



# Prosperous Places: Local Research Partnerships

A report from Metro Dynamics to ESRC

*Executive Summary March 2022*



Metro — Dynamics

# Executive Summary

Metro Dynamics have been commissioned by ESRC to review the landscape of ‘local research partnerships’ – partnerships between local government and universities or researchers – to understand the factors that make for successful partnership work, what can be achieved, and the challenges faced.

This research project comes at an important moment when the UK Government is considering how to support better evidence and data. Findings from this work regarding the landscape and dynamics of local research partnerships will help to inform ESRC’s approach to supporting locally focused research and innovation going forward.

## *Research methodology*

The research for this project has been undertaken over the period January to early March 2022 and has consisted of three elements:

- A series of 20 semi-structured interviews with policy and research partners from nine places across the UK.
- A survey sent to local government officials and academics, which received 35 responses from local government and 17 responses from academics.
- Engagement with nine broader stakeholder organisations with a perspective on the research issues.

## *Drivers of partnership*

The motivations for partnership differ between local government and researchers.

**For local government the primary motivations are:** to engage with a university as an important local stakeholder and employer, to supplement existing evidence gathering, access specialist research and expertise about economic issues, and to better understand which initiatives to pursue and how to implement them. For local government, partnerships with academics are part of a broader range of analytical work that includes using public and commercial data and drawing on published research and information.

**For researchers the primary motivations are:** to achieve a social impact or outcome, to strengthen long-term networks between the researchers and local government, to support access to research funding and to gain useful material for research publications.

## *Types of partnership*

Partly due to these different drivers, we see differing types and intensities of partnership. Some partnerships are short-term and transactional in nature, catalysed by available research funding, whilst others are longer term and more strategic in nature. **Successful, long-term partnerships tend to be embedded through strategic partnership structures** such as Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) or City Deals. Leaders within local

government and universities have an important role to play in ensuring that partnerships are taken seriously by their own organisations. Dedicated roles – either joint posts or partnership roles at universities – are also a factor in successful partnerships.

### ***Successful partnership outcomes***

The research highlights ways in which partnerships can create successful outcomes, including through:

- **Providing the space to question existing thinking and take a fresh perspective.** For example, partnerships in Norwich and Gloucestershire allowed local government and academic partners to tackle the big picture issues of, respectively, inclusive growth and sustainability through innovative research.
- **Creating strong economic analysis that provides evidence for ongoing policymaking.** For example, West Midlands REDI have played an important role for the City Region in developing and maintaining a Weekly Economic Impact Monitor which provides regular updates on economic issues and supporting the creation of the West Midlands Data Lab. Both of these assets allow policymakers to discuss issues whilst drawing on the latest evidence.
- **Moving from evidence to delivery to monitoring and learning what works.** For example, the North Wales Policy Lab is providing a space for local government to work with partners from Wrexham Glyndwr University on innovative policy agendas such as the Children’s University Pilot.
- **Applying academic specialisms to economic challenges.** For example, North East LEP have drawn on expertise from Durham University around trade intelligence – including links with the Department for International Trade (DIT) - to create their trade strategy ‘Global North East’.
- **Enabling the identification of other strategic opportunities.** An example is the Glasgow Economic Growth Commission which holds quarterly discussions on economic issues. Through these discussions an opportunity was identified to tap into £10m of sustainability research funding for investment in public infrastructure, which has been highly beneficial to the City Region.

### ***Barriers and challenges***

When local research partnerships meet barriers to effective working, the research finds that there are **‘environmental’ barriers** – particularly a lack of enduring analytical capacity within organisations, and a lack of capacity to support partnership working. These issues are exacerbated by short-term funding cycles which hamper long-term planning.

The research also identifies a range of **‘cultural’ differences** between the two sets of organisations, which include working to different timescales and paces, and having different scales of focus (global vs local). It is clear that there needs to be capacity from both sides to nurture and form these relationships in their earliest stages.

### *Considerations for policy*

The findings of this research suggest ESRC – and other broader partners including Government – could play an important role in supporting local research partnerships. The research suggests the following ways in which this could be achieved:

- **Increase engagement with local partnerships** so that ESRC is able to better understand local evidence needs, and to inform the creation of research specifications and management of research programmes. Greater engagement could also help local government to better understand potential opportunities. Clearly, this would need to take into account capacity challenges within local Government and other organisations.
- **Helping to create the right linkages between potential partners** – creating the right ‘match-making’ support / infrastructure to help bring together local authorities with particular research challenges and academics with relevant expertise.
- **Use research commissioning power to strengthen the emphasis on impact and encourage the right kind of research.** Support improved communication of the findings of research work that is undertaken. ESRC and others across Government could encourage and advocate for a system which is more responsive to and supports the needs of Government – local and central – as well as businesses and communities, and which places a stronger emphasis on impact (in addition to research excellence).
- **Supporting the right skills for partnerships.** This may include: greater support for PhDs in relevant disciplines, secondments and other forms of mobility between academia and local government, training for academics about the local government sector, training for knowledge brokers within universities, and supporting events that bring together academic partners and local government.



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