

Stepping Up: UKRI Policy Fellowships 2023 Scheme

Evaluation Report

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Abbreviations

CAPE.	Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement
AAAS	American Association for the Advancement of Science
CSA	Chief Scientific Advisor
DEC	Darlington Economic Campus
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
PPET	ESRC Public Policy Engagement Team
LRAPP	London Research Academic & Policy Partnership
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
MSA	Mayoral Strategic Authorities
NIHR	National Institute for Health and Care Research
P2R	Policy to Research
REF	Research Excellence Framework
UPEN	Universities Policy Engagement Network
UKRI	United Kingdom Research Innovation

Glossary of terms

Activities. The actions undertaken by fellows, hosts, research organisations and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) staff. Activities are frequently the processes through which inputs are transformed into outputs, outcomes and, ultimately, impacts.

Conceptual outcomes and impacts. Shifts in understanding, framing and thinking about the relationships between evidence, policy, evaluation and related issues within the wider practice of academic–policy engagement.

Home organisation. The research organisation that employs the fellow and from which the fellow is seconded.

Host team. The team within a government department or What Works Centre to which the fellow is seconded.

Host-team outcomes and impacts. Changes in institutional capabilities, mechanisms and systems within the host organisation, whether a government department or a What Works Centre.

Impact. A substantial, measurable and meaningful change, whether intended or unintended, that occurs following a specific intervention. Impacts are persistent and long-lasting and may remain evident for five years or more after the intervention.

Inception phase. The three-month period at the beginning of the fellowship devoted to the co-design of the planned research by the fellow and representatives of the host organisation.

Individual outcomes and impacts. Personal and professional development experienced by policy fellows and host representatives, including increased visibility within their organisations and the wider policy-engagement community.

Inputs. The core resources required to operate the fellowship programme.

Instrumental outcomes and impacts. The intended results of actions undertaken specifically to achieve a particular outcome or impact. Examples include projects completed by fellows in the form originally specified.

Knowledge exchange. The two-way exchange of knowledge, expertise and capabilities between higher education institutions and external partners, including businesses, government bodies, non-profit organisations and communities. Its purpose is to create social, cultural and economic benefits. Knowledge exchange includes research commercialisation, consultancy, public engagement, collaborative research, policy advising and community outreach (Knowledge Exchange UK, 2025).

Knowledge-exchange phase. The three-month period devoted to activities that promote the exchange of learning between the academic researcher, the host policy team and the fellow's home university or research organisation. These activities are intended to have a wider influence on academic research and policy development within higher education institutions, research communities, and the civil and public services.

Narrative CV. A format referred to by UKRI as the *Résumé for Research and Innovation*, or R4RI. It provides a structured account of an individual's contributions and achievements,

highlighting skills and experience and offering a more comprehensive picture of their capabilities than a traditional academic CV.

Outcome. A finite and measurable change achieved shortly after a planned intervention or activity. An outcome may be intended or unintended. Outcomes are generally short-term effects, in contrast to impacts, which are longer-lasting changes.

Relational outcomes and impacts. The development of long-term partnerships and trust between individuals in research and government organisations.

Research Excellence Framework (REF). A UK-wide system that assesses the quality of research undertaken in higher education institutions and informs the allocation of government research funding.

Research outcomes and impacts. The enrichment of the academic research environment through the promotion of new pathways to impact, including stronger systems for academic-policy engagement, enhanced knowledge flows and increased collaboration.

Researchfish. An online reporting service used to record and track research outcomes and impacts. UKRI fellows are required to report the outcomes of their research through Researchfish.

Secondment phase. The 12-month period during which the fellow works for the host organisation in a hybrid format combining in-person and remote working. The secondment accounts for between 60 and 100 per cent of the fellow's working week.

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Executive summary

This Stepping Up evaluation of the UKRI Policy Fellowships 2023 scheme finds that the programme has matured significantly since the earlier Stepping Out evaluation of the pilot ESRC scheme in 2021. The policy fellowship programme is a highly valued mechanism for strengthening evidence-informed policymaking across government, What Works Centres and devolved administrations. The evaluation confirms strong progress since the initial 2021 pilot, while also identifying a few structural and cultural constraints that continue, albeit in a reduced form, to prevent the scheme from realising its full potential.

Our analysis of progress against the programme's four-year theory of change identifies four central themes that capture both its successes and its ongoing challenges. These involve the scheme organisers, fellows, their hosts and research and public service organisations with an interest in improving links between academics and their counterparts in policy and analytic roles in public services. These four themes are: expectations, maintaining relationships, system-wide development, and conceptual understandings.

Expectations

The programme provides transformative professional development for fellows, granting deeper insight into the workings of government, the policy cycle and the political context in which decisions are made. Fellows reported significant growth in confidence, communication skills and understanding of policymaking processes, while hosts benefited from enhanced analytical capacity, new methodological perspectives and enriched links to academic networks. However, the evaluation reveals continuing misalignments in expectations between fellows, research and host organisations.

Many researchers enter the scheme expecting to produce academic outputs suitable for academic journal articles and REF impact case studies, whereas in practice the fellowship's outcomes tend to be developmental, relational and conceptual rather than directly instrumental. These outcomes create tension with university reward structures that privilege publications over experiential learning. Conversely, hosts often expect immediate analytical input but do not always anticipate the time fellows require for induction, relationship-building and navigating security, data and departmental processes.

Short fellowship durations, onboarding delays and administrative processes limited outcomes for several fellows. These pressures were even greater for the 2023 cohort because of changes linked to the 2024 General Election. Fellows and hosts consistently argued that the 18-month model, with 12 months of substantive secondment, was insufficient for completing scoped projects or embedding learning. The evaluation therefore recommends extending fellowships to two years, increasing flexibility in the timing of the three phases, improving onboarding consistency and producing clearer guidance on publication, clearance and expectations for outputs (Recommendations 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 13, 17).

Training provision was highly valued, especially sessions delivered by the training and mentorship providers, but fellows in devolved governments and What Works Centres noted gaps in the relevance and specificity of some of this support. Some tailored training for fellows who were not in central Government departments and the extension of the mentoring support across all cohorts would help equalise experiences (Recommendations 6, 8, 9, 11, 14).

Maintaining Relationships

Relationships were consistently identified as the programme's greatest strength and the primary enabler of long-term policy impact. Fellows developed extensive networks with policy officials, analysts and cross-government partners, while hosts gained new connections with academic communities. These relationships fostered trust, collaboration and pathways for continued engagement beyond the formal secondment period. However, sustaining these relationships proved difficult due to structural factors. High levels of civil service staff churn, shifting priorities following elections or machinery-of-government changes.

The evaluation highlights the need for a more deliberate infrastructure for maintaining relationships beyond the allotted time for individual fellowships. A UKRI-led alumni network for fellows, hosts and universities would consolidate learning, strengthen institutional resilience and encourage collaboration across cohorts. This type of development could also be linked with the growing number of civil service departments which have appointed colleges of experts. This would help to embed relational outcomes within programme design and support a shift away from a focus solely on instrumental impacts towards a broader understanding of policy engagement as an ongoing, cyclical process (Recommendations 14 and 15).

System-wide Developments

The programme operates within a wider ecosystem of academic-policy engagement, and its long-term success depends on strengthening institutional support systems across universities, government and UKRI. The evaluation finds strong appetite among partners of the programme for it to become part of a more coherent, interconnected landscape of research-to-policy and policy-to-research pathways.

Research organisations expressed enthusiasm for the fellowship programme but varied significantly in their strategic engagement and readiness to support participants. Many institutions still lack robust systems for recognising, resourcing, encouraging and rewarding policy engagement, creating inconsistent experiences for fellows and limiting institutional learning. Strengthening internal capacity through clearer promotion criteria, training for professional services staff, and support from senior leadership is essential for embedding benefits beyond individuals (Recommendations 10, 11, 16, 18).

At the governmental and UKRI levels, the report identifies opportunities to align the fellowship with other initiatives such as the Policy to Research (P2R) programme and civil service regional policy campuses as well as Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSA) and the Local Innovation Partnerships Fund (LPIF). This would enable a more distributed and resilient national infrastructure for knowledge exchange. A systems-oriented approach would help ensure the fellowship's impact is embedded across institutions rather than relying on individual champions.

With the scheme moving to an annual recruitment cycle, additional administrative resource is required to manage growing complexity, support consistent onboarding, coordinate alumni structures and engage with parallel schemes (Recommendations 4, 19, 20, 21, 22).

Conceptual Understandings

The programme contributes significantly to evolving conceptual understandings of how academic research and public policy can interact. Fellows and hosts reported greater appreciation of each other's incentives, constraints and ways of working with evidence. Exposure to government decision-making reshaped researchers' assumptions about evidence use, policy complexity and political context.

The evaluation shows that political differences across devolved governments and mayoral authorities require more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to academic-policy engagement. Without this understanding, research risks lacking policy resonance. Universities therefore need to develop more mission-oriented approaches to policy engagement, supported by senior leadership and reward structures that recognise conceptual and relational impact as valuable outcomes (Recommendations 9, 16, 18).

Conclusion

The UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme is a mature and highly successful initiative that delivers significant professional development for fellows, meaningful capacity building for hosts and wider value for the established and emerging systems of research-policy engagement. To reach its full potential, the scheme needs to continue with their plans to address the structural constraints around expectations, build sustained relational and organisational infrastructures, align with wider system developments and deepen conceptual understanding across institutions. Strengthening these foundations will enable the fellowship not only to support individual researchers but to shape a more connected, resilient and evidence-informed policy system across the UK.

Recommendations

Theme		Recommendation	Page number	Report section	Owner and UKRI comments where appropriate
Expectations	1	The fellowship could be extended from the current eighteen months to two years in duration. Many of the fellows and hosts reported that there was insufficient time available in the current scheme to successfully finish the projects that they had been recruited to complete.	34	Inputs and activities	UKRI to consider.
Expectations	2	There should be greater flexibility in the timing of phases of the fellowship placement with the host organisation so that the initial induction phase can be extended or decreased as appropriate. This should be considered without jeopardising the cohort of the fellowship instead encouraging peer-to-peer learning from those more advanced in the programme. In addition, fellows, research organisations and hosts should be encouraged to consider the knowledge exchange phase as operating throughout the period of the fellowship placement.	34	Inputs and activities	UKRI to consider.
Expectations	3	Where further extensions are requested by the fellow or host, the host organisation should fund and organise this additional activity.	35	Inputs and activities	Host organisation.
Systems	4	UKRI to continue with their established plans to centralise the administration of the fellowship scheme under the auspices of the Talent and Skills team.	37	Inputs and activities	UKRI
Expectations	5	Amend the applications process to enable applicants to rank order their choice of fellowships to aid any subsequent matching processes if applicable.	37	Inputs and activities	UKRI
Expectations	6	Host organisations and training provider to make a clearer distinction in the description of roles between the Policy	38	Inputs and activities	Host organisation and training providers.

		Profession, Analysis Function and What Works centres to reflect the consequent different future experiences and training needs of these fellows.			
Expectations	7	UKRI in collaboration with hosts to produce a checklist and distribute to fellows, hosts and research organisations detailing the security clearance, onboarding and induction procedures.	39	Inputs and activities	UKRI and host organisations.
Expectations	8	There should be additional training for What Works fellows and fellows placed in devolved governments to reflect the different nature of their experiences and training needs. In addition, mentoring support from mentor provider should be extended to all fellows.	39	Inputs and activities	Training providers.
Systems wide development	9	There is a need for a research organisations and knowledge mobilising units to have a greater understanding of civil service guidance about evidence gathering and evaluation as outlined in the AQuA, Green and Magenta books. Responsibility for this activity should be allocated to the Talent and Infrastructure strand of activity within UKRI and contracted to higher education and research organisations via representative organisations such as the London University Knowledge Mobilising Network (LUMEN); University Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) and Yorkshire Policy Engagement Network (YPERN) could lead on this guidance.	41	Inputs and activities	UKRI
Systems development	10	UKRI could explore working with the Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) to coordinate their people and skills initiatives with the civil service and What Works centres.	45	Inputs and activities	UKRI and selected Mayoral Combined Authorities initially on a pilot basis.
Systems development	11	UKRI to approach networks such as UPEN to produce	45	Individual outcomes	UKRI

		guidance on developing people and skills in policy engagement including knowledge brokering for universities.			
Training and support	12	UKRI to update their guide on the range of career and development schemes they provide and how they interact with research organisation and public services' career pathways.	51	Individual outcomes	UKRI to continue to update and maintain their Fellowship Investment Framework: Fellowship investment framework – UKRI
Expectations	13	Improved progress recording to monitor wider range of outcomes and impacts in-keeping with the evaluation framework. Hosts to write outcome summaries every six months to log project and fellow's progress. Fellows to write a Narrative CVs, or what UKRI call a Resume for Research and Innovation (R4RI) to be used as a basis for informing career progression and promotion. UKRI to support these initiatives with a narrative building CV workshop in the first quarter of the fellowship period.	55	Individual outcomes	UKRI and hosts.
Relational	14	UKRI to collaborate with UPEN to provide knowledge brokering training during the fellowship. Fellows could be provided with training by representative organisations such as the London University Knowledge Mobilising Network (LUMEN); University Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) and Yorkshire Policy Engagement Network (YPERN).	55		UKRI and UPEN
Relational	15	UKRI should explore establishing a fellows, hosts and universities alumni network. The frequency of meetings to be determined in collaboration with partners.	55	Relationship outcomes	UKRI
Systems wide development	16	UKRI to encourage the CEOs of Universities UK (UUK) and Universities HR to develop a reward and recognition system for policy engagement work in-keeping with the principle 6 of the Knowledge Exchange	70	Conceptual outcomes	UKRI to meet with Universities HR (the collective body for university HR directors) and to discuss the potential for a range of policy

		Concordat which requires universities to define approaches to recognising and rewarding successful activities and outcomes within promotion criteria and reward processes for academic and professional services staff.			exchange supports to mirror those available through the Knowledge Exchange Concordat.
Expectations	17	UKRI and the UK Cabinet Office to co-produce guidance on clearance and publication protocols to support secondment agreements and Intellectual Property clauses.	70	Research organisation s outcomes.	UKRI in process of actioning this recommendation.
Systems	18	UKRI to specify the minimum support expected from research organisations/universities before, during and after the fellowship placement. This statement of desired outcomes to be used as a basis for engagement with university deputy vice-chancellors research and innovation or equivalent and their policy teams at the beginning of the fellowship to help establish a shared expectation of what will be done to support their fellows during the placement and subsequent knowledge exchange phase.	70	Research organisation s outcomes	UKRI and research organisations/universities.
Systems thinking	19	UKRI should develop a minimum specification of regionally appropriate ways of supporting policy fellowship system development at a regional level in conversation with one or more selected regional policy engagement units, e.g. City-REDI in the West Midlands, Insights North East in Northumbria, London Research a Policy Partnership (LRaPP in London, Scottish Policy Research Engagement in Scotland, Wales Centre Public Policy in Wales and Y-PERN in Yorkshire. Partner organisations to provide training in policy engagement. The outcome should be an agreed statement of how this regional	71	Embedding and developing the scheme	UKRI and selected Mayoral Combined Authorities initially on a pilot basis.

		system of support operates and how it is planned to develop in future.			
Systems thinking	20	UKRI to coordinate links with the UKRI Policy to Research (P2R) programme to enhance knowledge exchange between schemes.	71	Embedding and developing the scheme	UKRI
Systems thinking	21	Future evaluations to use value for money techniques to compare the policy fellowship scheme as viewed by the host teams with other forms of policy and analyst support, e.g. PhD studentship placements, contract research, consultancy advice, additional analyst staffing or a part-time course for an existing member of staff in the analyst function or policy profession.	71	Embedding and developing the scheme	UKRI and designated future evaluators if appointed.
Systems	22	To manage the additional workload and support associated with the transition from a biannual to an annual cycle of recruitment and the coordination of the alumni programme increased administrative support will be required.	72	Embedding and developing the scheme	UKRI.

1. Introduction

The current UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme was introduced by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 2021 as a new addition to the range of schemes available to support academic researchers professional and career development. The initial pilot scheme was evaluated in 2023 and demonstrated that the first cohort of the programme had been successful and was welcomed by fellows, hosts and research organisations. There were, however, recommendations about improving some of the processes that underpinned the scheme and providing opportunities for fellows to broaden and deepen their impact on their home research organisations, typically universities. In this second evaluation we revisit these findings and extend the analysis to consider how the positive outcomes from the scheme can be developed into lasting system wide impacts. This opening section of the report provides 1.1 an outline of the origins of the scheme and 1.2 summarises the findings of the last evaluation and assessments of similar schemes. It also 1.3 details the evaluation approach adopted and 1.4 outlines the main themes and recommendations of the report.

1.1 Origins of the scheme

The UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme was initially launched by the (ESRC) in 2021 to provide eighteen-month funded secondment opportunities for university based academic researchers in central government departments (ESRC, 2021). The aim of the scheme was to bridge the gap between academic research and policymaking by embedding researchers in policy settings, fostering stronger joint working so that they could learn to co-produce research evidence, policy briefings and evaluations. These forms of working arrangement are often referred to as knowledge exchange and policy engagement.

1.1.1 Objectives of the 2021 scheme

The objectives for the 2021 scheme were to:

increase the science and research capabilities of government.

create a more robust connection between academia and policy.

ensure that research and expertise are used to inform and shape effective public policy and its implementation.

facilitate the mobility of academics into embedded positions in policy-making environments.

The 2021 UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme provided support for 26 fellows recruited from 22 universities to work in 12 government departments.

1.1.2 Expansion of the scheme in 2023 and 2025

The 2021 ESRC Policy Fellowship scheme was followed by two subsequent cohorts in 2023 and 2025 (UKRI, 2023, 2025). This evaluation of the scheme focuses on the 2023 cohort with additional reflections on the outcomes and impacts of the 2021 scheme as evaluated by a research team at the University of Sheffield (Flinders and Benson-Eggleton, 2024). In

2023 the UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme was extended to What Work centres in addition to central UK Government and devolved administrations as a fellowship location. This second version of the scheme provided 47 fellowships for academic researchers from 29 universities working in 26 government departments, devolved administrations and What Works centres.

1.1.3 Objectives of the 2023 scheme

The aim of the scheme in 2023 remained to foster rich, deep, and sustainable relationships between researchers and policy professionals by facilitating the movement of people from research into policy settings to share expertise, build capacity and co-develop knowledge. The scheme was also seen as a key mechanism for creating a collaborative and connected research-policy ecosystem that can address societal, economic, and citizen-focused challenges. The specific objectives of the scheme in 2023 were as follows:

Enhancing researcher-policy collaboration and mutual understanding.

Increasing mobility between academia and government.

Aligning fellowship opportunities with government research priorities and UKRI strategic goals.

The programme was also seen as contributing to the development of a connective infrastructure that enables the pursuit of dynamic opportunities while building long-term partnerships across disciplines and institutions.

1.1.4 Fellowship phases

The fellowship scheme in 2023 was divided into the following three phases:

Inception phase - three-months focused on the co-design of the planned research work by the fellow and representatives from the host organisation.

Secondment phase - a 12-month period of working for the host organisation in a hybrid format combining in-person and remote working for between 60% and 100% of each working week during this period.

Knowledge exchange phase – a three-month period devoted to activities to promote the exchange of learning between the academic researcher, their host team in the policy organisation and their home university or research organisation. It was intended that these activities would have a wider impact on the broader pattern of academic research and policy development activity within higher education institutions and research communities as well as civil and public services.

1.1.5 Types of fellowships

There were two types of fellowship in the 2023 version of the scheme: Core Policy Fellows and What Works Fellows. Core Policy Fellows were placed in government or arm's-length bodies to work on public policy areas which at the time aligned with the UKRI's strategic themes of 'building a secure and resilient world', 'a green future' and 'ageing and wellbeing'. In the 2025 version of the scheme the UKRI strategic themes have been superseded by plans to align with key government missions and natural hazard resilience initiatives in response to recommendations from the Covid Commission (DCMS 2025). The importance of the latter has been recognised in the 2025 Policy Fellowship scheme with the inclusion a third category of Natural Hazard and Resilience Fellows.

The second type of policy fellow in the 2023 version of the scheme were What Works fellows who were hosted in one of the UK Government sponsored twelve What Works centres. This network organisations focus on research-based evidence generation, evaluation and synthesis to improve public services in domains like education, crime and social services.

1.1.6 Eligibility and requirements

Applicants for the Policy Fellowship scheme were required to be based at a UKRI-eligible research institution and to hold a PhD or have equivalent research experience. Fellowships were aimed at early to mid-career researchers. A secondment agreement was required between UKRI, the Government or What Works Network host and the relevant research organisation which is their permanent employer. The fellows were also required to complete security checks and other clearance processes required by their host policy departments and to observe the provisions of the Civil Service Code and Official Secrets Act 1989/National Security Act 2023. In addition, fellows were required to complete a 'conflict of interest' form.

1.1.7 Funding and support

Funding for the Policy Fellowship scheme in 2023 was provided by UKRI which covered 80% of the full economic cost (FEC) up to limits dependent on the nature of the fellowship (i.e. Core Fellowships could incur costs of up to £170,000 with an additional £40,000 for What Works Fellows so the total funding possible for this type of fellowship is £210,000). All variants of the scheme included a £15,000 flexible 'placement and impact' budget for travel, training and mentoring. In addition, there was cohort-based training, mentoring, networking provided by the training and mentorship providers, as well as support for part-time/flexible working and career breaks is integral to the scheme and was provided by the training and mentorship providers.

1.2 Findings of the 2021 evaluation and assessments of similar schemes

1.2.1 Evaluation of the ESRC 2021 Policy Fellowship scheme

The evaluation found that the policy fellowship scheme was valued by participants and delivered positive impact for individual fellows, host organisations, and the broader research and policy system. Fellows reported enhanced skills in translating research into policy, stronger confidence, widened professional networks and deeper insight into policy processes. Meanwhile hosts said that they valued the injection of specialist knowledge, methodological challenge and boundary-spanning connections. At the systemic level, the scheme helped foster cross-departmental collaboration, built trust in academic-policy links and created space for unexpected insights which they referred to as 'structured serendipity'. Similar, positive findings were reported in a working paper reporting an evaluation by fellows in the first cohort, although this has not yet been published in a refereed academic journal (De Vito et al., 2023).

The evaluation of the ESRC Policy Fellowship scheme in 2021 also commented on the broader systemic impacts, including improved collaboration across government departments, enhanced awareness of diverse research methods and the creation of new networks. However, the evaluation also highlighted a number of challenges. Fellows and hosts sometimes had differing expectations regarding the fellowship's purpose and outputs. Academic pressures to publish were not always easily reconciled with government confidentiality requirements. The complexity and fluidity of policy environments,

compounded by staff turnover, could affect continuity. The fellows managing dual roles in academia and government also experienced workload pressures. Overall, the evaluation of the pilot demonstrated the strong strategic value of the scheme and suggested that deeper longer-term impact would develop over time. Notwithstanding this very positive assessment the report made the following nine recommendations for further improvement.

Table 1: Insights and recommendations from the evaluation of 2021 UKRI Policy Fellowship programme

Insight	Detail	Recommendation
Clear Expectations	Expectations need to be clear, transparent, and aligned with those of the policy host.	Greater support and training for prospective fellows and hosts about expectation management, and different sorts of policy fellow functions.
Competing Pressures	Tensions can emerge between the academic emphasis on publications and the hosts requirements around confidentiality and data security.	Establish clearer expectations around fellows' ability to produce publications as a critical aspect of the fellowships. Work with hosts to understand and navigate potential barriers to publication.
Managing Complexity	Policy settings are complex and learning to navigate them takes time.	All fellows to have two key link people to militate against staff churn, establish minimum standards for induction. Consider making the inception phase more time intensive.
Boundary spanning	Working in a boundary-spanning manner generates significant additional professional and cognitive demands.	Provide guidance to institutions that fellows should be released from all but the most essential academic duties, with teaching a particular priority.
Strategic support	Training, support, and community can enrich the fellowship experience	Increase opportunities for the cohort of fellows to engage at both a departmental and cross-scheme level. Ensure alignment of schedules between fellowship sub-streams.
Co-production and compromise	Fellowships involved a mixture of collaboration and compromise.	Develop guidance around co-production with examples of successful approaches in the pilot phase. Case studies during host training.
Absorptive capacity	Capacity-building and systems wide thinking is needed for the policy fellowship scheme to achieve its full potential.	Uplift systemic capacity by promoting research-to-policy and policy-to-research opportunities. Invest in long-term cohort activities. Connect and collaborate across existing fellowship schemes.
Outsider/insider	Being an 'outsider on the inside' creates opportunities as well as frictions.	Greater support and training for prospective fellows and hosts about embedded fellowships. To cover access to information, clarity of role and relationships, internal email address, etc.
Entry and exit	Transitions 'in' and 'out' of the fellowship are important to get right.	Transitional arrangements are critical and flexibility is key. Simplification of contractual arrangements and the provision of templates

		including 'exit interviews' to collect knowledge and insight.
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Source: (Flinders and Engleton, 2024a)

Good progress has been made by UKRI in responding to all nine of these recommendations. With each of these proposals additional guidance and procedures have either been added to arrangements on the programme or are in the process of being adopted as detailed in Appendix 1.

1.2.2 Summary of assessments of similar policy fellowship schemes

Other evaluations of the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) fellowships; Parliamentary Academic Fellows (PAF) scheme and British Academy (BA) fellowship scheme found that these schemes are effective for knowledge exchange but require good induction and support arrangements (British Academy, 2018; CAPE, 2022; Prabhakar, 2025). See Appendix 1 for more information on findings of previous st.

The British Academy commissioned an evaluation of their mid-career fellowship scheme between 2012-17 in advance of the UK Government spending review that year to support the case for continued funding. This evaluation involved a survey of 107 former fellows, a series of theory-of-change workshops and interviews with 17 senior academics as well as analysis of diversity monitoring data. The findings from this evaluation found strong positive impacts on fellows with many reporting increased confidence in research, stronger ability to attract funding and the development of deeper expertise in their chosen areas of research. Overall, 84% of those surveyed reported producing publications resulting from the fellowship, notably journal articles and many expanded public engagement activities. In addition, 60% of respondents reported that they had been promoted since undertaking the fellowship and almost all indicated that their fellowship had had an 'important' or 'very important' influence on them achieving this outcome.

The British Academy is now undertaking a second evaluation of the scheme (2018-2024) via the Careers Research Advisory Centre (CRAC) to assess more recent rounds, with surveys and stakeholder interviews planned.

Evaluation of the PAF pilot scheme between 2016-19 focussed on the impact of the scheme on academic and legislative knowledge exchange. The evaluation drew on interviews with former fellows, Parliamentary hosts, and Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU) staff within the Houses of Parliament and found that these groups reported different expectations and experiences. The academics seek research impact and career development while the hosts prioritised practical capacity and responsiveness to immediate policy needs. The journal article reporting the findings notes that the KEU has improved the schemes since its pilot phase by introducing shared project plans, induction materials, and clearer agreements, but administrative complexity, inconsistent supervision, and funding gaps persist. Fellows valued the experience highly yet noted that reliance on university funding can undermine accountability and inclusivity. The pandemic's shift to hybrid working created both flexibility and isolation, with face-to-face contact identified as crucial for trust and learning. Differences

in definitions of 'evidence' and research purpose also limited mutual understanding. The study recommends simplifying recruitment, clarifying support, developing alumni networks, and fostering reciprocal exchanges, e.g. Parliamentary staff placements in universities.

1.3 Approach adopted in the evaluation of the 2023 Policy Fellowship scheme

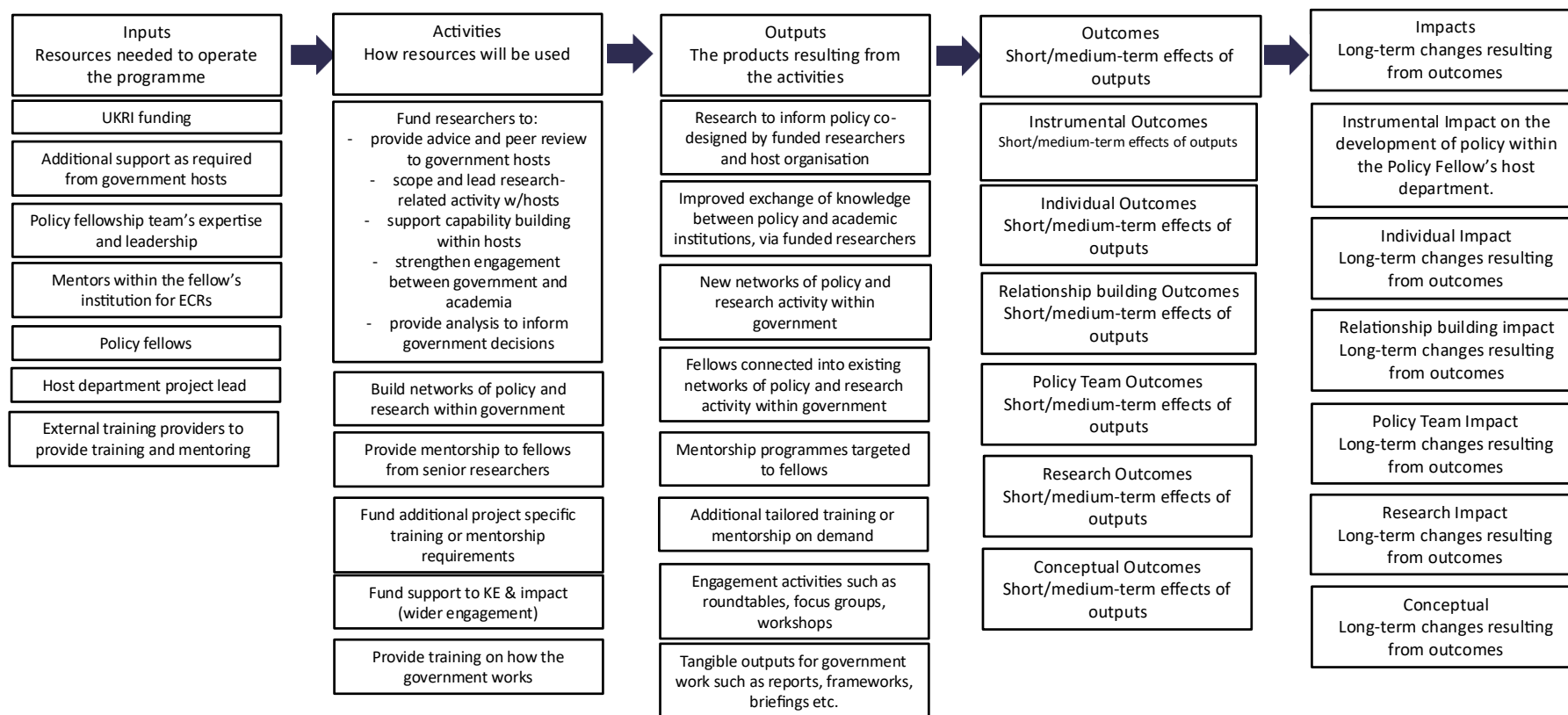
At the beginning of this project, the objectives for the evaluation and the pre-existing 2021 theory of change developed was discussed with the advisory panel (Dr Eleanor MacKillop and Dr Olivia Stevenson). On the basis of these discussions, the earlier theory of change was amended to take account the six types of outcomes and impact. These new outcomes and impacts had been specified in a parallel evaluation of the UK Government's 12 What Works Centres (MacKillop, forthcoming). The amended theory of change and the three objectives for this evaluation were then agreed with the ESRC PPET.

- a. To what extent is the programme meeting its aims and objectives?
- b. To what extent is the programme achieving the six different types of outcomes and impact: individual, relationship building, host team, instrumental, conceptual, research organisations.
- c. What recommendations can we make to UKRI, universities, policy hosts, funders, and fellows to improve the UKRI Policy Fellowship Scheme and the wider environment in which academic-policy engagement operates?

The theory of change (ToC) and associated logic model (see figure 1 overleaf) used in this review was produced in-keeping with the guidance on impact evaluations in the UK Government's Magenta and Green books and supplementary guidance (HM Treasury 2026). The ToC accepts the distinctions between inputs, activities and outputs adopted in the first evaluation of the scheme. However, this framework is extended through the addition of six categories of outcome and impact, i.e. instrumental, individual; relationship building; policy team; research and conceptual (MacKillop et al, forthcoming).

Under the inputs heading, the TOC identifies the resources required to operate the programme effectively, these include UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding; policy fellowship team expertise, programme leadership and mentors within fellows' institutions, especially for early career researchers (ECRs). Additionally, support from government hosts and external training providers contributes to targeted capacity building and practical understanding of policy processes. Other essential inputs include the policy fellows themselves, who act as the bridge between research organisations and government as well as the project leads within host departments. Collectively, these inputs create the foundation for sustained engagement and cross-sector collaboration.

Figure 1: Policy Fellow Evaluation Framework Theory of Change (2023)



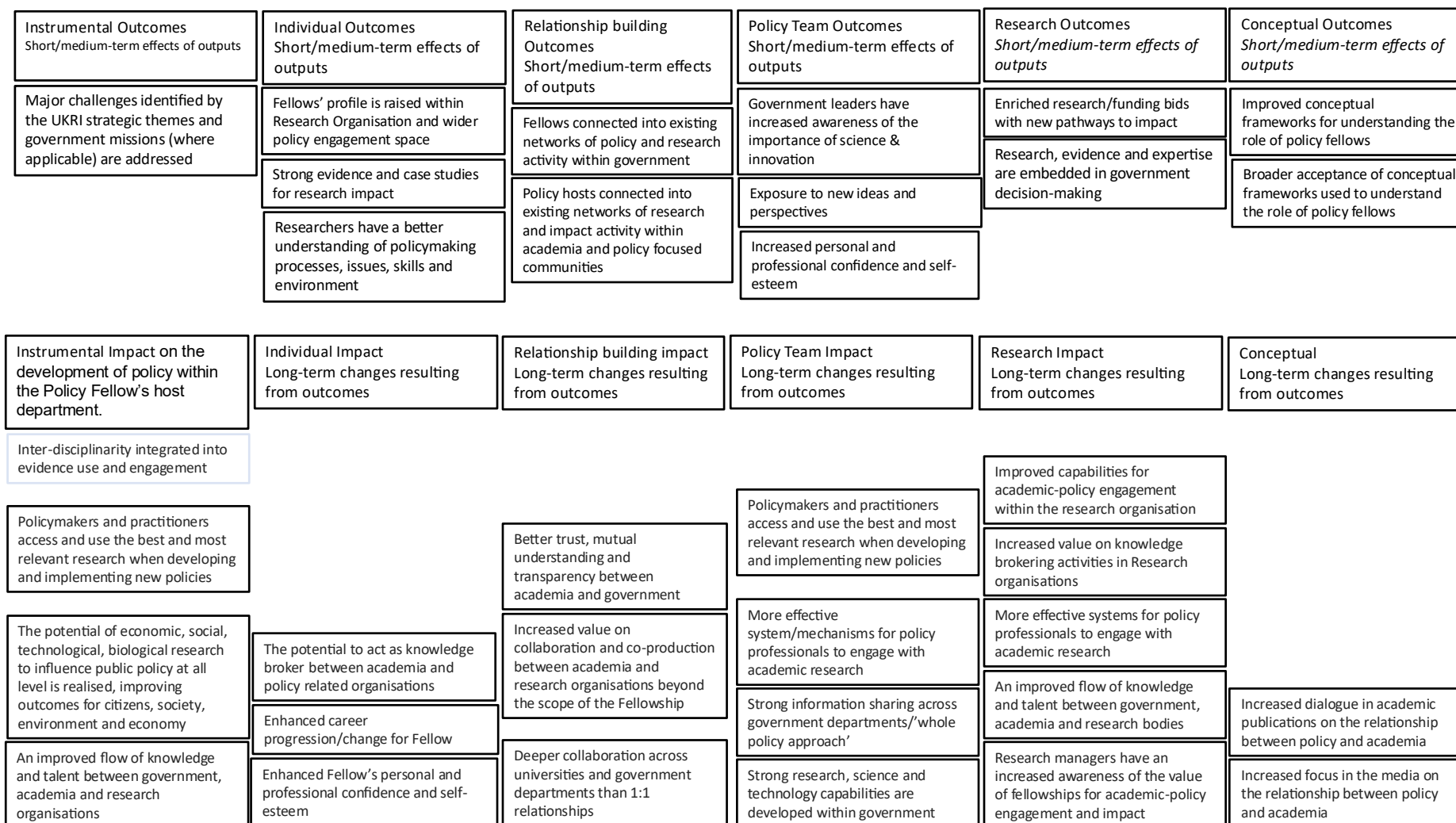
Activities within the model focus on how resources are deployed and how the fellows work with staff in the host organisation to co-design research that informs policy, ensuring that outputs are relevant, timely, and applicable. The focus here is on fellows engaging in advisory and peer review work, scoping and leading research-related projects and supporting capability building within government departments. Key activities include contributing to roundtables, focus groups, and workshops which encourage dialogue between academics and policymakers. Mentorship programmes, available for some fellows, embedded throughout the fellowship, providing structured support and opportunities for reflection. Additional tailored training and mentorship are made available based on project-specific needs. Fellows are also trained on how government operates, promoting better understanding of the policy environment and improving their ability to contribute effectively.

The outputs heading in the theory of change draws attention to the tangible and immediate results of these activities. They include the creation of research and evidence co-designed by fellows and host organisations which lead to policy-relevant analyses, reports and briefings that inform government decision-making. These products demonstrate the practical value of academic expertise in providing research evidence and shaping policy development. The model recognises the programme's intention to foster new networks of policy and research activity within government, encouraging interdisciplinary, interdepartmental and inter-organisational collaboration.

This element of the theory of change also highlights the importance of relationship building through engagement and mentorship activities. Through these mechanisms it is intended that fellows will become better connected with existing policy-research networks, strengthening the flow of knowledge and expertise across institutional boundaries. The improved exchange of knowledge between academia and government facilitated by fellowship activities is also intended to help establish long-term partnerships and institutional learning.

The scope of the outcomes and impacts components of the theory of change have been extended and elaborated for the second wave of the policy fellowship scheme 2023 evaluation as detailed in figure 2 overleaf. This extension has been achieved by differentiating between instrumental, individual, relationship building, policy team, research and conceptual outcomes and impacts. The main elements in each of these categories are explained below.

Figure 2: The Outcomes and Impact Elements of the Theory of Change



Instrumental outcomes are direct, practical change in policy or practice that results from using the research findings generated or collated by the policy fellow and the people they work with in the host organisation. It is hoped that these outcomes will incentivise further policy engagement by academic researchers and by the host organisations that sponsor them thereby enhancing the potential of research in different domains to inform policy at multiple levels.

The individual outcomes focus on personal and professional growth for policy fellows and host representatives so that they can gain visibility within their organisations and the broader policy engagement community. It is hoped that they will also develop stronger research capabilities within government settings, producing robust evidence and case studies of research impact. In the long term the intention is that this will foster enhanced career progression, personal confidence, and self-esteem, empowering fellows to act as knowledge brokers between academia and policy spheres.

Relationship-building outcomes focus on developing long-term partnerships and trust between academia and government. When this is successful fellows are integrated into existing networks of policy and research activity, improving mutual understanding of each sector's processes, challenges and priorities. Over time, both sectors benefit from stronger information sharing, exposure to new ideas, and a collective culture that values evidence use, collaboration, and knowledge exchange.

Policy team outcomes refers to changes which extends beyond the individual fellows to include the people that they work with in the host organisation. When this is successful policy teams gain improved mechanisms to engage with academic research and expertise. Cross-departmental and cross-university collaboration strengthens, moving beyond one-to-one relationships toward a whole-of-government and whole-of-academia approach. Policymakers develop greater awareness of science and innovation's importance in shaping effective, forward-looking policies. The fellowship contributes to embedding research, evidence, and expertise directly into decision-making processes addressing key UKRI strategic themes and government missions.

Under research organisation outcomes, the theory of change sees the fellowship scheme as enriching the academic research environment by promoting new pathways to impact. It is intended that research organisations will build stronger systems for academic-policy engagement, resulting in enhanced knowledge flows and collaboration.

Finally, the conceptual outcomes component emphasises shifts in understanding and framing of both the policy issue and the relationship between academia and policy. This is intended to be achieved through increased dialogue in academic publications and media about this relationship, fostering mutual learning and appreciation of interdisciplinary approaches. The fellowship is intended to improve conceptual frameworks for understanding at the policy-academia interface which are then gradually be accepted across research and policy communities.

1.4 Summary

This section of the report has outlined the background to the development of the UKRI policy fellowship scheme, the results of the evaluation of the pilot 2021 cohort and similar recent schemes. It has also outlined the objectives of the current evaluation and detailed the theory of change that underpins the consequent analysis. The next section of the report moves on to consider the methodology used to assess the effectiveness of the scheme by reference to the theory of change.

2. Methodology

Our assessment of the policy fellowship scheme draws on information from six evaluation methods. This mixed methods approach was adopted to enable us to test the ToC that underpins the scheme. This approach was also used because we expected to find a variety of experiences and opinions about the operation and benefits of the scheme reflecting the different perspectives of fellows, hosts and research organisations. We anticipated that these different forms of data collection and analysis would emphasise different aspects of the policy fellowship scheme. These different aspects including the person-centred reflections of the fellows and hosts to the higher-level strategic visioning of the scheme's organisers, senior civil servants and research organisation leaders. See appendix 3 for more details on our methodological approach.

The six complementary evaluation methods used in the study were as follows. First, a literature review and web search were undertaken through structured searches of Google Scholar, Overton, Scopus and Web of Science. The searches used combinations of the terms “research”, “policy fellow”, “evaluation” and “United Kingdom” and covered the period from 2020 to 2025. Fifty key texts were identified and analysed thematically. This method was used to understand the wider context in which policy fellowships operate, identify relevant methodological approaches, highlight prominent themes within existing debates and broaden the scope of the evaluation.

Second, focus groups and interviews were conducted with fellows and hosts. Nine focus groups involved 32 of the 47 fellows in the scheme's 2023 cohort, while three interviews were conducted with four fellows from the 2021 cohort. Seven focus groups were also held with 21 hosts from 15 host organisations. In addition, the evaluation included a panel discussion involving four fellows and three hosts and a focus group with nine professional services staff from five universities. The resulting data were analysed thematically using NVivo and Miro, an online collaborative whiteboard platform. These methods were selected to encourage dynamic interaction between participants and generate richer insights than might have been obtained through individual interviews alone. They also enabled experiences to be compared and cross-referenced, supporting a better understanding of the cohort as a collective.

Third, interviews were conducted with senior policy and research leaders. These involved 13 professionals from relevant organisations, including the British Academy, Research England, UK Research and Innovation and the Scottish Policy and Research Exchange, as well as five senior university leaders from a diverse range of institutions. Participants included senior representatives of UKRI funding councils, pro-vice-chancellors and heads of departments or research from fellows' home institutions. The interview data were analysed thematically using NVivo and Miro. The purpose was to assess awareness of and perceptions of the impact and sustainability of the UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme across the civil and public services, universities and national research and policy organisations. The interviews also explored whether and how the programme influenced academic engagement with policy and policymaking processes, together with its broader effects on the research community.

Fourth, five mini case studies were developed from material emerging through the focus groups and interviews. These provided more detailed accounts of the experiences of fellows, hosts and home departments at different stages of the scheme. The case studies were identified through the wider qualitative research and co-produced with participants. Their

purpose was to illuminate examples of better practice and explore key issues arising at the intersection of research evidence generation and policy development.

Fifth, survey data were analysed by examining the frequency of responses to different questions. The surveys had been distributed to fellows and hosts by the ESRC Policy and Public Engagement Team at two points during the operation of the fellowship scheme. This analysis was intended to illuminate fellows' and hosts' reflections on the processes, inputs and activities associated with different stages of the fellowship period.

Finally, data relating to all 2021 and 2023 fellows were extracted from Researchfish and analysed comparatively. The dataset covered 73 fellows, and the qualitative information was analysed using NVivo. This method was used to understand how the outcomes and impacts of the fellowships were recorded and communicated to funders through a public reporting platform.

Case Study 1: Comparative reflections of focus group versus. Researchfish submissions

We analysed three 2023 fellows' focus group transcripts alongside their Researchfish submissions to examine how impact is articulated across different evaluation methodologies, looking particularly at variations in tone and language. The focus groups were open-ended and conversational, with fellows speaking candidly about their experiences, learning, relationships, and the emotional labour of navigating academic–policy spaces. Their reflections were personal and nuanced. By contrast, Researchfish submissions foregrounded formal outputs and outcomes such as data models, business cases, resource banks, and rapid evidence reviews, emphasising policy relevance and institutional influence.

The divergence in the tenor of responses reflects the framing demands of each format. In focus groups, fellows described impact as ambiguous, diffuse, and often premature to assess, highlighting ongoing engagement, informal influence, and the limits of attribution. Researchfish, however, presented impact more definitively, stressing applied findings, policy contributions, and sector-wide uptake. Several fellows acknowledged tailoring their narratives to fit reporting expectations, sometimes amplifying influence in formal accounts while downplaying it in peer discussions. Academic identity also surfaced as a tension: while university affiliation was valued for its freedom, Researchfish positioned expertise as transactional, framing knowledge as a deliverable rather than a dialogic process.

Together, these accounts reveal a duality in how impact is experienced and reported. Fellows may temper claims in group settings to avoid overstatement yet amplify them in formal submissions to meet funder expectations. This duality reflects the multi-identity argument noted in the literature (Lambraki, 2022), highlighting tensions between academic autonomy, institutional demands, and evolving notions of research impact. Crucially, these contrasts do not privilege one form of evidence over another. Instead, they underscore the need for mixed-method evaluation, where multiple formats allow fellows to tell different stories for different audiences, capturing diverse expectations, experiences, and impacts across communities.

2.4 Main themes and recommendations of the report

The policy fellowship programme has evolved into an established and broadly valued initiative which is widely welcomed by fellows, host organisations and research institutions alike. Since its first evaluation, substantial improvements have been introduced and the programme is widely viewed as successful in developing skills, strengthening relationships and enhancing the interface between research and policymaking. The programme's growing maturity also reveals deeper structural, cultural and systemic questions that need to be addressed if it is to deliver its full potential. We identify four themes which require improvements.

2.4.1 Expectations

The fellowship provides valued opportunities for research staff to understand government, political dynamics and the realities of policymaking. Fellows consistently emphasised how transformative it is to step into roles that expose them to the workings of politics and public administration. However, evidencing the instrumental impacts of this engagement remained challenging. Universities often undervalue experiential learning and tend to prioritise quantifiable outputs over the developmental outcomes that emerge from policy fellowship scheme. Fellows sometimes enter the programme expecting that the placement will generate material suitable for academic articles and impact case studies, but these outputs and outcomes are not guaranteed. The individual outcomes are therefore a blend of instrumental gains such as projects completed and more relational and conceptual benefits that are harder to articulate within traditional academic reward frameworks. We therefore make the following series of recommendations:

Extending the fellowship from eighteen months to two years this would allow fellows the time need to complete their projects more effectively (Recommendations 1 and 2).

More flexible structuring of induction and knowledge-exchange phases, clearer role descriptions and more comprehensive training, particularly for What Works centre placements, devolved administrations would help ensure consistency across diverse contexts (Recommendations 3, 6, 8 and 12).

The introduction of checklists for onboarding, security clearance and induction speaks to the practical challenges experienced by many fellows and hosts at the start of the fellowships (Recommendation 5 and 7)

A recurring priority is improving the visibility and understanding of outcomes and impact. Recommendations on progress recording, the use of narrative CVs (R4RI) and guidance on clearance and publication protocols aim to equip fellows and hosts with better tools to articulate outcomes (Recommendations 13 and 17)

2.4.2 Maintaining relationships

The development of relationships between fellows and hosts was identified as one of the most significant strengths of the scheme. Fellows built collaborative relationships and networks that deepened mutual understanding between academics and officials in government departments and What Works centres. Sustaining these ties was hampered by the institutional churn of officials, the absence of a UKRI fellows' alumni network or individual

host department alumni networks. These barriers weaken the longer-term relational infrastructure that policy engagement depends on. As a result, individual interactions can fail to translate into enduring system-wide connections, leaving relationships vulnerable to staff changes and shifting organisational priorities. We recommend the creation of an alumni network to address relational gaps and institutional memory loss, fostering continuity across cohorts (Recommendation 15).

2.4.3 System-wide developments

From a systems perspective, the programme shows clear potential to contribute to inter-organisational learning and resilience. This broader view would allow the fellowship to operate beyond individual relationships, ensuring its impact is not reliant on particular personalities or short-term circumstances. Indeed, there is scope to better align the programme with both fellows' career development and the strategic ambitions of public service and research organisations. Situating the scheme within a wider understanding of how the different elements of government, public services and research organisations operate and could inter-relate in all of the nations and regions of the UK will produce more extensive benefits. Strengthening systems of support could also help the programme to weather the inevitable churn of officials and the financial pressures that characterise both research institutions and public services. We make the following recommendations:

Adopting a systems-thinking approach offers pathways for enhancing the programme's long-term sustainability. This includes regional and national collaboration with policy engagement units, alignment with complementary initiatives such as UKRI's Policy to Research (P2R) programme. It also includes the use of value-for-money evaluations to understand the fellowship's distinctive contribution compared with other policy-support mechanisms (Recommendations 10, 19, 20 and 21).

The transition to an annual recruitment cycle will also require strengthened administrative support, recognising the growing complexity of programme coordination (Recommendations 4 and 22).

2.4.4 Conceptual understandings

A key theme emerging from this evaluation is the impact of the scheme on conceptual understandings of the relationships between government and academia. Fellows and interviewees recognised the need to develop a richer understanding of the political and cultural contexts across the UK's increasingly devolved landscape of government. Here it was suggested that policy development requires attentiveness to the differing constitutional, political and institutional contexts across the UK, including devolved administrations and regional governance arrangements in England. Without this sensitivity, both university researchers and host teams risk producing work that lacks practical resonance. For research organisations, this means cultivating a deeper, more mission-oriented orientation towards UK Government policy engagement and a nuanced understanding of regional and local needs. This will require active buy-in from senior research organisation leadership which was not yet fully evident in this evaluation. We therefore make the following recommendations:

- Universities to develop reward and recognition systems for policy engagement to reflects a growing acknowledgment that career pathways must evolve if the fellowship's benefits are to be fully realised (Recommendations 11 and 16).
- More coherent support from senior leadership, particularly deputy vice-chancellors for research and innovation is essential (Recommendation 9 and 18).

Taken together, these insights highlight a programme that is both impactful and full of potential yet still navigating tensions between academic and governmental expectations. The policy fellowship stands at the intersection of two cultures—research and policy and its success depends on the willingness of institutions to bridge these cultures through more flexible structures, stronger networks, and a more nuanced understanding of impact. As the programme matures, its future lies not only in supporting individual fellows but also in shaping a more connected, resilient and politically attuned system of knowledge exchange across the UK.

3. Inputs and Activities

The aim of the UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme as previously noted, was to enhance researcher policy collaboration and mutual understanding; increase mobility between academia and government and to align fellowship opportunities with government research priorities and UKRI strategic goals. The extent to which the scheme can achieve these objectives and the associated outputs, outcomes and impacts is dependent on the inputs and activities undertaken by the scheme participants. In this section we explore these aspects of the policy fellowship scheme in more detail. The analysis in this section is divided into two sub-sections dealing in turn with inputs and activities. Each section assesses the theory of change, draws conclusions about scheme effectiveness, and recommends changes to align the expectations of fellows, hosts and research organisations more closely.

3.1 Inputs

Inputs are the resources required to operate and sustain the Policy Fellowship scheme, including placement length and phasing, UKRI funding, recruitment arrangements, host support, induction, training and mentoring. The rest of this section examines these activities in more detail.

3.1.1 Length and phasing of the fellowship

There was a general sentiment among many of the fellows and several of the hosts that the fellowship placements were not long enough and would benefit from being extended from their current eighteen-month duration to two years.

'I think one of the reasons actually for the extension is that because now's the time, a lot of it's going to bear fruit. As I think I said it was kind of 18 months of trying to generate some energy and a little bit of anxiety around the topics that I wanted people to take seriously. And I feel like we kind of have got to that point now and it'd be a shame to walk away and go 'good luck with that let me know how you get on'. So, I'm really glad that I'm going

to be here for another period of time. Now that some of that energy is in the system really with the partners I've been working with so' (Fellow Rep 9).

Several of the hosts also commented that once allowance was made for the three-month inception phase at the beginning and the three-month knowledge exchange phase at the end, 12 months was too short for the research activity to be completed.

'I do agree that the one-year Fellowship really isn't long enough because they're only getting started. They're only getting to, you know, understand the work. There's a lot of induction. And you know, I honestly think to make real impact. It's two years we got maybe another six months' (Host Rep 15).

The phasing of the fellowship was also something where several fellows and hosts indicated that they would have preferred greater flexibility over the length and intensity of the different phases.

'So, there is a timing thing and I think the kind of UKRI approach of having this period before, where the[re is] sort of some engagement. Or it's like one or two days a week or something like that. Was it three or six months before and then kind of afterwards? I don't know that that's really working particularly well because it's like quite kind of tricky to sort of half engage' (Host Rep 10).

Policy fellows in the 2023 scheme benefitted from an increase in the amount of time and resource devoted to the three-month inception phase at the beginning of the scheme. Changes were made from a timetable expectation of 0.2fte to a new presumption of 0.4fte. Despite this increase in the level of support there were delays at the start of the scheme due to the multiple administrative steps involved with registering these new starters.

'For the 2021 and 2023 fellowships, the common agreement was led by UKRI and then it needed to be signed by the host, the fellow, the research organisation and ourselves [.....] it was hugely resource intensive. So [.....] we worked with the government's legal department (GLD) to make sure that what we're putting in this common agreement wasn't anything kooky that that couldn't then be kept in' (Interviewee 14).

Close to three quarters of the 2023 cohort of policy fellows had no cost extensions to the length of their secondment due to delays in their start dates. The normally high level of civil service job churn remarked on in the evaluation of the 2021 Policy Fellows cohort increased for the 2023 Policy Fellows due to the General election (Benson-Eggleton & Flinders, 2025). As one of the interviewees said:

'[it] is a resource intensive process anyway, but because they then had this fellowship agreement, we then needed a letter of amendment to say in line with your fellowship agreement. So again, that then had to be signed by [ESRC], by the fellow, by the host and by the RO as well. So again, just processes that take time. Yeah, that's the main challenges' (Interviewee 14).

These delays had consequences for fellows who had arranged changes in their teaching and other commitments, which often involved other staff covering lectures and seminars as they needed to alter or extend these arrangements.

Recommendation 1. The fellowship could be extended from the current eighteen months to two years in duration. Many of the fellows and hosts reported that there was insufficient time available in the current scheme to successfully finish the projects that they had been recruited to complete.

Recommendation 2. There should be greater flexibility in the timing of phases of the fellowship placement with the host organisation so that the initial induction phase can be extended or decreased as appropriate. This should be considered without jeopardising the cohort of the fellowship instead encouraging peer-to-peer learning from those more advanced in the programme. In addition, fellows, research organisations and hosts should be encouraged to consider the knowledge exchange phase as operating throughout the period of the fellowship placement.

3.1.2 UKRI funding and support

As Policy Fellowship scheme has grown in size so has the scale of the financial commitment to this programme and the administrative support required to organise the recruitment and placement of fellows.

Earlier versions of the Policy Fellowship scheme had included an element of co-funding with a requirement that departments that took part in the scheme would contribute to the costs. Under the arrangements that operated in 2023 the ESRC covered 80% of the costs of the fellowship and the sponsoring home department was expected to cover the remaining 20%. Interviews with senior university leaders revealed that QR was insufficient to cover the additional funding needs and so institutions were turning to other sources of finance to cover the costs of the scheme.

Interviews with the organisers of other fellowship schemes revealed that their funding came from a mix of direct grant from government, donations from corporate and individual endowments as well as co-funding and combining activities with other scheme organisers. These arrangements were seen to be beneficial in spreading the risks beyond a single source of funding and gaining wider opportunities to connect with other groups and networks.

‘There was real value in connecting up their fellow cohorts with our own fellow cohorts and co-funding. It was very positive and it’s helped us to sort of connect up a lot of the new fellows with a wider network of people who are sort of working on a similar kind of fellowship’ (Interviewee 9).

Interviewees from the universities and other interested parties indicated a strong desire for a genuine joint endeavour, underpinned by strategic investment from all parties to support the academic-policy engagement infrastructure. We appreciate the technical difficulties associated with establishing the proposed co-funding model, however, information collected during the evaluation raises concerns about the longer-term viability of the present arrangements if UKRI funding is removed or reduced in future funding rounds. While financial modelling falls outside the scope of this evaluation, we see real value in exploring this further.

Recommendation 3. Where further extensions are requested by the fellow or host, the host organisation should fund and organise this additional activity.

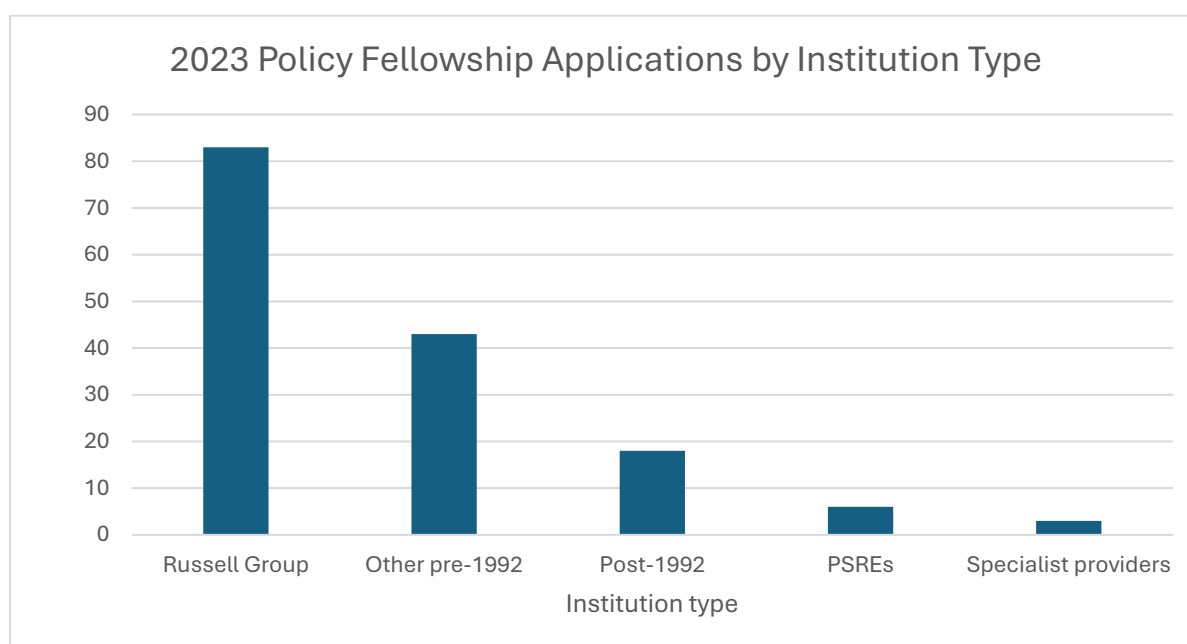
3.1.3 Recruitment and selection of fellows

The growing popularity from both hosts and researchers in participating in the scheme demonstrates its success. This however leads to increasing demands on those involved with the organisation of the fellowships including significant amounts of staff time to find and define suitable projects in a range of government departments, arms-length bodies and What Works centres. The expansion of the scheme between the first cohort in 2021 and the second in 2023 saw the number of public sector organisations involved double from 13 to 26. With this expansion came the need to explain the scheme to a larger group of people. This task was made a little more difficult by the movement of staff between roles in the host organisations between the start of the first cohort and the beginning of the second. Once the fellowship opportunities had been defined the next stage was advertising these roles and handling the application and selection process.

The Policy Fellowship scheme was very popular with university staff and to a slightly lesser extent with the employees of other UKRI funded research organisations. There was a total of 153 applications from staff in 60 universities and five Public Sector Research Establishments (PSREs). This was a 58% increase in the number of applications and a 30% increase in the number of institutions participating in the scheme by comparison with the 2021 cohort. The earlier pilot version of the scheme had received 96 applications from 46 universities.

The majority of the applications in 2023 as demonstrated in Figure 3 were made by researchers based in Russell Group universities (83 applications from 21 institutions). There were fewer from other pre-1992 universities (43 applications from 22 institutions) and still fewer from post-1992 universities (18 applications from 15 institutions). PSREs and specialist providers accounted for the smallest numbers. There were 6 applications from 5 PSREs and 3 applications from 3 specialist providers. This pattern of applications mirrored the range of applications in 2021 with the addition in the latest version of the scheme of applications from PSREs.

Figure 3: Applications by types of universities



Analysis of the applications by nation reveals broadly expected numbers in proportion to the populations of these countries. Meanwhile, within England there was a spread of applications across regions which broadly reflected the distribution of higher education staff in these different parts of the country. Internal equality and diversity monitoring of the scheme revealed roughly equal numbers of men and women taking part and a spread of ages, ethnicities and career stages (see appendix 1).

In-keeping with the first pilot cohort of the scheme some of the fellowship opportunities proved to be more attractive than others. The most popular fellowships tended to be those focused on projects with broad economic, health or social remits. The less popular fellowships tended to those focused on highly specialist and novel areas of research activity. There were less marked differences in the pattern of applications to Whitehall departments, arms-length bodies, What Works centres and devolved governments.

Table 2: The frequency applications to policy fellowship opportunities

Number of applications	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Frequency	5	15	9	4	5	3	1	1	1	3	0	0	1	1

The final selection of fellows was a time consuming and labour-intensive task. A total of 103 applicants were interviewed for their first choice of placement and 35 of these applicants were selected with 37 being notified that they were unsuccessful. The remaining applicants who had been unsuccessful in obtaining their first choice of fellowship opportunity were then offered a second interview and support through a matching process. These arrangements led to the placing of a further 12 fellows.

Overall, according to the fellows interviewed, the recruitment and selection of policy fellows was handled in a very professional manner. This was recognised by the fellows and hosts who praised the simple application process, friendly selection interviews and professional support they received from the ESRC PPET.

The expansion of the fellowship scheme for the 2025 cohort has led to the centralisation of responsibility for the recruitment and selection of the next cohort. The current programme team indicated that they anticipated that this would lead to a simplification of these processes.

Recommendation 4. UKRI to continue with their established plans to centralise the administration of the fellowship scheme under the auspices of the Talent and Skills team.

3.1.4 Host department and fellow expectations

The focus group discussions revealed that many of the fellows placed in central government departments and ministries were working on analysis activities rather than directly in policy teams. There are distinctions within the civil service in most departments, as outlined in the literature review (appendix 7), between the work of officials in the Policy Profession and their colleagues in the Analysis Function. These distinctions are rarely evident in academic writing about the work of the civil service although the differences in working methods and management arrangements are very important in practice.

The statement of standards for the Policy Profession within the Civil Service defines their role as designing, developing, and proposing government policies to meet ministerial objectives and national priorities. Staff in the policy profession are divided into departments based on a minister's portfolio of responsibilities, e.g. apprenticeships or further education. By contrast staff in the Analysis Function are employed to support informed decision-making across their department by collecting, analysing and interpreting data to provide evidence or evaluations (Analysis Function, 2025). These civil servants are normally based in a separate directorate (e.g. the Analysis Directorate in the Ministry for Justice (MoJ)).

The distinctions between staff in policy and analysis departments are less clearcut in devolved governments, arms-length bodies and What Works Centres. In devolved governments and arms-length bodies it is more common for staff to be working across these distinctions in mixed branch, division and directorate teams. Meanwhile, in What Works Centres staff are expected to provide independent, methodologically rigorous, practical, accessible accounts of what works in practice and to help build capacity among relevant policy and practitioner communities in a transparent and accountable manner.

Among the policy fellows recruited in the 2023 cohort there were three based in arms-length bodies, six assigned to What Works Centres, 10 in devolved governments and 28 in UK government departments and ministries. In the central government departments, the vast majority of these fellows were working on specific technical projects undertaken by staff in the analysis function. They typically worked with colleagues in the policy profession, but they were not generally located within those teams.

Recommendation 5: Amend the applications process to enable applicants to rank order their choice of fellowships to aid any subsequent matching processes if applicable.

Recommendation 6. Host organisations and training provider to make a clearer distinction in the description of roles between the Policy Profession, Analysis Function and What Works centres to reflect the consequent different future experiences and training needs of these fellows.

3.1.5 Induction, training and mentoring

The online surveys of fellows revealed that there were variations in the induction arrangements between placement locations. The focus groups further demonstrated that the extent of wider formal induction arrangements varied between placements. Several fellows reporting that they were provided with lots of opportunities to attend department meetings, engage in staff development and network with others within the department and more widely. For others these opportunities were more limited and constrained by geographical distance, the churn of policy officials or timing issues.

‘...if anything could change or I could sort of wish for anything to change for the next people who are coming into the organization I was in, or others it would be that there was proper preparation put in place before you arrive into that space. That somebody from UKRI ensured that what needs to be in place is in place. What resource, whether that's somebody who you can actually talk to or whether it is actually a physical resource that you need to be able to do because the amount of time [that was] wasted on mine and on other fellowships’ (Fellow Rep 13).

There was considerable praise for the ESRC PPET and their ability to resolve problems and to support the fellows. However, there was also comment about the large number of forms that had to be completed by the fellows, hosts and others for security clearance, staff passes, a computer and email address. The fellows understood and were supportive of the rationale for these arrangements, but raised concern about the variety of different procedures and the time it took to complete these different stages in the onboarding process.

When dealing with these issues there was very positive comment about the support that the fellows received from other members of their cohort. This was evident in the exercises and socialising associated with formal training sessions and the more informal WhatsApp group chats and other forms of peer support.

‘There [were several] of us who were [expertise deleted] who are doing various fellowships, but not necessarily all in the [policy organisation deleted]. So, we kind of spread all over the place so that we've got our own little WhatsApp group and that's also been really helpful because I mean the colleagues who are in the [host organisation deleted] have had their own challenges but being able to have somebody on the inside who can explain, ‘Oh well, these people are in this team, this is the name of the person’.
(Fellow Rep 26).

The training support provided on scheme was also viewed very positively with particular praise for the training provider development sessions. However, there were differences of view between those who had considerable experience of the Civil Service and those who

were new to these settings or in What Works Centres where direct engagement with government policymakers was rare. Some fellows suggested that additional peer learning or cohort-wide training could further enhance impact and there were several who asked for specific sessions on devolved governments and What Works centres. These fellows explained that this would be helpful to them as it would help them to understand the different but aligned constitutional, political and institutional contexts in these settings.

There was also positive comment about the high quality of the support provided by the mentors from mentorship provider who were charged with supporting the professional development of fellows assigned to civil service roles in central government policy departments. Many of the fellows placed in other contexts, whether arms-length bodies or What Works centres said that they would have liked to have similar support and suggested that this should be made available to future cohorts.

The fellows with academic mentors noted benefits from continued academic engagement and reflective guidance although there was some variation in perceptions of the mentoring quality reflecting the prior experiences and objectives of the mentees.

Recommendation 7. UKRI in collaboration with hosts to produce a checklist and distribute to fellows, hosts and research organisations detailing the security clearance, onboarding and induction procedures.

Recommendation 8. There should be additional training for What Works fellows and fellows placed in devolved governments to reflect the different nature of their experiences and training needs. In addition, mentoring support from mentor provider should be extended to all fellows.

Case Study 2: Churn: the policy board game

The board game Churn emerged from an original idea by Katie Thorpe (Head of Learning and Development at the training provider) which was then developed into a full playable prototype with Melissa Jogie, a UKRI Policy Fellow, supported by seed funding from the University of Roehampton. This unique partnership combined a deep expertise in public policy training with the fellow's academic focus on innovation and engagement, transforming their shared vision into a tangible learning tool.

Developed over seven months, the concept of Churn was conceived as an imaginative way of helping people understand and experience the complexities of policy making in central government, highlighting both the challenges faced by policy makers. Key concepts emerge from discussions during play rather than being delivered by a presenter, making the experience more immersive, tailored and engaging. The collaboration drew on research by staff at the training provider, Thorpe's experiences of teaching people about the civil service and the Fellow's consideration of the game concept as an immersive experience for new researchers entering the policy space.

Named after the regular job movement, or 'churn', within the civil service, the game immerses players in the fast-paced realities of government work. Played across six rounds, Churn simulates the challenges of developing and delivering policy through a series of event cards that mirror real political volatility. Players balance teams, resources, and evidence

gathering to navigate ministerial reshuffles, policy wins, and shifting priorities, learning first-hand how decisions, timing, and collaboration shape the outcomes of public policy.

3.2 Activities

This section considers how the resources outlined in the previous section were used by the fellows and their hosts with the support of the ESRC PPET and fellows' research organisations. The picture that emerges is of policy fellows providing a valuable role and engaged in a wide range of tasks from helping to develop the capability of their host team through to supporting the day-to-day tasks of answering queries. The recommendations that flow from this analysis point to the need for developments to support researchers' wider understanding of government procedures and to create conditions where fellows' activities' can be embedded into a wider system of policy development.

3.2.1 Analysis and advice

The online surveys of fellows revealed that the fellows generally felt well supported in their host departments with most citing the constructive supervision they received from the local management team and the collegial working environment in most departments. These views were echoed by the hosts who reported that the fellows contributed meaningfully to capability building within their teams and to enhancing their departments' access to scientific and analytical resources.

Feedback from the policy fellows also revealed that the knowledge flow and capability building was far from all one way. Most of the fellows remarked on the expertise of the policy officials whether that was in central or devolved government departments, arms-length bodies or What Works Centres. This expertise meant that the fellows learned as much if not more from the teams that they were placed with than they expected and perhaps more than the policy officials expected that they would as well. This point was mentioned by fellows in their comments about the high quality of the research produced by the policy officials and the rigour of the quality assurance and approvals processes used to agree and sign off research evidence and evaluation reports. For example, one fellow commented:

'So, in terms of the way that they generate and collate and quality assure high quality evidence, it's been more my disciplinary expertise that I think has been of relevance [rather] than necessarily my ability to provide advice around what makes the high-quality evidence because they're already doing that to such a high level' (Fellow Rep 26).

The rigour of the civil service and What Works centres approaches to evidence gathering and evaluations became evident to the policy fellows during the early stages of their placement. As the case study below from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) demonstrates hosting a fellow can lead to changes which better align understandings of policy and procedure between staff in public service organisations and their colleagues in research organisations.

Case study 3: Aligning Policy Fellowship induction with MoJ's Research Governance

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) have well-established processes for [external research approvals](#). These cover a range of research activities in different settings: primary research in prison and probation, approved via the National Research Committee (NRC); research in courts, approved via the HMCTS Data Access Panel; or research using administrative data made available via [Data First](#) (or otherwise).

For research conducted or commissioned by MoJ, the process mirrors the principles and standards of external research approvals. Research undertaken by academic Fellows embedded in MoJ is subject to the same internal governance.

Whether internal or external research, these processes are rooted in the guidance provided by the Government 'books' – [The AQuA Book - GOV.UK](#) and [The Magenta Book - GOV.UK](#). They focus on ensuring that proposed research has a clear rationale to help shape evidence-based decision-making, proportionate sign-off, is methodologically robust, and ethically sound. This is particularly important for research in the justice space, which will often deal with sensitive topics and vulnerable populations. Furthermore, both internal and external research applications feed into the same reporting systems in MoJ, to provide a complete snapshot of the research landscape for decision-makers.

In general, both in MoJ and across government, experience shows that academic researchers are sometimes surprised to find that internal research is subject to the same governance processes as external research. And, crucially, that research undertaken inside a government department is held to the same high standard, whilst balancing rigour and efficiency in the approvals process.

This places great emphasis on early conversations during the Inception Phase of the Fellowships, to ensure an optimal project is agreed between the Fellow and host team. Co-design of projects may take time but ensures the project meets the needs of the Fellow, as outlined in their Fellowship application, and those of the host, in line with both emerging and strategic priorities for the department as set out in the [Areas of Research Interest \(2025\)](#).

MoJ's experience reinforces the value of early and explicit communication about research governance. It also highlights the complexity involved in the Inception Phase of a Fellowship. A flexible approach to the Fellowships' Inception Phase is recommended, to allow for longer periods of up to six months (where required) depending on the nature of the fellowship and the host department.

This case study was co-authored with MoJ.

Recommendation 9: There is a need for research organisations and knowledge mobilising units to have a greater understanding of civil service guidance about evidence gathering and evaluation as outlined in the AQuA, Green and Magenta books. Responsibility for this activity should be allocated to the Talent and Infrastructure strand of activity within UKRI and contracted to higher education and research organisations via representative organisations like the London University Knowledge Mobilising Network (LUMEN); University Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) and Yorkshire Policy Engagement Network (YPERN).

3.2.2 Lead research-related activity with hosts

The form of the research work undertaken by the fellows varied between host departments. Some of the fellows were able to begin work on a project which was fairly tightly defined from day one and others went through a process of developing one or more project ideas, but which became clearer over time. There were few discernible patterns to this variation between departments, but What Works centres were more single project focused than central government ministries. Some of these projects continued to fruition and others were delayed or abandoned. Between these two extremes most of the fellows managed to carve out one or more projects that they could call their own and were happy to provide advice for their colleagues. As one fellow and one of the hosts remarked:

'I still have my main project in the background, but it has not necessarily been the priority focus. My issue is I [have] had quite a lot of engagement with policy making cycle through the policy team, in my case, what has been really kind of changing has been the alignment with a bigger narrative' (Fellow Rep 15).

'They (the fellow) were very flexible like that. So, they improved specific analysis and did a couple of teach-ins. So, they were actually an amazing resource for us because, you know, they were more knowledgeable than lots of people within the team on certain areas. And they were also sort of on tap, you know, and they also came into the office at least once a week' (Host Rep 9).

This variability was generally welcomed by the fellows who felt that it provided them with a realistic insight into the working of government departments, arms-length bodies and What Works centres. It was also welcomed by many of the policy hosts who felt it provided better professional development for the policy fellows and improved organisation development for the host organisations.

'That would be another general feedback I'd give about the scheme that having an academic coming in to do their own piece of research for a year and a half in the department is not very useful for the department, and I don't think they'll get the most out of it. And I don't think they'll really learn what being a policy maker is like to improve their own ability to do policy relevant research' (Policy Host 17).

It was common for the most engaged policy fellows to be seen as a resident expert who could use their experience to advise their analyst and policy colleagues on academic research and methods of enquiry. As the second online survey of fellows revealed for most fellows the primary project which they had been seconded to complete had often developed beyond its initial research agenda. By the end of the fellowship they were typically achieving deeper policy engagement while strengthening their professional networks in the knowledge exchange phase.

'I think it's kind of understanding evidence very differently [...] It's not that I'm provided with a paper and then on the basis of that paper, a policy has been made or modified or anything. It's more ways of thinking that I think I've

contributed. Which is based on my long experience. So, whether you can call that evidence, I don't, I wouldn't call that evidence necessarily, but yeah, thought leadership is maybe a grandiose way of putting it, but ways of thinking I think is the closest thing to what I've contributed. I mean when I've been asked to review specific policies or can you even call them policies, specific documents or write rounds or, you know, briefings there? You know, I've changed specific wording to make it more accurate based on convention based on current academic understandings' (Fellow Rep 24).

Many of the fellows also recorded tangible outputs such as policy briefings, analytical frameworks and collaborative publications but overtime there was a tendency for this to become a programme or portfolio of work rather than just one project. This meant that the fellows were charged with and frequently completed many different tasks and undertook a wide variety of activities. Some of this was by design and some of it was a consequence of changed circumstances.

The churn of policy staff and changes in departmental priorities had an impact on many of the policy fellows. This meant that even for those who were able to maintain continuity in their original project terms of reference the form of this work was apt to change. Over the period of 2023 cohort's activities there were frequent ministerial changes and a general election which led to major changes in the political complexion of the Government and the associated machinery of state.

There were also significant issues for many of the fellows in maintaining a good work-life balance as almost all were undertaking the three phases of the fellowship on a fractional basis. This meant that they were combining their work in the policy organisation with other commitments at their home research organisation, whether that was teaching, research, supervision or administrative activities. The online survey revealed that most of the fellows were experiencing difficulties associated with managing the volume of work as a consequence of combining their fellowship with the remaining responsibilities associated with their permanent roles. In response to these pressures several fellows extended the period of their fellowships or altered the scale and pattern of their commitments to their host and home organisations.

3.2.4 Strengthen engagement between government and academia

Beyond the day-to-day activities of fellows, they were also involved in developing longer term networks and structures to strengthen engagement between government and academia. Indeed, the desire of many fellows to maintain contacts with their host organisation appeared to be stronger than originally anticipated by the designers of the scheme in the ESRC and wider UKRI.

Many of the policy fellows and hosts indicated that they would like to maintain and build on the professional relationships that they had established on the scheme. The range of things they had considered to take this forward included extending the period of their placement, applying for another similar fellowship, considering permanent employment in the civil service, jointly bidding for research, or providing/recruiting another fellow in a subsequent round of the scheme. For those fellows anxious to maintain contact there was frustration that the end of their placement and their security clearance would mean they would not be able to interact with civil service colleagues in the same way in the future.

'Who then has the business case that they can make to their department to, let's say, increase the length of time that my security clearance is valid for because right now any sort of connection, any sort of institutional memory, that I can provide stops on [date deleted]. There is this scheme too, you know, to bring back the alumni but that's a one-hour team's call every three months. There's nothing I can do with that, you know, with the best will in the world, I can't even access the directory of who's in [department name deleted] to find out who is working on topic x. I can't find out who's who, unless I really depend on the five people I still know in the organisation and rely on them to tell me who to contact' (Fellow Rep 24).

For these fellows there was a feeling that a lot had been invested in their and that this might now be lost if arrangements were not put in place to maintain established connections. The Foreign, Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) has run a successful alumni network for its past policy fellows from a number of different schemes. As one of the hosts for this scheme reported:

'We actually have quite a big alumni network. So, there are 20 or so former academic fellows who are kind of alumni of being embedded in research analysts and we meet with that alumni network every six months. So current fellows and former fellows get to kind of talk to each other about their experiences and how they benefited and therefore they grow their network through that kind of alumni. I don't know whether that's something to think about in terms of across all those fellows that are also in other bits of kind of Whitehall'.

Evidence that more systemic thinking about how the relationships between government and academia could create longer term networks was evident in the development of Colleges of Experts in three government departments (Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) and the (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)). In these settings the established Science Advisory Councils or Committees (SACs) were supplemented or replaced by a larger group of experts recruited from a wide range of universities and other knowledge-based organisations (Government Office for Science, 2025). Some of the members of these new groups were drawn from the ranks of previous policy fellowship schemes. These committees and the fellowships more broadly were also seen as potential sites for the development or recruitment of future Chief Scientific Advisers or their deputies. As one of the interviewees commented.

'Not all academics understand how policy kind of happens and how you can shape and influence that. So, you know the idea of here's my 40-page journal paper that you can't access because it's behind a paywall; that's not massively useful, so I think that's why we've done things like the College of Experts. That's why we've spent a lot of time trying to engage with very diverse kind of research communities [to say] we're accessible and really keen to hear what you're doing. Sometimes we'll just get stuff kind of pumped to us of interest and like Bristol, Loughborough, Manchester and Nottingham are really good at doing policy brief stuff... But we're also very open to hear about any relevant expertise and some of that is like signposted through things like the Areas of Research Interest (ARIs), but also [through] the College of Experts because it is really broad and diverse' (Interviewee 7).

Established civil service commitments to move a larger proportion of jobs outside of London (Goddard, 2025; Government People Group, 2024) as well as more recent commitments from the Labour Government to devolve decision-making within England to 42 regions has added impetus to the need to develop systems for connecting Mayoral Strategic Authorities with expert policy advisers (Goddard, 2025; Government People Group, 2024; UKRI, 2025).

The planned increased devolution of policy making in England and the established devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are likely to bring with them greater variety in the politics and policy positions. This diversity reinforces the need for the training and development of future policy fellows to consider the different cultural traditions, institutions and political contexts within which evidence is gathered, policy developed and government actions evaluated. As one of the interviewees commented.

'If we don't recognise [the politics], it becomes very hard, I think, to really improve the ability of both researchers as individuals and of the whole Community and of research organisations to do that meaningful engagement. I think you can see though, that as devolution is an increasing focus in England. There's now more awareness, I think among some universities of the importance of kind of regional and place-based policy engagement.....I think that's really positive that we can see in some parts of the country you have universities coming together to think about how to engage in their place, some of that's probably powered by the sort of the Civic Challenge and perhaps the sense that the Civic University's agenda has lost momentum a bit. So, I wonder if some organisations see this as a way of renewing that. I think there is a real challenge at that regional level, because I think academic policy engagement gets much closer to the sharp end of some political considerations. Universities are very overtly political actors in their regions in a way you don't always have to be at a national level. So, I think that's quite interesting. You know, how do you build a positive relationship with your mayoral combined authority, where the university is kind of a significant anchor organisation in that region, but therefore has a political relationship, you know, very explicitly political relationship with the combined authority?' (Interviewee 8).

The established civil service policy profession standards provide some pointers to how this political awareness and sensitivity can be developed (Gov.UK, 2024).

Recommendation 10: UKRI could explore working with the Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) to coordinate their people and skills initiatives with the civil service and What Works centres.

Recommendation 11: UKRI to approach networks such as UPEN to produce guidance on developing people and skills in policy engagement including knowledge brokering for universities.

Case Study 4: The Civil Service Policy Campus

The Civil Service Policy Campus is a UK Government initiative which aims to decentralise policymaking to key regional hubs most notably in Darlington, Glasgow, Leeds and Sheffield.

The Policy Campus has three principal goals. First, it is designed to diversify the civil service workforce by recruiting people from different socio-economic backgrounds and geographic locations. This is intended to improve the representativeness and responsiveness of UK policy development. Second, the initiative aims to stimulate regional economic growth by

bringing high-quality jobs and investment to areas historically underrepresented in national decision-making. Third, it seeks to make policy development more responsive to the diverse needs of different parts of the UK and to foster connections with staff and students in local universities and colleges.

The Policy Campus functions as a networked virtual hub, rather than a single physical site. It integrates civil servants from multiple departments, including Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and HM Treasury. It also has a physical expression in regional offices which bring civil service departments together in flexible workspaces with shared policy training resources and links to local universities to encourage collaborative policy research, evidence gathering and evaluation.

The Sheffield regional hub was one of the first to identify as a Policy Campus. Staff at this centre have developed a 10-week paid policy internship programme for university undergraduates and further education college students. It also runs a 'Day at DfE' experience for school and college students who can role play civil servants developing policy options for a 'minister'.

The Policy Campus has encouraged better policy collaboration between government departments. At the Sheffield Hub, the DfE and DWP strategy teams now connect more regularly, sharing knowledge and best practices. These arrangements have enabled senior officials to develop stronger links with the combined authority and city council, especially on skills and employment matters. Campus organised events include a seminar series which has fostered links between civil service departments, universities, businesses and other local experts.

4. Outcomes and impacts

4.1 Introduction

The difference between outcomes and impacts lies at the heart of consideration of the effects of any government policy or organisational strategy. In this section we consider these differences in more detail before examining the outcomes of the policy fellowship scheme on the fellows, their host departments, home organisations and the policy areas they have worked on. To these ends this section is divided into the following seven sections.

- Outcomes versus impacts

- Individual

- Relationship building

- Host team

- Instrumental

- Conceptual

- Research organisations

4.2 Outcomes versus impacts

In this report we focus on outcomes defined as tangible results for those the programme serves after an intervention (Weiss, 1998). An outcome is generally a finite and measurable change achieved shortly after a planned activity (Harding, 2014). For example, a person completing a workshop or training event and passing an assessment which measures their learning and changed beliefs and actions. By contrast, an impact is a much broader effect which has a longer duration. For example, the effect that the training event had on the ability of the participant to engage in policy development or to establish and maintain a relationship with a policy maker. Impacts are typically evident up to five years after an intervention.

Following these distinctions throughout this section we explore the six different types of outcomes the theory of change suggests should be achieved through the fellowship programme. We reserve consideration of impacts for sustained effects that have been present over two cohorts of the scheme. Each of the following six subsections compares observed outcomes with assumptions made in our TOC (figure 2) and prior evaluation findings. This analysis highlights what is novel, unexpected and indicative of deeper shifts in the patterns of behaviour and comments by the fellows, policy hosts and university leaders engaged. While the terrain is complex and difficult to measure, we apply this framework pragmatically to surface meaningful patterns.

There are clear overlaps where one outcome can lead to other outcomes. For example, better knowledge of academic systems can allow for better relationship building and vice-versa, however we have placed examples where the primary outcome was at the forefront of the participant's response. We include recommendations within this section to highlight how outcomes can be reinforced or sustained to become impacts or for outcomes to be more equal and dispersed across the breadth of the fellow, university and host department cohort. We have also attempted to build on the 2021 evaluation by describing the barriers or limitations to the achievement of each outcome.

4.3 Individual outcomes

The most discussed individual outcome across the fellows' focus groups was their personal and professional development. This growth was shaped by a range of contributing factors, both formal and informal, including structured training, general interactions and the experience of being embedded within government teams. Fellows gained insight simply through proximity to, observation of, and immersion in policy processes. Overall, they valued being given a platform to contribute meaningfully to evidence gathering and policy development.

For the most part there are clear sustained outcomes on the individual level found from both the 2021 and 2023 cohort evaluations, suggesting the potential ripple effects of learning from the individual, relational and systems level (see Appendix 7). The deeper shifts in fellows' skills and knowledge in academic-policy engagement point to the potential for longer-term cultural change in how researchers and policymakers collaborate.

Some of the fellows framed this transformation and potential for impact in philosophical terms. One described the fellowship as a journey where the most enduring impact is the personal growth through which the fellows themselves become the agents of lasting change,

supported and empowered by the policy teams around them. In this subsection we consider the ways in which fellows navigated the use of evidence; shaping their research and professional career trajectory; communication and skills adaptation as well as the limitations and barriers faced by fellows and hosts.

4.3.1 Navigating the use of evidence

Fellows recognised the tension between academic rigour and policy relevance. Translating research into usable evidence often required simplification. Fellows expressed increased confidence in their own expertise and knowledge as their fellowship progressed but commented that they also learnt that the usability of evidence depended on a range of factors that were often out of their control. One fellow noticed ‘that even my informed opinion is often better informed than maybe what they were thinking about [...] so that was nice and kind of gave me a bit of confidence’ (Fellow Rep 21).

Many fellows returned to their academic institutions with a more distinguished role in bridging research and policy. This was seen as both empowering and demanding which many noted altered their position within their home research organisation when they returned. As one fellow remarked, ‘I pitched and positioned myself as a policy-engaged scholar on my return,’ (Fellow Rep 2). Others noted the most demanding aspect of this role. One fellow shared that they often took on the role of a research broker, frequently facilitating connections between different stakeholders. While they acknowledged that this position enhanced the visibility and influence of their work, they also emphasised the personal demands it placed on them, noting that it came with a wide range of responsibilities and expectations.

The 2023 fellows, like their colleagues in the 2021 cohort, gained a deeper understanding of how government works, including the role of politics, the policy cycle and the distinctions between research, analysis and policy. Learning was often informal and immersive, as one fellow described: ‘just being in that environment, I was already learning and absorbing the culture and information, almost by osmosis’ (Fellow Rep 70). Fellows became more attuned to the constraints faced by civil servants and the importance of aligning academic and policy goals: ‘I now better understand what my policy interlocutors can and can’t do, and how crowded their portfolios are. That’s helped me work more sensitively and strategically’ (Fellow Rep 24). This form of experiential learning offered a different perspective from other types of engagement, revealing the full pipeline from ministerial questions to civil service responses:

‘Being embedded within a department really gave me a different perspective [about] what the full pipeline is from having an initial idea and maybe getting ministerial push to then going to that entire process of what does the civil service machine do to then make a response for the Minister’ (Fellow Rep 8).

Whereas learning was felt prominently through informal osmosis, there was shared appreciation of the formal training provided by the training and mentorship providers and

host departments. In the survey conducted by the ESRC Policy and Engagement team, the training support was generally viewed very positively with praise for the development sessions, with focus groups supporting this view: 'the [training provider] did an incredible piece of training on just informing us how government works' (Fellow Rep 20).

This feedback aligns with views held by interviewees, who would prefer to see schemes developed which more overtly consider the political aspects of change. As one of the interviewees commented, 'it's very difficult and it brings up all kinds of ethical concerns and issues. So, in a way I understand why we don't often talk about the political angle, but I think it would be more honest and probably more useful in the long term if there was a willingness to acknowledge the political context and to work with all partners, to work out how you navigate that context effectively' (Research organisation interviewee 2). One way to encourage this, they added was requiring applicants to write a paragraph reflecting on the political context that the work sits within just to make sure that they are in fact attentive to it.

4.3.2 Shaping their research and professional career trajectory

While our Theory of Change anticipated enhanced career progression for fellows, the reality proved to be more nuanced. Where there were clear examples of 2021 fellows moving into policy roles such as official ambassadors and civil servants, there was also evidence of fellows developing their research to focus more fully on policy issues. This was particularly evident among those assigned to projects beyond their original area of expertise. As one fellow commented:

'being able to bring my methodological and research skills to quite a different area and to be honest, I've absolutely loved learning so much more about that this is now a new area of research that I'm able to do [and to] consider publishing on' (Fellow Rep 4).

Others found space for curiosity-driven research, particularly when not tied to a predefined project:

'I was approached by other departments within the larger department to take on particular pieces of work that were sort of linked to what I've done in the past, but not directly and so it's really given me the space to engage in things that I probably wouldn't have done otherwise at any point in my career. And that's been really refreshing. It's also probably been the first time since completing my thesis years ago that I've had the chance to actually concentrate intensely on a smaller number of things and projects' (Fellow Rep 2).

The fellowship also prompted more strategic thinking about the policy relevance of academic work and fostered learning among host supervisors: 'I'm now looking into turning that learning into a recognised qualification' (Host Rep 9). Another host supervisor commented how 'it's been nice to reconnect with an academic and especially a really high-flying academic [...] (and) see someone who excels at the things that I didn't really enjoy and to learn from that process' (Host Rep 12). While subtle, it is important to recognise that career

development does not always manifest as a clear change or promotion. Instead, it often reflects a more experiential and personally transformative outcome of engaging with the programme.

Several fellows recorded additional roles in advisory committees/groups within their host departments. Some mentioned that this was a unique opportunity for academics: 'if I wasn't inside as a Fellow, they won't have an academic' (Fellow Rep 10). Seven 2021 fellows reported in their Researchfish that they had participated in advisory groups as part of the fellowship; however, it is unclear if these roles have continued. Being able to track the longer-term roles of these individuals would be useful for understanding the impact of the fellowships on these individuals and their host teams.

4.3.3 Communication skills and language adaptation

Another unexpected outcome, not originally included in the Theory of Change though briefly mentioned in the 2021 Evaluation, was the development of the fellows' communication skills. Fellows consistently noted how they learned to adjust their style, especially shifting from what could be a convoluted academic style of writing to the clear and direct language used in government. As one host explained:

'What they needed most help with was moving away from academic style; the outputs were extremely long and technical. We had to get them used to the language spoken in government, even among analysts' (Host Rep 9).

This shift required greater precision, removing unnecessary complexity, and learning to express ideas clearly and concisely. Surprisingly, the change extended beyond speaking and writing, fellows also became better listeners. They reported being more responsive to the needs, constraints and expectations of policy audiences. As one fellow reflected:

'I have learnt to let go of what is just a priority for me and [to] listen a bit more openly to what's happening [...] to where other tensions are, listening to what other people are working on and then just I believe you could make an entire career in policy from asking better questions' (Focus Group Rep 20).

4.3.4 Limitations and barriers

While the fellowships generated a range of positive outcomes on the individual level, several and contextual factors limited their depth and consistency. Fellows described a persistent pressure to produce visible, trackable impacts, often framed narrowly as deliverables or case-study style results. This expectation placed a heavy burden on individuals from the outset and overlooked the complexity of working in fast-paced, secure environments where influence is diffuse and competition for impact is high. One fellow reflected that the expectation to deliver clear and measurable change, like something you would showcase in an impact case study, is often unrealistic. This is especially true in secure and fast-moving

environments where sensitive information is involved and where everyone is striving to make a meaningful contribution. The pressure to reduce complexity into simplified metrics can result in superficial narratives, overstating instrumental impact and encouraging misleading comparisons or inappropriate measures and benchmarks.

The reality of balancing academic and policy responsibilities proved challenging. One fellow reflected, ‘the process was actually quite tough [...] You're not doing what it says you'll be doing, like 80% or 60% of your time here and 20% in your home department. The reality is you're doing two jobs’ (Fellow Rep 8). The strain of managing dual calendars, inboxes, and expectations contributed to a significant mental load with limited institutional support from their universities in terms of finding replacements for their workload.

The strain of working in boundary spanning roles was a key insight from the 2021 report with a recommendation to provide guidance to institutions that fellows should be released from all but the most essential academic duties. What counts as ‘essential duties’ will differ between and within institutions and so there is a need for increased dialogue between UKRI and research organisations to understand what these are and how they can be managed. One planned action from the 2023 evaluation was for ESRC to consider increasing engagement with Research Organisation contact point as Heads of Departments. The findings from this evaluation supports greater engagement with universities and will be discussed in section 4.8

Although reporting high levels of professional and developmental learning, the longer-term impact of this is hard to ascertain. One potential method for future evaluations could be to measure career development of fellows, over two/five/and ten years after fellowships dates against non-successful candidates who applied to the same project and scored similar points (Recommendation 21).

In terms of tracking successful and not successful UKRI policy fellows, it would be useful to clarify what metrics or benchmarks are used. What are they measured against, and to what extent do they achieve their stated motivations or goals? There may be useful parallels in the apprenticeship literature, which provides evidence of benefits for participants and could inform how fellowships are evaluated. Mapping these outcomes against an existing typology could help structure the analysis.

4.3.5 Summary and recommendations

The evaluation shows that while the programme delivers transformative professional development, fellows and researchers more widely need stronger support to sustain and build on these skills. Mapping career and development pathways and investing in clearer sector-wide guidance would help address persistent misalignments in expectations and reduce the structural barriers that currently limit the depth and consistency of outcomes.

Recommendation 12. UKRI to update their guide on the range of career and development schemes they provide and how they interact with research organisation and public services’ career pathways.

4.4 Relationship-building

Fellows frequently expressed appreciation for the expanded networks and strengthened relationships developed through the fellowship. These relational outcomes, often intangible and harder to evidence, were nonetheless felt strongly. Fellows reflected on the value of simply being present in policy spaces, noting that informal, off-the-record conversations and spontaneous exchanges were rarely accessible to academics outside such settings. These moments included contributing to email discussions or sharing relevant evidence. As well as cemented through informal gatherings, relationships were built through incidental activities, often initiated by Fellows to connect host, partner and home organisations, such as seminars, conferences, and workshops. Examples included chairing a cross-government group involving regulators and policymakers, and developing networks between practitioners, policy professionals, and academics. In this sub-section we explore these themes in more detail under the following five headings. Co-production as a key theme; broadening or deepening of relationships for hosts and research organisations; challenging assumptions and building understanding and the limitations and barriers for fellows and hosts.

4.4.1 Co-production as key theme

Co-production emerged as a central theme, with both fellows and hosts emphasising the value of 'producing knowledge that is both academically rigorous and practically relevant' (Fellow Rep 16). Another fellow reflected on the relational foundations of impactful work: 'The [academic and policy] relationships come first, the understanding of the problems comes second, and then you work from there to craft some research that might be useful' (Host Rep 73).

The importance of co-production and compromise was also highlighted in the 2021 evaluation report, which identified it as the sixth key insight and recommended the development of guidance to support co-design practices during host training (Flinders et al., 2024). Building on this recommendation, the UKRI team incorporated co-design case studies from the pilot stage into the training and plan to embed co-design more explicitly in future calls. This change will involve framing the inception phase as a space for collaborative shaping of projects and using the mid-term report to capture and reflect on any significant deviations from the original plan.

Our findings suggest that UKRI fellows harnessed skills in co-design during the fellowship. As Harvey, Cochrane, and Van Epp (2019) note, '[w]ith no 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to knowledge co-production available, successful models can be difficult to articulate,' underscoring the need to provide fellows with guidance on how to describe and communicate the value of these collaborative ventures.

4.4.2 Broadening or deepening of relationships for hosts and research organisations

Hosts reported being able to consolidate relationships with researcher and local universities by using the policy fellowship as a springboard to look for other opportunities potentially in other areas of policy. One host commented that 'an academic who's an expert has multiple

contacts and a wider network which we are able to connect up for office staff to be able to kind of again help them with that understanding.’ These relationships were further consolidated through co-funded PhD studentships and placements, and policy to research fellowships between their home and host organisations.

This evaluation emphasised the findings of 2021 evaluation that fellows improved cross-team and departmental working. One fellow commented that ‘I’ve been viewed as a useful mechanism for joining up policy makers within [deleted name of organisation] that don’t normally interact (Fellow Rep 18).’ Many fellows reflected on the value of networks in enabling policy-relevant research and collaboration:

‘I’d underappreciated the importance of personal networks sort of the impact pathway from academia into government [...] from a personal perspective, one of the best things that the fellowship gives you is the network’ (Host Rep 73).

The fellowship opened doors for some to build trust with individuals they might never have encountered otherwise, leading to unexpected and meaningful opportunities. Being welcomed into those circles created a sense of belonging that unlocked access to networks and spaces that would have been difficult to reach, even with significant expertise. This was enabled, as some commented, by leveraging their status as a UKRI Policy Fellow for making new connections: ‘it does turn heads that you’re doing something different and UKRI being the big money ticket’ (Fellow Rep 20). Fellows noted that their status as UKRI Policy Fellows helped open doors and build credibility. Being vetted through the programme earned trust from policy colleagues and helped fellows build new connections and earn trust as knowledgeable when talking about policy systems.

4.4.3 Challenging assumptions and building understanding

Both fellows and hosts reflected on how the fellowship challenged assumptions about each other’s worlds, fostering greater understanding and breaking down metaphorical barriers to collaboration. One host noted: ‘In the end it’s been really positive that people have come round to the idea that you can be an academic, but also a human being with a normal life (Host Rep 12).’

For some hosts, the experience prompted deeper reflection on their relationships with academia. One of the hosts commented on their relationships with academics as either the best or worst they have and went on to say that they are often ‘U-shaped sort of relationship’ and having one embedded with the team placed a certain pressure on them to reflect on the nature of these relationships (Host Rep 32). These reflections underscore the fellowship’s role in humanising academic-policy interactions and opening space for more authentic and productive engagements.

4.4.5 Limitations and barriers

Despite seeing the value and importance of leveraging the fellowship to build relationships, many fellows commented on the time-consuming nature of it, especially given the politics and high churn making negotiating relationships risky and emotionally and professionally

charged. One fellow described the experience as unexpectedly difficult, noting how hard it was to identify the right contacts within a particular policy organisation and how even after making initial connections, coordinating a simple meeting could take months.

These reflections underscore the complex reality of relationship-building within policy environments and the mostly invisible but crucial work required to improve knowledge exchange (Cvitanovic and Cairney, 2025). While fellows clearly recognise the strategic value of forging connections, the process is often fraught with challenges, ranging from opaque organisational structures to high staff turnover and shifting priorities. The emotional and professional labour required to navigate these dynamics can be substantial, and progress is not always linear or visible. These insights point to the need for more structured support and realistic expectations around engagement, acknowledging that influence in policy spaces often depends as much on persistence and timing as it does on expertise. Several fellows voiced concerns about the sustainability of relationships after the fellowship ended. One noted 'I am worried about the kind of dropping off the cliff once the fellowship ends.' This concern has been evidenced by 2021 fellows, who reported that connections often remained limited to a few individuals rather than a wider web of relationships, '[i]t's primarily been personal connections, myself and a couple of individuals on both the government and university sides. It hasn't really gone beyond these people.'

Another fellow described how initial contact with their host organisation faded over time: 'I stayed in touch for about six months until all of a sudden, it wasn't really important anymore. Almost all the people I was working with had changed, and there was a big restructuring going on.' Despite investing over two years in relationship-building, the fellow reflected: 'You feel like it's really difficult to know again who's working on what and who to ask.' These reflections highlight the fragility of institutional memory and the challenges of maintaining continuity in fast-moving policy environments. To help strengthen ties beyond individuals and the fellowship period, we recommend the establishment of a fellow and host alumni. The Alumni network would be coordinated through a dedicated, closed LinkedIn network (Recommendation 15) to account for individuals moving to new institutions and gaining new email addresses. UKRI and parallel government coordinator to coordinate an annual in-person gathering to deepen connections and share learnings, complemented by an online update session mid-year to maintain engagement. An alumni network could help address the challenges highlighted in the 2021 evaluation, particularly the feeling of being an 'outsider on the inside.' By connecting new fellows with alumni who were seconded to the same host organisation, the network would offer valuable context, guidance, and peer support. These connections could help new fellows navigate both the complexities and opportunities of their unique position more effectively.

Fellows reported facing both technological and political constraints around data sharing and access, which hindered longer-term collaboration and information exchange. As one fellow explained: 'For me, my [deleted research organisation] department isn't going to be able to talk about the work I've done or highlight it in any way. So, I don't know how it would have improved their relationship as such' (focus group 14). These limitations not only restricted visibility of fellows' contributions but also made it difficult to embed learning or strengthen institutional ties beyond the individual level.

For the What Works fellowships, there was broad agreement that existing relationships between the What Works Centres and universities were already well established. As a result, the fellowship was seen as reinforcing rather than significantly expanding those connections.

4.4.6 Summary and recommendations

The evaluation highlights how the programme helps cultivate more trusting and compassionate relationships between academia and hosts. However, concerns about the short-term nature of these connections point to the need for more structured monitoring, clearer guidance, and stronger infrastructure to support and sustain longer-term partnerships.

Recommendation 13. Improved progress recording to monitor wider range of outcomes and impacts in-keeping with the evaluation framework. Hosts to write outcome summaries every six months to log project and fellow's progress. Fellows to write a Narrative CVs, or what UKRI call a Resume for Research and Innovation (R4RI) to be used as a basis for informing career progression and promotion. UKRI to support these initiatives with a narrative building CV workshop in the first quarter of the fellowship period.

Recommendation 14: UKRI to collaborate with UPEN to provide knowledge brokering training during the fellowship. Fellows could be provided with training by representative organisations such as the London University Knowledge Mobilising Network (LUMEN); University Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) and Yorkshire Policy Engagement Network (YPERN).

Recommendation 15. UKRI should explore establishing a fellows, hosts and universities alumni network. The frequency of meetings to be determined in collaboration with partners.

4.5 Host team outcomes

Fellowships were widely seen as a valuable tool for organisational development yielding short-, medium-, and long-term benefits. Fellows provided host teams with immediate expertise, embedded responsiveness and provided clearer pathways for sustained collaboration, further engagement and even recruitment. The possibility of positive outcomes was often shaped by senior leadership buy-in and the degree to which fellows were embedded in host teams. Many hosts linked outcomes directly to the fellow's physical presence in the office, enabling informal exchange and relationship-building.' The findings emphasise that 'knowledge is a much broader concept than research results' (Best and Holmes, 2010: 151). This supports a more expansive definition of policy engagement, one that encompasses not only the dissemination of research, but also the sharing of tacit and implicit knowledge.

4.5.1 Immediate expertise, embedded responsiveness and pathways for recruitment

Fellows provided immediate expertise and capacity. Fellows were often described by hosts as highly valuable contributors, with one noting that their fellow brought expertise that, in some areas, exceeded that of existing team members. While fellowships clearly provided immediate support, they were also widely seen as a stepping stone into civil service careers.

A policy interviewee reflected that increasing academics' understanding of how to navigate the civil service could spark greater interest in public sector roles, something many may not have previously considered. Programmes like this, they noted, help bridge that gap. Senior leaders echoed this sentiment, encouraging fellows to view the experience as a potential pathway into senior advisory or CSA-type roles.

To build on this momentum, fellows could benefit from clearer guidance on civil service career pathways. This might include access to tailored career advice, mentoring from current civil servants, or a career map outlining potential roles and routes into government. Such support would not only enhance fellows' development but also strengthen the pipeline of research-informed talent into the public sector. (Recommendation 11).

Hosts valued the informal advice and embedded expertise fellows brought to their teams: 'Having someone literally sitting next to you expands your network and shows different ways of working -how they reach into evidence and approach problems.'

Fellows helped plug knowledge gaps and respond to urgent policy questions. One host commented that 'our fellow fed into different projects, especially when senior colleagues asked, 'What's the answer to this?' or 'Where's the evidence?'" (Host Rep 2).

A policy interviewee reflected that increasing academics' understanding of how to navigate the civil service could spark greater interest in public sector roles, something many may not have previously considered. Programmes like this, they noted, help bridge that gap. Senior leaders echoed this sentiment, encouraging fellows to view the experience as a potential pathway into senior advisory or CSA-type roles. The Policy Fellowships scheme develops leaderships skills but without the supported progression framework and signposted transition points, researchers might not have the knowledge and support needed for career mobility.

To build on this momentum, fellows could benefit from clearer guidance on civil service career pathways. This might include access to tailored career advice, mentoring from current civil servants, or a career map outlining potential roles and routes into government. Such support would not only enhance fellows' development but also strengthen the pipeline of research-informed talent into the public sector. (Recommendation 11 and 12) This aligns with the Chief Scientific Advisor's commitment to encourage more mid-career scientists into civil service roles and reflects wider calls for 'strategic scaffolding' of career routes.

While it is recognised that comparing the value of different types of resources is challenging, qualitative feedback from one host helped illustrate the advantages of fellows over external contractors in terms of data access, contextual understanding, and responsiveness:

'The alternative is we might have paid somebody to do it, but there are a few things that wouldn't have been as good. One is data access [...]They (the fellow) had a government email and got the data [...]They were already working in this area, but being with us made sure the work was targeted to our policy problems. [...] And the fact they were embedded so that they could come to policy meetings, which you wouldn't get with a contractor' (Host Rep 9).

Similarly, another host noted a lesser quality of understanding from non-embedded exchanges: ‘when you work with other academics who aren’t embedded in the team, and they’re not part of your team the quality of the relationship is different and the level of understanding of what actually the organisation is trying to deliver isn’t as mature or deep’ (Host Rep 7)

Conversely, some teams have opted not to pursue a subsequent fellowship. One fellow reflected that their experience highlighted a need for more sustained resources in a particular area, leading the team to consider a consultancy model instead, largely due to the practical challenges encountered during the fellowship. Another host noted that the fellow ‘helped in setting up research projects that the department contracts externally by defining the research scope by identifying evidence needs’ (Host Rep 11). There is evidence that both different models work for different teams at different sections of their policy making or evaluation cycle.

Evidence from fellows also points to longer-term investment outcomes. One 2021 fellow reported in their Researchfish submission that their final report was used to support the business case for a new post and was even referenced in the job description. Another fellow shared that their fellowship prompted the host team to identify the need for a dedicated role and begin seeking funding to continue the work initiated during the fellowship.

Beyond formal staffing, fellowships have inspired teams to pursue PhD opportunities in related fields or with the same university. This underscores the value of fellowships as a space for experimentation, allowing teams to test new approaches and refine their focus before committing to long-term investment.

4.5.2 Host team’s culture, skills and development

For hosts, fellows challenged teams to engage more critically with evidence. One host commented that the fellow’s work made them ‘look at the evidence in the cold light of reality’ helping them to widen the lens through which they examined their work’ (Host Rep 13). Whilst another host commented:

‘it’s brought me closer to the cutting edge in terms of what’s going on, deepened my understanding [...] in terms of the where that fits in the academic field as well as the sort of practitioner field where we operate’ (Host Rep 20).

In several cases, fellows helped produce internal guidance on working with academics, including how to support impact submissions and research bids and external guidance for academics to better engage with their host organisation.

Conversely, one fellow reflected on the need to discourage excessive deference to academic titles: ‘Some of the people I’ve dealt with are so knowledgeable and so experienced and so brilliant at what they do, yet they still tend to defer just because of a title or whatever to me, I’m trying to say no, you are the experts here’ (Fellow Rep 2). There was clear evidence that teams benefited from the expertise gained from a fellow. One host commented that the ‘involvement of the policy fellow has greatly accelerated the rates at

which we could develop the [delete area of work] capability [...] I don't think we could have done it without the level of expertise that they brought to it' (Host Rep 20). To further bolster this, policy to research fellowship or engagement opportunities would support this bi-directional learning around research cultures and academic practices.

An unexpected outcome was that fellowships were seen to foster a more open and creative working environment, one that encourages an innovation-friendly culture where it feels safe to challenge assumptions, think laterally and explore new ways of solving problems. One host described a standout example of methodological innovation, highlighting a fellow's work in developing advanced technical and analytical tools. Unlike traditional fellowships, which often focus on specific policy questions with immediate outputs, this project operated at the 'cutting edge of government capability' (host rep 20). It contributed to a broader infrastructure with the potential to enhance ministerial advice and strengthen alignment with central decision-making over time.

As the host explained: 'It's very much state-of-the-art. It will enable us to give our Ministers much better advice on those kinds of impacts' (Host Rep 20). This points to the fact that outcomes are often intangible, supporting innovations in how civil service works. This aligns with the evaluation of CAPE fellowships where experimentation was recognised as one of the six pillars of success (CAPE 2024). This highlights how evaluations must look beyond what is delivered (outputs) and seek to understand subtler changes to cultures, attitudes and values around evidence use, collaboration and the topic at hand.

One outcome not included in our Theory of Change but noted in the previous evaluation was the professional development of host teams. Multiple hosts commented on the professional development opportunities possible through hosting fellows. Whether through formal training and workshops led by fellows or informal interactions, fellows upskilled civil servants. One host commented that fellows were able to upskill 'civil servants to be able to deliver a much higher standard of policy because they have a better understanding of the context' (Host Rep 10). Another host added that the 'involvement of the policy fellow has greatly accelerated the rates at which we could develop the [delete area of work] capability [...] I don't think we could have done it without the level of expertise that they brought to it' (Host Rep 20). Fellows contributing to upskilling host teams is also an important way to ensure a legacy of the fellowship. One host commented that their fellows record podcast or creates teaching material to ensure that that they have longer term contribution to the team beyond the fellowship period.

4.5.3 Limitations and barriers

Several hosts from smaller organisations noted that the fellowship had limited outcomes, largely due to internal constraints. As one host reflected, the experience: 'highlighted weaknesses in our own management processes and structure that we were not able to get past, and as a result it hasn't so far had the impact that it really could' (Host Rep 19). While initially interpreted as a barrier, the fellowship can also be seen as a benefit, shedding light on organisational mechanisms and processes that require change in order to enable stronger external collaboration in the future.

There was a shared view among stakeholders that consistency and clarity in fellowship schemes were more valuable than constant innovation. One stakeholder argued for a 'clear,

easy-to-understand format; that could be repeated reliably, allowing both managers and applicants to engage without having to navigate a new process each time. Another interviewee echoed this sentiment: 'What matters is that they are sustained and they're not just kind of a one off because there's too many of those' (Interviewee 8). They added that too often, promising schemes are discontinued and replaced, requiring fresh explanation and adaptation. Instead, they advocated for stability, with room for refinement, so that internal capability and capacity could continue to grow.

In a similar vein, fellows observed that it often takes time for host teams or organisations to adjust to the presence of fellows and understand how best to collaborate with them. As one Host Representative noted, 'We have become more comfortable with fellows. I think the experience helps us understand how they can add value, and how we might better align our requirements for UKRI with their contributions' (Host rep 10). With this kind of investment, it seems reasonable to give space for outcomes to gradually take shape and potentially lead to impact.

Alongside cultural and organisational challenges, fellows also identified practical barriers to evidence use particularly difficulties in sharing literature and documents across institutional platforms. Case Study 5 illustrates how fellows helped address these structural obstacles, focusing on the critical issue of journal access.

Case study 5. Improving structural barriers to evidence use by improving journal access

Many of the policy fellows mentioned that the lack of access to academic journals was a significant limitation on the effectiveness of analytic and policy teams undermining the efficiency and quality of research evidence they were able to include in briefings.

One of the fellows who had sought access systematic reviews and meta-analyses during their placement to familiarise themselves with a new specialist policy area found that the department's IT firewalls and access restrictions blocked access even though they were using their own valid university library account. Consultations with colleagues and IT support revealed this was a widespread issue across all civil service departments. Analysts reported that they frequently relied on interns, academic contacts or personal devices to obtain academic papers, highlighting that this was an uncoordinated and inefficient approach. Some analysts were even required to pre-register URLs for access approval which was felt to be an unrealistic step with rapid literature searches. As a result, analysts often relied on grey literature or summaries, reducing analytical depth and the ability to critically appraise research.

The fellow's investigations across their host department revealed that the barriers were both technological and financial. Security settings prevented access to many journal sites, meanwhile limited licensing arrangements restricted full-text availability. Recognising the scale of the problem, the fellow explored solutions including piloting access to UCL's EPPI Reviewer tool, which received positive early feedback. A subsequent survey co-designed with the department's training team gathered responses from over 200 analysts, confirming widespread frustration and limited awareness of paid-access options.

Recommendations included establishing honorary academic affiliations, centralised funding for journal access, cross-departmental knowledge sharing and the creation of internal working groups to look at local needs. While uptake was slowed by cost-saving pressures and inconsistent infrastructure, the fellowship spurred discussions on improving evidence literacy, reducing reliance on third-party vendors, and embedding structural reform.

Ultimately, the fellowship demonstrated how resolving technical barriers like journal access can significantly enhance policymaking quality and foster long-term institutional change.

4.5.4 Summary and recommendations

The evaluation found that hosts benefited from fellows' expertise and fresh perspectives, but clearer induction processes and added administrative resource are needed to manage annual recruitment, ensure smooth onboarding, and strengthen alumni coordination. Building internal coordination across hosts and aligning with initiatives like P2R, regional campuses, civil service hubs, Mayoral Strategic Authorities, and the Local Innovation Partnerships Fund would create a more distributed and resilient national infrastructure for knowledge exchange.

4.6 Instrumental outcomes

4.6.1 Definition and measurement

We interpreted instrumental outcomes as the extent to which the fellowship was 'considered a resource for improving policy outputs or performance', specifically in relation to the intervention itself rather than as a signal of government competence or credibility (Boswell, 2014). Identifying tangible evidence of instrumental impact, as originally defined, proved challenging. It was difficult to trace the direct implementation of fellowship-related work in ways that clearly satisfied hosts or met the needs of intended user communities.

While Researchfish offered some useful data points, focus groups provided a more experiential and reflective lens. Through these discussions, participants revealed diverse understandings of what impact entails, how it is measured, and what counts as credible evidence. This underscored the complexity of assessing instrumental impact in practice, especially when outcomes are indirect, long-term, or embedded within broader organisational change.

Fellows raised several challenges in responding to our question: 'Can you describe a specific way in which policy work or decisions have changed as a result of insights or evidence gained through your fellowship?' with some questioning the framing itself. Common barriers to commenting on instrumental impact included: the timing being too early to assess change, difficulty attributing outcomes directly to the fellowship, the long-term and iterative nature of policy influence, and the co-produced nature of change. For this type of outcome, we foreground examples of instrumental impact with the challenges that shape how such are understood and evidenced, offering context and framing for a more nuanced discussion.

For example, many fellows felt that it was too early to reflect on the instrumental outcomes of their fellowship. With one host commenting 'this is a tricky one, and like a lot of evaluating research, we'll be able to say more in a year's time or two years' time probably. But so far

what the work [fellow's name deleted] has done has got high potential for policy impact' (Host Rep 9).

Hosts also highlighted the complexity of evidencing instrumental change, particularly when fellowship outputs were shelved due to spending reviews or shifts in government priorities. These moments carried emotional and professional weight, as one stakeholder reflected: 'how do you say to people that having done that work, having supported the government is still of value? And also recording that work, because things are cyclical. When things come back round, actually having that work stashed can be helpful' (Interviewee 4). This underscores the importance of recognising latent outcomes and valuing contributions that may only become visible over time.

Fellows and hosts reflected how impact unfolds gradually, with one describing the fellowship as 'the beginning of a very long-change that will happen incrementally over time [...] (it) reinforced for me the importance of really embedding the research and that evidence-based practice in now' (Host Rep 13). Furthermore, others highlighted the need for further funding to support the implementing phase of impact. As one fellow explained 'I know I have had impacts, but I would like something clearer and so the Impact Accelerator Award gives me the opportunity to deliver that [...] that is very helpful for me to help to solidify some of those things in a different way' (Fellow Rep 11).

Another fellow added that their work was part of a snowballing effect: 'I ended up doing a review, which has now led to them commissioning other research to look at other potential policy options. So, although those are not in train, we will have a group of other researchers coming on board soon to do some trials and pilots. It will then inform what the policy response is going to be.' This illustrates how fellowships can catalyse broader programmes of work, with influence extending beyond the immediate timeframe or scope of the original placement.

These reflections suggest that fellowships should be viewed not as standalone interventions, but as one stage in a longer, co-creative process. To support sustained and iterative impact, both for policy and individual development, complementary funding and mechanisms may be needed beyond the fellowship period.

Fellows reflected on what they saw as the often-misplaced assumptions and expectations of impact held by UKRI and their home institutions. After outlining some of the changes that occurred during their fellowship, one fellow remarked: 'I don't think that's necessarily down to the work that I've done. I think I was just part of that process, but probably not responsible for it' (Fellow Rep 2).

This observation highlights a wider issue introduced by another participant: namely, the question of who has the legitimacy to speak about the tangible effects of their work, the individual fellow or the organisation hosting them. The uncertainty surrounding who owns the narrative of change and how visible that change was further underscored by a participant who noted the difficulty of claiming influence over a policy process when the reactions or interpretations of key stakeholders remain unknown and inaccessible. This reflection highlights a common challenge: tracing the impact of fellowship work on policy interventions often requires a holistic evaluation of both users and service users, which is resource-intensive and difficult to execute retrospectively. These insights underscore the complexity of

attributing policy influence and the limitations fellows face in evidencing change, particularly when outcomes are diffuse, indirect, or mediated through institutional processes.

To address this, embedding evaluation into the co-design phase of fellowships, where fellows and hosts collaboratively shape the project, could help ensure that evidencing contribution is considered from the outset. This approach would make it easier to track outcomes over time and support more meaningful assessments of influence and value. Hosts should be encouraged to track the contribution of fellows to their work streams, providing written feedback to fellows during the fellowship (Recommendations 13 and 20).

4.6.2 Co-produced nature of change

Closely linked to attribution challenges was the recognition that change is frequently co-produced. As one fellow noted: 'I think there's maybe a bit of an assumption in here [the question] that the academic or the fellow is the catalyst for change, rather than change itself being co-produced' (Fellow Rep 4). On the other hand, other fellows identified with the term 'catalyst', with several noting that they were a 'catalyst for already existing strategic changes that were on the way planned but not yet developed prior to the fellowship' (Fellow Rep 5). Another fellow in a different focus group added 'that doing a fellowship is like being a stimulator or a catalyst in the system' (Fellow Rep 20). A host echoed this:

'My main reflection on this kind of question overall though is it's really difficult to draw a direct link. The input the fellow can give will only be one of a number of things that pushes a decision or the way something's done in a particular direction. So, we'd like to all think I'm sure that our contributions to things really shift the needle individually, but I think it's always a combination of different factors and inputs that affect how things change' (Host Rep 7).

This perspective aligns with the broader view that researchers alone cannot drive systemic change. Instead, collaboration and where necessary co-production are essential throughout the entire process of knowledge creation, synthesis, and application (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Van de Ven, 2007). As such, it is important to reframe how we understand and measure outcomes and impact of academic intervention in policy making process and systems, viewing them more as contributors in the co-creation process rather than direct influencers.

Future evaluations should adopt a contribution analysis framework, focusing on how fellows support and shape policy change rather than attributing outcomes solely to their involvement (Morton, 2015). This approach also highlights the need for greater investment and coordination with a diverse range of stakeholders in the policy development process. Fellowships should be seen as exchanges among multiple actors, local government, individuals with lived experience, community advocates, NGOs, and businesses, requiring deeper engagement to understand and assess co-produced outcomes.

Increased support for local networks and stronger collaboration with regional governments and service users would not only enhance co-production but also enhance the capacity for meaningful evaluation.

4.6.3 Evidence of instrumental outcomes

A host reflected on how the fellowship had prompted a shift in departmental practice, describing changes to the management of a subsidy scheme. Fellows drew on existing evidence, academic expertise, and professional networks to help the department 'define updated, more robust ways of implementing [policy name deleted] criteria and the scheme that the department runs.'

In another case, a fellow described their team's role in shaping funding decisions during the spending review: 'We played a large role in assessing the quality of evidence coming through from departments, and had conversations with spending teams about what constituted credible evidence and which claims were justified' (Fellow Rep 3).

For capturing instrumental outcomes, Researchfish proved particularly useful due to its capacity for detailed reporting, which was often more precise than the information that emerged from the focus group discussions. These outcomes typically relate to the production and use of outputs, where implementation success can be more readily tracked. The following examples illustrate how fellowship-linked research has fed into recommendations, reports, and frameworks with the potential to shape policy interventions.

One fellow contributed to the development of the Net Zero Resilience Index (NZRI), which has been used to inform early interventions targeting transition risks in high-emissions sectors and workplaces across the UK. The index provides a novel evidence base to foreground geographies of risk and resilience in policy discussions.

[Researchfish link](#)

One fellow supported the creation and implementation of the Scottish Business Sentiment Index (BSI) a real-time tool for tracking business confidence and economic conditions. The Office of the Chief Economic Adviser (OCEA) has committed to embedding the BSI into official reports and macroeconomic forecasts. [Researchfish](#)

[link](#)

Additional examples include research being used to inform internal policy papers, shape business case development for government spending, and advise on evaluation frameworks for assessing outcomes.

One fellow reflected: 'I provided evidence and analysis that helped establish a shared baseline understanding across government on the historical and contemporary trajectory of the TPNW and its implications for UK nuclear policy. This input directly informed the review process and the policy recommendations that followed' (reference respondent).

4.6.4 Summary and recommendations

Fellowships were found to generate instrumental outcomes by supporting policy development, though evidence was often indirect, long-term, and co-produced with multiple actors. Attribution was difficult due to timing, shifting priorities, and shared ownership of change. Overall, fellowships acted as catalysts within broader processes, highlighting the need for embedded evaluation within projects, sustained funding, and stronger collaboration to capture and extend their policy outcomes.

4.7 Conceptual

Conceptual impact refers to shifts in understanding, framing, and approach to specific policy issues or to the broader practice of academic-policy engagement. Across the fellowship programme, we identified two distinct but interrelated dimensions of conceptual impact: (1) influence on policy, analysis, and research thinking, and (2) changes in how policy teams and researchers conceptualise the value and practice of academic-policy collaboration.

4.7.1 Policy analysis and evaluation issues

Several hosts and fellows described how the fellowship prompted a shift in how policy issues were understood and discussed. For example, one host noted that the fellowship had ‘contributed to a shift in thinking around the policy issue,’ helping the organisation to consider the topic more broadly. This shift was not solely driven by the research outputs, but also by the informal conversations and reflective dialogue that surrounded the work. The presence of the fellow created space for new perspectives to surface, often challenging existing assumptions and encouraging more holistic thinking.

Fellowships also created opportunities for experimentation within departments. One fellow described their contribution as enabling ‘play space approaches’ (Fellow Rep 17) where elements of their findings were integrated into internal learning sessions, away days, and cross-directorate meetings. The fellow’s role as an external actor, neither fully embedded nor entirely detached, appeared to create a permissive environment for testing new ideas.

Another fellow reflected on their placement as a form of organisational experimentation: ‘I think I was an experiment in trying to get those conversations going’ (Fellow Rep 20)). While acknowledging the limitations of individual influence, they emphasised the value of introducing new ways of thinking into long-established strategic frameworks. A host echoed this sentiment, stating: ‘It’s not a policy change as such, but it’s very much a change in our thinking. This is an area of experiment for us.’

The fellowships also prompted reflection on the nature and use of evidence within policy teams. One fellow described how within their host team ‘think creatively about different forms of evidence,’ particularly when faced with divergent findings (reference respondent). This led to deeper conversations about how evidence is interpreted, synthesised, and communicated especially in contexts where multiple data sources offer competing narratives.

Fellows introduced tools and frameworks that challenged conventional approaches, offering alternative ways of framing problems and presenting evidence. One fellow described their work as ‘giving people a different way of thinking about this particular problem and how evidence and science are communicated.’ This epistemological shift was often subtle but meaningful, influencing how teams approached complexity and uncertainty. Fellowships contributed to a shift in how policy teams conceptualised and communicated key issues, particularly using terminology and framing. One fellow described their influence as helping colleagues adopt more appropriate language and approaches when integrating human perspectives into policymaking. This shift was not limited to technical vocabulary but extended to how policy teams engaged with the underlying values and assumptions embedded in their work.

Another fellow reflected on their contribution to a complex policy issue that had previously been explored through a smaller, internal project. Drawing on a range of existing conceptual frameworks, including one developed by the host organisation, they expanded and refined the approach in collaboration with both internal teams and external stakeholders. This included working closely with data specialists to identify ways of measuring conceptual constructs. By the end of the fellowship, the host anticipated having a 'novel, in-depth conceptual approach' (reference respondent) that could inform departmental work and potentially be developed into a national framework.

These examples demonstrate how fellows helped shape not only the language used within host teams but also the conceptual architecture underpinning policy development. Their contributions often bridged academic theory and practical application, enabling teams to engage with policy issues in more nuanced and strategically aligned ways. In this sense, fellows can be seen as an epistemic community, sharing or generating knowledge which can be seen in this context as a 'key commodity in agenda setting' (Dunlop, 2016, 273).

4.7.2 Priority setting and strategic direction

In several cases, fellowships played a role in clarifying strategic priorities and prompting new directions of work. One host noted that the fellowship had helped the team 'understand what's not working and what we need to evaluate in future' (Host Rep 16). While the scope of the project limited the depth of exploration, it nonetheless surfaced areas requiring further attention and investment.

Fellows also contributed to elevating specific topics within departmental agendas. One fellow observed that their work had supported the inclusion of a previously underexplored issue on the division's priority list, noting that it had 'become a more prominent topic of conversation between the division and other stakeholders within government.' (Fellow Rep 5). This influence was not always straightforward; fellows described the challenge of presenting alternative approaches and expanding the policy toolkit beyond conventional options. As one fellow put it, 'A and B are just two options amongst a whole suite of things you can do.' (Fellow Rep 2). While navigating these conversations could be difficult, the fellow felt that their host team was receptive and engaged suggesting that the fellowship had initiated a longer-term shift in thinking.

In some cases, fellows acted as internal change agents, helping to catalyse structural developments within departments. One fellow described their role as 'agitation from within,' which was underpinned by the connections knowledge they generated during the fellowship. (Fellow Rep 9)

4.7.3 Shaping thinking about academic-policy engagement

Beyond specific policy issues, fellowships also influenced how policy teams and researchers conceptualised the nature and value of academic-policy engagement itself. One host reflected on a lasting change in their team's appreciation of academic expertise, recognising its potential to enrich policymaking processes. This shift was not just about valuing research

outputs but about understanding the strategic benefit of involving academics throughout the policy cycle from problem definition to evaluation.

Fellows were seen as catalysts for reframing, confirming, or challenging existing thinking. Their presence encouraged teams to consider academic input not as a final validation step, but as a foundational element in shaping policy direction. This repositioning of academic expertise, toward the beginning and middle of the policy cycle suggests a growing recognition of its conceptual and strategic utility.

Finally, the fellowships prompted reflection on how impact itself is understood and measured. Rather than focusing solely on instrumental outcomes, participants began to value the subtler shifts in thinking, framing, and organisational culture. These conceptual impacts, while harder to quantify, were often described as foundational to longer-term change.

4.7.4 Limitations and barriers

Fellows and hosts alike reflected on the value of academic independence, particularly in navigating the space between evidence generation and policy influence. As one university representative explained, 'You've got to really make sure that you retain your independence in terms of what the outcome of that evidence is. In other words, you're going to be very clear about providing evidence, and then the decision and policy by government may well not be based on evidence at all. They're based on other things, particularly values. So, I think understanding that is really important' (University Rep 1)

A host supervisor echoed this sentiment, highlighting the value of an independent perspective: 'Having the fellow, and particularly their independence, was really helpful because they weren't maybe telling me what I might have wanted to hear like some of my team might do sometimes' (Host Rep 13). These reflections align with findings from the 2021 evaluation, which noted that being an 'outsider on the inside' can open up new possibilities for influence, while also introducing moments of tension.

4.7.4 Summary and recommendations

The fellowship programme delivers strong conceptual impacts, reshaping how policy teams and researchers frame issues, use evidence, and value academic collaboration. Fellows acted as catalysts for experimentation, priority setting, and organisational reflection, often challenging assumptions and broadening strategic thinking. Their independent perspective enriched policymaking while exposure to government processes deepened researchers' understanding of policy complexity and political context. These outcomes varied across national and regional settings, highlighting the need for mission-oriented, context-sensitive approaches and stronger researcher institutional support to embed conceptual and relational outcomes as valued measures of success.

4.8 Research organisations

The impact of the fellowships on the home organisations varied considerably, largely due to differences in institutional capacity for policy engagement. Where the impact was most

visible, it tended to centre on developing academic-policy engagement among colleagues. This was often shaped by the involvement of a university policy unit (where one existed) or the active support of senior leadership.

Some universities clearly valued the designated funding for policy engagement, yet competing financial pressures limited their ability to invest fully in this area. Interestingly, there was no consistent correlation between a university's existing infrastructure and the opportunity for fellowship-related impact. In fact, institutions with well-established policy engagement structures sometimes saw less direct influence from individual fellows. By contrast, greater potential for impact appeared in universities with limited infrastructure but strong senior-level commitment where fellowships could act as a catalyst for change, helping to rebalance opportunities/capacity for engagement across the university sector.

4.8.1 Raising awareness and interest in policy engagement

Fellowships have contributed to raising awareness of policy engagement within universities, particularly among colleagues and senior leadership. Fellows actively promoted academic-policy engagement and related schemes, helping to 'increase the amount of interest in doing this type of work and the slightly different career path that it leads you down' (Fellow Rep 3). Another fellow noted that their department is now more aware of the opportunities and 'why it might be helpful and interesting to engage with policy making.'

Another fellow noted that the fellowship had elevated the profile of more structured engagement, with potential long-term benefits for developing policy-literate researchers within their university. These skills were seen as valuable both within and beyond the institution, and across UKRI's disciplinary landscape. The fellowship also prompted senior leaders to assess the evidence base for such engagement, recognising its contribution to future collaboration with government with one fellow commenting that their 'the organisation encourages continuously such engagements, but it also tries to bring more to the fore the fact that this is very strong for funding as well' (Fellow Rep 5).

One fellow commented that they were able to 'feed a lot of the policy priorities back into the team' to support with project, policy focused events or writing commissions. This included feeding back insights on what the host department were interested in and where there is alignment. Fellows also reported integrating learnings into their teaching, promoting policy focused research.

One fellow observed a noticeable shift in faculty engagement, especially among early career researchers:

'I've seen the biggest changes, probably in terms of engagement from other members of faculty, and particularly from early career staff who have seen the fellowship as something that they might want to do. And I think that there's something about sort of being there and demonstrating it is sort of helpful to show that' (Fellow Rep 3).

Fellows are in what one described as having 'bang(ed) the drum a little bit louder' in the raising awareness of academic-policy engagement, adding that 'it's had a direct impact because already my seen the biggest changes has suggested that I apply for [...] they recognised the value of the policy fellowship straight away (Fellow Rep 17).

Raising awareness has resulted in universities developing their own schemes at different levels. One fellow noted that for their university, working with their host organisation was 'seen as quite normal' but 'what has changed is the idea of more of a secondment model, which I think has been quite interesting and with quite good potential' resulting in expanding that model to a local authority (Fellow Rep 4). Indeed, some universities have benefited directly from the fellow's experience, with one fellow supporting and advising on setting up policy fellowships locally.

4.8.2 Limitations and Barriers

Fellows consistently reported that their home universities placed greater emphasis on tangible outputs, particularly those that could be counted as impact within the Research Excellence Framework (REF), than on the experiential learning gained through the fellowship. One focus group participant noted, 'I've heard quite a few fellows were quite anxious about this being a gap in their CV. There being no publications during this time, or that they're working in areas that cannot be published' (Fellow Rep 9). Another fellow reflected on their initial expectations in the following terms. 'I thought this was going to be a fantastic 18 months where I'd do loads of research and get loads of publications out of it,' but in reality, they were 'not allowed to present at any conferences. I have a lifetime ban on what I can disclose and cannot disclose about the department. I was not allowed to write any journal articles from the work' (Fellow Rep 16).

One fellow described their university's stance as a 'decoupling' of the individual from the outputs, noting that institutions often expect guaranteed, high-impact results, which can place considerable pressure on fellows. Host organisations, by contrast, were seen to derive more immediate value from fellows' contributions, while universities showed less interest in leveraging these experiences for institutional learning. One 2021 fellow commented:

'When I get to the end of the year if I'd done an academic publication that would be valued more highly by the university than the government report that I produced which is now, you know, making a big impact in terms of this [organisation name deleted] framework' (Fellow Rep 80).

This challenge is compounded by a broader misalignment in how success and impact are defined across academic and policy environments. Academia tends to rely on structured frameworks such as the REF, whereas the policy world operates in response to fast-moving priorities and real-time decision-making. As a result, contributions such as shaping conversations or aligning with shared goals though often deeply influential are difficult to quantify and may be undervalued in academic metrics.

Some fellows also expressed concern about their wellbeing, noting the risk of overextending themselves when attempting to share insights with their home institutions. This suggests that outcomes for home universities are often deprioritised or deferred, possibly reflecting a broader lack of awareness or engagement with the potential long-term benefits of fellowships. Recognising both the demands and the value of policy engagement therefore requires a stronger duty of care from employers, ensuring appropriate support for staff whose work is divided across academic and policy sectors.

4.8.3 Career progression and recognition of policy engagement

Although academic career frameworks theoretically recognise policy engagement as a valid pathway to promotion, fellows noted that prestige continues to be associated primarily with grants and publications. As one interviewee put it, 'It is a perception prestige thing—the grants and papers are what really matter.' Shifting these perceptions will require time, sustained leadership commitment, and ongoing investment from universities, funders, REF, universities and regional policy engagement units.

Indeed, the long-term impact of fellowships is not immediately visible. When fellows return to their home institutions, it is often difficult to assess cultural change through mechanisms like Research Fish. To strengthen this outcome, we recommend that the knowledge exchange period be distributed throughout the fellowship, such as allocating half a day every fortnight, rather than concentrating at the end. As highlighted in the literature review (Appendix 7), the opportunities for the development of relationships between policy makers and researchers are structured by the organisations they work in, the operational processes they adopt to make decisions and the resources allocated to engage in different activities.

It is for this end that we added several inputs to the TOC including home organisation finance and HR professionals; home organisation policy engagement leadership; home department's support; home department additional staff to cover and home department's funding to cover overheads. Since knowledge exchange is less about disseminating outputs and more about sharing cumulative learning, networks, and experiential insights, this should be reflected in buy-out time. It is also important to guide fellows integrating knowledge exchange into their projects from the outset, better preparing them for the post fellowship phase. Indeed, as policy engagement is a relational activity involving a set of people rather than individuals, it is important to engage and build these networks as early as possible.

To support this, clearer guidance is needed on completing Researchfish, using narrative CVs, and building stronger connections between fellows and university policy units or advocates. These measures will help articulate and communicate the value of policy engagement more effectively, ensuring that its impact is both recognised and sustained (Recommendation 13).

While there were encouraging examples of increased collaboration between policy professionals and academics, the programme did not fully achieve the intended outcome outlined in our TOC. There remains significant potential to improve, diversify and communicate the pathways through which policy professionals can access, contribute to, and benefit from academic research.

4.8.4 Sector wide development or inter-institutional/organisational support for academics and professional services staff

To maximise the long-term impact of the fellowship scheme, greater integration and engagement from universities is required. First this involves greater understanding of the benefits fellowships bring to the university both at the departments and institutional level. Fellows' contributions should be recognised not only at the individual level but also as part of broader institutional development.

Establishing clear career pathways across all institutions with structured support for promotion to higher academic and professional services grades is essential to sustaining engagement and incentivising participation. There is a valuable role for the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) to collaborate with government and universities to produce sector-wide guidance on developing people and skills in policy engagement. This guidance should include detailed information on policies and procedures for career progression and promotion, supported by illustrative case studies from member universities and beyond.

4.8.5 Summary and recommendations

Outcomes from Fellowships on research organisations varied, shaped by institutional capacity and leadership commitment to policy engagement. Fellows raised awareness, inspired colleagues, especially early career researchers, and helped embed policy-focused skills and models within universities. However, academic structures often undervalued experiential learning compared to REF-countable outputs, creating career recognition and wellbeing challenges. Stronger institutional support, clearer promotion pathways, and sector-wide guidance are needed to sustain engagement, with recommendations focusing on reward systems, publication protocols, and early collaboration between UKRI and universities.

Recommendation 16: UKRI to encourage the CEOs of Universities UK (UUK) and Universities HR to develop a reward and recognition system for policy engagement work in-keeping with the principle 6 of the Knowledge Exchange Concordat. This requires universities to define approaches to recognising and rewarding successful activities and outcomes within promotion criteria and reward processes for academic and professional services staff.

Recommendation 17: UKRI and the UK Cabinet Office to co-produce guidance on clearance and publication protocols to support secondment agreements and Intellectual Property clauses.

Recommendation 18: UKRI to specify the minimum support expected from research organisations/universities before, during and after the fellowship placement. This statement of desired outcomes to be used as a basis for engagement with university deputy vice-chancellors research and innovation or equivalent and their policy teams at the beginning of the fellowship to help establish a shared expectation of what will be done to support their fellows during the placement and subsequent knowledge exchange phase with a view to realising agreed outputs and outcomes

5. Embedding and developing the scheme

The UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme is a mature and highly successful initiative delivers significant professional development for fellows, meaningful capacity building for hosts and wider value for the established and emerging systems of research-policy engagement. The scheme delivers a unique set of benefits to all parties involved, owing to the specific structure and context of the programme. Unlike other academic policy engagement or research impact mechanisms, this fellowship model builds deeper, more sustained collaboration.

To reach its full potential, the scheme must continue addressing structural constraints around expectations, build sustained relational and organisational infrastructures, and align with wider system developments while deepening conceptual understanding across institutions. The priority is not radical redesign, but maintaining and strengthening a reliable, well-established programme that embeds fellowships more systematically within the wider policy and research landscape. This requires shared funding, inclusivity across research organisations, countries, and governments, and stronger integration between UKRI, host organisations, universities, intermediaries, and fellows themselves.

Recommendations are both structural and cultural, emphasising shared responsibility and recognition of fellowships as mutually beneficial. They highlight the importance of fostering leadership, experimentation, innovation, and mutual understanding within academic-policy engagement, while investing in future leaders to ensure their expertise remains accessible and impactful. ESRC's core mission—to enable the movement of researchers into policy settings to share expertise, build capacity, and co-develop knowledge—must be supported by investment at individual, institutional, and systems levels. Active engagement with home institutions will deepen appreciation of the scheme's value and strengthen its contribution to both universities and the wider research ecosystem.

Ultimately, the success and diversity of the fellowship programme depend on sustained cross-sectoral collaboration, with academics recognised, supported, and rewarded for their policy engagement efforts during and beyond the fellowship period. Strengthening these foundations will enable the fellowship not only to support individual researchers but to shape a more connected, resilient, and evidence-informed policy system across the UK.

Recommendation 19: UKRI should develop a minimum specification of regionally appropriate ways of supporting policy fellowship system development at a regional level in conversation with one or more selected regional policy engagement units, e.g. City-REDI in the West Midlands, Insights North East in Northumbria, London Research a Policy Partnership (LRaPP in London, Scottish Policy Research Engagement in Scotland, Wales Centre Public Policy in Wales and Y-PERN in Yorkshire. Partner organisations to provide training in policy engagement. The outcome should be an agreed statement of how this regional system of support operates and how it is planned to develop in future.

Recommendation 20: UKRI to coordinate links with the UKRI Policy to Research (P2R) programme to enhance knowledge exchange between schemes.

Recommendation 21: Future evaluations to use value for money techniques to compare the policy fellowship scheme as viewed by the host teams with other forms of policy and analyst

support, e.g. PhD studentship placements, contract research, consultancy advice, additional analyst staffing or a part-time course for an existing member of staff in the analyst function or policy profession.

Recommendation 22: To manage the additional workload and support associated with the transition from a biannual to an annual cycle of recruitment and the coordination of the alumni programme increased administrative support will be required. This should be provided by the UKRI.

6. Updated Theory of Change

Any additional points to the previous theory of change have been indented after the list of the points in the original theory of change.

6.1 Inputs

- UKRI Funding
- ESRC Public Policy & Engagement Team support as required
- Host team's expertise and support
- Mentors within the fellow's institution for ECRs
- Fellows
- External training providers to provide training and mentoring
 - Host department lead
 - Home organisation finance and HR professionals
 - Home organisation policy engagement leadership and support
 - Home department cover
 - Home department funding to cover overheads
 - Assessment and selection teams as required
 - UKRI Talent support as required

6.2 Activities

Fund researchers to:

- Provide advice, analysis and peer review to hosts
- Scope and lead research and evaluation related activity -with hosts
- Support capability building with hosts

Other activities

- Build networks between policy and research within and between government, What Works centres and arms lengths bodies
- Mentorship from senior researchers
- IFG and host department training
- Knowledge exchange activities such as workshops, seminars etc.
 - Informal alumni network
 - UKRI and training provider monitoring and evaluation

Assessment, selection and recruitment

6.3 Outputs

Research outputs to inform policy co-designed by funded researchers and host organisation
New networks for policy and research activity with government.
Fellows connected into existing networks for policy and research activity within government
Additional tailored training or mentorship
Engagement activities such as roundtables, focus groups, workshops
Tangible outputs for host department such as reports, frameworks, briefings,
New research projects, collaboration agreements
 New networks for policy and research activity within, across and beyond (local) government and What Works centres
 Tangible outputs such as training resources

6.4 Instrumental outcomes/Impacts

Major challenges identified by government missions (where applicable) are tackled
Inter-disciplinarity integrated into evidence use and engagement
Policymakers and practitioners access and use the best and most relevant research when developing and implementing new policies
The potential of economic, social, technological, biological research to influence public policy at all levels is realised
 More robust ways of implementing policy

6.5 Individual outcomes/impact

Fellows' profile is raised within Research Organisation and wider policy engagement space
Researchers have a better understanding of policymaking processes, issues, skills and environment
Strong evidence and case studies for research impact
Enhanced career progression/change
Enhanced personal and professional confidence and self-esteem
The potential to act as knowledge broker between academia and policy related organisations
 Shaped research trajectory and interests

6.6 Relationship building outcomes/impact

Fellows and hosts connected into existing networks of policy and research activity within government
Enhanced What Works and university relationships

Better trust, mutual understanding and transparency between academia and government
Increased value on collaboration and co-production between research organisations beyond the scope of the fellowships
Deeper collaboration across research organisations, government departments and What Works centres beyond 1:1 relationships.

6.7 Host team outcomes/impact

Government leaders have increased awareness of the importance of evidence, science & innovation
Exposure to new ideas and perspectives
Enhanced innovation and experimental working culture
More effective systems/mechanisms for policy professionals to engage with academic research
Stronger information sharing across government departments/whole policy approach
Stronger research, science and technology capabilities are developed within government

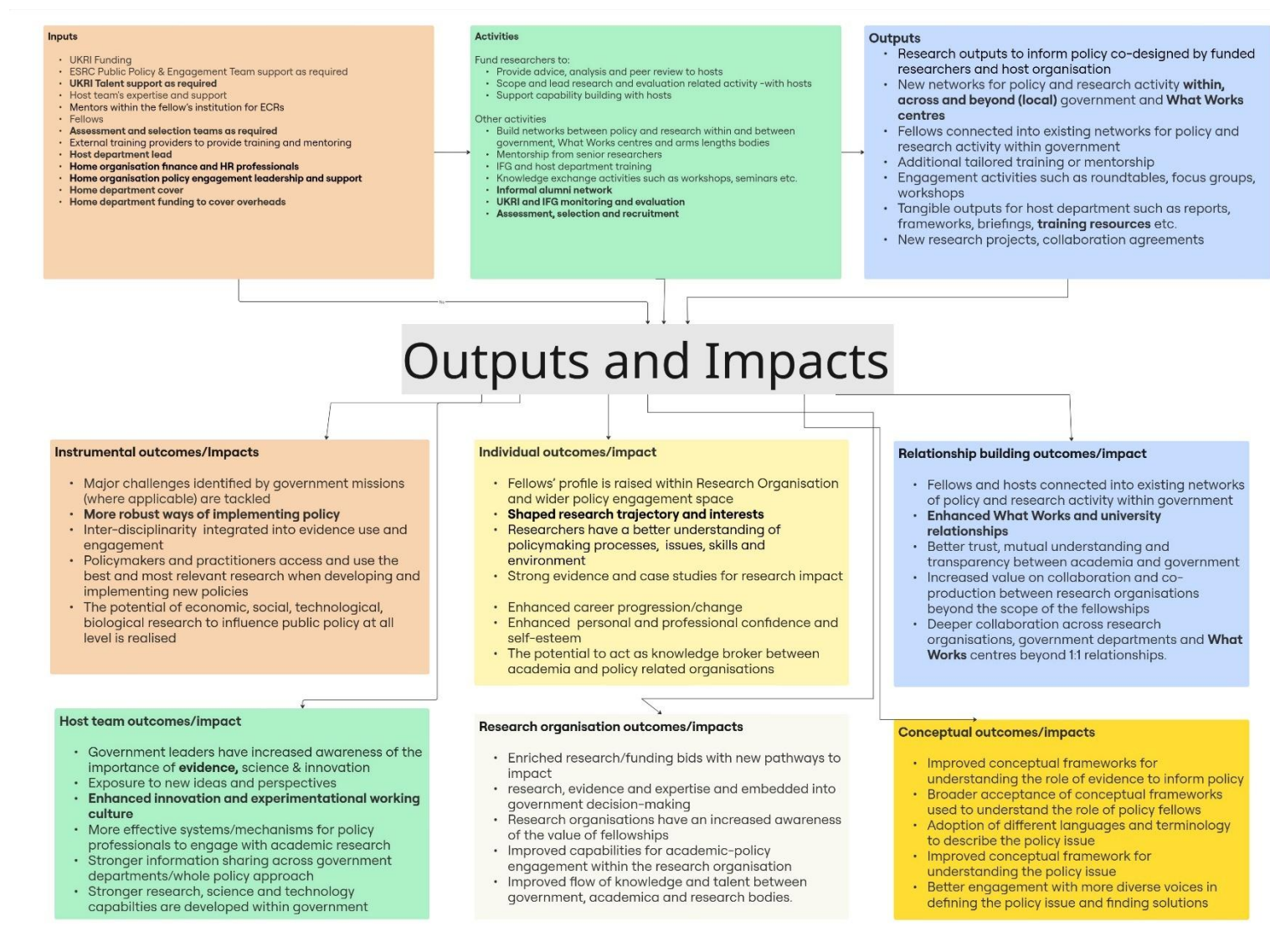
6.8 Research organisation outcomes/impacts

Enriched research/funding bids with new pathways to impact
research, evidence and expertise and embedded into government decision-making
Research organisations have an increased awareness of the value of fellowships
Improved capabilities for academic-policy engagement within the research organisation
Improved flow of knowledge and talent between government, academia and research bodies.

6.9 Conceptual outcomes/impacts

Improved conceptual frameworks for understanding the role of evidence to inform policy
Broader acceptance of conceptual frameworks used to understand the role of policy fellows
Adoption of different languages and terminology to describe the policy issue
Improved conceptual framework for understanding the policy issue
Better engagement with more diverse voices in defining the policy issue and finding solutions

Figure 4: Updated Theory of Change (additional factors in bold)



Appendix 1: Previous assessments of Policy Fellowship schemes and programmes

Table 3: previous assessments' methods and findings of Policy Fellowship schemes and programmes

Scheme(s) evaluated	Authors and date	Title	Journal or report	Methods	Findings
ESRC Pilot Policy Fellowship scheme (2021-23)	Benson-Egginton and Flinders (2025)	Understanding the dynamics of research policy fellowships: an evaluative analysis of impacts and ecosystem effects	Evidence and Policy, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp257-278.	Semi-structured interviews, NVivo analysis, literature review, ESRC documentation, and contextual interviews.	Three levels of impact:(1) Fellows gained confidence, networks, translational skills; hosts benefited from new perspectives and training. (2) Policy fellows contributed to tools, reviews, data analysis, and cultural change in teams. (3) Systems: networks and trust generated but sustainability fragile.
ESRC Pilot Policy Fellowship scheme (2021-23)	Flinders and Benson-Egginton (2025)	Understanding the dynamics of research-policy fellowships: an evaluative analysis of barriers	Evidence & Policy, Vol XX, No XX, pp1–22.	Semi-structured interviews, NVivo analysis, literature review, ESRC documentation, and interviews.	Nine barriers identified: 1. opaque expectations, 2. competing pressures, 3. managing complexity, 4. boundary-spanning stretch, 5. strategic support, 6. administrative absorption, 7. academic absorption, 8. spatial (im)mobilities, 9. silos.
Parliamentary Academic Fellowship scheme (2016-19)	Prabhakar, Rajiv (2025)	Evaluating Parliamentary Academic Fellows	Parliamentary Affairs, Vol 78, No 1, pp 135–157.	Interviews with 9 PAFs and 4 hosts in different departments in Parliament.	PAFs and hosts want different things. There is a wider issue of the differing incentives for academics and Parliamentary staff in conducting knowledge exchange. Staff turnover within Parliament was an issue.
Directory of 19 fellowships schemes and similar roles.	GO Science (2025)	Directory of exchange schemes from academia to policy	Not applicable.	Web-based search and correspondence.	Describes 19 policy fellowship schemes and a smaller number of capability building and internship programmes.
Analysis of 174 fellowship and related	Akerlof et al (2025)	Training researchers to engage in policy in	Evidence & Policy, Vol	Database of US policy fellowships (n=174) and a case	National-level programmes run by scientific societies including fellowships/placements, academic training and networks.

schemes in the USA.		the United States of America.	21, No 4, pp456-484.	study of schemes in Virginia 12 interviews and surveys.	Evidence use mainly instrumental and conceptual but not strategic. Barriers: underrepresentation of less research-intensive universities and lack of evaluation.
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Scheme(s) evaluated	Authors and date	Title	Journal or report	Methods	Findings
Capabilities for Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE)	Tofts and Parker (2024)	Optimizing Research to Policy Fellowships: A Six-Pillar Toolkit	Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement	Review of 22 CAPE Policy Fellowships (2020–2024) across 18 host organisations with 19 interviews.	Six pillars identified as important to developing successful fellowships: (1) preparation, (2) embedding, (3) experimentation, (4) flexibility, (5) mutual understanding and (6) integration.
Conceptual framework building on SPIRIT (Supporting Policy In Health with Research: Intervention Trial)	Mäkelä, Boaz and Oliver (2024)	A modified action framework to develop and evaluate academic-policy engagement interventions	Implementation Science, Vol 19, No 1, pp1-9.	Literature review of models/frameworks. Consultations with HEI staff across England and piloting with stakeholders.	Focused on core domains in SPIRIT model (1) catalysts to motivate (2) capacity: expanded from individual to organisational and system-level (3) engagement actions, (4) outcomes, (5) impacts and sustainability (6) focus on facilitatory expertise (brokering, contextual awareness, strategic planning). Emphasis on communication skills, empathy, emotional intelligence, perspective-taking, cross-cultural competence, social capital and entrepreneurialism.
Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Health System Impact (HSI) Fellowship	Kasaai et al (2023)	Early Career Outcomes of Embedded Research Fellows: An Analysis of the Health System Impact Fellowship Program	International Journal of Health Policy and Management, Vol 12, No 7333, pp1-10.	Cohort study of 87 people from three cohorts of the embedded research fellows scheme (2017–2019). Online career data from LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Twitter and employer	All tracked alumni employed at follow-up: 37% academia, 29% public sector, 17% healthcare delivery research, 14% private sector. Roles: 42% senior scientists, 18% professors, 12% directors/managers, 7% knowledge translation experts. Hybrid careers: 32% held dual roles spanning academia and another sector. Fellows rated the fellowship's contribution to career preparedness highly (mean = 4.49/5).

				websites analysed statistically,	
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Scheme(s) evaluated	Authors and date	Title	Journal or report	Methods	Findings
ESRC Pilot Policy Fellowship scheme (2021-23)	De Vito et al (2023)	Policy fellowship schemes as a vehicle for co-production – insights from Welsh Government fellowships, Centre for Science and Policy.	Not applicable working paper.	Based on the experiences of four academic policy fellowships in Welsh Government (2021-2023).	Policy fellowships can be effective in embedding research and research co-production in policymaking. It is important to be clear about reciprocal expectations when defining the focus and scope of the research. Policy fellows can be exposed to organisational challenges, such as high job turnover.
Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE)	Buckley et al (2022)	Hosting Policy Fellows Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement a guide for higher education institutions	Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement report	A guide based on the CAPE programme (2021–2023), 40 staff across five UK universities plus feedback surveys and comparison with other schemes	Policy fellowships facilitate mutual knowledge exchange by building long-term collaborations. The time and resources required are substantial: 41–124 staff hours per fellow plus 9–15 months for planning and follow-up. Flexibility is crucial to manage attrition, political changes and shifting policy questions. Effective evaluation requires tracking impacts at multiple time points (e.g. exit, 3 months and 6 months).
Policy Fellowships in South Eastern states without full-time legislatures.	Diasio et al (2020)	Developing Science and Technology Policy Fellowships in State Governments without Full-Time Legislatures	Journal of Science Policy & Governance, Vol 16, No 1.	Comparative case study of two schemes, Virginia and North Carolina. Policy landscape reviews of additional states, Ohio, Texas and Tennessee. Interviews with legislators, agencies, and stakeholders.	North Carolina fellowship launched in 2020 placing fellows in executive branch agencies funded by a mix of state and philanthropic sources. Ohio legislative fellows programme. Tennessee opportunities in executive branch. I. Texas short-term opportunities available. Virginia: Short term opportunities available.

Appendix 2: Research organisations involved in the UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme

University/research organisation	2021	2023	Total
University College London	2	7	9
University of Cambridge	1	4	5
London School of Economics and Political Science	0	2	2
University of Oxford	0	1	1
University of Manchester	0	4	4
University of Exeter	1	3	4
University of Bristol	2	1	3
Kings College London	1	1	2
University of Edinburgh	1	0	1
University of Glasgow	1	0	1
University of Warwick	1	0	1
University of York	1	0	1
University of Bath	1	2	3
University of Leeds	1	2	3
University of Essex	1	1	2
University of Loughborough	1	1	2
University of Sheffield	1	1	2
Aston University	0	1	1
Cardiff University	1	0	1
Durham University	0	1	1
Queen's University of Belfast	0	1	1
University of Birmingham	1	0	1
Cardiff Metropolitan University	0	1	2
Nottingham Trent University	2	0	2
University of the West of England	2	0	2
Bournemouth University	0	1	1
British Geological Survey	0	1	1
Cranfield University	0	1	1
Institute of Development Studies	1	0	1
National Institute of Economic and Social Research	0	1	1
Royal Holloway, University of London	0	1	1
Scotland's Rural College	0	1	1
SOAS	0	1	1
Swansea University	0	1	1
University of Bangor	1	0	1
University of Dundee	1	0	1
University of Gloucestershire	0	1	1

University of Greenwich	1	0	1
University of Keele	0	1	1
University of Reading	0	1	1
University of Roehampton	0	1	1

Appendix 3: Host organisations involved in the UKRI policy fellowship scheme.

	Government department, arm's length body and what works centre	2021 scheme	2023 scheme	Total	Staff numbers 2023/24	Ratio of staff to fellows
1	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	4	4	8	9,435	1,179
2	Scottish Government	2	4	6	28,110	4,685
3	Welsh Government	3	3	6	6,110	1,018
4	Ministry of Justice	2	3	5	95,990	19,198
5	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	2	2	4	13,715	3,429
6	Department for Transport	3	1	4	16,650	4,163
7	Home Office	1	3	4	51,020	12,755
8	Cabinet Office	2	1	3	10,735	3,578
9	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities	1	2	3	3,883	4,715
10	Northern Ireland Executive	0	3	3	23,722	7,907
11	Administrative Data Science UK	2	10	12	NA	NA
12	Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)	2	0	2	NA	NA
13	College of Policing	0	2	2	600	300
14	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	0	2	2	975	487
15	Department for Health and Social Care	0	2	2	10485	5,243
16	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology	0	2	2	6,730	3,365
17	Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)	0	2	2	93,815	46,908
18	Centre for Homeless Impact	0	1	1	29	29
19	Competition and Markets Authority	0	1	1	1,075	1,075
20	Department for Business and Trade	0	1	1	9,610	9,610
21	Department for Education	0	1	1	8,600	8,600
22	Department for Energy Security and Net Zero	0	1	1	4,360	4,360
23	Education Endowment Foundation	0	1	1	94	94
24	HM Treasury	0	1	1	2,710	2,710
25	National Infrastructure Commission	0	1	1	42	42

26	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills	0	1	1	1,995	1,995
27	Wales Centre for Public Policy	0	1	1	44	44
28	Youth Futures Foundation	0	1	1	NA	NA
	Total	24	47	73	NA	NA

Appendix 4: Methodology

Introduction

Our assessment of the policy fellowship scheme draws on information from six evaluation methods.

1. Literature review and web search
2. Focus groups with policy fellows and hosts
3. Interviews with senior policy and research leaders
4. Case studies
5. Surveys
6. Researchfish database

This mixed methods approach was adopted to enable us to test the theory of change that underpins the scheme. This approach was also used because we expected to find a variety of experiences and opinions about the operation of the scheme reflecting the different perspectives of fellows, hosts and home organisations. We anticipated that these different forms of data collection and analysis would emphasise different aspects of the policy fellowship scheme from the person-centred reflections of the fellows and hosts to the higher-level strategic visioning of the scheme's organisers. Our approach brought together different methods commonly used when evaluating secondments but in a mixed methods approach to allow for a comparison of methodologies and provide a richer set of data in a literature review on secondments between 2001 and 2021. It was found that most of the fifty-four studies employ a qualitative research design (23), comprising case studies, semi-structured or in-depth interviews, focus groups, with case studies (9) and interviews design (9) being equally selected. Eighteen out of the fifty-four studies had a quantitative design, and ten a mixed-method methodology design (Lampraki, 2022).

The rest of this section provides an outline of the six research methods used in this study and the associated ethics approvals process.

Literature review and web search

The literature review for this report involved structured searches of the Google Scholar, Overton, Scopus and Web of Science databases using the key words: Research AND 'Policy Fellow' AND Evaluation AND 'United Kingdom' for the period 2020 to 2025. This search produced initial search protocol and subsequent review of the abstracts of these articles and reports produced an initial count of 1,494 publications. Once four duplicate references were removed, the abstracts and summaries of these papers were read to identify articles which considered the operation of policy fellowships.

Table 6: Literature Review Search Results

	Google Scholar	Overton	Scopus	Web of Science	Recommended by interviewees and others
Research AND Policy AND Fellow AND Evaluation	767	105 (712)	126	248	24
Initial items identified	14	0	7	5	
Items included after review	17				
	41				

In-keeping with the first phase evaluation this review revealed three themes in the evaluation research to date. First, a focus on developments at the individual project level with analyses that considered the benefits and costs of these schemes to the participating fellows. Second, studies that concentrated on the relational aspects of fellowship working within the host organisation and with the home research organisation. Third, studies which considered the wider systems of research and policy engagement. What the review revealed in addition was a parallel set of studies which emphasised the role of organisational and sector cultures as well as the political processes associated with the determination of research questions and the interpretation of evidence and evaluations. A summary of the literature review is contained in Appendix 2.

Focus group with fellows and policy hosts

Focus groups have long been recognised as a valuable method in applied research and evaluation (Massey 2011). The focus group approach was chosen in preference to individual interviews because a number of fellows and hosts had previously been interviewed by the project team as part of earlier exploratory studies of the UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme (Morris and Watermeyer 2026). This approach was also selected as an effective method for gaining detailed insights into the operation of initiatives, their outputs, outcomes, and impacts. To ensure the sessions were handled in a thoughtful and inclusive way, contributions were encouraged from all participants, with the option to submit additional material after the event in cases where confidentiality was a concern.

We initially planned to conduct four focus group discussions at varying times to facilitate engagement from groups of fellows and groups of hosts. However, scheduling challenges prevented this plan from being realised and we eventually held nine focus groups involving 32 of the 47 fellows in the 2023 cohort of the scheme and three interviews with fellows from the 2021 cohort. We also held seven focus groups with 21 hosts from 15 host organisations and one panel discussion with four fellows and three hosts.

The focus group discussions and interviews were conducted under Chatham House rules. These sessions drew on prompt questions (see Appendices 5 and 6) and an associated

script that had been previously reviewed by the project advisory panel. Participants were sent an information sheet and a consent form in advance of the sessions, following a format and approach agreed with the UCL Ethics Committee.

The sessions were audio recorded, and the material collected was subsequently transcribed. The transcripts were cleaned and edited, with any references to individual identities, home or host organisations anonymised. The original audio recordings were deleted once transcription was complete, and the resulting text was analysed through a combination of manual sorting and coding using NVivo. The coding was guided by previously referenced forms of outcomes and impacts, while also allowing for the identification of additional insights. We conducted thematic analysis of the transcripts in Nvivo, identifying recurring patterns that emerged through group dynamics and the open interplay among participants. The resulting themes captured a spectrum of individual attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, while also surfacing implicit norms and shared social values that may otherwise have remained unspoken. The coding and thematic analysis for each participant were reviewed and quality assured by another member of the team. The results of this analysis were then discussed with the project advisory panel, ESRC Policy and Engagement Team and three selected host departments.

The focus group format enabled dynamic interaction between participants, which we anticipated would generate richer insights than individual interviews alone. Crucially, it allowed for comparison and cross-referencing across experiences, helping us to better understand the cohort as a collective.

While focus groups can carry the risk of groupthink, we found instead that they created space for participants to respond to one another, building on, challenging or elaborating each other's reflections (Barbour 2018). The risks of group think emerging in the answers of the focus group participants were counteracted through six mechanisms. First, through our questioning and prompts, we encouraged participants to agree or disagree with other participant's answers, providing prompts such as 'how was that experience for you was it similar or different?'. We intentionally encouraged both agreement and disagreement to surface a diverse range of perspectives. In one focus group, the following exchange illustrates how prompting divergence can lead to a thoughtful acknowledgement of difference:

‘Interviewer 1: Did you want to come in and add or take us in a different direction?’

Fellow Rep 14: It's quite difficult to follow that because our experiences are so very different in terms of what we're doing.’

Second, through the circulation of a Qualtrics form to participants that could be used to record any individual views on a confidential and anonymous basis that had not previously been raised in the focus group. Third, we provided all focus group participants with a copy of the anonymised transcript of their session and allowed them to amend their answers. Fourth, we also put the theory of change in the Teams Chat, asking participants to comment on it in the Chat, via email or on the Qualtrics form. Submissions on the form were very

limited suggesting participants felt comfortable talking in the group or that they did not have the time following the focus group to follow up. Fifth, in our introduction to each focus group session we encouraged the participants to challenge any of our questions if they felt they contained inaccurate assumptions or could be expressed more effectively. Finally, we made some small adjustments to how we conducted the focus group after the first group in response to feedback that there was insufficient direct attention to the experiences of What Works fellows in the questioning. As one of the focus group participants commented:

‘Too often when we (What Works fellows) attend fellowship events, my impression is that people tend to forget about us. I think people just kind of look at the whole cohort as everyone being a policy fellow. However, there is a small, I like to think of it as an exclusive club of people who are not exactly policy fellows, but more like What Works Fellows’ (Fellow Rep 7).

Ethics

The evaluation methodology outlined in this report was approved by the Humanities, Arts and Sciences Research Ethics Committee at University College London with the ethics ID 1061, reference No Z6364106/2025/04/57. Although ethics approval was not formally required for a service evaluation, we decided to seek this clearance from the outset of the project as we anticipated producing additional research outputs. This approach ensured that participants were informed and consented to their data being used for specified purposes beyond this report. All data collected was anonymised to protect the participants identities.

During the data collection phase of the project, we became aware that the ESRC had published a data policy in 2018 which included a commitment to Open Data and Open Science. We also learned that this policy was reviewed in late 2024 by Professor Angela Daly and a team at the University of Dundee and that a consultation on the revised Data Policy was underway within UKRI. The Daly Review was premised on the assumption that the ESRC should aim to maximise the use of research data that it funds for public benefit’ (Allanson, 2024). The Daly Review highlighted the impact of the General Data Protection Regulation (2018) and the tensions that exist between this legislation and the earlier Freedom of Information Act (2000) as well as the ESRC Data Policy (2018). The Review’s final report recommended that the scope of the ESRC’s open data principles should be extended to other areas of the UKRI’s operations.

Given the richness of the insights gathered through the Policy Fellowship evaluation and the likely extension of the open data policy across other research councils, we recognised the potential value of this dataset for future research. Accordingly, we revised our ethics application to seek explicit consent from participants for the use of interview transcripts in an open data journal. Once data collection was complete, we contacted fellows to request permission to use their transcripts for this purpose.

Data sources: All data was collected by the research team excluding Researchfish and ESRC PPET surveys.

Software code: I developed the software, informed by examples found online and modified

using ChatGPT.

AI: UCL's closed version of Copilot was used for proofreading.

Other: Parts of this work were developed in conversations with members of the advisory group and ESRC PPET, as listed in the Acknowledgements.

Appendix 5: Questions for semi-structured focus groups with fellows

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself, your host organisation and your fellowship project.
2. Can you describe a specific way in which policy work or decisions have changed as a result of insights or evidence gained through the fellowship? Can you describe a specific way in which your Fellowship has helped improve the way government and other public sector organisations create, share and use high-quality evidence?
3. In what ways has participating in the fellowship influenced your personal or professional development?
4. How has the fellowship contributed to building or strengthening relationships between academic and policy communities or What works networks??
5. What changes, if any, have occurred within the policy team/What Works Centre as a result of your Fellowship?
6. How has the fellowship affected the way your research organisation approaches engagement with policymakers or What Works Centres?
7. Has the fellowship influenced how you or your host organisation think about or frame the policy issue? For What Works fellows, has the fellowship influenced how you or your host organisation think about or frame evidence collation or synthesis, If so, how?
8. What do you think about the Theory of Change?

Appendix 6: Questions for semi-structured focus groups with hosts

1. Can you describe a specific way in which policy work or decisions have changed as a result of insights or evidence gained through the fellowship? Or can you describe a specific way in which your Fellowship has helped improve the way government and other public sector organisations create, share and use high-quality evidence?
2. In what ways has hosting the fellowship influenced your personal or professional development?
3. How has the fellowship contributed to building or strengthening relationships between academic and policy communities or What works networks?
4. What lasting changes, if any, have occurred within your team/What Works Centre as a result of your Fellowship?
5. How has the fellowship affected the way your department or What Works Centres approaches research and engaging with academia.
6. Has the fellowship influenced how you and your team think about or frame the policy issue For What Works fellows, has the fellowship influenced how you or your host organisation think about or frame evidence collation or synthesis, If so, how?

7. What do you think about the Theory of Change?

Appendix 6: Questions for semi-structured interviews

1. Please can you provide an overview of your organisation's policy positions on research and innovation and the documents within which reference is made to these policies?
2. Please can you provide us with an overview of how your organisation's research and innovation policies/strategies have been developed?
3. How do you view the ability of university researchers and research organisations to engage meaningfully with national and regional policy agendas? How is this reflected in your organisation's views on the structure and support of 'policy exchange' activities and 'research impact'?
4. How are the research and innovation policy/strategy positions adopted by your organisation aligned or not of with comparable organisations and collaborative partners in the UK and overseas?
5. Does your organisation have a view about 'policy exchange' activity and funding involving university researchers with government and other public sector bodies and charities? Is there a view about how this is best supported by member institutions, national governments and Mayoral Strategic authorities?
6. What role does your organisation play in facilitating longer-term partnerships or networks between university researchers, policymakers, and external bodies such as national governments and Mayoral Strategic Authorities? In short, is there a view about how this is best organised at a national and regional level?
7. Do you have a personal view about the success or otherwise of 'policy exchange' activity between university researchers with national governments and other public sector bodies? What are the factors that help it to work? What are the barriers?
8. Have you observed any changes in the way the relationship between research and policy is conceptualised, either in strategic communications, policy documents, or public discourse, within or beyond your organisation?

Appendix 7. Literature Review

Introduction

Over the last twenty-five years there has been growing interest among research funders, government departments and universities in encouraging academic researchers to engage

in policy orientated research; engage with policy professionals and more recently to take part in policy fellowships (NCCPE 2023; Mäkelä, Boaz, and Oliver 2025; UPEN 2025). In this section of the evaluation report we examine how research and the work of researchers informs policy and the work of policymakers. The background models and contextual information in this section provide the basis for the evaluation of the 2023 Policy Fellowship scheme in subsequent sections. Here we consider the extent to which the scheme has met the objectives of:

enhancing researcher-policy collaboration and mutual understanding;

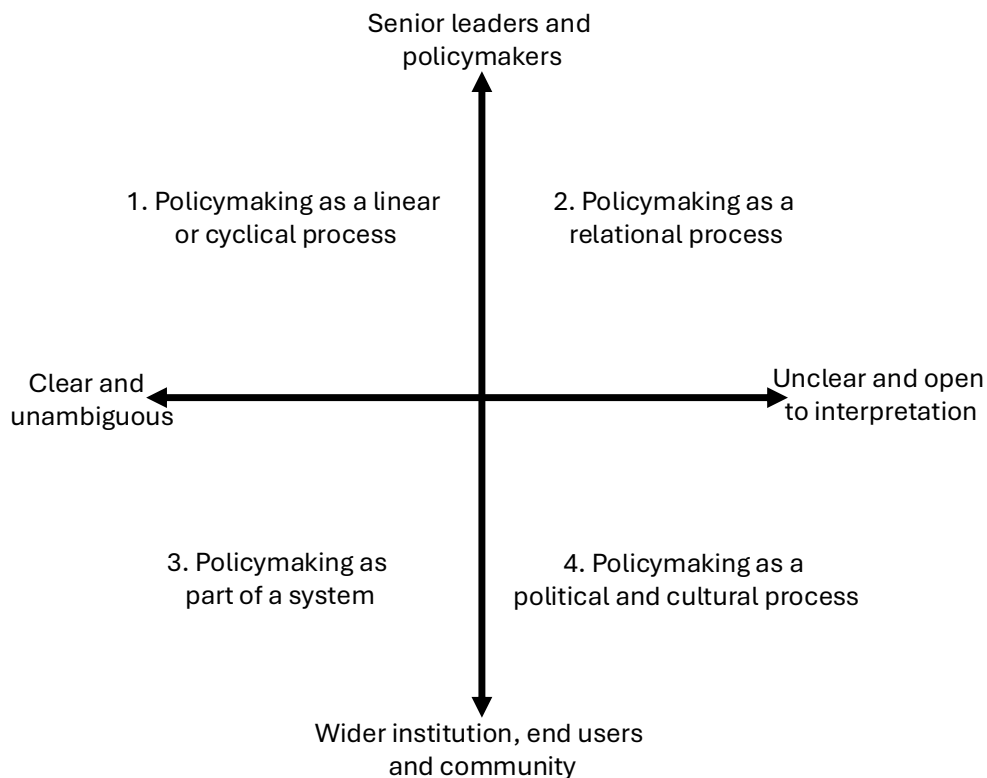
increasing mobility between academia and government; and

aligning fellowship opportunities with government research priorities and UKRI strategic goals.

How does the work of academic researchers inform policy development?

The term policy is widely used but rarely defined precisely (Hogwood and Gunn 1984; Cairney and Kippin 2023). Where definitions have been offered, they have tended to vary in terms of the emphasis they place on formal written statements of intentions and planned actions and vaguer accounts of the patterns of thought, speech and action on the other. They have also varied in the extent to which the focus is on top down or bottom-up policy development. For example, emphasis is sometimes placed on government, institutional and organisation level activity, e.g. the work of politicians, policy makers and institutional leaders, whilst others focus on the work of more junior staff, practitioners in the organisations affected by policy or the end-users. The combination of these two dimensions produces four distinctive potential focal points for the examination of the interaction between researchers and policymakers and academic evidence and evaluation as outlined in Figure 4 below.

Figure 5: The dimensions and elements of policy making and implementation



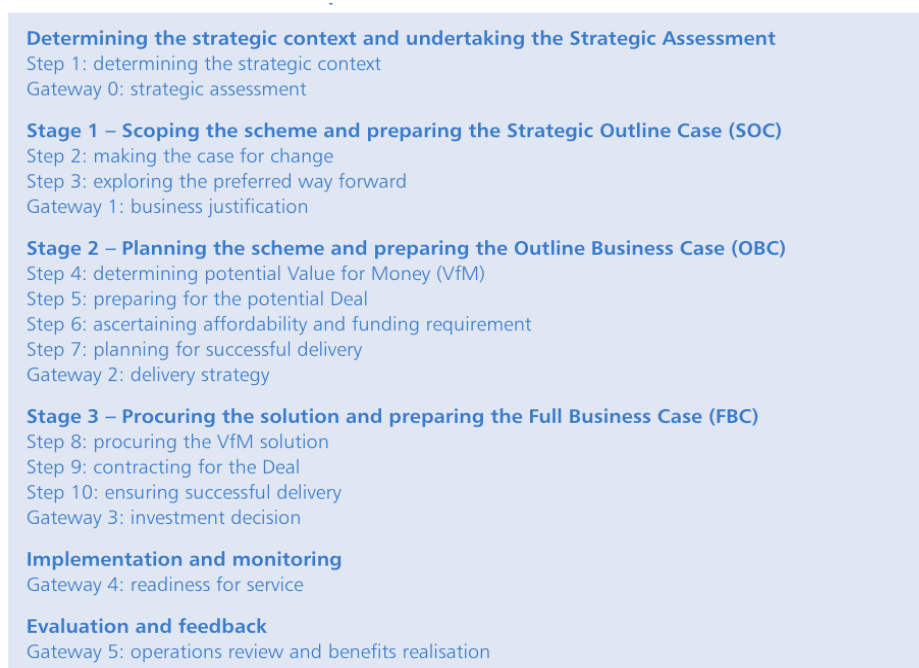
The distinctions in figure 5 are important because for many researchers studying the relationships between research evidence, evaluation and policymaking the first three approaches (i.e. linear, relational and systems) are sufficiently distinctive and different from one another that they should be treated separately (Best and Holmes 2010). As we will see, these different approaches have generated normative guidance on how to develop policy and analytical and critical commentary on policymaking in practice. Each tends to privilege particular understandings of the policy processes. For some, these different views of research reflect distinct stages in the development of thinking about policy, analysis and engagement activities (Hopkins et al. 2021). For others, the different perspectives reveal different facets of these activities and can be used separately or together to analyse and evaluate activity (OECD 2025). In this evaluation study we have adopted the latter approach to inform the design of our evaluation framework. We have also added a fourth view of research-policy engagement activity as a political and cultural activity to reflect insights derived from more recent insider accounts of these activities as they actually occur in government departments (Mulgan 2025; Boyd 2024; Freedman 2024; Myers 2020). This fourth perspective emphasises similarities and differences of views between politicians, policymakers, practitioners and the end-users affected by these decisions. This fourth perspective also reflects longer traditions in organisation studies and public policy research literature about how to analyse change and gives primacy to how the individuals involved in policymaking conceive of their own practice (Morgan 1986; Burrell and Morgan 1979; Jabko and Schmidt 2021). What follows is a discussion of the four views of research-policy engagement activity.

Policymaking as a linear or cyclical process

This approach focuses on defining the activities which might be undertaken as separate steps as part of a linear or cyclical process of policy development. The roots of this approach in academic discussion of public policy making can be traced back to the 1950s when Harold Lasswell and others outlined a different type of work that needed to be undertaken when developing public policy. In the 1970s (Althaus & Threlfall 2021) when describing the messier reality of policymaking in practice (Sasse and Thomas 2022).

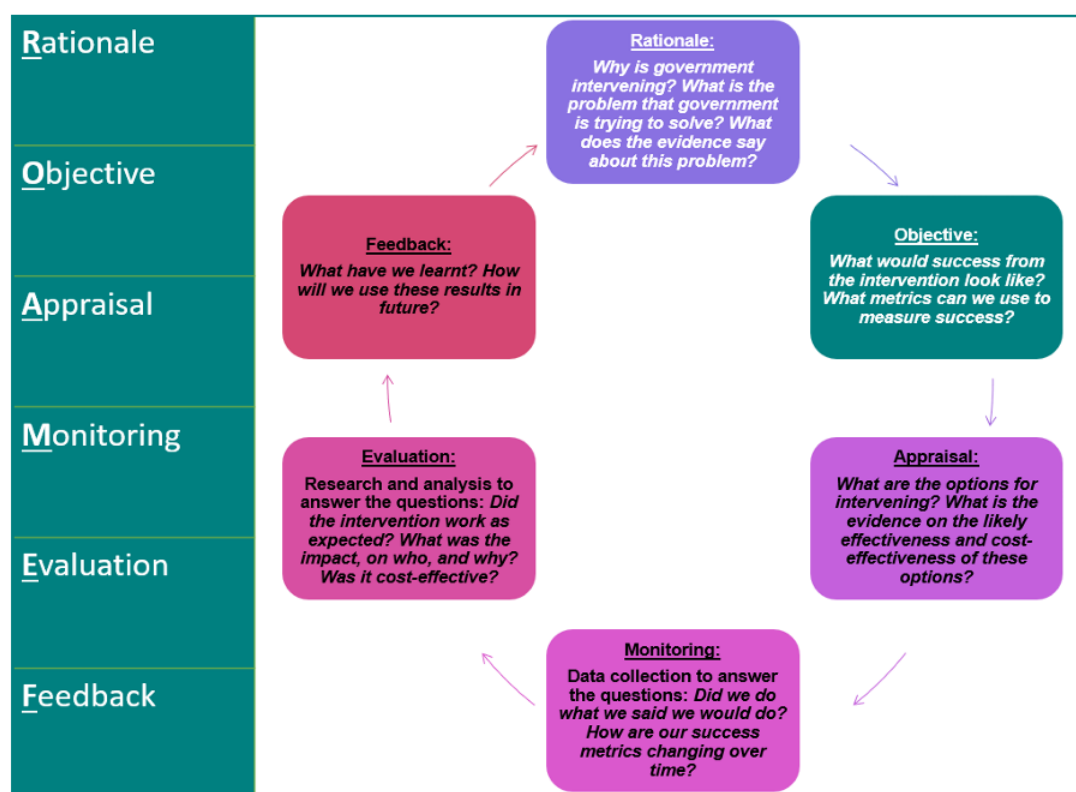
Examples of the guidance available to civil and public servants working in central government, arms-length bodies, local government and What Works Centres about how research should inform evidence gathering, policy implementation and evaluation is set out in a series of guidance books. The Treasury's Green Book provides guidance for the senior responsible official (SRO) associated with major projects and members of the commercial, economics and finance professions advising them. (HM Treasury 2022). The Aqua Book sets out guidance for members of the analysis function involved in producing quality analysis for government departments (Analysis Function 2026). The Magenta Book details guidance on how to conduct evaluations (HM Treasury 2026). Finally, the Teal Book outlines how portfolios, programmes and projects should be managed (Government Project Delivery 2025). An example of how these different sources of advice encourage public servants to consider policymaking a series of steps in a policy cycle or series of stages in the development and implementation of a plan are provided by figures 6 and 7 below which are taken from the Treasury's Green and Magenta books. A major focus in these accounts is the definition of the outputs and outcomes that should be expected from the successful implementation of a project. These tangible results are then used to provide an instrumental measure of what can be evaluated to assess the achievements of the project. In short, what are the reports, forecasts, data sets and other forms of analysis that have informed or should have informed the development of policy and its implementation.

Figure 7: The Business Case Development Framework (Green Book Guidance)



Source (HM Treasury 2018: 12)

Figure 8. The ROAMEF Cycle (Magenta Book Guidance)



Source (HM Treasury 2020: 11)

From a cyclical or linear policy development perspective, the role of researchers is to engage with policy development at its inception, through evidence gathering to inform analysis of issues, the development of options and the appraisal of alternatives. These experts should then also play a role in the subsequent process, impact and value for money evaluations.

Polymaking as Relationships

The second of our four approaches to the analysis of polymaking gives primacy to the relationships between individuals and groups of people within and between organisations. This approach draws on the often-repeated observation that the most influential research on policy development is often disseminated through personal networks. This approach views evidence gathering and evaluation as inherently collaborative and rarely the work of individuals working on isolated activities.

One of the principal tools used to map these relationships is stakeholder analysis (Analysis Function 2024) which maps the individuals and groups with an interest in a policy issue. In more sophisticated forms this entails assessing the scale of influence and impact in a matrix. These forms of analysis typically identify the role of ministers, politicians and senior polymakers on an issue as well as lobbying groupings and international, national or local collective bodies, industry federations, trade associations or trade unions. This form of analysis also reveals the important contribution made by wider communities whether defined as customers, end users or citizens. In short, these relationships are generally multi-level dynamic and complex.

The opportunities for the development of relationships between policy professional and researchers are shaped by organisational structures, decision making processes and resource allocation.

In central and local government departments politicians and civil/public servants are the principal policymakers. In these settings, politicians decide and communicate policy and civil and public servants advise and support the development and implementation of these proposals and the maintenance of established policies. In arms-length bodies, (e.g. the Competitions and Markets Authority (CMA) and Ofsted) and What Works Centres politicians are rarely engaged in the day-to-day activities of the organisation but provide strategic guidance.

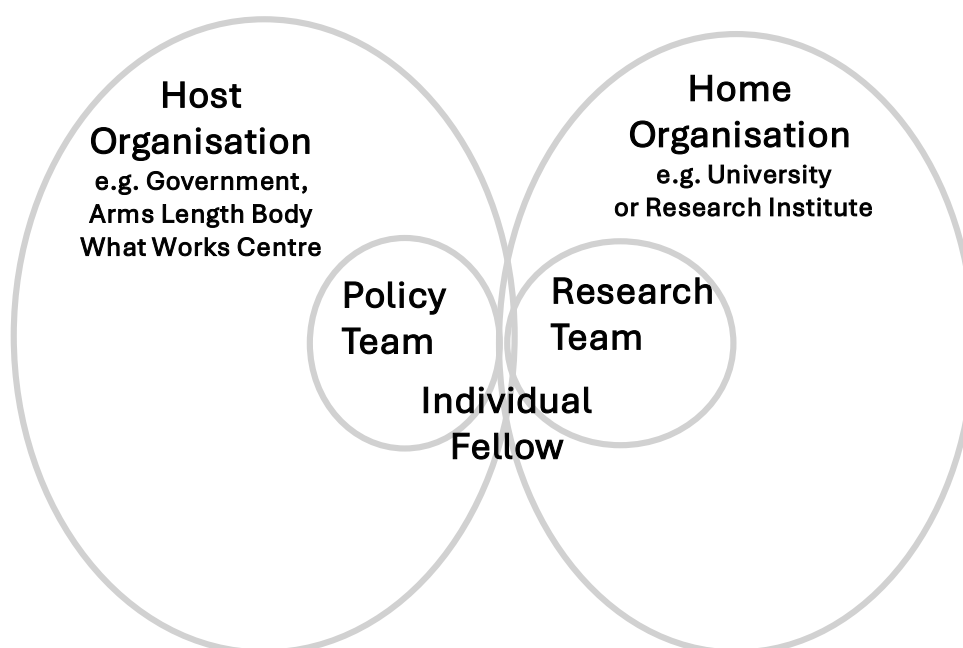
In central and devolved governments civil servants are organised vertically into ten hierarchical grades from administrative assistant to permanent secretary with a distinction between junior and senior civil servants. The latter group of deputy directors, directors and director generals sign off major actions, spending and policy proposals before they are put to ministers for approval. Senior civil servants also tend to move between roles and departments regularly to gain new experiences and promotion, a process often referred to as 'churn'. Civil servants are organised within ministries and departments into teams, divisions, directorates and groups. Most of these civil servants are then assigned or choose to join one of 21 professions or functions, e.g. the policy profession (c35,000 staff), the analysis function (c17,000 staff), project delivery (c26,000 staff) and operational delivery (c300,000) (Cabinet Office 2024). Among these groups the policy profession is expected to develop policy and commission research evidence collection and evaluation from a separate analysis function. The analysis function varies in size and sophistication between different ministries and departments, but normally includes separate professional groups of social researchers, statisticians, economists and operational researchers. With major policy initiatives responsibility for implementation is then handed over to the government's project delivery function who oversee large scale changes to staffing structures and systems before the staff in operational delivery teams begin to work with the new arrangements. In local government, national parliaments and assemblies as well as arms-length bodies and What Works centres there are similar grade structures and different internal department arrangements. In these settings it is much rarer to see formal distinctions between different groups of professional researchers. In universities staff are typically divided into three groups: academics, professional services staff and manual grades. These staff, like their counterparts in the civil service, have a common grading and pay structure, but different job and role descriptions dependent upon the activities they are expected to undertake on a day-to-day basis. Within the academic staff group staff are categorised according to their contract status as either researchers; teachers and researchers; teaching only staff or research enabling staff (e.g. technicians). These distinctions influence the amount of time these staff are allocated to undertake research and teaching and whether they are included in the periodic Research Excellence Framework (REF). Academic staff tend to remain within a chosen discipline or subject area for most of their university careers but may move between institutions to gain new experiences and promotion. Most academics are members or followers of one or more research and scholarly associations and will endeavour to keep up to date in their specialisms by reading work published in journals and books associated with these groupings.

Staff in the research category are generally expected to apply for and win research grants, write journal articles, book chapters and books, supervise doctoral students and engaged in other scholarly activity. Many of these activities will extend over several years and are therefore difficult to pause or stop midway through a project. Academic staff and their

professional services colleagues are organised on a day-to-day basis within universities and research institutes in subject and discipline-based groups, departments or schools which are then typically grouped together in faculties or colleges. The work of these groups as measured by research publications, grant capture and impact on government policy and business practice is assessed every seven years by the REF.

The relational approach draws attention to the need for these academic researchers to change their relationships with colleagues in their home organisation and form new relationships with staff in their new host organisation. This begins with gaining support from their university or other research organisation at a team, departmental and institution level. If they are going to go on a policy fellowship, then their existing role will need to change and this may mean cancelling or postponing existing activities or bringing in additional staff to undertake these duties while they are away. Once this potential change in relationships has been agreed, the next step is applying for the role and being selected before being inducted into the new team and host organisation. Once in post there is then a need to maintain and manage relationships with the host policy team and organisation as well as with their home research team and university or research organisation. It seems reasonable therefore to postulate that successful completion of the fellowship and the possibility of future fellowships being agreed by the host and home organisations will depend on their satisfaction with the inputs provided by funders as well as the activities, outputs, outcomes and impact of the fellow's work. Figure 7 below maps out these relationships and begins the theme of seeing these different elements as part of a wider system. Recognising the complexity of boundary spanning and cross-institutional collaboration, this evaluation aims to explore the relational dynamics of the UKRI Policy Fellowships by examining their inputs, activities and outcomes, with a focus on how the scheme fosters cross-organisational collaboration.

Figure 7: Inter an intra-organisational relationship on policy fellowship schemes



Polymaking as systems

Since the early 2010s the UK Civil Service has increasingly considered policy development as a dynamic process within an interconnected system of activities rather than a set of isolated initiatives (Hallsworth, Parker, and Rutter 2011; Hallsworth 2011). This systems approach highlights the importance of understanding complexity, interdependencies and both the intended and unintended consequences of initiatives across sectors and stakeholders (GOS, 2023). This approach draws on analogies from the natural sciences and engineering, where systems are studied as interconnected wholes rather than isolated parts. Just as ecosystems or mechanical systems rely on the interaction of various elements and components, policy systems involve multiple actors, processes, and institutions that influence one another.

At both national and regional level, systems thinking has informed the development of the influential Triple Helix Model used to explain the superior economic performance of places like the Boston's Technology Corridor and Silicon Valley (Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz 1996). This conceptual framing links policymaking processes and strategic development and has since evolved into the Quadruple and Quintuple models. These models have been used to advocate greater interaction between academic researchers, policy makers, businesspeople and civic leaders (Carayannis and Campbell 2009; Barth and Campbell 2012; Goddard et al. 2016).

Figure 8: The Triple, Quadruple and Quintuple Helices, Policy Initiatives and Modes of Research

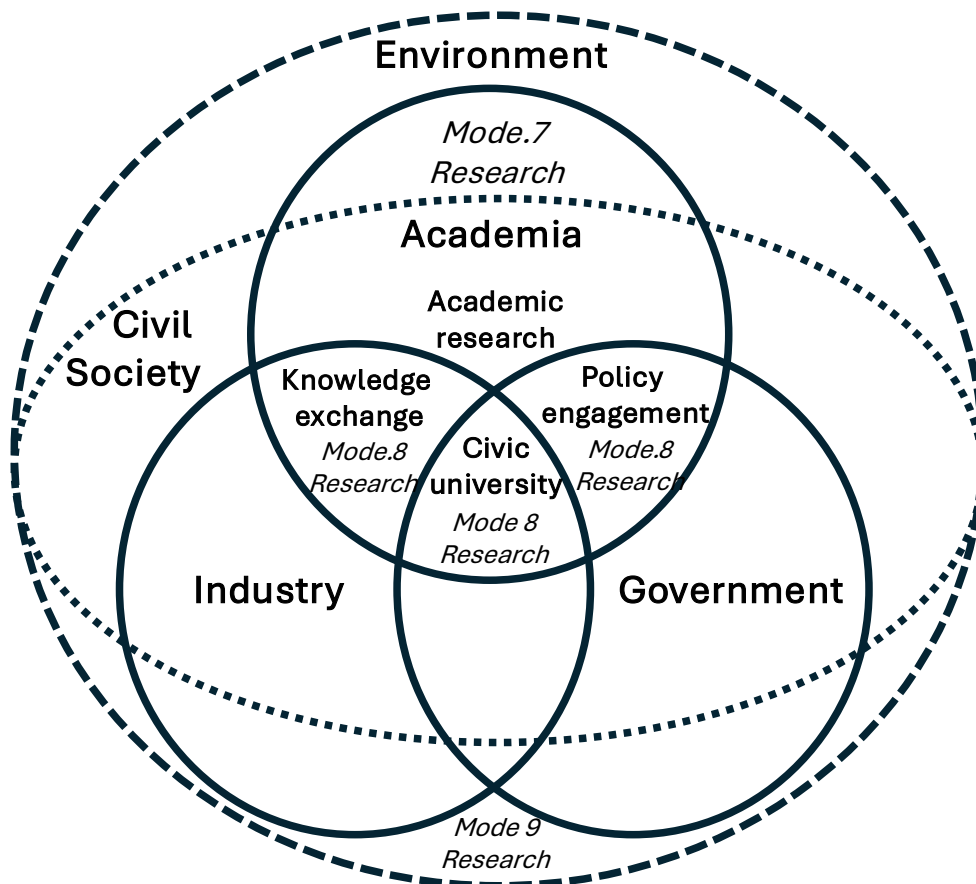


Figure 8 provides a conceptual view of the possible relationship between universities, government and business. It also draws attention to the possible implications for the types of

research undertaken in these different settings whether that be Mode 1, 2 or 3. Mode 1 research is discipline-based, expert-led, and academically driven, focused on theoretical knowledge within established scientific paradigms and controlled institutional settings (Gibbons et al. 1994). By contrast Mode 2 research is transdisciplinary, collaborative, application-oriented knowledge production conducted in real-world contexts with diverse stakeholders (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2001). Finally, Mode 3 research has a less clear-cut claim to distinctiveness as it is defined as an approach which seeks to integrate multiple sources of knowledge, emphasising co-creation and collaboration across academia, industry and society (Carayannis, Campbell, and Rehman 2016). As also noted in Figure 8, a series of research council initiatives, funding streams and forms of assessment have been developed over the last twenty-five years to encourage interactions between university-based researchers under the general heading of promoting impact. These initiatives have included several focused-on university and business interaction under the banner of knowledge exchange, interaction with local communities and a civic university network as well as schemes to promote policy engagement.

Systems thinking has also informed the suggestion that policy development should be informed by a theory of change (TOC) (Sullivan and Stewart 2006). Guidance on this approach suggests that the first stage in this process is to identify the stakeholders with an interest in the proposed policy and to categorise them according to their interest and influence over this policy area. The next stage is to assemble representatives of these different interest groups and to define the intended outputs, outcomes and impacts as well as inputs and activities/processes that need to be assembled to achieve these goals (Analysis Function, 2025).

A recent systematic review of this approach has revealed multiple benefits, gaining a better understanding of the complexity of systems, facilitating stakeholder engagement, capturing different perspectives, developing a more holistic view, shifting thinking and mental models (Nguyen et al, 2023). The barriers to using this form of analysis include limited practitioner expertise, inconsistent terminology and categorisation leading to resistance to new views and approaches, challenges in stakeholder engagement, and constraints related to time and resources.

From a systems perspective policy fellows are potentially important additions to the range of people and organisations engaged in policy development, evidence gathering, implementation and evaluation. However, it is also important that the hosts, home organisations and others involved in these fellowships are aware of the role of these other groups. As a recent systems map demonstrates there are many hundreds of advisory groups, consultancies and research organisations and others active in this space (UPEN, 2025).

3.6 Policymaking as politics and culture

The last of the four conceptual frameworks sees policymaking as a deeply political and culturally located process, shaped by values, beliefs, and struggles over authority and meaning. For example, Stephen Myers a former senior civil servant argues that policy decisions are grounded in the moral and cultural assumptions of societies, rather than being the outcome of neutral, rational procedures (Myers 2020). He highlights that policymakers operate within social contexts where notions of fairness, justice, and responsibility are culturally defined, making every policy choice an expression of collective values as much as evidence or expertise.

The role of politics in policymaking and its relationship with public trust is taken on Gil Eyal's *The Crisis of Expertise* which illustrates how the authority of experts has become increasingly contested in contemporary democracies (Eyal 2019). Taking as his starting point the BREXIT debates and Michael Gove's charge in 2016 that 'I think we've had enough of experts' Eyal demonstrates that disagreements about evidence and expertise often reflect broader cultural and political divides, where trust in institutions and academic authority have been challenged if not fractured. Chief among these challenges were the financial crisis in 2009, BREXIT in 2016, Covid between 2020 and 2022 and questions about climate change (Eyal 2019) (Eyal, 2021). Similar points are made by Justin Parkhurst. In *The Politics of Evidence*, he suggests that evidence is never used in a purely objective manner but is frequently, if not always, selectively interpreted, prioritized, or ignored depending on ideological commitments and political incentives (Parkhurst 2017).

Geoff Mulgan, the former Head of Policy in No 10 Downing Street, reinforces these points in his recent book *When Science Meets Power* where he notes the interaction between knowledge and policy is shaped by competing narratives about what constitutes legitimate reasoning (Mulgan 2025). A counterpoint to this analysis is provided by Sir Ian Boyd, a former Chief Scientific Adviser in the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) contrasts the purity and analytical rigour of scientific analysis, if only ever probable facts, with the much more fluid and less endearing 'politics factory' of much modern policymaking (Boyd 2024).

For writers associated with the politics and culture perspective, policymaking is not a neutral technocratic exercise, but a dynamic negotiation where power relations and societal values ultimately determine which policies are seen as credible, legitimate and just. This perspective stresses the importance of academic researchers understanding the cultural and political issues which frame the range of acceptable research methods and potential policy solutions.

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