



Prosperous Places: Local Research Partnerships

A report from Metro Dynamics to ESRC

Final Report March 2022

Metro — Dynamics

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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.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Metro Dynamics have been commissioned by ESRC to review the landscape of 'local research partnerships' – i.e., partnerships between local policy stakeholders (such as local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, combined authorities and regional bodies) and the researchers and research organisations in their area.
- 1.2 The purpose of this work has been to understand the factors that make for successful partnership work, what can be achieved, and the challenges faced. Understanding the landscape and dynamics of local research partnerships will help to inform ESRC's approach to supporting locally focused research and innovation going forward.
- 1.3 This report is structured as follows:
 - **Section 2:** Describes the methodology used for this research.
 - **Section 3:** Presents the evidence on different types of partnerships, how they are operating and what they are focussing on. A number of examples highlight what can be achieved through successful partnership work and barriers to greater partnership working are discussed.
 - **Section 4:** Presents a series of considerations for ESRC that can support the next phase of work to catalyse new partnerships and enable existing partnerships to achieve greater impact.
- 1.4 While not exhaustive, this work covers a wide range of partnership models and experiences. Insights gathered from three strands of research highlight strengths, weaknesses and needs that ESRC can use to guide their approach to place. This work could also serve as a starting point should a more comprehensive study of the partnership landscape be undertaken as it identifies active partnerships across the UK, models being used, common areas of interest and common barriers.
- 1.5 Alongside this research work, Metro Dynamics have been asked to provide our view on two important related questions:
 - Alongside stronger local research partnerships, what is needed to improve the socio-economic evidence that is available to policymakers?
 - How could a regional observatory model funded by ESRC support improved partnerships and improved evidence?
- 1.6 Our views on both issues have been set out in a separate note to ESRC which is appended to this report.

- 1.7 This work is timely. The recent Levelling Up White Paper has set ambitious targets for the UK's places to achieve over the period to 2030. An important emphasis of the White Paper is ensuring that the country, and its regions and localities, have access to effective data and evidence:

'Good quality data, monitoring and evaluation are essential to delivering beneficial outcomes for citizens and value for money for taxpayers. For those reasons, high-quality, timely and robust spatial data are a foundational pillar of the new policy regime for levelling up.

Granular data are essential for understanding the UK's complex economic geography and tailoring policy to local needs. They enable monitoring of policy impact in places, and facilitate external scrutiny and accountability of those policies, including to the general public.

*In these roles, good spatial data, monitoring and evaluation is a clear public good with benefits for multiple stakeholders.'*¹

- 1.8 The White Paper further identifies local government and the research community as two of the four key constituencies that benefit from improved data and evidence.
- 1.9 The publication of the White Paper follows on from the publication of the Government Statistical Service's (GSS) Subnational Data Strategy (SDS).² The SDS is intended to mark a step change in the availability of subnational data and has four aims:
- Producing more timely, granular and harmonised subnational statistics, particularly for small area geographies, including making greater use of experimental methods when understanding what drives local growth.
 - Improving the way data, methods and expertise are shared across government, the devolved administrations, academia, and the private sector.
 - Improving the dissemination of subnational statistics so that local decision makers are able to access data-led evidence to guide their planning and policy decisions.
 - Creating a single service for the dissemination of subnational data and statistics - 'Explore Subnational Statistics' – organised by standardised geographies, able to accommodate flexible user-defined enquiries.
- 1.10 As well as noting the importance of data in its own right, the White Paper also identifies the role of data in strengthening local institutions and local leadership – and that an absence of data can weaken effectiveness and transparency.

¹ HM Government (2022) Levelling Up the United Kingdom – pg. 149

² Government Statistical Service (2021) Subnational data strategy

*'Data collected by local government can vary from one place to another, making it difficult to understand how well services are being delivered and the impact they are having. The lack of a singular, shared view of delivery in places, supported by robust and comparable data, curbs the ability to make evidence-based decisions. This matters to local leaders and councils who can learn from being able to compare performance and share best practice.'*³

1.11 The White Paper also recognises the 'importance of partnerships between sectors when growing local economies'⁴ and makes specific investments in three Innovation Accelerators - private-public-academic partnerships - to boost clustering effects in key sectors. The value of partnerships at the heart of City Deals in devolved nations is also explicitly recognised.⁵

1.12 Lastly, the White Paper recognises the current complexity of local governance arrangements, particularly in England.

*'Levelling up requires effective and coherent local institutions with responsibilities defined across appropriate strategic geographies. It also requires adequate capacity and strong leadership to make effective decisions. At present, there is a patchwork of local administrative bodies across the UK, which often overlap and are complicated to navigate. This can inhibit the cultivation of local capacity and leadership.'*⁶

1.13 This complexity – and the implications of this for partnership working – are a theme which emerges from this research. Another theme is the importance of capacity to act strategically. The White Paper observes that:

*'The loss of institutional memory and capacity, if institutions are neglected, reduces local ability to design and deliver change. In the UK, the depletion of civic institutions, including local government, has gone hand-in-hand with deteriorating economic and social performance.'*⁷

1.14 In responding to the challenge of promoting more and better local research partnerships, it will therefore be important to think about how to ensure effective capacity within places, and to operate at a sensible strategic geography. As the White Paper acknowledges, this is a challenge for the country as a whole.

1.15 Therefore, this research project comes at an important moment when the UK Government is considering how to support better evidence and data. This report describes how local research partners can be an important element of this, and how they can be better supported.

³ HM Government (2022) Levelling Up the United Kingdom – pg. 138

⁴ HM Government (2022) Levelling Up the United Kingdom – pg. 58

⁵ HM Government (2022) Levelling Up the United Kingdom – pg. 107

⁶ HM Government (2022) Levelling Up the United Kingdom – pg. 133

⁷ HM Government (2022) Levelling Up the United Kingdom – pg. 47

2 Methodology

- 2.1 The research for this project has been undertaken over the period January to early March 2022. The research has consisted of three elements:
- A series of paired interviews with policy and research partners in nine areas around the UK.
 - A survey sent to local government officials and academics.
 - Engagement with a broader set of stakeholders with a perspective on the research issues.
- 2.2 These three research elements were undertaken in parallel due to the short timeframe of the project. While carrying out the interviews, emerging findings were reflected on regularly, which informed subsequent interviews. It has been important to capture a broad range of experiences and geographic diversity, and this was a focus through each of the three research elements.
- 2.3 The following sections describe the methodology for each element of the research in more detail.

Paired interviews

- 2.4 The paired interview element of the project was a series of 20 semi-structured interviews with partners from nine places across the UK. To capture both researcher and local government body perspectives on local research partnerships, at least two interviews were held for each place.
- 2.5 The purpose of these interviews was to:
- Understand data and evidence needs and identify gaps in evidence.
 - Understand the structure of the partnership and understand the origins or impetus for initiating the partnership.
 - Understand the focus for the partnership, the driver(s) of this focus and potential areas of future focus (where partnerships were evolving and expected to change going forward).
 - Understand how the partnership was developing and expectations for future working.
 - Identify any perceived outcomes and successes of these partnerships.
 - Identify any perceived challenges in collaborating through partnership.

- Draw out general lessons learned for other partnerships.
 - Identify any considerations for ESRC in terms of how they might support more and better partnerships of this nature.
- 2.6 The interviewees were drawn from across the UK and had experiences of different models and maturity of partnerships - providing a range of examples of partnerships operating in different circumstances.
- 2.7 An interview format was agreed with ESRC prior to undertaking the interviews, and this was used to guide the conversations. Interviews took place through February 2022, and each lasted approximately 45 minutes. A full list of organisations spoken to is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Paired interview consultees

Area	Organisations engaged
Newcastle and Durham	North East LEP (x2 interviews)
	Durham University
	CURDs, Newcastle University
South Yorkshire	South Yorkshire Combined Authority
	University of Sheffield
West Midlands	West Midlands Combined Authority / City-REDI (University of Birmingham)
	Midlands Engine observatory
Lincolnshire	Greater Lincolnshire LEP
	University of Lincoln
Norwich	Norwich County Council
	University of East Anglia
Gloucestershire	Gloucestershire University
	GFirst LEP

Area	Organisations engaged
Glasgow	University of Glasgow
	Glasgow City Council
Northern Ireland / Belfast	Ulster University
	Queens University
	Market Development Association
Wrexham	Wrexham Glyndwr University
	Wrexham Council

Survey

- 2.8 Given the limited timescales for engagement, a survey of local government economic policy officers and relevant academics was used to augment and enhance the work being undertaken as part of the paired research interviews.
- 2.9 The survey therefore covered similar ground to the paired interview format, albeit modified as required so that it would be suitable for a survey. Recognising that some of the respondents might not be involved in partnerships, there were two question paths: one for those respondents involved in partnerships, and one for respondents not involved in partnerships. In the case of the latter path, the focus of questioning was on whether they were intending to develop partnerships and / or their openness to this.
- 2.10 To ensure the best possible targeting of questions two versions were developed, one for local government officials and one for academic researchers. The survey questions were co-developed, with ESRC providing feedback and suggestions.
- 2.11 For the Local Government version of the survey, the aim was to identify senior officials working on economic development, growth, or strategy in every Unitary Local Authority, LEP and Combined Authority in the UK. In total it was sent to 256 local government officials: 193 in England, 32 in Scotland, 21 in Wales and 10 in Northern Ireland. The regional breakdown of responses was continuously monitored, and an effort was made to elicit responses from all regions with two follow-up emails sent out.
- 2.12 The Researcher version of the survey was sent out through ESRC's existing networks. It was sent to the 26 ESRC Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) and was included in the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) weekly newsletter

which has a large distribution list. The regional distribution of responses was monitored, and an effort was made through targeted follow-ups to capture a diverse geography in responses.

- 2.13 In total the survey received 52 responses, of which 35 were from local government and 17 were from academics. In interpreting the survey we take the view that the survey is additive to the main findings of the engagement work, though the results should not be treated as representative of either local government or academics.

Broader stakeholder engagement

- 2.14 The broad engagement element of the research consisted of a series of interviews with groups and organisations that have a perspective on local research partnerships. Speaking to these organisations offered a wider view of the partnership landscape, success factors and opportunities.
- 2.15 The purpose of each of these conversations differed depending on the organisation being spoken to and how they engage with local policy, researchers, and research partnerships. Broadly, there were three main types of perspective sought through these interviews.
- National government perspectives
 - Perspectives on existing capabilities
 - Views from local government representative organisations
- 2.16 The objectives for each interview and the questions to be asked were discussed in advance with colleagues from ESRC.
- 2.17 The organisations engaged with were:
- Civic Universities Network
 - National Co-ordination Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE)
 - Local Government Intelligence Unit (LGIU)
 - Welsh Government
 - Scottish Government
 - Local Government Association (LGA)
 - National Community & Voluntary Organisation (NCVO)
 - County Councils Network (CCN)
 - ADR (Administrative Data Research) UK

2.18 The following organisations were approached for views but were unable to participate during the timescales of the study: Office for National Statistics (ONS); Department for Levelling Up, Homes & Communities (DLUHC); National Centre for Universities & Business (NCUB).

3 Research Findings

3.1 In this section we draw out the key research findings. These are divided into four sections:

- Findings about sources of evidence used locally and underlying evidence gaps and needs.
- Findings about the types and nature of partnerships observed.
- Examples of successes achieved through partnerships.
- Barriers preventing greater success in partnership working.

3.2 Throughout this section we have tried to draw out findings where there is broad agreement between local government and researchers. Where views are restricted to one group, or a subset of opinion, we have noted this. Where we refer to ‘consultees’ we are referring to colleagues we have interviewed as part of the paired research interviews or the broader stakeholder engagement. Where we refer to ‘respondents’ we are referring specifically to respondents to the survey.

Evidence: sources and gaps

Sources of data

3.3 Underpinning the need for research partnerships is a requirement for data and evidence to inform policy development. The survey asked respondents which local, regional, or national research organisations or resources they draw on when undertaking locally focussed policy or service development. Examples given as prompts were: published research (academic), published research (policy), evidence centres, research ready datasets, specialist institutes or observatories, and university departments.

3.4 Respondents suggested a wide range of sources they draw upon including:

- The Office for National Statistics (ONS), including the Nomis data portal and the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR).
- Published research from Government departments and agencies. Specific sources mentioned include: Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC), Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the Department for International Trade (DIT), Innovate UK, the Department for Education (DfE) and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) Datacube, as well as the Bank of England.
- Published research from specialist university research centres and Catapults.

- Published research from research institutes and think tanks including: Learning and Work Institute, Institute of Employment Studies (IES), Productivity Institute,⁸ What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth,⁹ Centre for London, Centre for Cities, Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), Resolution Foundation, Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and New London Architecture (NLA).
- Devolved nation and regional observatories, including: Welsh Government, Visit Wales, Welsh Centre for Public Policy (WCPP),¹⁰ Greater London Authority (GLA), Midlands Engine Observatory.
- Published research from specialist consultancies.
- Commercial datasets including: EMSI, Burning Glass, Beauhurst, FAME, Banksearch, Experian, Labour Insight, Popgroups, CACI, etc.

3.5 As well as utilising these sources directly, research work and evidence synthesis is also commissioned from consultancies and academic partners. A few respondents mentioned the use of more advanced analytical techniques such as data scraping to capture certain types of data.

3.6 There were significant variations in the answers to this question – both in terms of the answers provided, and the number of sources referred to by different respondents. The answers reflect a complex evidence landscape, knowledge of which requires considerable expertise.

Strengthening data capabilities

3.7 The survey also asked respondents which of a list of options would contribute most to strengthening the translation of evidence into policy in their area. The tables below show how options were ranked – for local government and for researchers - with rankings aggregated into three groups.

Table 1. Local Government responses re: data and evidence requirements (n=35)

	% of respondents ranking the option by preference		
	First, second or third most important	Fourth, fifth or sixth most important	Seventh, eighth, or ninth most important
Resources to pursue specific research projects that support local policymaking	51%	23%	27%
Dedicated resource in local policy organisations (e.g., local government) to synthesise existing evidence to support local policy making	51%	39%	9%

⁸ The Productivity Institute is an ESRC £25m investment 2020-25.

⁹ The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth is an ESRC, BEIS, DLUC and DfT £3.8m investment 2020-23.

¹⁰ The Wales Centre for Public Policy is an ESRC and Welsh Government £5m investment 2017-23.

	% of respondents ranking the option by preference		
	First, second or third most important	Fourth, fifth or sixth most important	Seventh, eighth, or ninth most important
Improved access to relevant public sector data / evidence (e.g., ONS Smart Data Lab\, more accessible statistics)	49%	22%	28%
Dedicated resource in research organisations to synthesise existing evidence to support local policy making	49%	22%	28%
Improved understanding of networks and opportunities for engagement on evidence use and production with local research institutions	43%	42%	15%
Support from research institutions in terms of time / capacity / expertise	35%	38%	29%
Improved internal analytical capacity and / or skills	31%	42%	26%
Improved access to relevant commercial data / evidence (e.g., commercial data services such as Beauhurst\, Emsi\, CoStar\, etc.)	23%	42%	35%
Improved access to data analysis or visualisation tools (e.g., GIS\, PowerBI\, etc.)	9%	35%	57%

Table 2. Researcher responses re: data and evidence requirements (n=17)

	% of respondents ranking the option by preference		
	First, second or third most important	Fourth, fifth or sixth most important	Seventh, eighth, or ninth most important
Resources to pursue specific research projects that support local policymaking	59%	24%	18%
Dedicated resource in research organisations to synthesise existing evidence to support local policy making	59%	29%	12%
Support from local policy organisations (e.g., local government) in terms of time / capacity / expertise	47%	47%	6%
Improved access to relevant public sector data / evidence (e.g., ONS Smart Data Lab\, more accessible statistics)	35%	41%	24%
Improved understanding of networks and opportunities for engagement on evidence use and production with local policy makers	35%	24%	41%
Dedicated resource in local policy organisations (e.g., local government) to synthesise existing evidence to support local policy making	29%	59%	12%
Improved internal analytical capacity and / or skills	24%	29%	47%
Improved access to relevant commercial data / evidence (e.g., commercial data services such as Beauhurst\, Emsi\, CoStar\, etc.)	12%	24%	65%

Improved access to data analysis or visualisation tools (e.g., GIS\, PowerBI\, etc.)	0%	24%	76%
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- 3.8 Clearly, there is a lot of variety in the responses provided, which is perhaps unsurprising given the heterogeneity of partnerships across the countries. It is also important to reiterate that this data does not provide a representative sample. Nonetheless, the data does highlight some differences in the value ascribed to different requirements, and differences between local government and researchers.
- 3.9 For both local government and researchers, the most important requirement is to boost evidence generation related to additional resource. Both groups identified the need for *‘resources to pursue specific research projects that support local policymaking’* most often in the top three responses. This was reinforced by both groups choosing *‘dedicated in-house resource to synthesise existing evidence’* as the second most popular choice to be selected in the top three options. However, it is also important to note that 27% of local government respondents chose additional resource as one of their bottom three choices – highlighting differences of opinion between organisations and places.
- 3.10 Local government and researchers also noted the importance of resource and support from their counterpart organisations. Nearly half of local government respondents selected *‘dedicated resource in research organisations to synthesise existing evidence to support local policy making’* as one of their top three choices, whilst 35% selected *‘support from research institutions in terms of time / capacity / expertise’* as one of their top three choices.
- 3.11 Interestingly, the preferences for researchers were reversed, with 47% selecting *‘support from local policy organisations (e.g., local government) in terms of time / capacity / expertise’* as one of their top three choices, and 29% choosing *‘dedicated resource in local policy organisations to synthesise existing evidence’*. This suggests that researchers may prefer support from local authorities in the form of inputting expertise and experience, whilst local authorities may have a preference for academics to undertake research directly and provide insights, rather than supporting local government to undertake research.
- 3.12 Aside from resources and support, there was some evidence of a desire for improved access to data, particularly from the local government perspective. 49% of local government selected *‘improved access to relevant public sector data / evidence’* as one of their top three choices. However, 28% of local government respondents chose this as one of their bottom three preferences, suggesting that access to data is less important for some places. Researchers also rated improved access to public data relatively highly, though less so than local government, and with 24% of researchers also choosing this amongst their bottom three choices.

- 3.13 Improved understanding of networks and opportunities for engagement was another area where there was reasonably strong interest from both groups, though local government showed greater interest in this.
- 3.14 Interestingly there was relatively strong agreement about the options which are lower priority, with neither group seeming to view better access to analytical tools or commercial data as being particularly helpful. The low ranking of commercial data is interesting, given that both groups ranked improved access to public sector data relatively highly. One possibility is that there is limited awareness around what this data is and how it can provide insight at local level.

Types of Partnerships

- 3.15 In examining a range of different partnerships, we have observed a range of similarity and variation across a number of key partnership features.

Motivation / Catalysts for Partnership

- 3.16 The motivations for partnership differ between local government and researchers. For local government the primary motivations are:
- To engage with an important local stakeholder and employer.
 - To access specialist research and expertise about economic issues and insights about local economic conditions.
 - To better understand which initiatives to pursue and how to implement them.
- 3.17 Clearly the first of these is quite different from the latter two, with the former being more of a strategic relationship building connected to the economic value of the university, whereas the latter two relate to accessing expertise. Note that these are not mutually exclusive.

“[Research partnerships provide the...] opportunity to bring in wider thinking / academic insight / challenge the way things are done. This may be uncomfortable, but it is vital.” – Local Government respondent

- 3.18 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 access funding.
 - To gain useful material for research publications

- 3.19 Again, these motivations are quite different from each other. The first two of these are more concerned with achieving impacts and being more connected with the local area, whilst the latter two are more focussed on the benefits for the institution and individual researchers. As above, these benefits are not mutually exclusive.

“Potential for public good (impact in local area), not just REF impact case but wider, more purposeful than that” – Researcher respondent

“[The driver of partnership is to] understand how policy works, increased likelihood of securing impact, increased likelihood of securing funding” – Researcher respondent

- 3.20 The origins of and catalysts for individual partnerships vary. In many cases, there is a strategic level partnership between the local government and universities in its area. This can originate through direct engagement between institutions, or it can be catalysed through a central Government initiative. In the past decade, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), City Deals, Devolution Deals, and Local Industrial Strategies have all created focal points for joint working between local government and universities. In some cases, the strategic impetus comes from the local area, particularly where there has been an independent economic review process or economic commission which has brought together local government and universities.
- 3.21 In other cases, the impetus arises from specific identified needs and / or individual relationships between local government officials and researchers. Sometimes these are initiated by local government where there is an evidence need locally that could be supported by local research expertise. North East LEP provides an example of this approach where having identified particular research needs, they approached Durham University for help in accessing academic expertise, and the two partners have continued to work together since this initial approach.
- 3.22 Sometimes partnerships are initiated by researchers who see the potential for using research funding to support local government activities in a way which generates research outcomes and impact. An example of this is Gloucestershire University’s work with Gloucestershire County Council where the University secured £100,000 of funding for the Council which led to three research strands:
- Natural flood management
 - Localised procurement of food
 - The circular economy
- 3.23 The research design was a participatory one, structured as living labs around the three areas. The first strand, natural flood management was most successful and led

to the creation of regional management mechanisms, alleviating governance challenges. The latter two strands were disrupted by Covid, particularly the circular economy strand, which was the last of the strands to start. The food strand was also impacted by changes in national policy focus which diminished the interest in the dynamic procurement system that they were exploring.

- 3.24 Both local government and researcher colleagues identified the importance of existing relationships as well as chance meetings at conferences and events in sparking collaboration.

Areas of focus

- 3.25 Some partnerships have a broad-based focus and might, for example, describe the partnership as focussing on ‘economic growth’. They take a holistic view of the local economy and cover a typical range of local economic issues e.g., businesses and sectors, labour markets, innovation, infrastructure, etc.
- 3.26 Other partnerships focus on inclusivity, their goal is to understand socio-economic challenges within communities and how these interact with wider measures of economic success. The Norwich Good Economic Commission, a partnership primarily¹¹ between the University of East Anglia (UEA) and Norwich City Council is an example of this. The goal of the Commission is to identify challenges across Norwich and find solutions that address inequalities and increase prosperity. The work of the North Wales Public Service Lab from Wrexham Glyndŵr University is a further example of this, as provided in Case Study 1 below.
- 3.27 Broad-based partnerships are most likely where there is a strategic level relationship between the university in question and local government, particularly where this is formalised through an institutional structure or formal strategy process. As above, this might include collaborating through a LEP, work on a City Deal, an Independent Economic Review or an Economic Commission.
- 3.28 Some partnerships have a more specific focus on individual themes or issues where there is an identified need and – on the researcher side – relevant expertise. The research identified a wide range of themes which are the focus of partnership activity at present, including:
- Net-zero and sustainability issues.
 - Tackling the climate and biodiversity crisis while balancing demand for land for food and housing.
 - Spatial policy (housing and employment space demand).
 - Improved functioning of the local innovation assets and infrastructure. Barriers to innovation.

¹¹ Norfolk County Council and the New Anglia LEP are also involved to a lesser extent.

- Innovation to address societal challenges and create new commercial opportunities.
- Rural Growth.
- Delivery of Shared prosperity Fund/Levelling Up.
- Supporting civil society organisations in Wales to transit to post-Brexit context.
- Factors hindering exporting.
- Skill gaps in expected future job roles.
- Social cohesion.

3.29 These examples demonstrate that there is a wide range of specific issues which research partnerships are addressing.

3.30 Respondents also identified several areas which are under consideration for future activity:

- Sectoral, thematic, and geographical challenges related to Covid and lockdowns.
- Public service efficiency and effectiveness especially in the NHS.
- Social care.
- Development of data on exporting, imports and FDI to understand how local firms relate to global supply chains.
- Electrification skills training.
- Developing a Nature Recovery Centre.

Case Study 1: North Wales Public Service Lab from Wrexham Glyndŵr University

Established in 2020 by [Wrexham Glyndŵr University](#), the [North Wales Public Service Lab](#) (NWPSL) works with leaders across North Wales to meet the University's co-created civic mission to end social inequality across the region by 2030, working in partnership.

Responding to the University's 'leadership, governance, and whole system working' strategic priority, the NWPSL provides a physical and intellectual space that convenes a range of local partners to provide expertise that enables collective action.

Current partners include university researchers and students, leaders from North Wales's local authorities and other public services, including [Public Health Wales](#), [Natural Resources Wales](#), [North Wales Fire and Rescue](#), [North Wales Police](#), FE partners, housing partners, third sector organisations and regional partnership, Public Services Boards of

[Wrexham](#) and [Flintshire](#), partners from the [2025 social movement](#), resident communities, and children and young people across the region.

The Lab has three principles:

1. Provide a space for conversation
2. Enable a community of systems leaders
3. Have a commitment to being useful

The work of the NWSPL involves developing a programme of events and research outputs around key themes in collaboration with partners. In addition to hosting a programme of events (including masterclasses, cafes, lectures, events, and workshops) the NWSPL engages with place-based projects by providing research, evidence, and evaluation and identifies individual experts for specific requests from partners. Examples of this include evaluating the Children’s University Pilot; researching school experiences and transition points for children and young people Wrexham; reviewing the impact of the Covid Support hubs in partnership with the health board; and undertaking an exploratory study to develop a training workshop on compassion for social prescribers.

As well as individual projects, the NWPSL engages academic teams with community projects on a longer-term basis. An example includes the NWSPL’s work enabling Flintshire and Wrexham Public Services Boards (PSBs) to work together on community resilience and recovery. By joining forces, the previously separate PSBs and the NWSPL developed a structure for delivery to ‘open’ up the PSBs in the form of subgroups that connected and engaged far more people into the PSB and the focus areas.

As part of this, Graphic Design and Illustration students from Wrexham Glyndŵr University were involved as ‘civic engagers’, tasked to create a [magazine called ‘Llesiant’](#) to spread the ethos behind the PSB work and approaches, and engage wider partners — including the private sector — to support community recovery. A paper sharing the learning of this approach was accepted to the European Conference on Service Learning and Higher Education in September 2021, and the 12th RCE Global conference in November 2021. The NWPSL also jointly hosted a Learned Society of Wales roundtable, focusing on ‘if civic mission is the answer, what is the question?’ as well as facilitating workshops with neighbouring PSBs in Denbighshire and Conwy to shape their approach to similar work.

Resulting from this partnership between the NWPSL and the PSBs is an innovative new [North Wales Research and Insight partnership \(NWRIP\)](#). This is a long-term partnership that is part of the Lab and was set up to develop the use of evidence and insight, with the aim to collaboratively shape the North Wales that communities want to live in now and in the future. The work of NWRIP includes integrating approaches, evidence, and resources across all systems working; focusing on understanding root causes of key challenges and how these are interconnected; and developing leaders’ ability to be evidence and insight informed.

An initial point of work for the NWRIP has been supporting PSBs with their wellbeing assessments. As part of this work, the Lab recently enabled the NWRIP to run a project to

pilot a new approach to ‘citizen analysis’, taking the climate emergency as its topic. This project focused on data, innovation, and sense-making for communities, to inform the wellbeing assessments being developed by the PSBs. Twelve citizen analysts with different life experiences, backgrounds, beliefs, and characteristics, were recruited and paid to interact with information and data on CO₂ emissions, travel, and water. Through a series of facilitated workshops, the analysts were invited to share their interpretations of the information and identify opportunities for community action. As a result, data packs were developed that were incorporated into the wellbeing assessments, making them representative of the diverse populations they affect.

Through the work of the NWRIP, the well-being assessments are now more analytical in nature, focussing on interconnections and root causes. They have been deliberately framed to assist people and organisations to make sense of and use the data - acting as a bridge between the data and analysis, and the action. The next stage for the NWPSL is to reengage citizen analysts in co-producing wellbeing plans with partners and communities, in order to tackle the challenges identified collaboratively.

Partners are continuing to explore options to deepen collaborative working, including looking at the potential to: create a development fund to enable community, partners and academics to work together on priority projects; access funds to work on new projects such as how to evaluate the impact of civic mission and focus on research that matters to communities and public services in collaboration; how to use art as a form of dissemination; and co-create a more data-driven approach to evidence and research with local leaders and change makers.

Level of formality

- 3.31 A number of partnerships identified were fairly ‘transactional’ in nature. In these cases, a research project would be carried out by an academic on behalf of the local government in question, with limited or no ongoing work following the completion of the project.
- 3.32 Some consultees identified that they worked in an ‘episodic’ way with partners, with the level of engagement dependent on available funding for the academic activity (either through research funding or funding directly from the local government themselves). In the cases of these transactional or episodic arrangements, the partnerships were relatively informal and dependent upon inter-personal relationships in order to establish the research projects.
- 3.33 Where there was a strategic link between institutions these varied in terms of the level of active commitment and the extent to which there was an active research component alongside the strategic working. In some cases, the strategic link was joint membership of another institution or grouping – e.g., a LEP Board. In these cases, whilst there would be ongoing contact between the institutions, the level of joint working – particularly on evidence and research – might be fairly minimal.

- 3.34 In other cases, the strategic link was more formally established as a forum for ongoing strategic dialogue with the university specifically. One example of this cited during the research is the Glasgow Economic Growth Commission which was established to evaluate the Glasgow City Deal. This is an ongoing forum for high level feedback on local government policy which supports the identification of potential research capacity where there are identified evidence gaps. In cases like this, the partnership is far more active and dialogue between senior leaders in local government and universities is more direct.
- 3.35 In some cases, there is a formal institution which helps bring together partners. An example is the Midlands Engine Observatory (MEO) which receives funding from the UK Government, and which has a forum for local government officers across the region, as well as forum for academics and researchers. The MEO is working to better integrate these two groups and facilitate collaboration directly.
- 3.36 The Welsh Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) is joint funded by the Welsh Government and ESRC. WCPP work with national and local policy stakeholders supporting the translation of evidence in priority areas to support local and national policy need. They have worked with some Public Service Boards in Wales in the context of the Future Wellbeing of Generations Act requirements placed on public bodies.
- 3.37 Some partnerships have attempted to embed a partnership approach more actively by having joint posts. This is true in the West Midlands where there is a joint post between the City-Regional Economic Development Institute (City-REDI) at Birmingham University and the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). This post helps support joint research work as well as helping to create regular economic monitors for the City Region (as detailed in Case Study 2 below). Greater Lincolnshire LEP and the University of Lincoln similarly share a joint post which is focussed on improving links with and visibility to UK Government.
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West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute from University of Birmingham

In early 2020 the University of Birmingham launched the new [West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute](#) (WMREDI), building on the success of [City-REDI](#) (a similar partnership from University of Birmingham which focus more specifically on city regions), in order to catalyse regional collaboration. The objective of WMREDI is to enable better policy insights through collaborative research and new channels for knowledge exchange, to help rebalance the UK economy and create inclusive local economies. From this work, the institute aims to improve the alignment of universities and public sector organisations in selecting priority investments for the economy and society of the West Midlands.

WMREDI is a collaboration with various local and regional stakeholders, established with a major award from the Research England Development (RED) Fund, together with matched

funding from the University of Birmingham and regional stakeholders. The partnership includes and also received match funding from:

- [The West Midlands Combined Authority \(WMCA\)](#)
- [Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership \(GBS LEP\)](#)
- [The GBS Chambers of Commerce](#)
- [Business Professional Services consortium \(BPS\)](#)
- [West Midlands Growth Company \(WMGC\)](#)
- [The Black Country Consortium Ltd](#)
- [Aston University](#)
- [Birmingham City University \(BCU\)](#)

Wider partners of WMREDI also involve [Birmingham City Council](#) and the seven metropolitan local authorities in the West Midlands¹², the [Midlands Engine](#), and the [University of Warwick](#). WMREDI provides a collaborative space to co-locate secondments from these stakeholders, provide policy workshops and training programmes, and engage national partners. The Institute is located in The Exchange on the University's Edgbaston campus. This location provides a city centre hub for public access to the University's research expertise, education, and cultural collections.

The work of WMREDI includes providing regular economic impact monitors, developing a regional data hub and tools for analysis, conducting comparative benchmarking of the UK regions, providing policy support, and delivering workshops and training programmes.

In addition to this work, during the Covid-19 pandemic WMREDI started to publish its [Weekly Economic Impact Monitor](#), which pulls together information from across regional partners to understand the impacts of Covid-19 on the economy. It is a practical report which takes account of both quantitative and qualitative intelligence as the situation develops to inform the policy response to Covid-19 recovery. This weekly reporting has had a direct impact on the WMCA Resilience Plan through economic impact assessment work, and lead to an additional funding allocation of £66 million for recovery and £1.5 billion in infrastructure investment.

More recently in 2021, WMREDI and its partners launched the [West Midlands Data Lab](#). The data lab provides a single interactive portal for a wealth of up to the minute regional data and research. This tool can be used to inform decision making around key investments and policy formulation for economic, social, and environmental benefit in the West Midlands. The site provides access to live data and Power BI dashboards, intelligence briefings, information on the data lab projects, and access to the latest in-depth research, alongside the latest state of the region report and a range of supporting evidence.

¹² The metropolitan districts include Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

Figure 1 West Midlands Data Lab



Alongside the Data Lab, WMREDI produces research and insight blogs to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of UK regions, focusing explicitly on regional systems of innovation and the relative alignment of university R&D with user-needs at the local and national levels. For example, a recent article highlights the ‘2020 Shock’ on the Midland’s automotive sector and its policy implications relating to Net Zero. The article points policy makers to the need to continue to include Covid-19 as a consideration while variants of the virus still exist, and to recognise the multiple crisis which are having knock-on effects across supply chains for the sector. Through sector and business research such as this, WMREDI has helped to shape national policy on Levelling Up and contributed to place elements of HMT Green Book through advisory changes that have affected public sector projects nationally.

Capacity and funding

- 3.38 Capacity and funding were noted as significant barriers to partnership almost universally (see ‘Barriers to effective partnership working’ section below). This particularly reflects the funding challenges faced by local government generally across the UK, and LEPs in England. As well as low levels of funding and capacity generally, long-term surety of funding is also a barrier to partnership working.
- 3.39 Transactional or project focussed research work, is heavily dependent on accessing research funding through competitive research grants, discretionary university resource or local authority budgets. Consultees were keen to stress that even relatively small amounts of funding could help get a research project off the ground.

- 3.40 Some of the larger partnership vehicles have access to more significant budgets. For example, the budgets for MEO and WCPP are approximately £0.5m per annum, allowing for a number of research posts and commissioning of research. The Belfast Market Community Project with Queens University Belfast also has a significant research budget over three years. This provides essential capacity to undertake research, and the confidence for institutions to tackle longer-term research problems.
- 3.41 Whilst funding is a challenge, some consultees noted that universities are in some cases able to access significant amounts of research funding which could be leveraged for economic development purposes. A multi-million-pound grant for a sustainability research project was noted as an example. The grant provided substantial funding to allow the authority in question to invest in important sustainability projects that otherwise would have been deferred indefinitely. This also created a positive outcome for the academic team who were seeking a testbed for the research. Whilst not directly related to evidence generation, this was provided as an example of how stronger research partnerships could support economic development aims by identifying these kinds of research funding opportunities, as well as supporting improved evidence.

A complex partnership landscape

- 3.42 The landscape for partnership working can be complex. As noted above, there are area-based partnerships that bring together multiple universities with their respective local governments, particularly in city regions. However, it is also clear that partnerships can be a complex web of interactions between individual officers / local government institutions and different researchers within and across institutions.
- 3.43 Whilst partnerships between local government and researchers / research organisations is the focus of this study, a range of other relevant partnerships that make this ‘web’ of partnerships even more complex were encountered, including:
- Strategic place-based partnerships that also included stakeholders such as businesses, community groups, voluntary & community organisations (VCOs).
 - Partnerships between universities and VCOs.
 - Partnerships between VCOs and local government.
 - Partnerships between universities and businesses.¹³
- 3.44 Another complexity is reflected in the fact that universities sometimes undertake research projects outside their own area with broader partners – often through funded research projects that may have a ‘consultancy’ service element. This could be beneficial to local partnerships if the findings of such research were translated to

¹³ Partnerships between local government and business are in place through LEPs.

local circumstances and communicated locally – however this does not typically appear to happen.

Geographical variations in partnerships

- 3.45 The Welsh and Northern Ireland contexts are different to England. In both cases there is a formal or semi-formal Government funded research capacity which can extend to local government (and has been encouraged to do so through City Deal and Wellbeing Plan initiatives). In Northern Ireland there are strong semi-formalised partnerships between the Northern Ireland Government and the two major Universities: Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast (particularly with the former). In Northern Ireland, the City Deals have acted as a focal point for local government and university partnership. In Wales the WCPP, based at Cardiff University, is funded to undertake work focussed on public services which involves working with some Public Service Boards.
- 3.46 The size of both Wales and Northern Ireland means that there are much more direct links between local government, universities and the devolved administrations, which helps ensure local issues are better understood and recognised by the devolved governments.
- 3.47 The situation in England is quite different and more varied. Local government and LEP budgets for economic research are relatively low and limited by short-term funding settlements. Combined Authorities are not universal in coverage and analytical capacity within these is mixed, with examples of this capacity supporting lower tiers of local government. Regional organisations exist in the North and Midlands which have some resource as well as some convening and co-ordinating power, though limited analytical capacity. Strategic transport authorities can be an important source of additional resource for analysis in where they exist, but their focus is primarily on the evidence needed to inform transport investment and operational decisions. In all cases, English authorities feel more distant from the UK Government than counterpart authorities in Wales and Northern Ireland.
- 3.48 In practice local government geography in England is variable and can be quite complex. Boundaries do not always neatly overlap, which can create challenges for engagement. Analytical imperatives are driven by the authority which is commissioning the research or strategy in question. In one example encountered during the research an initiative being pursued on the basis of an urban area had excluded the broader City Region hinterland and institutions from the core partnership group – which illustrates how boundary issues can create challenges for partnership working.
- 3.49 In general, analytical capacity, funding, and partnership activity is strongest in large cities in England. This can create a 'Matthew effect', whereby places that are (comparatively) well-funded are able to develop stronger evidence bases, which in turn make them better equipped to bid for other Government funding and research funding - thus perpetuating a divide between urban areas with stronger analytical

capacity, and more rural places and smaller towns with weaker capacity for analysis. Whilst this divide is generally true, we also encountered examples of positive working in rural areas and areas with smaller towns.

- 3.50 Scotland appears to fall somewhere between the experience of the other devolved nations and England. Like the other devolved nations, City Deals have been an important catalyst for partnership working and there appear to be strong city-region partnerships which drive strategic working, as well as a network of research projects.

Successes

- 3.51 The research has identified different ways in which partnerships can create successful outcomes:
- 3.52 **Where partnership provides the space to question existing thinking and take a fresh perspective.** For example, work undertaken as part of the Norwich Good Economy Commission brought together City Council, Norfolk County Council and New Anglia LEP colleagues alongside researchers from the University of East Anglia. This work was able to look at socio-economic issues in the city from a fresh perspective and funded projects on: good business practices, community cohesion, the experiences of family carers, persistent vacancies in the labour market, and the impact of the pandemic on women.
- 3.53 **Where partnerships create strong economic analysis that provides a baseline for ongoing policymaking.** As an example, the work of City-REDI in the West Midlands has created a strong regular economic monitor that provides an update on economic issues that affect the City Region. It helps quickly translate national macroeconomic issues into a diagnosis of what the impact for the City might be, as well as bringing together qualitative insights from key employers and stakeholders.
- 3.54 **Where partnerships move from evidence to delivery to monitoring and learning what works.** Partnerships are particularly valuable when they create evidence and suggest policy in a way which galvanises changes in delivery and approach. The work of the North Wales Public Service Lab at Wrexham Glyndwr University with public sector partners is a good example of how partnership working has resulted in delivery improvements and a movement towards a whole systems approach that builds community resilience.
- 3.55 **Where partnerships bring academic specialisms to bear on economic challenges.** Often academic researchers allow local government to develop more robust strategy by bringing to bear thematic expertise on particular challenges. Examples identified in the research include work between North East LEP and Durham University around trade intelligence and strategy.

3.56 **Where partnerships enable the identification of other strategic opportunities.**

In some cases, the relationships fostered through a focus on economic issues can help identify wider 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 to effective partnership working

3.57 The research work identified two main types of barriers that prevented more effective partnership working:

- **‘Environmental’ factors** arising from the context in which both local government and researchers / universities operate.
- **‘Cultural’ differences** between local government and universities that can act as a barrier to effective partnerships.

Environmental factors

3.58 Both universities and local government face challenges relating to capacity and funding for evidence development. 76.9% of local government survey respondents mention at least one of resources, capacity or funding being a challenge to collaboration, whilst 43.8% of researchers did likewise. As well as challenges related to the overall amount of funding available, there are challenges related to the short-term nature of funding.

“National competitive approach and ‘distance’ from our area means that real priorities do not have capacity behind them. Lack of continuity means that we often see multiple short studies ‘discovering’ similar things” – Local Government respondent

3.59 Given the capacity challenges in both types of organisation, it is perhaps unsurprising that dedicated partnership roles – either joint funded roles, or partnership development / business development roles within universities – play an important role in ensuring that partnership work occurs. As noted, above, we observed joint posts in the West Midlands between the City-Regional Economic Development Institute (City-REDI) at Birmingham University and the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), and in Lincolnshire between Greater Lincolnshire LEP and the University of Lincoln. These posts directly facilitate the partnership working between the respective organisations. In the North East, the role of Senior Policy Engagement & Impact Manager at Durham University was noted as being particularly important for ongoing engagement with North East LEP.

- 3.60 Both local government and academia are perceived from the outside as complex institutions which can be difficult for outsiders to navigate, leading to difficulties in identifying potential partners. Comments regarding these challenges included:

‘[There is] no defined entry point to research institutions – it depends on networks rather than a formal entry point’ – Local government respondent

“[The] complex administrative nature of local development agencies, with frequent reorganisation of administration systems makes it hard to know where to start.” – Researcher respondent

- 3.61 The perceived complexity of both types of organisations can act as a barrier to exploring partnership opportunities and increases the importance of dedicated partnership roles and / or chance meetings that create linkages.
- 3.62 Since formal routes to partnership can feel unclear, many partnerships originate in unpredictable ways based on chance meetings or informal conversations. In some instances, these informal networks evolve into formal, strategic partnerships. However, there is a risk that the opportunities which arise from informal conversations might be extinguished if there is a lack of capacity on either side to nurture and form these relationships in their earliest stages.
- 3.63 Building and sustaining relationships and partnerships is impacted by employee turnover - particularly in local government, but also in academia – often due to short-term funding and budgetary cycles. Several consultees – from both local government and academia - noted that the partnerships they have helped to create and sustain were at risk if they were to leave their current roles.

Cultural differences

- 3.64 There was a universal acknowledgement amongst consultees – from local government and universities - that there was a significant ‘cultural’ difference between the two sets of organisations which could act as a barrier to effective partnership working. These cultural differences included are described below.

Level of local focus

- 3.65 Many universities typically have a focus on internationally significant research, and / or research topics that are global by nature. This emphasis can be reinforced by the incentive structures that academics face, whereby they gain more professionally from publishing an article on an international topic in a major journal, than from working with local policymakers. There was a general feeling that more modern universities had a greater focus on local relationships than more traditional research-focussed universities.

- 3.66 Further to this, some universities may simply not have relevant expertise to support with local economic and policy issues and so there may be limited scope for partnership work.
- 3.67 There was a feeling amongst consultees that strategic leadership emphasis on this work – either from local government leaders, or universities leaders - was necessary for partnership working to occur by focussing priorities. However, it did not seem as though leadership prioritising partnership was always sufficient to galvanise activity between policymakers and academics – due to the incentive structures discussed above.

Different working expectations / norms

- 3.68 Local government often works to challenging timescales, with much policy work being driven by deadlines set by Central Government. Universities and researchers in contrast tend to work on longer-term projects, often where there is more scope for time flexibility or extensions. As such, it was reported by consultees that it can be challenging for academics to work on time-constrained local government projects.
- 3.69 Another issue is that policy work requires decisive conclusions – i.e., even where there is uncertainty, policymakers need to make a decision about what the evidence shows and the best course of action. By contrast, academics are more comfortable with the ambiguity of unclear findings and can be cautious about making stronger conclusions over shorter timescales.
- 3.70 Consultees spoke about different kinds of professional ‘fear’ that can affect the way local government and academics work. Local government colleagues were perceived to have a fear of policy failure, as they are publicly accountable for the use of public money and delivery of public services. Academic colleagues were perceived to have a fear of giving advice where the stakes are higher (i.e., where the expertise is being used to inform policy which will be implemented).

Communication and project management

- 3.71 In some cases, challenges were identified in terms of communication and managing projects effectively.
- 3.72 Consultees referenced the fact that local government colleagues and academic colleagues can speak different languages. This can manifest itself in terms of lack of clarity as to the nature of the required final output, or the purpose to which the final output of a research project might be put. This is due to a lack of mutual understanding about the other partner’s organisation and strategic priorities. There is also a challenge of ensuring that outputs written by academics ‘speak to’ the local government leaders who will be making key decisions (i.e., is written in a way which is accessible and reflects the priorities of the local government).

“There is often a mix of opinion between researchers/university and the local partners priorities for the research. The local partner intends on gaining operational outcomes, but the researcher has to stick to academic structures to ensure the passing of the course. Managing these expectations between different stakeholders is essential.” – Researcher respondent

“Time, resource, 'language' differences and perhaps misconceptions or lack of understanding of each other which makes the idea of collaboration appear more difficult than it might be. Embedding the idea of co-producing research agendas and building meaningful relationships over time to facilitate this will take time.” – Researcher respondent

- 3.73 Project management was perceived to be another challenge to partnership working. Examples of poor definition of roles, and lack of ongoing communication and expectation-setting were raised by consultees.
- 3.74 Other challenges related to the bureaucracy of commissioning academics, particularly for small pieces of work. These challenges were raised by academics themselves who felt that their institutions were better equipped to deal with large research projects than small research assignments with short timeframes and minimal delivery risk.

“The university accounting system both makes us expensive and lacks any return to the researchers thereby disincentivising this kind of work.” – University respondent

Overcoming barriers to partnership

- 3.75 Given the barriers identified above,¹⁴ consultees noted a variety of ways in which partnerships could be improved:
- 3.76 Increasing the emphasis that universities place on local impact, as opposed to research and funding, for academic progression and promotion. The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and the Civic Universities Network have both helped to do this, but there is still more that can be done.
- 3.77 Dedicated capacity for brokering partnerships and managing partnerships within institutions.

¹⁴ Note: that similar descriptions of these barriers are found in e.g. Institute for Government (2018) ‘How government can work with academia’ and the counterpart paper Institute for Government (2019) ‘How academia can work with government’ which describes challenges in terms of lack of time / capacity to engage, high staff turnover creating challenges to long-lasting relationships, knowing the right person to speak to, etc.

- 3.78 Providing training to academics about local government and managing these kinds of research projects.

4 Future considerations for ESRC

- 4.1 The findings of this research suggest a range of actions that ESRC could consider as it continues to develop its approach to supporting local research partnerships. In each case, the suggestions here reflect comments made by multiple consultees. We recognise that ESRC may not be best-placed to act on all of these considerations – and that work by other agencies and partners may be required. However, we have tried to give a full overview of the needs of the partnerships landscape so as to best inform ESRC’s strategy.

Closer working with local partnerships

- 4.2 Consultees were keen to have stronger engagement with ESRC as part of their ongoing evidence base and research work. Consultees felt it would be helpful for ESRC to be ‘in the room’ with partners discussing evidence programmes and local priorities. This might include engagement with partnership structures, particularly around long-term strategy processes such as City Deals, and local economic strategies. This would help ESRC better understand local evidence needs and priorities.
- 4.3 Other benefits mentioned were that it would help ESRC to be a more proactive ‘commissioner’ of research by identifying common priorities across multiple areas, and by identifying opportunities to scale up research where this was viable. On the latter point, this would help avoid single-place research which is not always widely applicable or widely communicated beyond the immediate study area. Stronger engagement would also help ESRC to better disseminate findings from research locally.
- 4.4 It will be important for ESRC to ensure that learning from local engagement is captured centrally so that it can inform long-term ESRC activity and funding priorities.

Creating the right linkages

- 4.5 Given the challenges noted in terms of accessing research partners, it was felt that some form of ‘match-making’ support or infrastructure would be beneficial to help bring together local authorities with particular research challenges and academics with relevant expertise.
- 4.6 There are existing networks that can be drawn upon to support this. For example, UPEN provides links to a strong network of academic researchers, though this would

need to be connected to a similar network of local government contacts (perhaps via the Local Government Association for example).

- 4.7 Whilst these networks are an important starting point, it is likely that ESRC would need to ensure sufficient capacity in the system to communicate the benefits of the network and ensure its effective operation.
- 4.8 Another perspective on this is the notion of ‘entry points’ or ‘docking points’ – that is, providing clear pathways into institutions for relevant research conversations. The Government’s publication of Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) since 2017 for individual departments is felt to have provided clearer entry points to central Government, and a similar approach could be encouraged across local government.

Using commissioning power to strengthen impact

- 4.9 Many consultees felt that there was a valuable opportunity for ESRC to use its position as a research funder to encourage locally-relevant research. Suggestions included:
 - **Increased role for local government in informing the research agenda.** In order to ensure that research genuinely informs and influences policy it is vital that research projects are linked to places and/or specific organisations, with clear evidence of need and intention to utilise findings.
 - **A stronger recognition of research impact** within the scoring criteria for research funding was seen as a route to encouraging and recognising this type of work. It was noted that it could be difficult for researchers to demonstrate impact on policy research work where the impacts were of a long-term nature. Any future approach might consider ways in which researchers can evidence the intention of research to inform policy (e.g. a positive statement by the local government in question of their intention to use said research to inform policy, with clear examples of how this might occur in practice).
 - In a similar vein, **creating prizes for research impact for regional and local government**, to raise the status of this work and support academics who are involved in such research.
 - **Provision of longer-term sources of funding – and funding pilot projects as part of research.** The Future Leadership Fellowship programme was referenced as a positive example of long-term funding as well as funding to trial a policy approach.
- 4.10 Alongside these approaches, there was a recognition that more could be done to communicate the findings of the research work that is undertaken. Examples of how this might be achieved include:

- Establishing a local public policy research institute to act as a flagship centre for research and communicating findings publicly.
- Supporting events which provide opportunities for local policymakers and academics to meet.
- Requiring – through the commissioning requirements - the development of short-form accessible summaries of research – as per the online publication ‘the Conversation’ which summarises academic research.¹⁵
- Publishing a regular summary of research outcomes in a similar way to the NBER Digest produced by the US National Bureau of Economic Research.¹⁶

4.11 Over the longer-term it is likely that ESRC will have the opportunity to continue to reinforce the emphasis on impact (in addition to research excellence) through dialogue with Government and other stakeholders. ESRC is well placed to advocate for a system which is more responsive to and supports the needs of Government – local and central – as well as businesses and communities.

Improving the skills base for partnership

4.12 Academic colleagues in particular advocated for more opportunities and funding to support the supply of relevant skills in this area. Clearly, these considerations have broader implications beyond ESRC, with multiple actors in the research and funding system that could potentially respond to this. Any action in this area relating to training and approaches to research funding will require an ongoing commitment to diversity and inclusion.

4.13 Suggestions for improving the skills base include:

- **Support for PhDs in relevant disciplines.** It was noted that there was a limited supply of PhD students in some key areas of research – such as the UK labour market. PhD funding was highlighted as a way of increasing expertise and raising research capacity in key disciplines.
- **Supporting secondments and other forms of mobility between academia and local government.** Some of the knowledge brokers spoken to had previous experience within local government which enabled them to work across the ‘culture divide’. Providing more opportunities for this would be beneficial to partnership development. One consultee noted that in some European countries there are special professorships within universities for ex-professionals – and that encouraging similar activity in the UK would be helpful to improve relationships.

¹⁵ <https://theconversation.com/>

¹⁶ <https://www.nber.org/digest-2021-12>

- **Training for academics about the local government sector.** A number of academic colleagues suggested that it would be beneficial to have access to training on the local government sector so as to better understand the priorities and organisational structures of their partners.
- **Training for knowledge brokers within universities** to better work with academic colleagues to establish new partnerships. Knowledge brokers are critical for establishing and maintaining partnerships but have few direct levers to influence research colleagues. It was felt that specific training for these team members would help to improve outcomes and partnerships.
- **Supporting events that bring together academic partners, knowledge brokers and local government** – e.g. webinars, roundtables

5 Appendix: Developing Regional Observatories

Note: this section was produced as a separate briefing note to ESRC during February 2022 alongside the main research work. It has been reproduced here as it provides additional commentary on the need for data and evidence across the UK, and how ESRC might support an observatory structure – referred to as Local Policy Innovation Observatories (LPIOs) – on a regional basis in order to improve local evidence availability.

- 5.1 Metro Dynamics are currently engaged in a research project to understand the strengths, weaknesses and maturity of local research partnerships between local government¹⁷ and universities / research centres based in the same area. This research will help inform the emerging LPIO concept being prepared by ESRC / UKRI.
- 5.2 We have been asked to prepare this note which sets out our views on:
 - What local policymakers need in terms of data / evidence / partnerships to support improved policymaking and outcomes.
 - A potential regional structure for LPIOs and different options for configuring these.
- 5.3 This note is informed by our direct experience of working with local authorities, LEPs, universities on economic research projects over the past 15 years. This includes reflecting on our own experience of utilising economic data to inform strategies and policy at a local level. All views are our own and do not necessarily reflect the views of ESRC.

What local policymakers need

- 5.4 Local policymakers need more actionable information about what is going on in their economy. In practice it's important to recognise that when it comes to 'evidence and data' that we are referring to at least three different things:
 - **Data** – that is, practical indicators that enable policymakers to understand what is happening and where there are economic challenges.

¹⁷ Including local authorities, combined authorities, regional bodies, and local enterprise partnerships (LEPs)

- **Evidence on what works** – that is, evidence from projects which have already been carried out which provide a guide to best practice in how to choose and implement policy.
- **Modelling** - the use of economic models to understand how local economies might change in response to policy actions or trend growth. Models can also be more specifically focussed on particular policy changes such as transport or housing interventions.

Gaps in data

- 5.5 There are range of challenges that policymakers face in accessing useful data to understand their local economies:
- 5.6 **Data that is publicly and easily available covers a range of economic issues but also has some important omissions and limitations**, including: data on individual businesses in a particular area, detail data on commercial property, data on exporting export products and export sectors, data on labour demand and jobs vacancies, etc.
- 5.7 There are also challenges relating to the accuracy of the data available. For example, the sample sizes used for the annual population survey were reduced some years ago meaning that the accuracy of the data of it for some areas is limited. This is illustrated in the example below for Allerdale, which shows that the provided APS 95% confidence intervals are very wide – with upper and lower bounds often more than 20 percentage points apart. It is consequently hard to draw many conclusions about whether Allerdale has seen a growing or shrinking population with high-level skills, and how this has compared to the national average. This is felt particularly acutely in rural areas, where different towns with very different profiles are subsumed into one local authority, making these figures hold even less value for understanding what's going on in places.

Figure 1. Allerdale district: % of population with NVQ4+ qualification, showing lower bounds (LBs) and upper bounds (UBs)



- 5.8 Most datasets are only available for the past 5 to 10 years at most. The formal guidance for the BRES dataset on employment – one of the most essential data sets for understanding changes in local employment and sectoral employment – states that is data from two consecutive years or more should not be compared with each other (because the sampling methodology means that there will be significant discontinuities)¹⁸. This means that historical context is limited and it makes it hard to understand long-term economic trends in a particular place.
- 5.9 There is also some data which is available publicly but is not available at a local level. Some datasets are only available regionally or at NUTS geographies.
- 5.10 **Commercial data** produced by private firms can help fill in some of the missing gaps in public data - particularly in terms of jobs vacancies, commercial property data, and more detailed data on businesses. However, in most cases the costs of commercial data make it challenging for local policymakers to access consistently. Our analysis of commercial Data usage in the north of England finds that local enterprise partnerships purchase a patchwork of different datasets. The nature of these commercial agreements also mean that different authorities / organisations pay differing amounts to access the same data - anywhere up to twice as much depending on the data set in question.
- 5.11 **There is more that can be done with publicly available data**, however this requires local policymakers to have the capacity and the expertise to access such

¹⁸ See:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/methodologies/businessregisteremploymentsurveybresqmi> - 'BRES is a point-in-time snapshot of the Great Britain and UK economy and is not designed to be used as a time series, although it is recognised that users do use them in this manner. BRES is subject to discontinuities caused by standard industrial classification change, reference date change and source data change, potentially making any time series analysis difficult.'

data. Opportunities include: accessing the IDBR data on businesses, accessing the ONS smart data lab and secure research service, and making greater use of local administrative data.

- 5.12 In practice, the barriers to accessing this data are sufficient to deter local policymakers from using it. An obvious example is the IDBR, which is available at a relatively low cost (£150 per year of data) and provides detailed data on individual businesses in a given area. Whilst this data is indisputably useful for understanding local economies in most cases local policymakers do not pay to access this data – either due to lack of awareness or because they are deterred by the data handling requirements associated with using this potentially disclosive data.
- 5.13 The ONS secure research service is potentially even more useful but requires accredited research status which most local policymakers will not pursue due to the time and cost involved.
- 5.14 There is a range of data collected by government particularly by HMRC which could be used to shine a light on important economic processes and activities. For example, detailed data on exporting, employment, and businesses would add greatly to the stock of knowledge about a local economy. Much of this data is simply unavailable as it is retained by HMRC for example, though some is becoming available through the ONS data science hub but it is still not usable for local economic analysis, and a small amount is being published by ONS in a form which is useful for local economic analysis.
- 5.15 Further to these challenges, **local authorities face challenges in terms of their own capacity**. The significant decline in local authority budgets has led to a similar decline in the funding of non-statutory services including local economic development. At the same time local enterprise partnerships have significantly less funding as a group than did the predecessor RDAs. Funding settlements for local enterprise partnerships have been short-term necessitating the use of short-term contracts for staff which make it difficult to build long-term capacity and expertise. All of this makes it hard for local policy makers to get access to in-house expertise on what data is available, to knowledgeably commission economic studies and purchase commercial data where necessary, and network affectively with data providers to gain access to useful but more challenging to access public data sets.

Gaps in evidence

- 5.16 Whilst data is vital to provide insights into what is happening in the economy, this does not automatically provide local policymakers with the tools to understand exactly what to do and – crucially – how to do it. Instead, what local policymakers need is clear evidence of the efficacy of particular policy approaches to the problems they have identified using data. In practice this evidence needs to come from evaluations of projects and meta evaluations / systematic reviews of many projects.

- 5.17 In practice there is a dearth of evaluation activity which policymakers are able to draw on. Most importantly, this arises due to a lack of investment in evaluations and a lack of staff with suitable expertise. As budgets are limited evaluation is often an element which is omitted during project design. In fairness to local policymakers this reflects a lack of central mandate – and investment – from central government to undertake evaluations, as well as the expense of undertaking complex evaluations effectively. As a result, initiatives like the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, which in theory should be able to provide insights into economic policy approaches, have limited access to high quality evaluations needed to provide these insights.

Modelling

- 5.18 Another form of evidence is modelling the expected impact of ‘endogenous’ changes in the economy, as well as attempting to model the expected impacts of policy interventions. Economic modelling capacity has diminished significantly since the end of the RDAs, though some models have been maintained, usually in collaboration with academic partners. More recent investment in regional transport authorities such as Transport for the North (TfN) and Midlands Connect has been an important element in restoring regional modelling capacity, though this work tends to be more narrowly focussed on the modelling needed to support transport policy and is not necessarily configured to support wider economic policymaking.

Implications for LPIO

- 5.19 What this means for LPIO is that - in addition to partnership support - LPIO can add most value by:
- **Supporting the creation of and access to better economic data** (and insights derived from that data). This reflects the fact that existing public and commercial data provides an incomplete picture of economic conditions at a local level. Recognising that many local government organisations have limited capacity, this is not simply about increasing access to raw data, but publishing this in a way which is accessible, preferably with clear insights that make the data accessible to policymakers as well as specialists.
 - **Supporting local research and policy capacity.** At the simplest level this means ensuring that LPIOs contribute to increased local analytical capacity (more analysts). More broadly, sharing best practice and offering support to gaining new skills (or signposting to existing provision) will also help improve local capacity.
 - **Providing tools and resources which help economic policymaking locally.** This could include guidance on what policy approaches are shown to work, and how to implement these successfully. It could also include support – including funding – to evaluate projects to inform future policy. This would help local government implement better policy.

- 5.20 Whilst there are some important local differences in terms of priorities and capacity, these should not be overstated. Most economic data is relevant and useful to all localities, and indeed ‘universal’ data (that is, data produced on a national basis for all areas) is important for providing context when analysing data. Therefore, the role of a central or national LPIO capability which provides data and resources generally is important.

Developing a regional approach: Principles

- 5.21 We have been asked to consider different regional models that LPIO might adopt. In doing so, we suggest that there are some important principles:
- Utilise existing partnerships and avoid replication. This might mean investing in existing resources rather than creating new parallel observatories. It also suggests that observatory models might differ. Whilst it’s important to support existing partnerships, it will also be vital to ensure that these organisations are genuinely delivering what LPIO needs – i.e., useful data and evidence which responds to local needs and is focussed on informing policy decisions.
 - Observatories should be led by their places and have strong local government leadership / governance representation to ensure that research supports policy. Local leaders should also be consulted before the finalisation of these proposals (particularly in the case of the ‘local laboratory’ approach, below).
 - Development of ‘universal’ datasets in a sustainable way should be a priority to avoid balkanised studies with limited applicability for broader analysis. Given some of the shortcomings with existing datasets, data should be developed which conforms to actual policy geographies (i.e., not just the regional geographies of the LPIOs).
 - Prioritise long-term investments over shorter-term ‘transactional’ research programmes.
 - Strong communications and ‘translation’ function to ensure that insights are well-understood both inside and outside of the region they originate in.

Proposed approach 1: Universal Coverage

- 5.22 Given the importance of having universal data coverage, one model might simply be to adopt a full regional approach such that every part of the UK has its own LPIO. This could either reflect the existing NUTS1 geographies (i.e., the old RDA system – which would suggest 11 LPIOs), or potentially an approach with an LPIO for each of: Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the North of England, Midlands, and the South and / or London (which would suggest 6-7 LPIOs).

- 5.23 Of these two suggestions, the latter has advantages as the North and Midlands geographies would overlap with the strategic bodies of Northern Powerhouse (and groups / activities like the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, NPIER, and Convention of the North) and Midlands Engine, as well as the respective transport planning geographies of Transport for the North (TfN) and Midlands Connect.
- 5.24 The South and London are most challenging for a regional approach. The Greater South East (GSE) is a sensible geography for analysis, but firstly this leaves peripheral areas – and the South West in particular – without adequate representation, thus necessitating an additional (for example) South West LPIO. Secondly, the GSE makes intuitive sense but the partnerships between London and the wider GSE are less strong than in other English regions, and strategic organisations represent specific footprints within this area (particularly London with the GLA and TfL).
- 5.25 The devolved nations are relatively straightforward to accommodate within this schema, and there are obvious ways in which LPIO investment could strengthen existing collaboration (in the form of, for example, Ulster University / NI Government partnership, and the Welsh Centre for Public Policy).
- 5.26 The **advantages** of this approach are:
- Universal coverage and focus on strategic-level regional economic issues: trade, innovation, transport, housing, etc.
 - Where the governance links are currently poor between areas – e.g., the South – this could provide a spur for a new way of thinking about the GSE as an economic entity.
- 5.27 The **disadvantages** of this approach are:
- Greater distance from practical decision making (i.e., LA / CA level) may make it harder for evidence and insights to impact policy decisions.
 - May be more difficult for wide-ranging groups of partners to agree on priorities.
 - Despite the ‘universal’ coverage, it will be important to ensure that these bodies produce evidence which supports their constituent members / places as well as the LPIO geography as a whole.
- 5.28 It is reasonable to note that the scale of these issues will differ between areas – with the disadvantages being less of an issue in the devolved nations.
- 5.29 As above, the role of the national capability is important. It is possible to imagine a strong national capability through which a range of data is developed, with LPIOs being responsible for leading specific long-term research policy projects (e.g., long-term projects on housing, transport, productivity, etc.). Alternatively, the national capability might be more focussed on enabling actions – e.g., sharing best practice

between regions and running certain national infrastructure (e.g., ‘matchmaking’ services to link researchers with specific policy challenges).

Proposed approach 2: Local Laboratories

- 5.30 An alternative approach might be to develop a small number (6-10) ‘local laboratories’ – i.e., intensive partnerships between a range of local stakeholders (combined authorities, local authorities, local universities, etc.) with a focus on identifying and evidencing economic challenges, developing evidenced policy approaches, and evaluating and learning from policy efforts over the long-term.
- 5.31 In deciding which places would be best for these ‘laboratories’, it would be sensible to identify a range of places which:
- Individually already demonstrate good levels of collaboration and encompass genuine policy-making geographies.
 - Collectively cover a range of place types – i.e., major urban areas / city regions, smaller cities / large towns, and predominantly rural areas.
- 5.32 The **advantages** of this approach are:
- LPIOs with a meaningful policy geography and a group of stakeholders working together on policy approaches means that in principle evidence can inform policy, policy can be implemented, and the results of that policy can be evaluated. This could be a powerful way to generate insights about the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of local economic policy.
- 5.33 The **disadvantages** of this approach are:
- Will not support all areas of the country. Would not provide universal data without this being an explicit element of the national capacity offer.
 - Whilst it is right to build on existing partnerships and initiatives – it will be important to ensure that the principles discussed above are properly reflected in these – in particular, that local policymakers are driving the research agenda.
- 5.34 As with the first option, the role of the national capability is an important factor in how the LPIO concept would work in practice. With a stronger national capability, this could provide important data on a universal basis which supports non-LPIO areas as well as those with LPIOs. With a smaller national capability, the focus would tend towards communicating practical findings from the research of LPIOs to support policymaking in non-LPIO areas.

Looking at these options in the round

- 5.35 One way of examining these different options is shown below. For each option there is the choice between having a stronger national capacity (with commensurately less direct LPIO activity), or a more streamlined ‘enabling’ national capacity focussed on

limited data provision, sharing best practice, communicating LPIO findings, and networking researchers and policymakers. The table tries to capture the likely roles within each approach.

	'Enabling' National Capacity	Stronger National Capacity
Universal Coverage	<p>LPIO role: Strong regional observatories undertaking strategic evidence building to inform policy – with findings on a LPIO-wide basis and a local basis.</p> <p>National role: Sharing best practice between LPIOs, convening cross-LPIO working on mutually useful research, limited additional data projects.</p>	<p>LPIO role: Regional observatories undertaking focussed strategic evidence building to inform policy. Findings more oriented to LPIO level and major constituent areas.</p> <p>National role: Developing useful data for all parts of the UK. Funding evaluation and modelling work that can support all areas. An active role in sharing and communicating outcomes of local work.</p>
Local Laboratories	<p>LPIO role: local policy laboratories with significant budgets to define local problems and address long-term evidence gaps.</p> <p>National role: Sharing best practice from the LPIO areas with a wider audience. Supporting other areas to set up similar LPIO processes. Limited additional data projects.</p>	<p>LPIO role: local policy laboratories pursuing well-defined local challenges, undertaking research which is additive to national data provision and focussed on policy evidence (evaluation and modelling) that helps define the 'what' and 'how'.</p> <p>National role: Developing useful data for all parts of the UK. Funding evaluation and modelling work that can support all areas. An active role in sharing and communicating outcomes of local work.</p>

Taking this forward

- 5.36 Of the above two options, ESRC's engagement with a range of national policy, local policy, and academic stakeholders has indicated that option 2 has potential to address emerging needs and asked us to set out some high-level commissioning considerations.
- 5.37 ESRC have indicated that in the first instance they would look to test the LPIO model through supporting three LPIOs and a national capability which would be awarded via open competition

- 5.38 We suggest, therefore, that commissioning provides scope to support a breadth of geographies including:
- **City-region:** LPIO focussed around a large functional urban area that has a clear administrative geography
 - **Small City/Large Town:** LPIO encompassing a smaller urban settlement (or multiple smaller urban settlements).
 - **Rural area:** LPIO focus on a predominantly rural area.
 - **Devolved nation:** ensuring a minimum of one LPIO is housed within a devolved nation
- 5.39 We suggest that these are focussed on an area-wide approach, rather than - say - a neighbourhood approach, as this is likely to lead to more generalisable findings that can benefit other places. ESRC could consider population and / or size banding but will need to be mindful in the application of such an approach to avoid unintentional exclusion.
- 5.40 There would need to be evidence provided in the submission that the boundaries reflect both functional economic areas and the boundaries of constituent partner institutions.
- 5.41 As per the above principles, it will be important that submissions are clearly driven by local research needs that are shared between the partners. Governance and management of the LPIOs should demonstrate strong commitment to working across organisations. There should be clear examples given of how research work will lead through into actual delivery (with effective monitoring and evaluation of results).
- 5.42 There is a tension between providing LPIO places with choice in the research they pursue whilst also ensuring that the resulting research creates value for other parts of the country (those without LPIOs). We suggest that part of the national offer for LPIOs should be a strong communication function that can work with local places to draw out the key messages for other parts of the country. This work could include having LPIOs present at webinars / conferences that are open to a wider research community, as well as preparing some basic reporting which sets out: a description of the work, any methodological insights, and an analysis of what the work means for other areas of the country.



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