completely misplaced and picks up on genuine challenges in knowledge translation. But the intensified focus on knowledge mobilisation within academia over the past decade has meant that researchers have increasingly taken those challenges more seriously. Civil service leaders could, in partnership with research institutions, do more to dismantle continuing misconceptions among officials and build understanding across the research–policy divide.

There are already examples of successful initiatives in this space. Participants in the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) project reported greater connectivity across government and academia as a result of taking part, particularly through policy fellowships and knowledge exchange activities.³⁴ This included building or consolidating relationships between policy officials and researchers, and developing new ways to bridge the gaps in different 'languages' surrounding evidence.³⁵ Across different interventions, participants shared that they had gained a greater understanding of, and built stronger rapport with, professionals on the other side of the divide.³⁶ Participants also signalled that there were shifts in culture or attitudes at the individual, team or department levels.³⁷

CAPE's success is one example of how offering civil servants the chance to interact with academics can improve mutual understanding and help bring about a culture that is more open to, and interested in, external expert input. Government can go further to support officials' exposure to academics and the research community. Knowledge exchange activities such as bringing academics in for workshops, trainings and other events during 'peace time', without tying them to immediate policy needs, are valuable in this space, and should be part and parcel of broader departmental engagement strategies. Policy-to-research secondments are also a way for officials to develop a better understanding of the research community. Civil service leaders should provide more cover for officials to develop those kinds of relationships, and recognise that they are likely to have substantial benefits, even if they take time to materialise.

The use of evidence should matter more for professional advancement in the civil service

Criteria for professional advancement within the civil service are also critical to shaping officials' incentives and behaviour. Engagement with researchers and evidence is not consistently valued for career progression purposes across Whitehall. This is particularly the case for policy officials, whose ability to navigate the machinery of government to deliver at speed on ministers' priorities is in practice often more highly prized than other skills that are integral to a robust policy making process, such as having subject matter expertise or being able to use evidence effectively.³⁸

While, in theory, strong analytical teams can counterbalance this – the analysis function's career framework centres around the generation and communication of research insights³⁹ – it is policy professionals who make the ultimate decisions on whose input is sought and integrated into decision making. So the extent to which external expertise, advice and insight inform the policy making process will often depend on whether officials in charge of various policy areas are incentivised, or otherwise inclined, to prioritise it. Policy professionals who know the use of evidence is central to their career trajectories are more likely to bring analysts into decision making earlier in the process and to integrate their insights more deeply into their work.

Steps to create such incentives in the system have already been taken. 'Data, analysis and scientific advice' has been included as part of the 'strategy' pillar of the 2021 policy profession standards.⁴⁰ This is welcome, but questions remain about how strongly embedded these standards have become within the system. To make a difference, appraisal against the standards needs to be central to promotion and recruitment practices for policy makers. This should feed into broader thinking about performance management in the civil service, which the Institute for Government has previously argued needs to be strengthened.⁴¹

Along with more robust incentive structures around researcher engagement, the civil service should also do more to support learning and development for officials. Developing a better understanding of data and research methods, the ability to critically and constructively engage with research, as well as deeper subject matter expertise in particular policy areas, should become more prominent in future iterations of the civil service curriculum. The overhaul of civil service learning and development through the creation of the National School of Government and Public Services could provide a platform for this shift.⁴²

The development of the new school's training offer should be carried out in a way that brings together work done on improving learning and development in various parts of government, including the policy profession,⁴³ the analysis function⁴⁴ and the Evaluation Task Force.⁴⁵ It is important that this training is offered to – and expected of – not only analysts, but also all officials, especially those working in policy.

Easy access to scientific advice can make a big difference for time-poor civil servants

Civil servants face substantial time constraints – especially as, in recent years, rapid policy making has become the norm, rather than the exception, across Whitehall.⁴⁶ While there are examples of successful policy being made at pace, especially in emergency settings, the pursuit of speed carries risks. Institute for Government research has shed light on the experiences of policy officials delivering rapid advice to ministers who, among other things, told us they often had little choice but to sideline evidence and data.⁴⁷

There is a strong case against excessively compressed timelines for policy making in non-crisis contexts. But time pressures will likely continue and researcher engagement will often be deprioritised.

When pressed for time, policy makers will be far more likely to turn to evidence and research if access is as easy as possible. For one, government should ensure widespread awareness across the civil service about existing mechanisms and initiatives for sourcing researcher expertise. Although the landscape has expanded substantially in recent years, knowledge about the available routes for engagement remains uneven across the system.

However, some positive steps have already been taken in this direction. The Universities Policy Engagement Network's (UPEN's) interactive map of the academic-policy engagement ecosystem is among the most detailed of its kind to date.⁴⁸ GO-Science:

- maintains a webpage setting out the various routes for academic engagement with central government⁴⁹
- has mapped out scientific advisory committees, councils and arm's-length bodies⁵⁰
- has created directories of academia-to-policy⁵¹ and policy-to-academia⁵² secondment schemes.

The Scottish government has also brought together the various kinds of engagement opportunities it offers up to academics.⁵³

However, many of these initiatives are externally facing. Officials across government also need to have a clear sense of how they can leverage these engagement mechanisms, what the internal process for doing so looks like and when it makes most sense to use them. Forthcoming guidance from GO-Science on academic-policy engagement is a welcome step.

There are also specific tools whose expansion and proliferation would radically improve the timeliness of analysis and evidence provision to policy makers. Rapid evidence synthesis infrastructures, including those powered by AI, could substantially improve evidence take-up over the medium to long term.

More transparency – in data and evidence use – would be in government’s own interest

Parts of Whitehall can be parochial and closed off from many external sources of input into decision making.⁵⁴ Highly pressurised working conditions exacerbate this, often due to a fear of information leaks.⁵⁵ The upshot of this is a civil service that is less transparent than it should be, either because it is not interested in external input or because it is nervous about it, forgoing the benefits of better decision making that transparency often brings about.⁵⁶

For one, the civil service has not always been proactive about collating and publishing data that it holds and collects. This lack of data transparency has meant that government has missed out on opportunities to increase alignment between its priorities and research. While the engagement mechanisms outlined in this report are all key to stimulating the production of policy-relevant evidence, most evidence generation happens outside of direct policy–research collaboration and academics’ use of publicly available data drives it.

One example of best practice in this space is the Department for Education (DfE), which has a history of consistently compiling and publicising complex datasets. For instance, the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset,⁵⁷ which brings together data on educational attainment from the National Pupil Database and individual-level income data from HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), has proven to be an especially rich and insightful data source for researchers interested in the impact of education on labour market outcomes. Research that has been produced using this data has then been fed back into government decision making.⁵⁸ The latest iteration of DfE ARIs steers researchers towards a variety of search engines, tools and inboxes intended to facilitate access to useful data.⁵⁹

Compiling and publishing government and public sector datasets is not straightforward, and can be a labour-intensive process. But the recent focus on improving data sharing, including through the National Data Library,⁶⁰ could help make this easier. Ultimately, beyond questions of technical expertise and resourcing, civil service leaders should be proactive about creating and maintaining an institutional culture that encourages and empowers officials to work across government to share data and, wherever practical, to make more government data publicly available.⁶¹

Improved evidence use in government could also be bolstered through greater transparency about evidence use. The Institute for Government, Sense about Science and the Alliance for Useful Evidence have previously developed an evidence transparency framework that can be used to assess the extent and depth of evidence use in policy making.⁶² There is considerable variation in how willing different parts of government are to publish the evidence bases, and analytical work, underpinning their policy decisions.

Complete transparency about evidence bases may prove too onerous, given security and classification concerns and the time and resource requirements that it often entails. But there is also a positive case for publishing the analytical work underlying policy decisions. In particular, more transparency can help policy makers iterate policy solutions and strengthen the analytical grounding of future decision making. For instance, the Office for Budget Responsibility's (OBR) practice of transparency around its economic modelling has meant that it has, over time, succeeded in incorporating constructive scrutiny from academic economists when tweaking its models. This contrasts with the Treasury's reluctance to share the analytical work behind its estimates, with secrecy around budgets and fiscal decision making largely driving (and compounding) this.⁶³

Transparency about evidence also has the added benefit that it changes the incentive structures built into the policy making process. The added layer of accountability that comes with publishing the evidence behind government decisions could prompt policy makers to take a more considered, thoughtful and rigorous approach to weighing, and thinking through, the available evidence than they might have done otherwise. While making this a blanket requirement across the system would be too blunt a tool, civil service leaders should lead by example and, wherever possible, practise and advocate for greater transparency around evidence use in policy making.

Conclusion

Government and academia have made progress in engaging with each other more effectively. The civil service today offers academics a range of avenues to feed their evidence, insight and expertise into policy making processes. And the research community is more alive to the needs of policy makers – and savvier about how to engage with government. These are developments that should be celebrated. There are examples of best practice all across the policy–research interface, and successful initiatives have proven the value, and impact, of a strong relationship between policy makers and academics.

But government cannot be complacent. It should recognise that there is even more it can do to effectively capture and channel researchers' increased interest in policy impact. Pockets of best practice should be expanded to encompass increasing swathes of the civil service. Various disparate initiatives should be joined up more effectively. And the impact of interventions should be evaluated and fed back into decisions about how to conduct academic–policy engagement.

Most importantly, central government departments need to think more actively about what it is that they want from academics, who should lead efforts on researcher engagement and how different mechanisms for attracting academic input will be used to achieve that. To this end, departments should develop researcher engagement strategies that articulate how an engagement system can best deliver on departmental objectives and clarify these priorities externally. But for these strategies to be translated into practice, genuine shifts in the incentives for officials and a transformation in the culture in which officials operate need to back them up.

This report has set out the steps that government could take to bring researchers closer to policy making. Implementing our recommendations would require senior decision makers to take engagement with researchers seriously, and invest more time, energy and resources in getting it right. But there is a good case for doing so – the prize is better policy making that delivers more for the people of the UK.

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