

The Art of the Possible: Catalysts, Collaborations and Capabilities in Academic-Policy Engagement

January 2025



**Capabilities in Academic
Policy Engagement**



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Lead Authors:

Sarah Chaytor, Robyn Parker, Olivia Stevenson.

This report has been written collaboratively with contributions from team members and our partners across the project.

Foreword

Research England supports a vibrant research and knowledge exchange system in England's higher education sector. That includes nurturing emerging academic capabilities, enabling them to make the greatest possible contribution to our country's economy and society. Support for CAPE over the last four years has been an important pillar for our priority of building the capability to support 'evidence based' public policy.



Insights arising from university research can illuminate complex policy problems and help to identify potential solutions. The Research Excellence Framework has demonstrated the significant impacts that UK research has on public policymaking, both within the UK and internationally. Historically, however, only a small proportion of academics have engaged regularly with the policy community and there has been little opportunity for sector-wide discussion and debate about assessing and enhancing that engagement.

CAPE has provided a focal point for academic-policy engagement. It has supported a partnership of universities with distinctive characteristics and from different places across England to work together in order to build effective relationships with policymakers, deliver impactful projects, and enhance good practice across the sector. CAPE has expanded the frontiers of academic-policy engagement to include more organisations from regional and local government. It has allowed both universities and public bodies to experiment with academic-policy engagement through temporary placements and secondments. It has engaged a wide range of institutions and individuals, translating expertise from established practitioners into practical guidance for less experienced colleagues.

This report captures some of the many achievements and insights from CAPE over the last few years. I am delighted that Research England has been able to support the work of CAPE and I look forward to our continued involvement in the development of this exciting domain.

Jessica Corner,

Executive Director, Research England



**Research
England**



Introduction

Every person in the UK is impacted by public policy. The provision of pre-school education; the shape and size of the NHS; the effectiveness of flood defences; the duties of company directors; the regulation of food safety; and the shift to renewable energy are among the many features of our lives today. All are shaped by policy choices made by national, regional and local governments.

Public policy in democratic society reflects broad visions set out by politicians. Some policy areas are ‘doorstep’ issues, more likely to rise to the top of voters’ decision-making during election periods. Others concern only particular communities of interest and receive less public attention. The political context for public policy remains of paramount importance, with elected politicians ultimately responsible for governmental processes. Many of these have the potential for engagement with external evidence and expertise.

Policy takes many forms, from informal voluntary rules within organisations, through advisory guidance to national and international legislation. Decisions, for example, on clinical practice, on HR policy, on looking after vulnerable people or on keeping communities safe are made in countless places across the public and private sectors. These sites are very often where policy innovations are first made and tested.

Universities are major sources of evidence and expertise to inform the development, implementation, and scrutiny of public policy. Use of evidence in policy ranges from illuminating problems; underpinning problem analysis; identifying potential solutions; and evaluating policy implementation.

**What’s one thing
you are going to
take forward after
CAPE post-2024?**



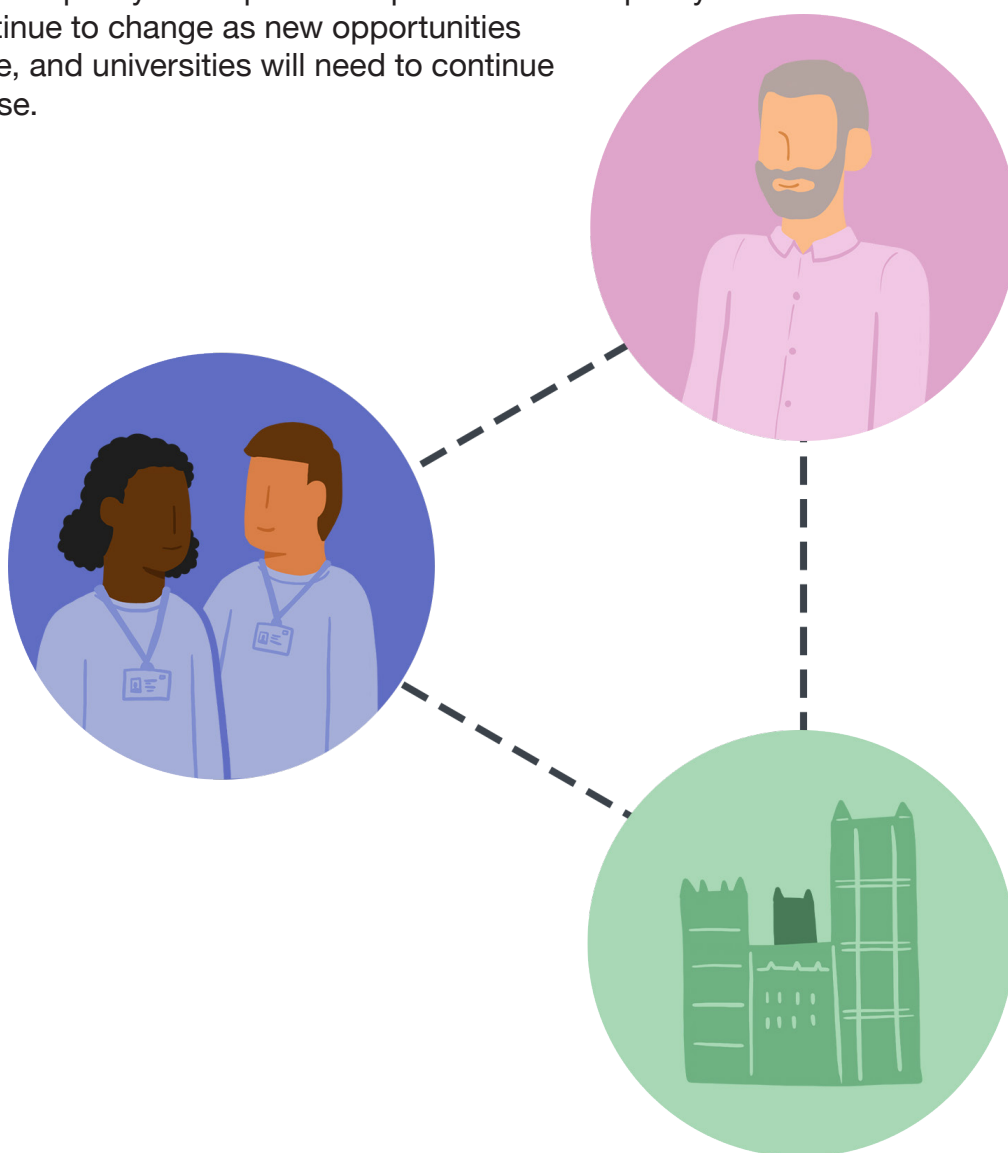
**Collaborative approach to knowledge
exchange and skill development.**

Participant feedback, celebrating CAPE event, December 2024



There are a range of systems in place across national governments and legislatures to support evidence use in policymaking. The Government Office for Science works across the UK Government to embed science advice within decision-making. Parliamentary inquiries and government reviews draw on external evidence to support individual pieces of scrutiny or policy development. UK government department **'Areas of Research Interest'** describe longer term requirements for external expertise. The Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, Senedd Knowledge Exchange, Scottish Parliament Information Centre, and Northern Ireland Assembly support parliamentarians to access evidence. Parliamentary committees, journalists, advocacy groups and academic experts all analyse public policy decisions and comment openly on their effectiveness.

The public policy landscape in the UK is not static. New governmental structures continue to develop. Policymaking is not a machine for turning evidence into policy, but good evidence is an essential part of good policy. The optimal shape of academic-policy engagement will continue to change as new opportunities and demands emerge, and universities will need to continue to adapt their response.



What was Capabilities in Academic-Policy Engagement (CAPE)?

Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) explored how to support effective and sustained engagement between academics and policymakers across the higher education sector.

The project was a consortium of 5 English Universities



University College
London



University
of Cambridge



The University
of Manchester



University
of Nottingham



Northumbria
University

CAPE worked closely with the Government Office for Science, the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology and Nesta. Transforming Evidence conducted an independent evaluation of some of the engagement mechanisms that CAPE deployed.

The project was funded through a £3.9m award from Research England with £6m matched funding from partners.

CAPE was managed by a Project Delivery Group consisting of university and policy leads, project coordination team and independent evaluation team. The Project Delivery Group was guided by a Theory of Change. An Advisory Board ensured good governance and offered strategic advice and direction, with membership was drawn from leading policy and advocacy institutions.

CAPE staffing included a Programmes and Impact Manager role based at the grant holder institution, UCL and project coordination positions at each of the university partners. Over the course of the 4-year project CAPE employed 18 individuals across these institutions.

During the delivery of CAPE, the team worked with

60 policy partners

in various ways. This included:



**Devolved
legislatures
across the UK**

**5
combined
authorities**

**UK
Parliament**

**11
government
departments**

**13
local authorities**

**16
charities and
non-profit organisations**

Our working practice within CAPE has been defined by the following principles:



Policy demand-led

Collaborative working

Sustained partnerships

Learning by doing

Experimentation and exploration

Using a Theory of Change



CAPE in context

The UK invests £20 billion in research and development annually. This places an onus on universities, who are in receipt of a considerable proportion of this funding, to leverage their research knowledge for public benefit. A key component in delivering public benefit is the role which research evidence can play in improving the quality of policymaking. However, connections between academic and public policy communities are not always strong.

CAPE was established to explore how to strengthen academic-policy engagement in order to improve the use of academic evidence and expertise and deliver better outcomes for citizens.

CAPE aimed to increase the **scale and diversity** of academic-policy engagement in order to make use of evidence and expertise routine in policymaking. Throughout the project, we have been mindful of deeply embedded structural constraints within the academic-policy ecosystem. Engagement often centres on well-networked ‘usual suspects’, rather than across the ecosystem. Mobility across the ‘invisible divide’ between academic research and policymaking is still relatively rare.

Activities tend to be transactional and fixed-term, rather than collaborative and enduring. Institutional efforts to support academic-policy engagement tend to prioritise competition over collaboration. There is limited tolerance for activities which don’t go according to plan. There is little documented practice or sharing of knowledge around different approaches and their efficacy and impact.

Whilst we didn’t necessarily expect to resolve all these structural problems, we have sought to address them in different ways and at different points throughout the project.

We wanted to address these challenges through CAPE, exploring how to overcome barriers to engagement, how to address capacity gaps, and how to develop effective methods and mechanisms for engagement. We were particularly focused on **building a collaborative effort beyond what we were able to do as individual institutions**, and on working with policy partners to understand the scope and potential for more **systemic approaches**.

The policy environment at the start and throughout our delivery of CAPE presented both opportunities and challenges. Following a decade of public spending austerity, the civil service had significantly reduced capacity and was eager to leverage external expertise and resource to address this. The aftermath of the Brexit referendum created significant policy complexities and an increased focus on consulting external expertise to address these. The Covid-19 pandemic brought the use of science advice in policy decisions into sharp focus and stimulated renewed efforts to draw on evidence. At the same time, there have been intense constraints on policymaking, whilst further devolution of government in England has seen the redrawing of the policy landscape amidst ongoing political turmoil.

As we reflect on the UK policy landscape in 2024, it is reconfiguring. Missions boards have been established to drive a cross-cutting approach to delivering on the Government's five missions. The Council of Nations and Regions is elevating the voice of sub-national government within Whitehall and will focus further attention on local, regional and devolved policymaking. There is a greater focus on incorporating citizen voice and community perspectives.

These developments offer new opportunities for the university sector to demonstrate our willingness and ability to provide effective input into policymaking. This will require an increased commitment to coordinate our efforts and to integrate different disciplinary and other forms of expertise. We will have to work harder to build collective understanding of policy needs and ensure collective responses. We hope the legacy and learning from CAPE can make an important contribution to this vital shared endeavour.



The academic-policy ecosystem has evolved significantly over the last decade. CAPE has played a key role in demonstrating the value of collaboration across universities and the importance of investing in connective infrastructure to support interactions. It has been transformative to see how much more effective we are when working together to respond to policy needs.

Crucially, CAPE allowed us the luxury of time and space to build relationships with policy partners and experiment and learn together. It offered flexible resource - both budget and people - to co-design activities and adapt them as needed. And it has enabled us to convene a community of researchers, practitioners and policymakers who are all committed to strengthening the use of evidence in policymaking and learning from each other as we do so.

Sarah Chaytor, Lead Investigator, Co-Chair CAPE Project Delivery Group & Director of Strategy & Policy, University College London

Creating effective conditions for academic-policy engagement

CAPE has been the provision of a flexible and collaborative resource which we have deployed in an explicitly demand-led way. We represent this in Figure 1, which illustrates the conditions which have enabled CAPE to operate as a mini “ecosystem”, deploying a range of interventions and approaches in order to strengthen engagement with and use of academic expertise in policymaking.

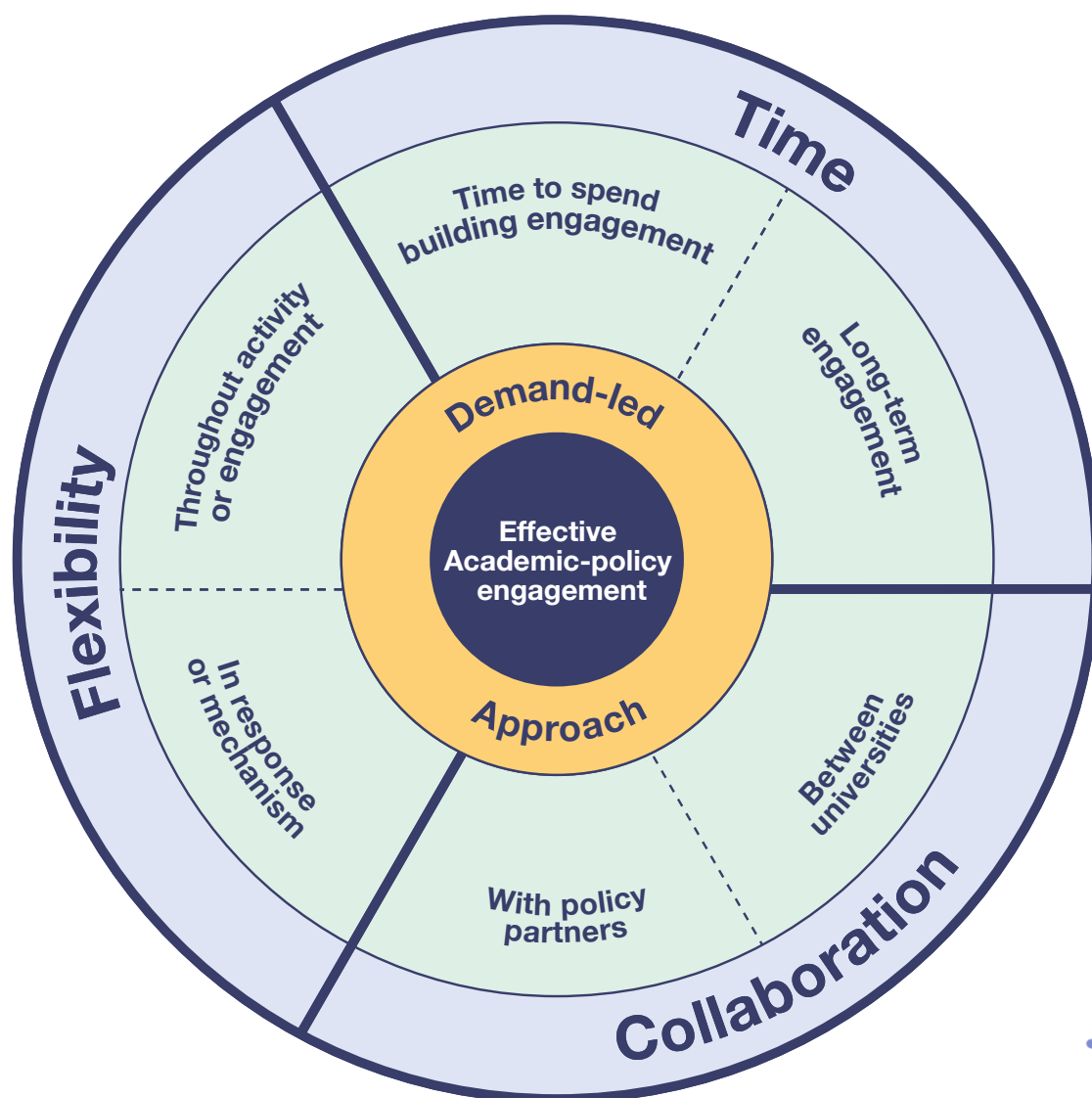
Our ‘first principle’ of being entirely **demand-led** meant identifying and exploring policy needs to understand how academic expertise could contribute, and the most appropriate means of building engagement. To deliver this demand-led approach, CAPE provided a **flexible** resource, in terms of both money and people. This enabled us to pivot in accordance with the requirements of specific activities and with changing circumstances. We were able to deploy our resource over a sustained period of time so that we could reflect on progress, build traction, and respond to emerging opportunities.

We were also able to devote time to building and sustaining relationships beyond one-off or transactional interactions and adapting activities to ensure we continued to meet policy need. Finally, we embedded a **collaborative** approach as the critical enabler of our delivery. Our project team functioned collectively in terms of engagement with policy partners and delivery of activities, providing a streamlined conduit between academic and public policy communities. We also emphasised collaboration and co-development of ideas and activities with our policy partners to support shared ownership and effective engagement.





Figure 1: CAPE operating as a mini ‘ecosystem’



The Government Office for Science has hugely valued being a part of the CAPE project. It's so important to have the space to fully test different academic-policy engagement activities and CAPE's findings have not only been helpful to us thinking about our engagement but we've also been able to disseminate findings widely across Government departments.

Sarah Steiner and Jo Foreman, Head of Science Networks, Systems and Capability, Government Office for Science

Developing and deciphering academic-policy engagement mechanisms



In this context, we have taken an unapologetic **‘learning by doing’ approach**. At the core of our work has been the design, delivery and testing of interventions to improve academic-policy engagement. This built on methods developed at UCL and other CAPE partners: policy fellowships, seed funding schemes, knowledge exchange events, and training. We have delivered these at **different policy scales and in different contexts** in order to better understand the potential to adapt and embed approaches. Above all, we have sought to build sustainable relationships with policy partners which went beyond specific projects to become a mode of engagement.

CAPE has provided an institutional scaffolding which has sustained stable and long-term relationships; institutional memory between individual activities; and functioned as a dynamic ecosystem to connect individuals, institutions and activities. This has enabled us to stimulate new interactions and ways of working whilst learning from the delivery of engagement mechanisms at scale.



CAPE enabled some professional staff like me to pursue policy fellowships with external organisations (in my case, POST in UK Parliament), and carry out practical research. These were transformative experiences, helping make me a more effective practitioner in academic-policy engagement in future’.

Nicola Buckley, Cambridge Lead, University of Cambridge & Director of Fellowships and Networks,
Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy, University of Cambridge

Learning about Policy Fellowships

CAPE piloted multi-university collaboration for both ‘policy to research’ and ‘research to policy’ fellowships.

‘Policy to research’ fellowships provided structured matchmaking for policymakers with researchers, centred on policy makers’ questions. The programme also supported follow-on work, establishing where there may be further academic-policy collaboration opportunities that could be supported. This was designed to fit policymakers limited availability for exploratory meetings at universities as a shorter time-commitment programme did not require salary buy-out. The scheme drew from Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy’s Policy Fellowship programme.



Meeting with a CAPE fellow provided an invaluable opportunity to see and discuss first-hand the practical implications of my research. Having the chance to propose solutions to live issues reflects this initiative’s efficacy in forging a dialogue between researchers and those close to policymaking.

Researcher who met a CAPE Policy Fellow

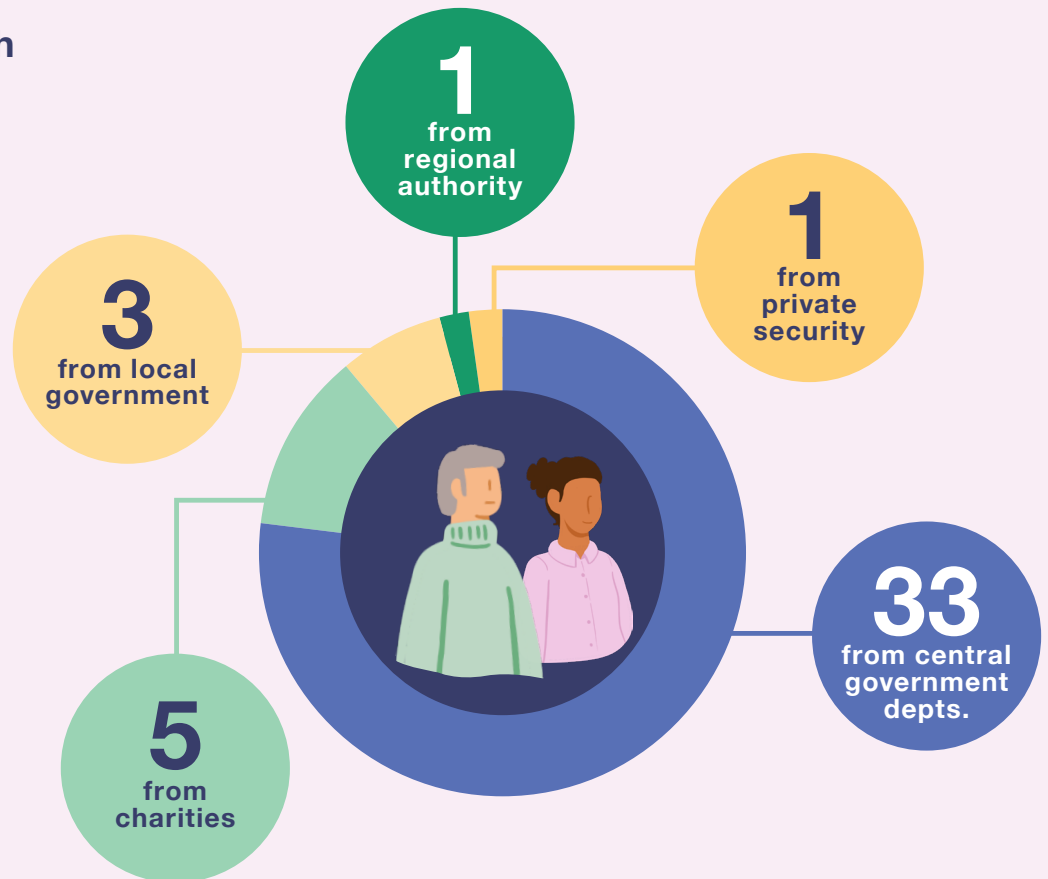
‘Research to policy’ fellowships placed academics and professional services staff from CAPE partner universities within policy organisations for several months to a year. These fellowships supported the co-delivery of work that policy organisations lacked the capacity or expertise to complete independently. Requiring funding for salary buy-out, fellowships appealed to researchers seeking a sustained experience of working in a policy organisation. The scheme was based upon on the Policy Fellowships model from UCL.

In both cases, fellowships were offered to and from all five CAPE partner universities.



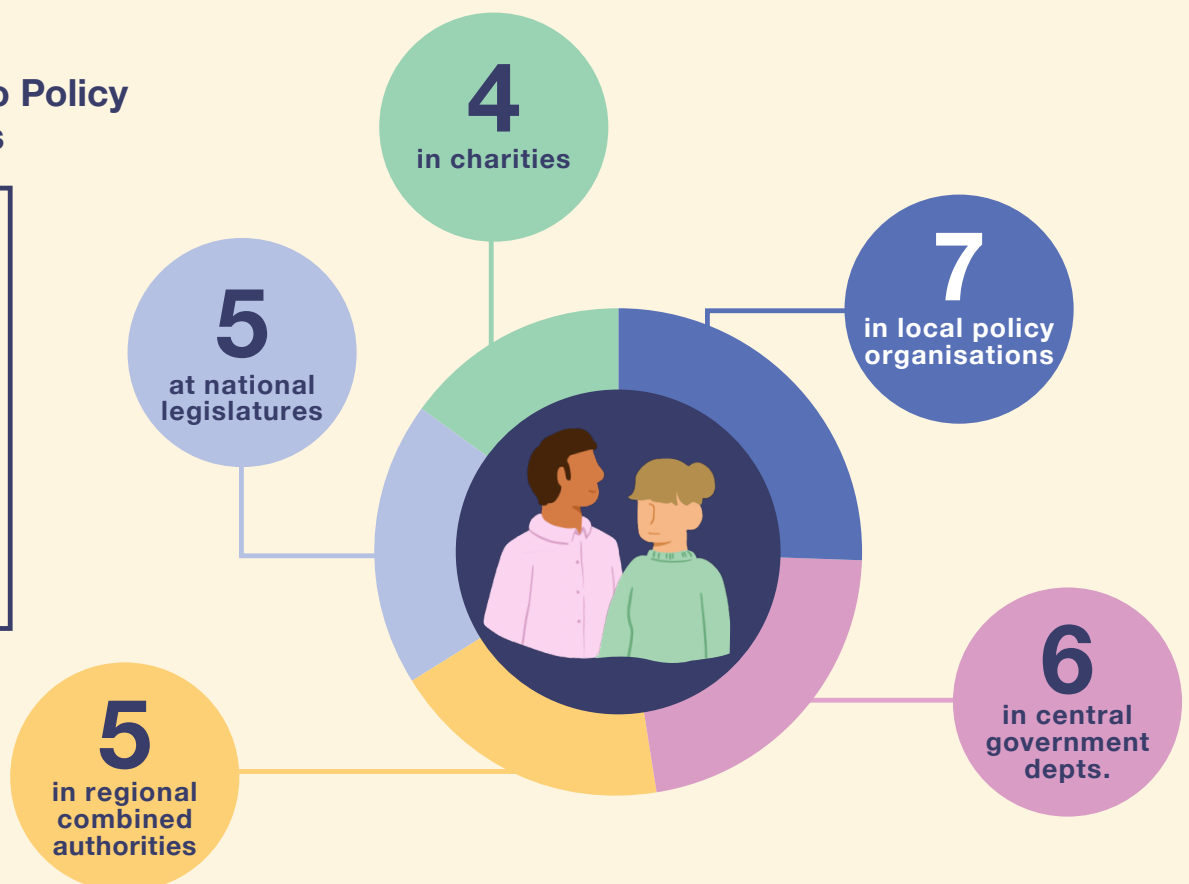
Policy to Research Fellowships

47
policymakers
met
396
academics



Research to Policy Fellowships

27
academics
& prof services
staff
placed in
18
policy orgs
for 9.3 mths (avg)



Insights

Fellowships are resource-intensive

For policy-to-research fellowships, organisational resources at CAPE universities was crucial for establishing and sustaining relationships. It was important to provide dedicated points of contact on both sides, and to develop clear processes to manage the fellowship. Research-to-policy fellowships required a substantial amount of staff time for management and administrative support, and the investment of a high proportion of funding in a relatively small number of individuals. Sustained policy partner buy-in, including time commitment to develop and manage fellowship activities, was critical to both.

Policy demand for fellowships is high

This was CAPE's most consistently popular mechanism, with considerable demand from policymakers to both host and participate in fellowships. There is also growing awareness of the importance of sustaining relationships beyond the formal fellowship, and of the value fellowships bring in terms of expanding and cascading networks.

Fellowships were valued by participants and hosts

Policy hosts valued academic partnerships in terms both of individuals' specific contributions and of the change that could endure beyond the fellowship. Policy participants valued the opportunity to engage with researchers from a range of disciplines and for longer term capability and confidence-building in engagement, beyond immediate interactions.

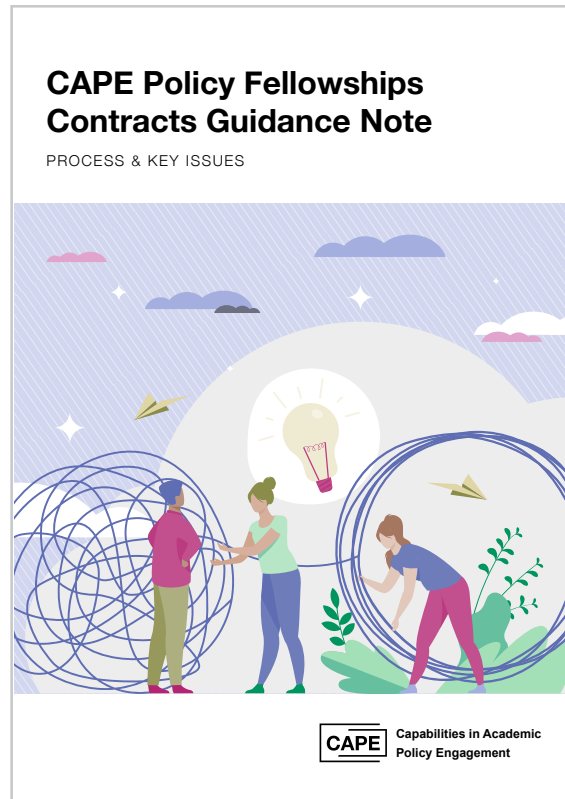
Expectation management is key

The CAPE project team spent significant time responding to and brokering different expectations amongst both researchers and policymakers. Where these were not clear and mutually agreed from the outset, academics felt that the development of academic-policy engagement capabilities was constrained. Establishing an agile approach was essential to account for changing policy needs.



Our conclusion is that fellowships are an effective mechanism to support engagement but need careful management and sufficient resourcing, and clearly defined policy need and buy-in. They should be deployed in a targeted way and co-developed to address mutual interests.

Fellowship Toolkits



[The CAPE Policy Fellowships Guide] has been useful to share with colleagues in [my] university to explain what is involved in [the] set up and management.

Respondent to the CAPE resources survey, September 2023

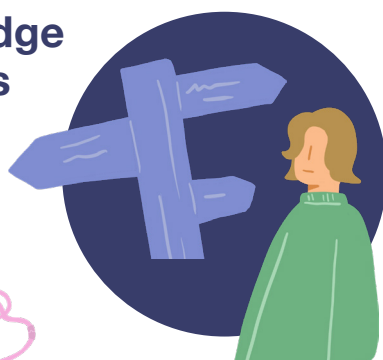


Learning about Knowledge Exchange Events

CAPE facilitated and co-created knowledge exchange and engagement events to coalesce expertise and policy need around particular topics. The events aimed to build relationships and enable open dialogue and discussion of relevant evidence, expertise, and policy priorities. We wanted to create space to explore and to develop shared interests and agendas - moving from knowledge exchange to knowledge collaboration.

CAPE knowledge exchange events comprised activities ranging from individual knowledge exchange, such as piloting a pairing scheme with the Government Office for Science, collective knowledge exchange events, for example sandpits and roundtables, and support for network development for example developing the Local and Regional Authority Academic Advisers network.

100+ knowledge exchange events engaging with...



2 x new networks

Supporting regional and local policy engagement

For knowledge brokers working in policy organisations



...3000 academics & policymakers

...in a variety of formats from roundtables to workshops, panel discussions, to small working groups.



Insights

Space for exploration and innovative thinking is important

We heard from many policy participants over the course of CAPE that they valued the opportunity provided through knowledge exchange events to test ideas, hear different forms of expertise, and explore new approaches.

Knowledge exchange events act as a gateway to new opportunities

They often served to scope future work, or resulted in additional activities being subsequently developed. Sometimes these were relatively predictable. In other cases, new directions and outcomes emerged. It was important to maintain a flexible approach to allow for serendipitous development, rather than being rigidly focused on specific impacts.

Knowledge exchange events enable convening of multiple perspectives

Policymakers valued having a range of voices and perspectives in the discussion - including those who weren't necessarily 'usual suspects'. A discursive knowledge exchange format allowed different forms of expertise to be explored and a range of ideas to be surfaced.

Knowledge exchange events are effective in creating new relationships

We observed many new connections being formed, with significant appetite for follow-up after specific events. Participants also reported that they valued events for the new relationships and networks formed. Establishing a tone of constructive dialogue, exploration, and mutual respect provided a positive grounding for new relationships - both those pertaining to CAPE-facilitated activities and more widely.

Knowledge exchange events require time to develop both before and after

This was important in planning and design, to ensure diverse participation, shared expectations, and a constructive tone for discussion. It also ensured follow-up to sustain engagement and progress specific actions and activities.



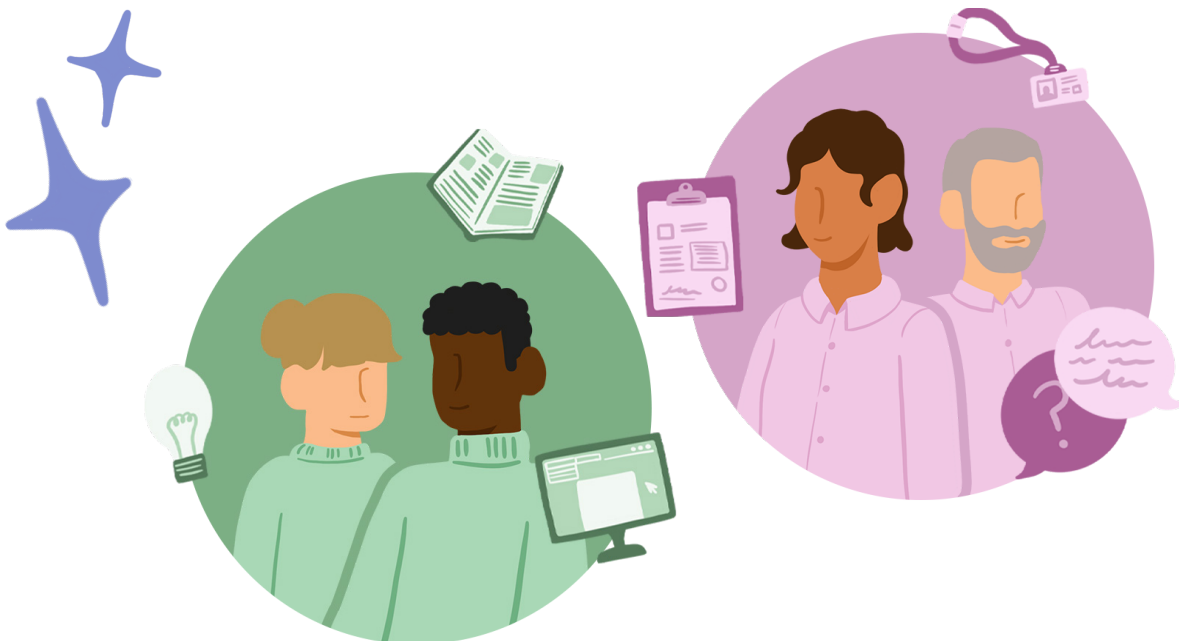
Knowledge exchange [events] can act as a landing point for further engagement and as a 'way in'.

Amanna Giles, Chief Scientific Adviser's Office, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs



For me, you're almost a catalyst [...] we're able to bring the academic partners that will allow us to change our thinking institutionally in a safe way and in a guided way [...]. What CAPE roundtables allowed us to do is to be a bit brave and to learn from radical experiments in other parts of the country.

Councillor Asima Sheikh, Islington Council



Our conclusion is that knowledge exchange events offer a relatively light-touch means of connecting people and exploring policy issues.

They enable the identification of shared interests, coalescence of relevant expertise and experience to consider potential policy solutions and identifying shared interests. They convene relevant expertise and experience and enable consideration of potential policy solutions.

Knowledge Exchange Toolkits



Developing partnerships & projects between universities and policy partners: a project scope template



December 2023



Rapid Evidence Assessments: A guide for commissioners, funders, and policymakers



September 2023

Jonathan Breckon, Sandy Oliver, Cecilia Vindrola, Thomas Moniz



Co-production in regional academic policy engagement: developing optimal conditions



Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement

Assessing the effectiveness of the Oldham Economic Review as an instrument for impactful academic-policy engagement

A REVIEW PAPER FOR CAPE (CAPABILITIES IN ACADEMIC-POLICY ENGAGEMENT) MANCHESTER TEAM

Prof. Alan Harding
CAPE Policy Fellow and Chief Economic Adviser
to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority



Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement

Learning about Seed Funding

CAPE operated two seed funding schemes:

The **CAPE Collaboration Fund** supported academics and policymakers to co-develop and deliver policy work in response to policy demand. This could be used for such activities as pump priming for deeper collaborations, co-developing research related to policy needs, co-convening workshops, and co-producing analysis or briefing work for policy development among others.



It was a positive experience, which if the opportunity arose again, I would be keen to take up - as it allowed two organisations, with different strengths and networks, to collaborate on a share project for the benefit of the region (and, potentially, at a national level).

CAPE Collaboration Fund Policy Partner

The **CAPE Challenge Fund** enabled policy stakeholders to put forward specific challenges to which researchers could respond. This aimed to build responsive capacity - often at pace - to address policy needs.

Both funding schemes were intended to build **agile response to policy needs, providing space and resource to explore new forms of collaboration and build deeper understanding of policy problems and their potential solutions**. We did not require applicants to specify outcomes at the outset, but did require them to apply collaboratively and to address an identified policy need.

CAPE Collaboration Fund
funded 20 projects worth

£424,000

of between

3-21 months

with an average length
of 11 months



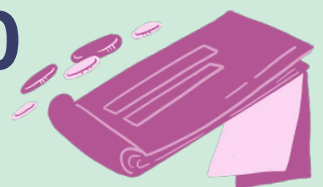
CAPE Challenge Fund
funded 11 challenge awards worth

£170,000

with

**7 different
policy partners**

with an average length of 6 months



Insights

Dedicated funding for collaboration is relatively rare but highly valued

Feedback from applicants and recipients suggested that it is difficult to access funding focused on developing partnerships. Funds were used both to develop new partnerships and advance existing ones, as well as to develop and deliver collaborative activities.

A problem-focused approach is important to deliver meaningful outcomes

A focus on identifying, understanding and addressing problems from the outset helped to give focus to collaborative activities, without pre-judging outcomes. It established a shared agenda and provided space for outcomes to emerge which addressed mutual needs.

Individual projects can be enhanced by wider institutional support

Where recipients of funding were able to access support from institutional knowledge brokers to gain further advice on designing and delivering activities or to identify additional connections and networks, they felt projects were enhanced. Such support is also important to enabling follow-on activities and identifying further outcomes over time.

Funding was valued for its flexibility

Scope for supporting innovation, support for developing partnerships, and the opportunity to increase the contribution to research from policymakers. A low administrative burden enabled recipients to focus on maximising engagement opportunities and adapting activities to sustain partnerships.

Policy challenge funding benefits from preparatory engagement work

To explore issues and expertise. It can take time to scope the funding call and build awareness and interest amongst potential applicants.

What's one thing you are going to take forward after CAPE post-2024?



Keep the networks and new professional relationships going. This work is all about connections and networks.

Participant feedback, celebrating CAPE event, December 2024.



Toolkits for Collaborative Projects

Developing partnerships & projects between universities and policy partners: a project scope template



December 2023

CAPE

Co-production in regional academic policy engagement: developing optimal conditions



Co-Production Collective

CAPE Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement

Awarding Funding for Collaborative Academic-Policy Projects

December 2024



CAPE

What's one thing you are going to take forward after CAPE post-2024?



More direct engagement with universities to launch Ministry of Justice Areas of Research Interest 2025.

Participant feedback, celebrating CAPE event, December 2024.



Learning about Training

CAPE originally intended to develop a new training scheme aimed at university staff.

However, after mapping existing provision, we realised there was already a plethora of such schemes. Accordingly, we changed tack to convene a community of practice (CoP), working closely with Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN), to identify what topics and formats of training were proving most useful and gaining most traction. The CoP ran a series of four workshops and in the final year of CAPE, we also developed a capabilities programme for university staff to share insights and resource from CAPE and surface further reflections.



Alongside this work, CAPE co-created and delivered a learning programme for policymakers to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to enable greater evidence use and academic engagement. The pilot scheme was undertaken by staff in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and created a toolkit ‘Engaging with Evidence’, a comprehensive training document based upon the ROAMEF policy cycle to integrate academic engagement at each stage. This was intended to provide a ‘train the trainer’ resource to support further uptake across the department.

**Bespoke training programme
for 25 civil servants at
the Ministry of Housing,
Communities and Local
Government**

**Community of Practice for knowledge
mobilisers across UK universities**



Insights

There is a significant amount of training available for policy engagement in universities, but limited knowledge of what is effective

A CoP approach can be a valuable means of sharing insights, peer support and mentoring. Case studies were a valuable way of sharing experiences and challenges.

There is appetite for an ongoing CoP around university policy engagement training

However, this would require associated resource to establish an appropriate structure, develop specific outputs and enable ongoing connectivity.

Training is most useful when it is action-oriented

And connected to real-time work. Participants valued the opportunity to consider their organisational context and innovative approaches to using evidence. Applying training to ongoing work increased its traction and utility.

Co-created training toolkits are perceived as useful, but resourcing is needed to support their further uptake.

Whilst early adopters were keen to modify and implement the Engaging with Evidence toolkit in their own contexts, this was difficult without further resourcing and guidance.

Toolkits for Training

Engaging with evidence toolkit

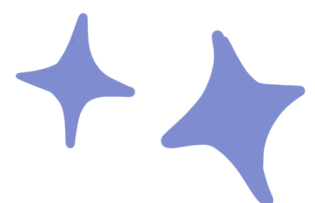
A practical resource to strengthen capabilities for evidence use and expert engagement

Created by:
Nesta

With support from:
The Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) partnership, funded by Research England, United Kingdom Research and Innovation



nesta



Transforming academic-policy engagement



CAPE has allowed us to try things that wouldn't otherwise have been possible. We could quickly respond to policymaking needs at local and national levels with expertise, capacity and the chance to experiment. We could deploy academic expertise, bring policymakers into universities and help form multidisciplinary teams to analyse pressing policy and delivery challenges.

CAPE enabled partners to provide capacity, expertise and urgency - when for different reasons all or some of these might have been lacking. The challenge now - both for those involved in CAPE and others in policymaking and academia is to learn at least some of these lessons.

Andy Westwood, CAPE HEI Lead, University of Manchester and Co-Chair CAPE Project Delivery Group

Over 4 years, CAPE has delivered a high volume of activities with a large number of policy partners. We have learnt about the operational and relational capacity needed to sustain collaborative activities and partnerships.

We have built understanding of **what methods and approaches work best for particular purposes and contexts**. We have helped to deliver new academic-policy engagement structures, most notably within regional policymaking and through expanding ARIs to new policy contexts. And we have amassed practice-based insights into the enterprise of academic-policy engagement which underpin our toolkits and other resources.

We have also come to learn something about the vital importance of embedding and sustaining meaningful collaborations - both within our own project delivery and between academic and policy partners. We have helped to illuminate **the critical role of intermediaries in connecting academic and policy communities**, and in delivering engagement mechanisms. We have highlighted the value of investing not only in individuals and projects but in the **connective infrastructures that can support systematic academic-policy engagement**.

Here we identify our overall insights from the delivery of CAPE. They reflect our individual and collective practice and learning, our conversations with policy partners, and our observations about the wider ecosystem. We also offer thoughts on some illustrative potential actions which could be taken by different actors to drive progress forward. As the landscape for academic-policy engagement continues to develop, we hope these insights will inform its future evolution.

**What's one thing
you are going to
take forward after
CAPE post-2024?**



Promoting the importance of academic engagement in policy making through my current and future roles in government.

Participant feedback, celebrating CAPE event, December 2024



Effective and sustainable academic-policy engagement requires individual and institutional capacity and capability. Currently, much engagement is carried out by individuals as an ‘add-on’ to their primary work, rather than as a formally recognised activity.

This constrains possibilities and fails to maximise engagement opportunities. Furthermore, focusing solely on isolated, individual efforts hinders the development of an institutional approach. Building institutional capacity is crucial to integrate individual activities into broader programmes, connect projects, maintain long-term relationships, and embed sustainable practices. It also supports a more collaborative approach to engagement.



57% of academics and 74% of professional services staff do not feel they have sufficient resource (time, staff, funding) for academic-policy engagement.

CAPE Report, Perceptions and Experiences of Academic, Policy Engagement in UK Universities 2022.

What could be done to build capacity?

Universities For Toolkit, click here	Provide better recognition of specialist skillsets and career pathways for intermediary and knowledge broker roles. Recognise academic-policy engagement in academic workloads.
Government/policy organisations	Establish dedicated posts to support engagement, in particular to leverage existing mechanisms such as Areas of Research Interest.
Funders	Invest in connective infrastructure to build systems, structures, and processes as well as individual research-policy projects.

Collaboration is a critical enabler of academic-policy engagement.

For institutions, working together can help open doors to policymakers wary or tired of bilateral institutional engagements, and ensure a necessary breadth of expertise and perspective to address complex policy problems. Establishing a collaborative approach to interactions between university and policy staff helps to build shared agendas, move away from a limited linear and transactional approach, and develop new collective insights.

What could be done to strengthen collaboration?

Universities	Seek to collaborate wherever possible when engaging with public policy. This could be done regionally or nationally, or on a particular policy theme or topic of expertise. Actively seek out funding opportunities which stimulate collaboration.
Government/policy organisations	Further embed use of evidence and external expertise throughout the policy process, including through facilitating more diverse and multilateral engagements. Provide feedback loops so that academics understand how their expertise has been used.
Funders	Encourage consortia and collaborative funding applications where possible. Work with collaborative projects to consider continuation or legacy beyond the funding period.



Now the importance and value of brokerage is widely recognised, with universities receiving dedicated funding from Research England, and support for new national and regional networks. I am extremely proud of the role CAPE played in supporting and shaping these developments, and especially on the work done to overcome barriers of career stage, geography, types of institution, caring and other responsibilities to open up the breadth of insight in England's universities.

Stephen Meek, Nottingham Lead & Director Institute for Policy Engagement,
University of Nottingham



Taking a demand-led and agile approach builds more meaningful engagement with public policy.

Taking time to understand policy needs - in terms of both identifying the policy problem and exploring potential responses - means engagement is more likely to be relevant and effective. Deploying resource flexibly across a range of potential activities or to offer a 'menu of options' enables agility and the ability to adapt to changing policy needs.

What could be done to embed agility?

Universities	Provide opportunities for researchers to network with policymakers and be exposed to policy needs. Consider how to provide flexible institutional capacity for academic-policy engagement and flexible workload allocation models to reflect time needed to deliver.
Government/policy organisations	Provide clear communication of policy needs through mechanisms such as Areas of Research Interest. Proactively engage with universities and other knowledge organisations to iterate needs and potential responses. Consider dedicated and visible contact points to support ongoing discussions.
Funders	Consider co-developed funding opportunities which address policy needs. Make more flexible funding available to support sustained partnerships and iterative development of activities. Support the inclusion of resource for knowledge brokerage in funding applications.

Trusted relationships underpin effective engagement.

Building trust takes time but pays dividends in terms of enabling flexibility and resilience and developing shared agendas. It is important to be alert to the need to increase diversity in engagement and the risk of reinforcing existing hierarchies and power dynamics.

What could be done to develop trusted relationships?

Universities	Commit to relationships over the long-term. Encourage the sharing of relationships across individuals and different parts of the institution. Build multilateral relationships which expand participation in engagement.
Government/policy organisations	Commit time to convening and networking in order to provide opportunities to develop relationships. Work with policy engagement teams in universities and other knowledge organisations to build and broaden relationships.
Funders	Recognise that resource is needed to build enduring relationships and invest in building capability and partnerships for co-design and co-production.



CAPE has reinforced how vital structured approaches are in building trust, mutual understanding and impactful collaborations. CAPE provided the rare opportunity to experiment, fail, learn, and adapt with a network of exceptional partners across academia and policy. As I take the learning and embed it into the UCL Public Policy programme, the key to sustaining CAPE's legacy will be in our ability to demonstrate that sustainable engagement and impact isn't just about projects or outputs, but about building systems and relationships that endure.

Olivia Stevenson, Deputy Director UCL Public Policy and UCL Co-Lead for CAPE

Learning by doing is critical, but requires a systematic approach to maximise effectiveness, share insights and codify practice to strengthen the legitimacy of practice-based knowledge.

This requires treating evaluation as a learning tool rather than as an assessment, and building shared understanding of evaluation frameworks which consider process, practice and outcomes. It will also require more openness about what doesn't work, as well as celebrating what does.

What could be done to improve learning by doing?

Universities	Share approaches to, and common challenges in, academic-policy engagement, for example through the UPEN blog and resource hub. Work together to explore evaluation frameworks.
Government/policy organisations	Where possible, make data on evidence use and engagement processes - such as participation, uptake, citations - more widely available. Consider how to ensure transparent and clear documentation of engagement and evidence use, to build institutional memory and learning and to support sharing of good practice.
Funders	Champion experimentation, recognising the value of learning from what doesn't work as well as what does. Explore different evaluation frameworks for academic-policy engagement activity.



The ability to 'fail' with CAPE was a really powerful way of building co-productive partnerships, where joint ownership of outcomes and evaluation enabled us to learn together.

Kayleigh Renberg Fawcett, Senior Programme Manager Yorkshire & Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network

CAPE's Highlights



Colleagues at the [Parliamentary] International Development Committee said [they] were very sceptical at the start about the whole 'Areas of Research Interest' thing'. And now that we've tried it, they've gone around the Houses recommending it to everyone, which speaks for itself.

Faten Hussein, Senior Specialist House of Commons Scrutiny Committee

CAPE has supported fellowships that have expanded Areas of Research Interest (ARI) beyond national government departments into UK Parliament, the Senedd in Wales, and regional policy bodies. This expansion has improved how evidence needs are communicated, diversifying engagement with the research community.

In UK Parliament, CAPE collaborated with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) and Scrutiny Unit to pilot ARIs within select committees. The initial pilot, led by CAPE fellow Rob Davies and the Scrutiny Unit with the International Development Committee, revealed ARIs' potential to attract new contributors: 47% of respondents had no prior engagement with Parliament. This success led to matched funding from Parliament, enabling four additional committees to adopt ARIs and a request to expand the work through a further fellowship, delivered by CAPE Fellow Nicola Buckley. ARIs are now integrated into select committee guidance manuals, and POST has launched a dedicated ARI webpage. **Today, seven UK parliamentary select committees use ARIs, bringing diverse perspectives to scrutiny processes.**



In the Senedd, CAPE supported a pilot to embed ARIs in two committees, launching six ARIs in 2022. These attracted nearly 100 responses from researchers at 45 universities, 62% of whom had not previously engaged with the Senedd. The pilot's accessible format has encouraged broader academic input, increasing the proportion of evidence from researchers in committee submissions from 9% to 13%.

CAPE introduced ARIs in regional policy systems through a fellowship with the North of Tyne Combined Authority. This led to the **first regional ARI**, "connected communities," which received 31 responses from across sectors. The insights were synthesised in a policy briefing by Insights North East, demonstrating the value of ARIs in addressing regional challenges.

Through fellowships and innovative partnerships, CAPE has brought ARIs into new policy spaces, strengthening evidence-informed policymaking across the UK.



Case Study: Developing a sustained partnership to maximise the value of academic-policy engagement.

The CAPE-Ministry of Justice (MoJ) partnership began as a one-year pilot but evolved into a three-year, sustained collaboration, delivering impactful knowledge exchange and strengthening evidence use in government policymaking.

Exploratory discussions in the partnership's early days highlighted the need for a model that could provide a more agile and sustainable response to policy needs than ad hoc project work. Over three years, the partnership brought together staff from all five CAPE universities, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), and its arm's-length bodies, including senior figures such as the Chief Social Researcher and Head of Insight, to explore how academic expertise could address policy priorities.



The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has thoroughly enjoyed being a partner on the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) programme. Those involved with the project have been great colleagues and champions of academic-policy collaboration and knowledge exchange. CAPE has supported our academic partnerships programme and helped deepen our understanding of what effective and impactful academic collaboration looks like.

Ben Hepworth, Evidence and Partnerships Hub, Ministry of Justice



It facilitated **eight knowledge exchange events** attended by over 120 participants. The partnership also established **two policy challenges**, addressed by researchers at CAPE university partners, and **two MoJ policy fellowships** to address critical evidence needs, including reforms to criminal legal aid following an independent review.



CAPE provided essential operational capacity to ensure the partnership's success, including navigating university contracting systems to embed MoJ policy fellows, co-creating and co-delivering knowledge exchange events, and advising on facilitating effective knowledge exchange. The partnership was supported by bi-weekly meetings between CAPE and MoJ staff, complemented by a shared Teams platform. This close working relationship created trust, with MoJ colleagues remarking that "it feels like we're in the same organisation."

This formalised structure ensured consistent follow-up from knowledge exchange activities, which MoJ colleagues noted would have been unlikely otherwise. At an early event, 94% of participants expressed interest in future CAPE-MoJ activities.

Outcomes of the partnership include broader MoJ-academic engagement, with 67% of participants at one event reporting new professional connections, and the **creation of the MoJ Academic Network**. This network now supports systematic academic engagement and hosts UKRI policy fellowships, embedding evidence use within policymaking. CAPE institutions also benefited from training delivered by MoJ staff, equipping academics to navigate government strategy and analysis more effectively.



This long-term partnership demonstrates **the value of maintaining an open and evolving relationship** that allows exploration without preconceived outcomes. The approach has enabled more agile collaboration, proving that sustained partnerships can achieve results that go beyond what is possible through short-term or one-off engagements.

What's one thing
you are going to
take forward after
CAPE post-2024?



Taking risks and learning from them.

Participant feedback, celebrating CAPE event, December 2024

Case Study: Developing capacity and capabilities with regional policy bodies

CAPE's regional policy fellowships have helped support the development of capacity and capabilities within regional policy bodies in different areas across the UK.

In West Yorkshire, CAPE regional policy fellow Richard Whittle worked with Yorkshire Universities (YU) and the Place-Based Economic Recovery Network to strengthen engagement with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and the Mayor. This partnership delivered activities such as **roundtables, research commissions, policy reports, evidence submissions, and the development of economic mapping and modelling tools**. Research topics included economic recovery, innovation mapping, regional tax policy, skills development, creative and retail economies, and women and girls' safety. A significant outcome was the development of the business case to establish the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN), inspired by CAPE's model.

Supported by £3.9m from the Research England Development Fund, Y-PERN now involves nine policy fellows, 22 local authorities, two mayoral authorities, and Local Enterprise Partnerships, addressing place-based challenges across the region.



The partnership between Yorkshire Universities and CAPE laid the ground for a larger, scaled-up project, across Yorkshire - the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN) - which was funded by a £3.9m grant from the Research England Development Fund. Y-PERN provided the basis for the region to bid successfully for funding, under the UKRI Local Policy Innovation Partnership (LPIP) call, for £5m to create the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Innovation Partnership (Y-PIP). The initial support from CAPE, and the partnership with YU, has led to a fundamental step change in academic policy engagement in Yorkshire.

Peter O'Brien, Executive Director, Yorkshire Universities



In Greater London, CAPE supported two policy fellows working with the Greater London Authority (GLA) to enhance knowledge exchange between universities and regional government through developing the London Research & Policy Partnership (LRaPP). Their fellowship supported the development of a roadmap for LRaPP to provide a **London-wide knowledge brokerage infrastructure**.



We are extremely grateful to CAPE for funding two Policy Fellows, Sarah Jasim and Ilias Krystallis, to help LRaPP understand what researchers and public servants want from each other and how they can best work together. Their research and the highly practical advice will be helpful not just to LRaPP but similar partnerships in other regions.

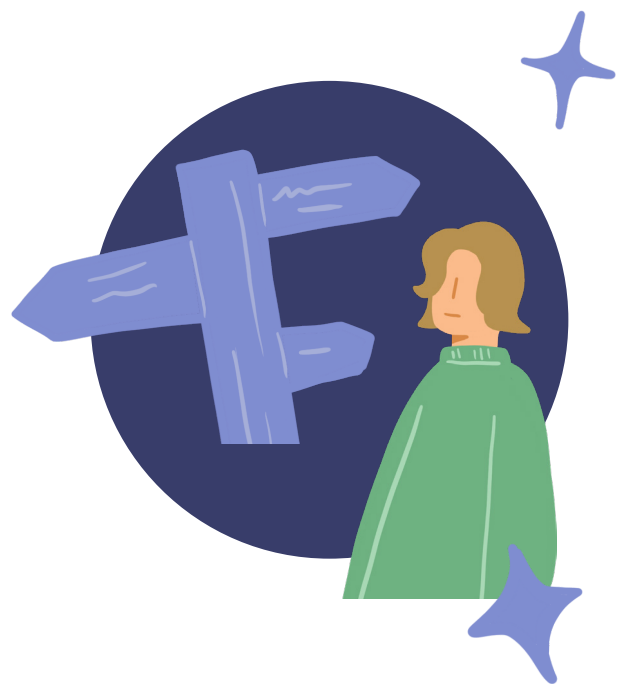
Jeremy Skinner, Assistant Director of Strategy, Insight, and Intelligence
for the Greater London Authority

In the North-East, CAPE funded three fellows who collaborated with the North of Tyne Combined Authority, now the North East Combined Authority. These fellows worked closely with the authority's data and insights team to co-create an Area of Research Interest (ARI) on "connected communities," marking the first ARI published by a regional government. **This ARI process included an inclusive call for evidence, promoted across the region, which resulted in 31 submissions from various sectors.** A follow-up workshop explored the gathered evidence, and the findings were synthesised in a briefing by the regional research-policy partnership Insights North East. This effort was also informed by the concurrent experience developing ARIs with Newcastle and Leeds City Councils and has led to the publication of a **toolkit for local and regional governments on establishing their own ARIs**.



In Nottinghamshire, the University of Nottingham collaborated with Nottingham Trent University to create an “**Expert Advisory Panel**” model for engaging policymakers and academics in an environment without (until recently) a Combined Authority. Using the “Universities for Nottingham” civic university agreement as the commissioning framework, the two universities convened a panel from a range of disciplines tailored to help one or more partners address a strategic challenge. The discussion was then summarised in an anonymised note and shared with partners. This approach made it more straightforward to engage across multiple local authorities and services as it wasn’t “owned” by any one of them, and was attractive to academics as it was a relatively small time commitment (a two hour meeting and preparation time). Policy partners found it a useful way to get a rapid overview of the latest evidence and to identify alternative approaches to a problem. It also made connections and built networks. The key challenge to making this arrangement work is carefully framing the question. The Expert Advisory Panel will continue beyond the CAPE programme, and will be extended to include the University of Derby to support the new East Midlands County Combined Authority.

**For Building a National Agenda
for Regional Academic Policy
Engagement Toolkit, click here**



Case Study: Building institutional capacity at Northumbria University



At the start of CAPE, Northumbria University had a strong tradition of engagement between researchers and policy, but had often been ad hoc and not always rewarded or recognised. CAPE provided a chance to accelerate academic-policy engagement activities and to consider how these might be instituted more strategically across the university.



[CAPE] allowed Northumbria to pilot different approaches that have helped us learn and improve how we support academic-policy engagement. It's deepened and strengthened our efforts moving forward.

Jenny Taylor, Executive Director of Research and Innovation Services

Early on, Northumbria turned the CAPE coordinator role, initially fixed term, into a permanent position focused on facilitating and brokering policy engagement. **Jenny Hasenfuss** became the university's first dedicated role for policy engagement.

During the project, Northumbria supported three outgoing policy fellowships and funded 5 co-production projects. These projects have had lasting benefits for policy partners.



In the short term partnering with CAPE has helped [North East Combined Authority] improve the range, quality and specificity of evidence used to respond to the rapid and short-term policy-driven demand. Working with CAPE will leave a lasting impression on the way the combined authority approach academic relationships, including using the Areas of Research Interest toolkit to better communicate our research priorities and developing cross-team research.

Alex Black, Data and Insights Officer, North East Combined Authority

CAPE funding enabled an internal review at Northumbria, exploring how individual policy engagement might be made more strategic. Michael Parker, Director of Knowledge Exchange, says CAPE has helped Northumbria “see the critical role academic-policy engagement plays in delivering impactful knowledge exchange. It’s also prompted us to develop better ways of supporting effective engagement between our researchers and policymakers.”

The Northumbria internal review fed into a larger project on building centralised infrastructure within universities resulting in the report ‘Growing a university policy engagement function: Towards better models, methods, and measures of success’. This report, launched at an event with 150+ attendees, featured in WONKHE, has had nearly 1,000 downloads, and led to follow on activities including for members of the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN).

Growing a university policy engagement function:
Towards better models, methods, and measures of success



May 2024
Jonathan Breckon, Jenny Hasenfuss, Lucy Jowett

CAPE

Looking ahead to post-2024, Professor Louise Bracken, Pro Vice Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange, says Northumbria is “committed to supporting policy engagement beyond CAPE. It is an important element to our knowledge exchange, research impact, and civic mission.” This is supported by the university’s commitment to take forward five recommendations from the internal review.

Dedicated staff capacity allowed Northumbria to develop a new Community of Policy Practice, creating a shared space for opportunities, activities, and visibility across the university. More than 300 academics and professional services staff have engaged with the community through their lunch and learns.



Building capabilities



Understanding and developing career pathways

CAPE has trained a cohort of highly skilled individuals in brokering engagement between universities and policy organisations. We call these roles “knowledge mobilisers”. CAPE staff alumni have gone on to work in programme management in regional academic-policy engagement initiatives, knowledge exchange roles within UK universities, and projects that use data analysis to track policy impact, among other parts of the UK knowledge exchange ecosystem.

Our work has also added to a **growing understanding of the complexity of knowledge mobilisation roles** and the various **specialised skill sets** that people in these roles have.



Our learning about knowledge mobilisation has shown us that when delivering at scale and collaboratively, the practice of knowledge mobilisation is as much operational and shared as it is about being a conduit for relationships across systems and between academics and policy professionals.

CAPE team blog, October 2022



Resources

CAPE has produced resources to share our practice-based learning for use across the sector to build capabilities. Our resources are developed collaboratively with our policy partners and are designed to be flexible so they can be adapted to meet the specific needs of different university and policy systems. These resources are intended as an entry point into addressing common challenges in academic-policy engagement and to inspire new and deeper forms of engagement.



The power of the CAPE resources lies in their practicality in solving common challenges faced by academics engaging in the policy arena.

Dr Eleanor MacPherson, Knowledge Exchange Lead, University of Glasgow

6500+
resources
downloads

10
Toolkits

Blogs -
sharing learning
& experience

21
Case Studies

Short guides
for toolkits

11
Podcasts

Videos



I am proud to have worked on the dissemination of the resources CAPE produced with our partners. They have always elicited a very positive response from audiences regardless of whether they are academics, professional staff or from policy organisations. This shows the practicality and transferability of CAPE's resources, which I am sure will still be of use well past the end of the project.

Rafael Carrascosa Marzo, Capabilities and Impact Coordinator, University College London



What's one thing you are going to take forward after CAPE post-2024?



Listening to policy partners - continual dialogue is key to progress.



The critical role Research England/funders play in legitimising research-policy work.



Thinking about next steps for the knowledge exchange 'profession' and how to professionalise it.



Using CAPE's resources in my day-to-day delivery of engagement activity.

Participant feedback, celebrating CAPE event, December 2024



CAPE team



Please note that roles and employer details refer to positions held at the time of individuals involvement with CAPE and may have since changed.

CAPE Project Delivery Group

University Leads

Sarah Chaytor, Lead Investigator, Co-Chair CAPE Project Delivery Group & Director of Strategy & Policy, University College London

Matt Baillie Smith, Northumbria Lead, & Professor of Global Development and Dean of Research Culture, Northumbria University

Nicola Buckley, Cambridge Lead, University of Cambridge & Director of Fellowships and Networks, Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy, University of Cambridge

Stephen Meek, Nottingham Lead & Director Institute for Policy Engagement, University of Nottingham

Olivia Stevenson, University College London Co-Lead, & Deputy Director UCL Public Policy, University College London

Andy Westwood, Manchester lead, Co-Chair CAPE Project Delivery Group & Professor of Public Policy, Government and Business, The University of Manchester

CAPE Policy Partner Leads

Jo Foreman and Sarah Steiner, CAPE lead for Government Office for Science

Abbi Hobbs, CAPE lead for Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology

Kuranda Morgan, Evidence Lead, Nesta





CAPE Coordination Team

Chris Sims, Deputy Director, Institute for Policy and Engagement, University of Nottingham

Amy Beckett, CAPE Programmes and Impact Manager (interim), University College London

Rafa Carrascosa Marzo, Capabilities and Impact Coordinator, University College London

Daisy Forster, Policy Insights Coordinator, University of Nottingham

Max Gillingham, CAPE Coordinator, University of Nottingham

Kat Hart, CAPE Coordinator, University of Nottingham

Jenny Hasenfuss, CAPE Coordinator, Northumbria University

Patrick McAlary, CAPE Coordinator, University of Cambridge

Hana Morel, Policy Engagement Networks Coordinator, University College London

Chris Peters, CAPE Coordinator, The University of Manchester

Robyn Parker, CAPE Programmes and Impact Manager, University College London

Kayleigh Renberg-Fawcett, CAPE Coordinator, University College London

Florence Robinson Adams, CAPE Assistant, University of Cambridge

Milena Santos, CAPE Coordinator, University of Cambridge

Gigi Tennant, Research Manager, Nesta



Research Fellows

Jonathan Breckon, CAPE Research Fellow, University College London

Ariana Darvish, CAPE Postdoctoral Researcher, University College London

Evaluation Team

Kathryn Oliver, Transforming Evidence

Annette Boaz, Transforming Evidence

Petra Makela, Transforming Evidence



Advisory Board

We extend our thanks to all members of the CAPE Advisory Board for their insights and guidance throughout CAPE.

Graeme Reid, CAPE Advisory Board Chair, and Chair of Science and Research Policy, University College London

Cathy Alexander, Deputy Director Science & Innovation, Systems & Capability, Government Office for Science

Sophie Boldon, Deputy Director, Science & Innovation Systems & Capability, Government Office for Science

Rakhi Biswas Evans, Knowledge Exchange Manager, Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology

Sarah Carter-Bell, Knowledge Exchange Lead, Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology

Sarah Foxen, Knowledge Exchange Lead, UK Parliament

Katrina Hann, Head of Research, Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Beth Hogben, Deputy Director, Science & Innovation Systems & Capability, Government Office for Science

Molly Morgan Jones, Director of Policy, British Academy

Chris Pook, Government Policy Director, Nuclear AMRC

Nick Starkey, Director of Policy, Royal Academy of Engineering

Julie Tam, Deputy Director of Policy, Universities UK

External Advisors

Sally Burlington, Local Government Association

Catherine Haddon, Institute for Government

Gemma Harper, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Henry Kippen, North of Tyne Combined Authority

Tom Sasse, Institute for Government

James Wilsdon, University College London





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