

A review of 'Areas of Research Interest' (ARIs) as a mechanism for research-policy engagement

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Executive Summary

Our report provides a review of the existing evidence base evaluating Areas of Research Interest (ARIs).

We argue that, since their introduction, ARIs have emerged as a promising mechanism for strengthening strategic engagement between researchers and policymakers, helping public bodies articulate their knowledge needs. They have broadened participation in research-policy engagement and enhanced the visibility and relevance of academic expertise. Early indications suggest ARIs improve the strategic value of research, encouraging greater alignment with policy priorities and drawing in a wider diversity of researchers.

However, significant structural limitations constrain the multiple and diverse ARI systems now functioning in their overall scope, impact, and effectiveness. ARIs are unevenly developed across central government, devolved administrations, local authorities, and public bodies, with no overarching mechanism to coordinate shared or overlapping evidence needs. This fragmentation makes it difficult to identify common priorities across governance levels, leading to duplication of effort

and incoherence in how evidence demands are articulated and addressed. As a result, researchers struggle to navigate an ever-more complex system, and policymakers are missing opportunities to pool insight and coordinate demand. **We recommend the UK ARI database is extended to encompass research interests across all tiers of government and public bodies to support a better integrated system.**

A further impediment is the lack of systematic alignment between ARIs, research funding mechanisms, and public authority investments. The expectation outlined first in the Nurse Report of Research Councils (2015), that ARIs might guide research commissioning has largely not materialised in practice, and the mobilisation of existing evidence has been limited. Without dedicated funding or capacity to synthesise evidence, many ARI-related knowledge gaps remain unaddressed. Even where substantial evidence bases already exist, policymakers often lack the time, resources, or capability to translate research into actionable insight. **We argue that universities, higher education funders, and public authorities including governmental partners should support their ARIs with strategic and resilient funding.**

Concerns persist around the opacity and inconsistent operation of ARI processes. Researchers receive little or no feedback on their contributions, have limited visibility of how submissions are considered, and rarely see how ARIs have led to action. This lack of transparency compounds existing differences in expectations: policymakers tend to prioritise rapid, targeted responses to immediate challenges; researchers often seek opportunities for strategic, co-produced projects. **We believe clearer communication, monitoring and evaluation of processes, goals, and value of ARI systems will build shared confidence and engagement.**

We conclude by arguing that to fulfil their potential, ARIs must be embedded within a more connected and strategic knowledge exchange ecosystem. This requires sustained reform, better resourcing, and transparent processes to position ARIs as a key component of a more coherent, integrated and impactful research-policy engagement. This involves clarifying ownership and accountability, ensuring adequate evidence absorption capacity within policymaking institutions, integrating ARIs with complementary mechanisms such as advisory committees and fellowships, and improving cross- and inter-government coordination and collaboration.



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Introduction

Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) constitute a structured mechanism by which parliaments, governments, and a growing number of public bodies can articulate and communicate their policy-relevant evidence needs to academic communities, independent research organisations, and other interested parties.

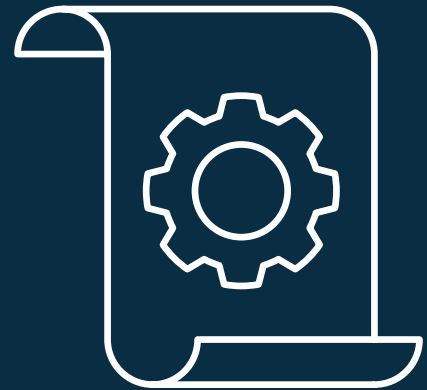
Their principal aim is to formalise and strengthen the interface between research, evidence, and policy to enhance policy design and delivery. By identifying priority areas, ARIs seek to ensure that researchers are informed in a systematic way about the evidence needs of public authorities and that decision-making is informed by rigorous academic research with the aim to foster more effective, efficient, and evidence-driven policymaking.

ARIs were first established in the UK in response to the Nurse Review of Research Councils (2015), which recommended clearer alignment between research funding and the strategic needs of the government. ARIs aim to offer policymakers a means of signalling

their research and knowledge needs – providing researchers clear guidance on where their expertise is most needed to inform policy and improve government performance (Boaz and Oliver, 2023).

In the decade since the Nurse Review, ARIs have quickly expanded across UK and devolved governments and more recently their publication has extended to a wider range of public bodies (Oliver and Boaz, 2026). This expansion of activity flags the increasing investment in ARIs as a tool for embedding research within the policymaking process across multiple levels of governance. Despite this growing investment, analysis of the effectiveness of ARIs in improving policymaking or fostering meaningful collaboration between policymakers and researchers across different tiers of government is limited.

This review aims to enhance understanding by analysing available literature on the development, implementation, organisation, and impact of the ARIs. It examines variance of ARIs across organisations, issues of funding and capacity, processes (including timescales and revision cycles), purpose, and the extent to which ARIs stimulate knowledge exchange or new research. The review also compares ARIs with other models of research–policy engagement and outlines future directions for strengthening the ARI approach, including opportunities to involve sectors beyond academic institutions more fully in the process. It concludes with several observations for the further development of the ARI ecosystem.



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A brief history of evidence in policymaking

The idea of demand-driven research, and the pursuit of policy-relevant evidence, has long been embedded in policymaking in the UK and internationally (Boaz *et al.* 2019).

Historically, however, these exchanges often operated through informal, *ad hoc* and often opaque channels, making the system difficult to navigate. As a result, there has been increasing pressure for more structured and transparent mechanisms for incorporating evidence into policymaking, including through expert advisory mechanisms. This shift towards more systemic and systematic processes has also been motivated by a desire to improve public service delivery and strengthen accountability within democratic systems (Head, 2016).

Alongside this, longstanding debates about what counts as ‘evidence’ have gained prominence. Policymakers routinely draw not only on academic

research, but also on administrative data, expert advice, practitioner insight, stakeholder views and community knowledge – each carrying different forms of credibility and influence in different policy settings (MacKillop and Downe, 2022).

Evidence Based Policy (EBP) is widely understood to have first emerged in the post-war period in medical and health-related policymaking. The first UK Government Chief Scientific Adviser was appointed in 1964 (Centre for Science and Policy, 2014). Gaining traction in the 1970s, EBP quickly extended beyond its origins in health, being utilised in education, social policy and criminal justice (Oliver *et al.*, 2014a). After decline during the 1980s and early 1990s, it experienced renewed momentum from the late 1990s as the ‘New’ Labour government sought to ‘modernise’ policymaking (see, for example, Cabinet Office (1999).

The resurgence of EBP reflected a broader expectation that policy decisions should, and could, be grounded in robust research and empirical evidence to strengthen their quality, rigour, and impact (Oliver *et al.*, 2014b).

The period saw the expansion of specialist analytical professions within government, including economists, statisticians, operational researchers and social researchers, in addition the growth of institutions designed to support evidence use, including the Government Office for Science, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), and later the establishment of the first What Works Centres.

However, EBP has been criticised for inadequately capturing the local, political and social complexities that shape real-world decision-making and politics. Academics argued that a “linear” model of evidence objectively guiding policy did not reflect the realities of political life (Cairney, 2016). The term ‘evidence-based’ itself appeared to some be more a political slogan than a feasible ambition. The degree to which evidence was used in policymaking appeared to be often influenced by political and contextual factors.

While in some health-related areas of research (particularly medicine), policy could indeed be described as ‘evidence-based’, academic research in many areas of social and economic policy were often informed by and integrated with other sources of evidence and expertise including citizen and community engagement (including citizen science), public opinion, vested stakeholder interests and competing political agendas (Cairney and Oliver, 2017).

Since the early 2000s, a shift towards the idea of evidence-informed policymaking (EIP) has recognised that policy is not formed in a vacuum but is influenced by wider economic and political dynamics. It is also often shaped contextual factors such as organisational capacity, social conditions, and practitioner experience. EIP promotes a more holistic approach in which high-quality evidence is integrated with professional judgement, stakeholder perspectives and situational (including political) considerations. The term has gained significant traction in fields such as education, healthcare and social work, where it is seen to better reflect the realities of decision-making in diverse and rapidly changing environments (Head, 2016).

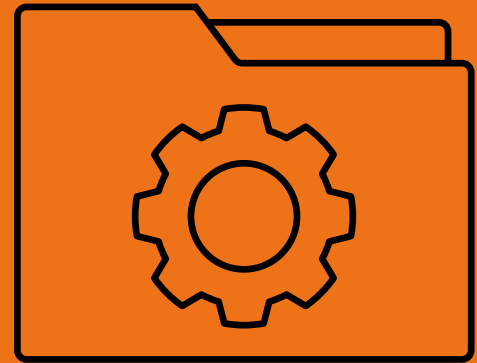
Policies underpinned by clear and transparent evidence are more likely to withstand scrutiny. In this sense, integrating evidence into policymaking is seen to act as a stabilising force, allowing decision-makers to demonstrate the rationale for their actions and supporting continuity across electoral cycles. Policies developed through processes perceived as rigorous, balanced, and methodologically sound are generally considered to be better placed to survive political challenge and sustain public confidence (Oliver *et al.*, 2014a). The visible use of research is thus thought to enhance the legitimacy of public decisions by associating them with actors regarded as credible



and independent. Public trust surveys consistently show that researchers and scientists are considered significantly more reliable and impartial than politicians (YouGov, 2024). This does not suggest that evidence can depoliticise policy, rather it but strengthen the perceived integrity of the process by showing that decisions are informed by more than partisan interests (Cairney, 2015).

However, in practice application of EIP is shaped by longstanding challenges. Policymaking takes place within dynamic and often politicised environments where electoral pressures, resource constraints, institutional culture and timelines complicate the effective use of research (Cairney, 2019). Analytical capacity in the UK remains uneven across government, particularly at devolved, regional and local levels, where access to research and time for engagement can be limited. Moreover, mismatched timescales between academic research and policy windows, alongside barriers such as paywalls, disciplinary jargon and academic incentive structures impedes effective knowledge exchange. Internationally, organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have also noted similar challenges, prompting many countries to establish dedicated evidence units and partnerships aimed at strengthening the interface between research and policy (OECD, 2025).

Across decades of evolving practice, the use of evidence in policymaking has thus become more structured, contested *and* central to political and public expectations of efficient and effective governance. While shifts from evidence-based to evidence-informed policymaking recognised the political, social, and organisational realities in which policy is made, they also highlighted persistent structural barriers to the timely, transparent, and meaningful use of research. Varied interpretations of what counts as evidence, uneven analytical capacity across government, and long standing challenges in connecting academic research with policy needs also pointed to the importance of clearer, more accessible mechanisms for engagement.



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In this context, the rise of the research impact agenda as a central organising principle of UK higher education over the past two decades has underlined growing expectations from policymakers that publicly funded research should demonstrate clear economic, social, and policy benefits. While the Research Excellence Framework (REF) institutionalised impact through case studies and funding incentives, the agenda has extended to include research council requirements for pathways-to-impact and engagement plans, and funding initiatives to accelerate research impact (Smith *et al.*, 2020). This broader research impact environment has normalised the idea that universities must show accountability and societal value, a shift which has been further accelerated through the introduction of the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and the emergence of the civic universities agenda (Dobson and Owolade, 2025)

The roll-out of Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) across the UK, outlined in the next section of this report, can be understood as part of this wider shift concerning research impact and is also a practical

response to acknowledged systemic research-to-policy challenges. By articulating government priorities in an open and forward-looking way, ARIs were framed as helping make evidence demand more visible and navigable, support more strategic knowledge exchange, and strengthen the alignment between research expertise and policy need. They were also seen to offer opportunities to better align research and knowledge exchange funding with key policy priorities (Nurse, 2015).

The emergence of ARIs should thus be understood as a direct response to longstanding concerns about the fragmented and opaque ways in which evidence is sourced and used across an increasingly complex, devolved governmental landscape. Moreover, they have offered the potential to establish more structured channels within an increasingly complex landscape, helping policymakers access relevant insights while offering researchers clearer pathways to contribute. As such, ARIs could potentially enhance evidence informed policymaking systems to be better capable of responding to complex societal challenges.





The development of ARIs across the UK

Over the past decade ARIs have proliferated across UK Government departments, devolved governments, Parliament, arms-length bodies as well as some strategic and local authorities.

This expansion reflects growing recognition of a need for clearer articulation of knowledge needs, as well as more structured engagement pathways and mechanisms that are visible to a wider research community. The following section provides an overview of the development of ARIs across the UK:

i. UK Government

UK Government departments have significantly expanded their capacity to draw on evidence and policy-relevant research in recent decades. This has been supported by the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, the network of departmental Chief Scientific Advisers, analytical and research units within departments, Science Advisory Councils, and targeted efforts to develop policymakers' skills, capabilities, and networks for engaging with research.

Publishing ARIs is now UK government policy. Relevant ministerial departments are required to publish and periodically refresh them, with the stated aims of aligning academic research with policy development, widening access to research suppliers, improving engagement with researchers, enhancing the quality and value for money of policy evidence bases, and enabling shared commissioning (Government Office for Science, 2025).

All relevant UK Government departments are encouraged to regularly update ARIs, which help to communicate knowledge needs more clearly by publicly identifying priority evidence gaps and signalling research needs to the academic sector and other research providers (House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee, 2022; Boaz and Oliver, 2023). In September 2023, the Government Office for Science and the Economic and Social Research Council launched the ARI Database: a central, searchable platform that consolidates all departmental ARI questions and improves researchers' ability to identify and respond to government evidence priorities (UK Government, 2024). Since the change in government following the 2024 general election, some departments have begun aligning their ARIs with UK Government missions, such as the Clean Energy Superpower Mission, which operate across multiple governmental departments and reinforce cross collaboration as well as the mission-oriented approach of the current government.

ii. UK Parliament, Senedd, Scottish Parliament

Since the UK Parliament's publication of the COVID-19 ARIs in 2020 (Bermingham, 2020), legislatures across the UK have also begun to use ARIs to make clearer the types of evidence that support their scrutiny, inquiry and oversight functions. In contrast to departmental ARIs, which typically focus on forward policy development, parliamentary ARIs often seek evidence to support the evaluation and scrutiny of existing policy to better understand the real-world impacts of legislation and facilitate policy learning (Davies, 2021).

The UK Parliament's Select Committees have adopted ARIs to enhance the transparency of their forward work planning and to strengthen engagement with academia. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) has played a coordinating role, supporting Committees to translate broad scrutiny interests into accessible research questions and developing mechanisms, such as committee evidence calls, fellowship schemes and thematic briefings, to link researchers to ARI priorities. Several select committees have piloted or adopted ARIs, including the International Development Committee, the Business and Trade Committee and the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. There has been no publicly available evaluation of their impact at the time of writing.

As part of their Knowledge Exchange Strategy (2021-26), the Senedd has used ARIs since 2022 to broaden and diversify the evidence informing committee scrutiny by inviting research across medium to long-term policy questions (Davies, 2022). Piloted by two committees (the Health and Social Care Committee and the Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee), they attracted nearly 90 submissions from 27 universities with most respondents engaging with the Senedd for the first time. These submissions helped to fill evidence gaps and bring new perspectives into scrutiny. Evaluation of this pilot noted that although ARIs were not a 'magic bullet', they had proven effective in engaging new audiences with the work of the Senedd, enhanced scrutiny, and strengthened committees' access to expertise. They had also instrumental in securing new ESRC funding to enhance future knowledge exchange activity (Johnson, 2023).

The Scottish Parliament has since drawn on both the UK Parliament and Senedd approaches and has trialled use of ARIs to its scrutiny needs – specifically the Draft Climate Change Plan. Its pilot focused on two targeted ARIs: one on circular economy and waste and another on the employment implications of a Just Transition. Researchers were invited to register their expertise to inform committee questioning, SPICe (Scottish Parliament Information Centre) briefings and the identification of expert witnesses (Barlow, 2025).

iii. Devolved national governments

Across the devolved national governments, ARI development has emerged as a mechanism for strengthening the visibility of priority evidence needs and improving coordination with the research system. The Scottish Government has published ARIs annually since 2024 covering Tax; Justice, Marine and Freshwater as well as Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research so far (Scottish Government, 2026). The development of the Scottish Government ARIs reflects the growing use of ARIs across the UK Government, stating the research priorities over medium term. Across all currently published ARIs, the underlying rationale has been to improve transparency on emerging evidence gaps, coordinate existing research investments and enable researchers, particularly those funded through UKRI and Scottish Funding Council programmes, to align work with long-term national objectives (Scottish Funding Council, 2022)

The Welsh Government published their first ARIs in late 2025 and early 2026 (Welsh Government, 2025; Welsh Government, 2026). The Welsh Government ARIs form part of a piloted approach designed to engage more effectively with researchers and align external research contributions with medium-to-long-term policy development needs.



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iv. Strategic and local authorities (England)

Several local and strategic authorities have developed and published ARIs, often in close collaboration with university partners in their area. These processes have been shaped by local place-based contexts, priorities, and relationships, meaning that no two local or strategic authority ARI systems have evolved in the same exact way.

Leeds City Council developed its ARIs in 2022 in close collaboration with the University of Leeds following a recommendation for a more strategic, systematic approach to knowledge exchange. The process encourages wide participation by inviting the sharing of evidence, the co-production of projects and the alignment of grant applications with **the Leeds ARIs** (Rowson, 2025).

Newcastle Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC), funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), took a ‘needs-led’ approach to the publication of Newcastle City Council’s ARIs in 2023, conducting 27 interviews with service leads to map policy challenges and evidence needs. The rationale was to prioritise questions most likely to improve long-term health outcomes and reduce inequalities, core aims of the HDRC, while keeping collaboration open to short-term placements, postgraduate projects and larger codeveloped funding bids (French and Hawkins, 2024).

North of Tyne Combined Authority used **Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement** (CAPE) funding to support a Policy Fellowship to test academic-policy engagement methods, centring its ARIs on community engagement and developing research

questions through an action research partnership with council officers. The rationale was to systematise engagement with academia around a core strategic theme and to generate an evidence agenda that would directly inform emerging strategies - work that has been carried forward by the successor North East Combined Authority (French and Hawkins, 2024).

More recent efforts have continued to innovate on this model. **Kirklees Council** has adopted a collaborative model, working with the University of Huddersfield, Yorkshire Universities and the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN), and established public sector and community partnership networks. It opened structured channels for evidence submission through a dedicated ARI website published in 2025 (Kirklees Council, 2025). Bradford City Council has both published Areas of Research Interest as well as the HDRC developing **Community ARIs (“C-ARIs”)** specifically to involve under-represented and under-engaged groups, mapping questions directly to the Bradford District Plan’s strategic outcomes (City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, 2025; Bradford Health Determinants Research Collaboration, 2026). **West Midlands Combined Authority** (2025) used its ARI process not only to align research with Mayoral priorities, but to build internal capacity - establishing academic partnerships, raising the visibility of research staff, and connecting teams across the organisation (Campbell *et al.*, 2026).

At the time of writing, ARIs at the local and strategic authority level are not included in the central ARI database. Instead, the University Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) links to these ARIs through its **Areas of Research Interest webpage**.





v. Arms-length bodies

Several arm's length bodies have also developed ARIs, each shaped by the nature of their remit and the relationships they seek to build research community. The Food Standards Agency (FSA), one of the first organisations to publish its ARIs in 2017, has taken a broad, long-term view. Notably, the FSA has been explicit that its ARIs are not an invitation to tender, but rather a basis for building relationships and developing joint programmes with research institutions, funding bodies and government at all levels (Food Standards Agency, 2024).

Sport England developed its ARIs to encourage new research in areas it considered underdeveloped, particularly around understanding the causal links between interventions, policies and levels of sport and physical activity. While its “Active Lives” programme provides strong insight into what is happening, the ARIs were designed to address gaps in understanding why, reflecting a desire to move beyond descriptive data towards explanatory evidence (Sport England, 2025).

The Office for Statistics Regulation framed its ARIs explicitly as an invitation to collaborate, drawing on its contact with statistics producers, researchers and industry to strengthen and expand its relationships with the research community. The aim was to build on existing evidence to better understand and promote statistics that serve the public good, with a clear offer to researchers including reciprocal event attendance and support with academic grant funding bids (Office for Statistical Regulation, 2025).

vi. Professional bodies

The Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA) provides an example of how professional bodies are beginning to adopt the ARI model. Its ARIs focus on strategic workforce questions, inviting engagement from academia, government, and sector partners through an Expression of Interest process (CIMSPA, 2025). Sport England has also noted CIMSPA's involvement in workforce-related research needs, suggesting early signs of alignment between ARIs published by different organisations operating within the same sector (Sadler, 2026).

Commonalities and divergence of ARIs

A decade on from the Nurse Review (2015), which called for a ‘more systematic expression of Government’s own research needs’ to enable ‘effective engagement with the research community’, there is still no single, standardised model for ARIs.

We identify some of the variances which have emerged in Table 1 (below), which we go to discuss in more length in the next section:

	UK Government and Arms-Length Bodies	Devolved Governments – Scotland, Wales	Legislatures – UK Parliament, Senedd, Scottish Parliament	Strategic Authorities and Local Authorities (England)
Opportunities for co-creation with external partners during ARI development process	Science Advisory councils and similar consulted during creation	Expert advice can feed into creation	Limited	Workshops involving academics and policy representatives have been trialled
Duration	Many are refreshed every 2-3 years, so are relevant to the conduct of new research as well as existing research being shared	First publications by Scottish Government in 2024 and Welsh Government in 2025	Typically only for a few months, accompanying select committee inquiry. An exception is the ongoing Violence Against Women and Girls ARI for House of Commons	Few examples yet, in Leeds have been refreshed annually
Funding	Not directly linked. Researchers guided to apply to funders of new research or within their universities to support knowledge exchange activity			Some collaborative funding created between local authority and university using Research England QR Policy Support Fund
Mechanism of response	Usually shared email inboxes to reach analytical team; some experimentation with using survey forms instead (e.g. DCMS)	Shared email inboxes	Survey forms, aimed at building additional repositories of expert lists	Shared email inboxes or survey forms
Suggested forms of researcher responding to ARI	Cite ARI in applications for research funding; get in touch to share summaries of existing research	Cite ARI in applications for research funding; get in touch to share summaries of existing research	Share existing research, and suggest scrutiny questions	Get in touch and University and local authority to explore possibilities / share existing research

While the growth of ARIs suggests a shared recognition of their value as a mechanism for integrating research into policymaking across different tiers of governance, approaches have diverged between the organisations that publish them. Variance can be often explained by the fact that ARIs are typically shaped by the specific institutional contexts, priorities and operational capacities of the organisations that develop them.

Although ARIs share a common label, they vary significantly across Government departments, Parliament, and devolved or local institutions. Central Government departments have generally used ARIs to support policy development by highlighting long term evidence needs and inviting input from researchers. While this approach has become fairly standard across Whitehall, there is far greater diversity in how ARIs are interpreted and applied by Parliament, devolved administrations, regional bodies, and arm's-length organisations.

In contrast, parliamentary ARIs, whether produced by the UK Parliament, the Senedd, or the Scottish Parliament, serve different functions. They are

typically short term, time limited exercises shaped by the needs of legislative scrutiny rather than long range policy planning. Their primary purpose is to help select committees and other parliamentary bodies quickly access relevant expertise when oversight demands arise, rather than to steer strategic research agendas.

At the strategic and local authority level, engagement with ARIs is newer and closely tied to partnerships with universities and other local actors. Capacity constraints, including limited staff and resources, restrict the scale and longevity of this work. Without a central coordinating body equivalent to the Government Office for Science, local ARI practices tend to be more bespoke, collaborative, and co produced with community organisations and evidence providers to help share the resource burden (Jopson and Rowson, 2024).





Evaluation of ARI processes

Given the ambition of the ARI process to strengthen the connection between academic research and policymaking, there has been to date no systematic evaluation to understand whether various ARIs are achieving the goals of the organisations publishing them.

The existing evidence base does, however, allow us to undertake comparative analysis of the various ARI processes to examine what is working, where evidence gaps persist and how they can be further developed to enhance their value. The following evaluation focuses on four key themes which emerge:

1. Process and Practice

Growing clarity and engagement

Evidence indicates that ARIs have contributed to improving clarity and accessibility within the UK's research-policy landscape. By publicly articulating a department's evidence needs, rather than relying on informal conversations or established personal networks, ARIs have created clearer and more transparent routes for researchers to understand where their expertise may be relevant (Oliver *et al.*, 2022; Institute for Government, 2025). This has widened participation, allowing a broader, though still incomplete, range of researchers to engage with government evidence agendas (French and Hawkins, 2024). For early career researchers and those without established policy contacts, ARIs can serve as an important leveller, signalling research needs in ways that were previously opaque (Heckels, 2024).

The scale of this effect is visible in practice. The Senedd's ARI pilot attracted nearly 90 submissions from 27 universities, with most respondents engaging with the institution for the first time (Johnson, 2023). Sport England received almost 200 responses from researchers and practitioners across all 20 of their ARIs, reflecting the breadth of disciplines contributing to sport and physical activity policy (Sadler, 2026). The Ministry of Justice has seen its ARIs amass over 8,000 online views and has used them to access over £3.5 million in funding to address priority evidence needs (UPEN, 2026). Where ARIs have proven most successful is when they have been used as 'conversation starters' -

inviting researchers to engage with officials, explore needs in greater depth and to build a shared understanding of the problem space (Oliver *et al.*, 2026).

In several government departments, ARIs have also emerged as productive convening tools. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) have all used ARI publications as the basis for seminars, engagement events, and partnership building activities with academic institutions (Government Office for Science, 2018). These events were not only seen to clarify priority areas but help departments cultivate longer-term relationships with researchers, embedding ARIs as part of their wider engagement strategies. Increasingly, ARIs are functioning more as catalysts for dialogue – moving towards more relational mechanisms of engagement (Campbell *et al.*, 2026).

Many ARIs now include activation plans that outline practical next steps. For example, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) ARI activation plan outlines departmental seminars and roundtables linked to discussions about placements and internships (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025). These activities recognise that evidence informed policy depends not on the linear transfer of information from academia to government, but on sustained relationships (both at the individual and institutional level), iterative dialogue and mutual understanding (Boaz and Oliver, 2026).





Methodological and engagement barriers

Nonetheless, progress remains uneven. ARIs continue to suffer from considerable variation in form, process, purpose, and quality. There is no standardised template, methodology or governance framework for ARI development, review, or refresh. Approaches to ARI production reflect institutional histories, policymaking cultures, resourcing constraints and political circumstances. This divergence makes the system difficult to navigate for academic and non-academic evidence providers, who must interpret different formats, levels of specificity and engagement expectations across an ever-growing landscape of governmental and non-governmental public bodies across the UK.

For example, the mechanism by which researchers can respond to ARIs vary across organisations (summarised in Table 1). UK Government departments and devolved governments typically rely on shared email inboxes to reach analytical teams, though some, such as DCMS, have experimented with survey forms. Legislatures have used survey forms more systematically, with the aim of building repositories of expert contacts. Strategic and local authorities have tended to use email inboxes (French and Hawkins, 2024). Across all types, researchers are encouraged to share summaries of existing work, though legislatures place particular emphasis on researchers suggesting scrutiny questions as well as sharing evidence.

One ongoing tension concerns the framing of ARI questions, with a significant proportion articulated in broad or non-researchable terms rather than clearly defined research questions (Oliver *et al.*, 2022).

This partly reflects the reality that government bodies are not research organisations, though research capacity varies considerably across government, as well as tensions between policy asks and research questions (Osman and Cosstick, 2022). Compounding this, researchers have flagged tensions about receiving pre-framed questions from policy organisations altogether. This suggests this issue is better understood as an unresolved tension shaped by differing expectations on both sides, rather than a straightforward problem to be solved.

A lack of shared understanding about what ARIs are for and what constitutes a useful contribution deepens this tension further (Oliver *et al.*, 2026). Governments may treat ARIs as strategic signalling devices or broad invitations for engagement, while researchers look for methodologically tractable processes and/or projects. When ARIs fail to meet these varied and sometimes competing expectations, policymakers may disengage when responses do not meet operational needs and researchers may disengage when questions appear too changeable to justify investment; this mutual uncertainty limits participation, reduces the diversity of those able to engage and ultimately weakens the bridging function ARIs are intended to serve within the wider evidence ecosystem (Boaz and Oliver, 2023).

Another challenge arises from the tendency to view ARIs primarily as prompts for new research. Evidence shows that ARIs do not necessarily lead to increases in engagement (Waddington, 2024). Even where there is existing research and expertise, ARIs may not be followed by active interaction and submission of relevant evidence. Given suggestions that up to 80% of ARI topics may already have substantial but largely untapped existing evidence bases (Oliver, 2023),

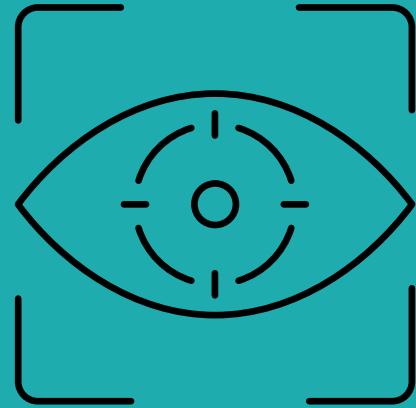
a more systematic emphasis on evidence synthesis and translation would appear be more appropriate. Yet academic incentive structures work against this. Universities reward the generation of new research, grant income and novel findings (Holmes-Henderson and Lewin, 2025), leaving synthesis and policy-ready outputs comparatively undervalued, often unfunded, and peripheral to academic career progression. Many researchers consequently lack the time, support or experience needed to translate existing knowledge into the timely, accessible formats policymakers require.

Culture change is needed on both sides. Researchers and policymakers alike require greater clarity on the purpose, processes, and desired outcomes of ARIs, and their place within the wider research-policy system (Campbell *et al.*, 2026). Without this, the combined effect of unclear question framing, inconsistent processes, and insufficient focus on synthesis will continue to reduce the utility of ARIs and inhibit their contribution to timely, evidence-informed decision making.

Timing and revision of ARIs

A review of timeframes (as outlined in Table 1) reveals considerable variance across institutional contexts. A Government review from 2024 suggested that all departments should annually renew ARIs (Government Office for Science, 2024a). However, UK Government departments are generally encouraged to publish ARIs aligned to medium to long-term priorities, typically three years or more, with scope to refresh or retire individual ARIs as priorities evolve - or sooner where “significant changes are made to an organisation’s objectives” (Government Office for Science, 2024b). Legislatures, by contrast, typically publish ARIs over much shorter timeframes, often only a few months, and tied to a specific select committee inquiry. This approach has also been adopted by the Senedd.

Exceptions exist such as the ongoing Violence Against Women and Girls ARI for the House of Commons, published in 2022, was set up to designed to support continuous parliamentary scrutiny of the issue rather than a single inquiry. Many strategic and local authorities are at an early stage and have yet to refresh their published ARIs at all, with Leeds City Council a notable exception, having reviewed its ARIs annually since launch.



Researchers and policymakers alike require greater clarity on the purpose, processes, and desired outcomes of ARIs, and their place within the wider research-policy system.

The variation in the timeframes and revision cycles of Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) across different institutions challenges the coherence and functioning of the overarching ARI system and contributes to difficulties in navigating the ARI landscape. Specifically, it is uncertain as to how university researchers and knowledge mobilisers can track diverse timeframe and revision cycles across a rapidly expanding range of ARIs in a timely and efficient manner.

Engagement beyond academia

The limited evidence available suggests that responses to ARIs have been dominated by research-intensive universities (Waddington, 2024), a pattern with several reinforcing causes, including incentives for research academics to seek impact and typically better-resourced support structures in research-intensive universities. Many devolved national, regional and local government ARIs have also been developed in direct collaboration with higher education partners, reflecting established relationships, pre-existing engagement infrastructure and research funding incentives that favour particular academic institutions.

This orientation towards universities has a structural consequence: non-academic organisations are largely excluded from the funding and engagement streams through which ARI engagement is resourced, which are designed primarily around academic institutions as principal recipients (Campbell *et al.*, 2026). Combined with limited internal resource capacity, this leaves think tanks, commercial social research agencies, national charities, and community-based knowledge holders, all producers of policy-relevant research, with fewer opportunities for meaningful ARI engagement.

Some efforts to address this are emerging. Bradford HDRC's community ARIs ("C-ARIs") (Bradford Health Determinants Research Collaboration, 2026) represent an attempt to widen participation beyond the university sector. However, these initiatives remain isolated and small-scale. Evaluation of what works to improve engagement is limited across ARI activity as a whole. Realising the potential of a genuinely broad evidence ecosystem will require departments and coordinating bodies to reconsider how ARIs are promoted, how engagement is structured, in addition to how funding and support mechanisms can enable participation beyond higher education (Oliver *et al.*, 2026).





2. Capacity and resource

Disconnection between ARIs and funding

A core ambition behind the establishment of ARIs was that they would help inform strategic funding decisions and contribute to a more coherent national research landscape. The Nurse Review (2015) articulated this explicitly, arguing that government should take a more structured approach to signalling evidence needs and aligning them with investments in research and innovation. In principle, ARIs were expected to support such alignment by making departmental research priorities visible to funders. Boaz and Oliver (2026) note that although there are systems and structures in place to weave ARIs to set research priorities, funders lack the internal capacity and skills to undertake this work.

There are at least two clear challenges in terms of funding. The first relates to funding to support the development of ARIs and staffing and other resources for their dissemination, functioning, oversight, utilisation, and refresh. This differs considerably depending on the policymaking institutions involved. The UK parliament, government departments, devolved national administrations, some strategic authorities in England, and public bodies have funded their ARI work. The UK Government Office for Science has a dedicated ARI engagement team which provides guidance across UK government and devolved national administrations, including workshops and other networking events with researchers and knowledge mobilisers. It works closely with government departments, identifying cross-cutting thematic links between ARI topics and updating the ARI Database. Government departments

and devolved national administrations also have discrete ARI teams (often embedded within research and/or knowledge exchange functions), though these differ in scale, organisation, and capacity. In each case, ownership of relevant ARIs and the funding of operational issues of capacity and functioning resides with the relevant departments or administrations.

Some strategic authorities have also developed research and insight capacities to support the development and publication of ARIs, such as the West Midlands Combined Authority. However, the asymmetric approach to devolution followed by successive governments has meant that the potential of strategic authorities to undertake ARI work differs considerably due to issues of capacity, maturity, and budget (Newman and Hoole, 2024; Barnett *et al.*, 2026). Most local authorities have had their strategic policy and research capacities severely diminished by a prolonged period of central government cuts to funding and resultant declines in staffing levels (Hoddinott *et al.*, 2024).

In such circumstances ARI work has developed on an *ad hoc* basis, with innovative collaborations drawing on the collective capacities and funding of multiple partners. For example, in West Yorkshire National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) investments have enhanced local authority research capacities, such as Health Determinants Research Collaborations (HDRCs) and Local Authority Research Practitioners (LARPs), to support ARI activities. In others, universities have drawn a range of institutional and external funding streams to support partnership working with local authorities to create ARIs. These remain exceptions rather than features of a universal, system-wide approach and lack certainty in terms of funding duration and scale.



A second challenge relates to access to funding to support engagement activities with ARIs. At present, ARIs in the UK remain largely disconnected from departmental budgets or dedicated research funds (Campbell *et al.*, 2026). Currently ARIs are published by UK Government without usually attaching funding streams to drive engagement, support evidence synthesis, or create new research (although the DHSC ARIs inform NIHR funding (National Institute for Health and Care Research, 2025)). Where there has been investment, including through flexible, responsive funding approaches and pilot initiatives, this has typically been short-term and often competitive in nature. As a result, ARIs currently rely heavily on academics securing external or institutional grants or drawing on their own institutional support to undertake relevant work (Boaz and Oliver, 2023). There are examples where ARIs have informed UKRI calls or shaped the framing of specific programmes, but these remain limited and unsystematic (Oliver and Boaz, 2025).

It is noteworthy that local authority ARIs in England have emerged through different funding arrangements. For example, the University of Leeds and the University of Bristol have both used Research England Policy Support Fund allocations to support modest, time-limited projects in which researchers respond to evidence needs articulated by their local city councils through ARIs. The University of Leeds has also used such funding to develop a short-term policy fellowship to support ARI development with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (Yorkshire Universities, 2026).

The consequences of this disconnection are significant. Without dedicated funding, organisations with fewer resources (teaching-focused universities, smaller research groups, civil society organisations and community-based evidence providers) are constrained in their ability to respond (Waddington, 2024). Even where relevant expertise exists, the absence of financial support for engagement, proposal development, or project delivery limits participation to those with pre-existing capacity and financial flexibility. This narrows the diversity of knowledge available to policymakers and perpetuates an uneven landscape of research production and mobilisation. Poor alignment between research funding and policy priorities also represents a broader inefficiency, reducing the impact and value of public investment in evidence (Meza *et al.*, 2025).

Inequalities in ARI engagement

Engagement with ARIs is not evenly distributed across the higher education sector. Research intensive universities, often with substantial institutional infrastructure for policy engagement, have proven thus far best positioned to respond. These institutions frequently hold internal funding sources, such as Impact Acceleration Accounts, Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) and Policy Support Funds, enabling them to more ably quickly convene workshops, undertake scoping activities, produce rapid reviews, or codesign ARI processes with local and regional authorities (Waddington, 2024). Their established policy engagement teams, strategic research offices, and internal brokerage functions further strengthen their ability to interpret ARIs and connect academic expertise to policy needs.

Institutions without comparable resources often struggle to engage, even where they hold relevant research and expertise underpinned by strong relationships and partnerships with policymaking institutions (MetroPolis, 2024). Such inequalities to engage are compounded by limited – or a lack entirely – of dedicated and specialist knowledge mobilisation capacity and resources (GuildHE, 2023). A situation persists in many smaller and specialist universities whereby academic researchers, often with multiple other teaching, administrative and research responsibilities, do not engage with ARIs due to lack of time and professional support. The consequence is a form of structural asymmetry whereby ARIs create opportunities for engagement, but only some universities and few other non-university organisations have the means to pursue them.

Capacity inequalities and constraints outlined in the previous section also affect the engagement of policymakers across different scales of government in ARIs. UK and devolved national government departments vary considerably in the staff time, analytical capacity, and organisational support they can commit to maintaining ARIs, triaging responses, or sustaining ongoing dialogue with researchers (see, Institute for Government, 2025; McKee and Allen, 2025; UNISON Cymru/Wales, 2025; Solace Scotland, 2024). In some cases, ARI inboxes have not been systematically monitored and responses have gone unanswered (Waddington, 2024).

Adequate research, capability, and infrastructure

Ensuring that all partners involved in ARIs have adequate resource, capability, and infrastructure to aggregate and use and absorb the research and expertise is as important as improving the supply of research itself (Heckels, 2024; French and Hawkins, 2024). Without this, even high-quality responses cannot achieve impact. Yet, there is currently no coherent or connected plan to establish appropriate capacity across individual or multiple levels of government, nor any systemic effort to build this across the higher education sector and other research actors. In the absence of such a plan, the risk is that policymaking institutions and the ARI system more widely will become progressively overloaded. There is potential that submissions from universities and other organisations to ARIs will outpace their ability to meaningfully process and engage, interpret, or act on them – thus meaning the potential value of ARIs is diminished or unrealised.

Moreover, limited capacity could affect the quality and specificity of ARI questions themselves. Developing well-framed, actionable research questions requires strategic analytical effort, consultation and coordination across policy teams – activities which appear to be often secondary to more immediate policy pressures (Boaz and Oliver, 2023). Where policymakers lack dedicated staff to support evidence needs, ARI development can become a low visibility, low resource activity, contributing to the variation and inconsistency observed across government (Heckels, 2024). Such gaps, if not addressed, could erode trust, reduce willingness to participate, and hinder the development of the long-term relationships that ARIs are intended to support.



3. Fragmentation across governance levels

ARIs have proliferated across UK government departments, devolved governments, parliaments and strategic and local authorities in England in ways that reflect their distinct priorities rather as part of any coordinated, overarching state-wide approach. While this decentralisation has allowed for responsiveness to institutional contexts, capacities, and needs, it has produced a highly fragmented ARI landscape. Different institutions have adopted varied formats, levels of specificity, engagement methods and refresh cycles. This has resulted in substantial disparities in ARI quality, quantity, functioning, accessibility and visibility (Boaz and Oliver, 2023). As such, the UK currently lacks a unified, multilevel framework for the development, coordination and use of ARIs.

The absence of a shared ARI framework has limited opportunities for alignment across governance levels (French and Hawkins, 2024). The national ARI database currently includes only ARIs produced by UK Government departments, arm's length bodies and devolved governments. ARIs developed by strategic and local authorities in England or UK and devolved legislatures are not captured. Information about these ARIs is dispersed across multiple platforms, including government websites, university newsletters, webinars, institutional mailing lists and informal networks. This omission reduces transparency and makes it harder for researchers, knowledge mobilisers, funders, and policymakers to gain a coherent picture of emerging evidence needs across the system (Campbell *et al.*, 2026).

As already noted, well-resourced universities with long-standing policy engagement teams and internal brokerage capacity are much better positioned to

monitor ARI developments and respond effectively (GuildHE, 2023). Their ability to interpret ARI questions, map expertise, convene researchers and organise responses reinforces pre-existing disparities in the research-policy system. As Waddington (2024) notes, such imbalances create a form of cumulative advantage as institutions already embedded in policy engagement structures are more likely to see and seize opportunities.

Equally, the lack of integration of ARIs across levels of government mean that opportunities to surface patterns, map overlapping themes or identify areas of cumulative evidence demand are frequently missed. Yet where systematic analysis has been undertaken, the value is clear. The Rebuilding a Resilient Britain (RRB) programme demonstrated that ARIs could be used to identify cross-cutting themes to inform evidence mobilisation and synthesis. This work subsequently shaped the British Academy's report on the long-term societal impacts of Covid-19 and informed the topic selection of both the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) and the Economics Observatory (ECO) (Government Office for Science, 2024a). Such examples illustrate what becomes possible when ARI analysis is conducted systematically and at scale.

In a policy environment increasingly characterised by interdependencies between UK-wide strategies, devolved national and regional priorities, and local government public service delivery, this fragmentation reduces the potential for collective evidence collation, synthesis and analytics to better inform coordinated policy development, delivery, evaluation and learning. It also impairs the scale and efficiency of universities to submit relevant evidence to thematically connected ARIs published by different policymaking institutions across relevant policy cycles.

4. Evaluation and monitoring

Limitations in evaluation

Currently there is an absence of robust, systemic and publicly available evaluations of ARI processes (Campbell *et al.*, 2026). Despite their increasing use, little is known about whether ARIs have led to more informed policymaking, more diverse engagement, or more effective research commissioning (Boaz and Oliver, 2023). This mirrors a wider global challenge: only a small proportion of research-policy initiatives are formally evaluated and even fewer have evidence of their impact on decision-making and policy outcomes (Oliver *et al.*, 2022).

Where metrics have been selected to measure ‘success’, they indicate that ARIs have stimulated valuable forms of engagement between policymakers and the research community. Such metrics typically fall into two categories. First is the scale of initiatives linked to ARIs. For example, the Ministry of Justice has reported that its ARIs helped generate substantial academic involvement, including seminars, networks, and secondments, which in turn expanded the department’s access to relevant expertise (Ministry of Justice, 2025). Second is quantity and type of evidence submission. Both the Senedd and Sport England ARIs succeeded in attracting responses from new academic communities, generating a breadth of research that had not previously been raised (Johnson, 2023; Sadler, 2026).

However, despite these positive examples, evaluation of engagement with ARIs remains limited and uneven. Estimates suggest that only a few hundred researchers, out of a sector comprising more than 50,000 active academic researchers, have engaged with UK-level ARIs (Waddington, 2024). Moreover, submissions are disproportionately dominated by research-intensive institutions, particularly those within the Russell Group, raising concerns about representativeness and equity. Taken together, these patterns highlight the need to understand not only who engages with ARIs, but how their contributions are used. There is however a need to invest more in evaluating patterns of engagement, disseminating analyses across research and policymaking communities, and developing initiatives to support further enhance participation.



Estimates suggest that only a few hundred researchers, out of a sector comprising more than 50,000 active academic researchers, have engaged with UK-level ARIs.

Attribution and impact challenges

Evaluating the effectiveness of ARIs faces several well recognised challenges common to research–policy analysis. First, it is rarely possible to attribute discrete policy outcomes directly to specific research and expertise contributions. Policymaking is shaped by multiple streams of evidence, political priorities, institutional constraints and timing, making direct causal links difficult to establish (Cairney, 2016). Secondly, much of the influence that research and expertise exert is conceptual rather than instrumental in that it may shift how policymakers understand an issue, introduce new framings, or influence internal discussions, without resulting in immediately observable or measurable policy change (Edler *et al.*, 2022). Temporal distance provides a further constraint. The effects of research engagement may unfold slowly, sometimes over many years or decades, and therefore fall outside typical evaluation cycles.

Moreover, there is a lack of transparency about processes in what happens after submissions are received, including how, when and to what extent research and expertise impacts on policy design, delivery, and evaluation (Sasse and Haddon,

2018). Compounding this, there is no public-facing evidence that policy institutions at any level of governance in the UK systematically tracks how ARI submitted evidence is used, leaving little visibility of its contribution to analysis or policy development. In practice, this can make ARIs appear as ‘black boxes’ – with researchers unsure whether their input has been received, considered or acted upon (Waddington, 2024).

This situation is slowly being addressed by some organisations. For example, formalising the evidence-management process has become a key priority for Sport England as it moves into the next phase of developing its ARI approach (Sadler, 2026). But too often, tracing the contribution of ARIs to policy outcomes is inherently complex and often opaque. Addressing this will require not only better monitoring and evaluation but cultural change on both sides of the research–policy engagement. A more transparent approach to how evidence is received and used is essential if ARIs are to appeal more widely to researchers and gain appropriate recognition and currency in relevant higher education research and knowledge exchange evaluation metrics and frameworks.





ARIs within the policy engagement landscape

Evidence assessed in this review indicates that ARIs offer a structured means for articulating policy or scrutiny research needs.

This noted, they represent just one mechanism within a much wider and often fragmented, ecosystem of ‘tools’ used to bring research, expertise, and policymaking closer together. ARIs have the potential to serve as a fundamental connective thread across the policy engagement landscape - articulating shared evidence needs, reducing duplication and helping to coordinate the diverse activities that bring research and policymaking together. In practice, however, these connections are weakly established,

inconsistently maintained, and in many cases entirely absent. The result is a policy engagement landscape in which ARIs operate largely in isolation from the very mechanisms that could amplify their impact.

The research-policy ecosystem in the UK is characterised by considerable institutional activity but limited coordination or coherence that some have described as a vast ‘rudderless mass’ (Oliver *et al.*, 2022). Advisory committees produce expert recommendations; evidence synthesis programmes aggregate research; fellowship schemes embed researchers in policy settings; seminars and workshops are delivered; and institutional collaborations build sustained partnerships (UPEN, 2024). Each of these mechanisms has the potential to interact productively with ARIs - either by informing

their development, addressing their questions, translating their priorities into action, or updating them. Yet the absence of systematic architecture that links these activities together means that ARIs frequently sit at the margins rather than the centre of these processes.

Making connections between ARIs and complementary mechanisms has tangible consequences – reducing duplication, improving use of existing evidence and building a strong research-policy relationships across the system. There is, however, growing suggestion that ARIs could function less as a single standardised model and more as one component within a flexible suite of tools, whose design and application reflects the contexts in which they are deployed. (Chaytor *et al.*, 2025). This requires a better understanding how ARIs currently integrate with, complement or differ from some of the other key policy engagement mechanisms:

Advisory committees and expert bodies

Advisory committees occupy a well-established place within the wider ecosystem of evidence informed policymaking, functioning as institutionalised channels through which governments access scientific, technical and analytical expertise (Owens, 2015). Bodies such as Defra’s Science Advisory Council and the Migration Advisory Committee exemplify what the literature describes as embedded advisory mechanisms: they provide ongoing, context specific input that can shape both the framing of policy problems and the interpretation of emerging evidence (Sasse and Haddon, 2018). In contrast to ARIs, which operate as relatively static articulations of departmental knowledge needs and are refreshed only periodically, advisory committees are integrated into day-to-day decision processes, enabling more iterative and responsive forms of expertise mobilisation (Government Office for Science, 2024b).

Research on expert advisory systems suggests, however, that their influence is contingent on institutional design, departmental culture, and

political receptivity; committees exert meaningful impact only when they are well connected to decision structures and when their advice is actively sought and valued by policymakers (Oliver *et al.*, 2022). These bodies can also play a formative role in shaping ARIs by identifying knowledge gaps and signalling emerging issues, illustrating the interaction between long term research prioritisation and more immediate advisory functions. Yet this relationship is not without limitations: differences in timescales, uneven departmental engagement, and the potential marginalisation of certain forms of expertise can constrain the extent to which advisory committees and ARIs operate in a coherent or mutually reinforcing way (Craft and Howlett, 2013; Cairney, 2016).

Evidence syntheses and systematic reviews

Systematic reviews and evidence syntheses represent an important route for bringing research and policymaking closer together. As previously noted, existing analyses suggest that many ARIs do not, in fact, require new research bids; rather, they point to gaps that could be addressed by drawing more effectively on existing knowledge (Oliver, 2023). Yet without sufficient time, funding, and capacity for rapid evidence syntheses or full systematic reviews, these knowledge gaps are often unaddressed in practice.

A structural opportunity exists here at the system level. ARIs, and thus the need for evidence syntheses, across government appear to cluster around overlapping themes, yet no mechanism currently exists to identify these commonalities and coordinate syntheses in response (Oliver *et al.*, 2022). Connecting these together would reduce duplication, improve the coherence of the evidence base, and enhance the overall value of the ARI system for policymaking (Boaz and Oliver, 2023; Wyborn *et al.*, 2018).

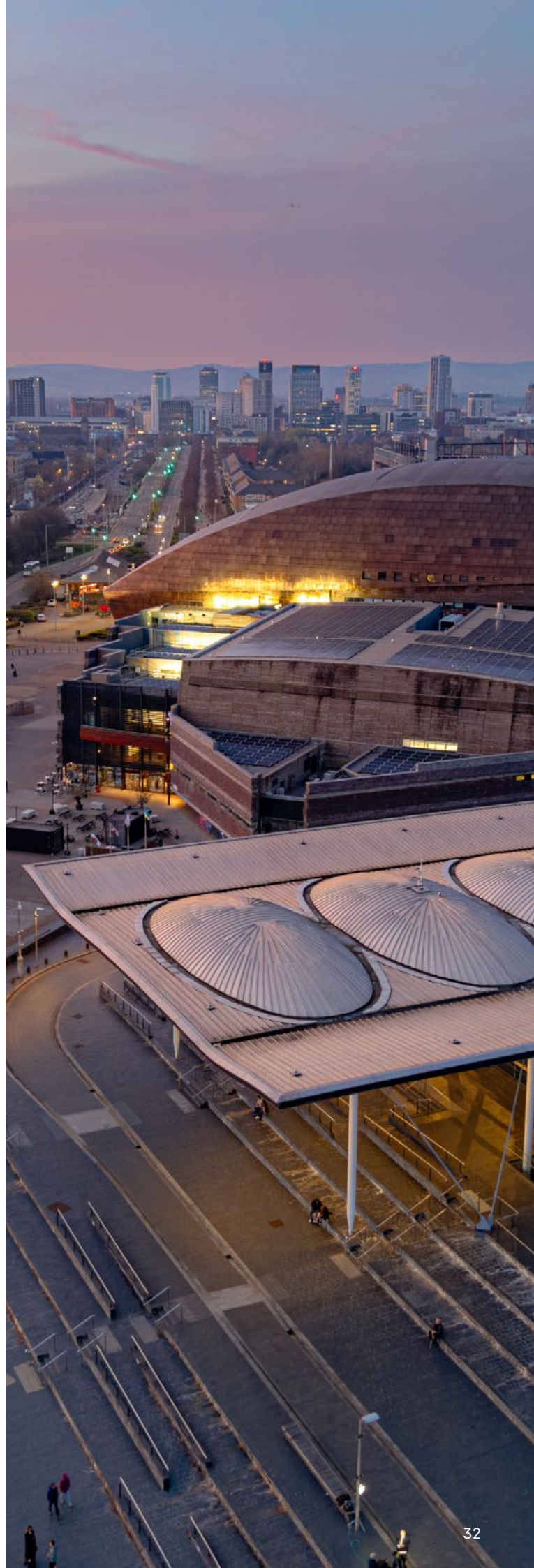
Internships, fellowships and secondments

Internships, fellowships and secondments provide important mechanisms for research-policy engagement, developing the skills, relationships and policy literacy of both researchers and policy professionals. They operate in both 'Research to Policy' (R2P) and 'Policy to Research' (P2R) directions (Buckley and Oliver, 2025). In the R2P direction, schemes such as the UKRI Policy Internships and UKRI Policy Fellowships embed researchers within policy settings, from short placements for PhD students to year-long fellowships for early- and mid-career researchers, offering exposure to policy processes and opportunities to contribute directly to analysis, reports and strategic thinking (Tuckerman, 2022; Obermeister, 2023).

Some fellowships have been explicitly connected to ARI processes. The ESRC ARI Fellows seconded to the Government Office for Science and the CAPE policy fellowships, which supported knowledge mobilisers working with UK Parliament, Senedd and North of Tyne Combined Authority, further illustrates how fellows can support ARI integration and strengthen academic-policy collaboration (French and Hawkins, 2024).

However, most fellowship and secondment schemes still operate independently of ARI processes. UKRI Policy Fellowships and Internships, for example, place researchers in government settings primarily to develop individual policy literacy and contribute to analytical work. Fellows are typically matched to host departments based on their research expertise and the issues departments identify as needing support, but these departmental needs are not generally explicitly articulated or framed. As a result, matching takes place without any formal mechanism for alignment to the ARI agenda.

Fellowships and secondments offer deep, relational engagement, while ARIs provide system-wide signalling of evidence need and pathways for wider participation. Used together intentionally, rather than in parallel, they could connect the formal expression of evidence priorities with the everyday practices of policymaking. If this linkage is built in by design, ARIs could become more than documents and instead form part of a broader, interactive knowledge exchange ecosystem.





Institutional models and multi-partner collaborations

The NIHR has invested in longer-term research–policy infrastructure through initiatives such as Health Determinants Research Collaborations (HDRCs) and Applied Research Collaborations (ARCs). HDRCs are fundamentally designed to build and embed research capacity within local authorities, strengthening the evidence base at place-based level. Some, like Bradford (2026), have gone further by developing their own ARI processes, using them as a structured mechanism to articulate local evidence needs through a bottom-up process involving community groups and residents. Beyond health, shorter-term funded collaborations, such as Y-PERN and Insights North East, have established place-based partnership models which have supported the development and dissemination of local and strategic authority ARIs in England (French and Hawkins, 2024).

Yet, such examples remain the exception. Much of the funding that supports research–policy collaboration in the UK continues to be short-term and competitive, creating inherent instability and limiting the depth of relationships that can be developed. What the ARI system currently lacks is a commitment to building long-term, resilient, and appropriately funded infrastructure to support strategic multi-partner collaboration (Chaytor *et al.*, 2025). Without this, the most promising developments in ARI practice will

remain isolated and fragile, dependent on the initiative of individuals rather than embedded within systems designed to sustain them.

Formal agreements between individual and networks of universities and policy institutions, as well as other public bodies, businesses and community organisations, are increasingly common. Most common are Civic University Agreements, which typically outline multi-partner place-based ‘civic missions’ or programmes of collaboration. Such agreements have typically identified key areas of agreed interests, connecting research–policy engagement (and other university activities) but without explicitly referenced the creation or development of ARIs.

There has however been innovation in the creation of formal agreements which focus in part on ARIs. For example, the West Yorkshire Higher Education Compact, a formal partnership between the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and universities in West Yorkshire and York explicitly identifies Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) as a mechanism for structuring research–policy engagement (Yorkshire Universities, 2026). The Compact commits universities and the Combined Authority to co-develop ARIs to support place-based policy development. The University of Leeds–Leeds City Council Research Collaboration Framework provides an institutional example of the integration of ARIs into a coherent and transparent set of engagement pathways between local government and the university (Leeds City Council and University of Leeds, 2024).

Consultancy and contract research

Consultancy is a significant route for rapid, tailored policy advice (Howlett and Migone, 2013). It is transactional, expert-led and effective at applying existing knowledge to defined problems quickly. Where speed is paramount, consultancy will continue to dominate over collaborative research. Instead, the strength of ARIs is in the medium-to-long term: signalling enduring departmental priorities, building relational rather than transactional engagement and widening participation in evidence production.

Crucially, this positions ARIs well to reshape how contract research is prioritised and allocated - particularly to academic partners. Commissioned for specific analytical needs, contract research sits between consultancy and grant-funded academic work. Universities frequently undertake it, but its timelines and requirements often misalign with academic priorities and autonomy, limiting who participates. Aligning consultancy and contract research more closely to ARIs and establishing mechanisms to explore the potential to link it with more strategic academic research could potentially help bridge the current gap brought about by the lack of aligned short- and longer-term funding.



Commissioned for specific analytical needs, contract research sits between consultancy and grant-funded academic work



Towards a more cohesive system

Overall, as we summarise in Figure 1, ARIs occupy a distinct but interconnected position within a diverse ecosystem of research-policy engagement mechanisms. But while ARIs currently offer a structured and transparent approach to articulating

government research needs, their coexistence with the wide array of rich but fragmented initiatives indicates considerable overlap in purpose and function and possible duplication of effort. Integration across mechanisms remains inconsistent, meaning opportunities for coordination and enhanced collective impact are being missed.

Figure 1 Research-policy engagement mechanisms and where they sit within the policy cycle.



The potential exists for a more joined-up approach, to align efforts, reduce redundancy and work towards a fuller spectrum of academic expertise being mobilised effectively to meet policy challenges. Many of the activities outlined in Figure 1, particularly those involving relational and experiential learning, require sustained investment in knowledge mobilisers,

infrastructure, and institutional support (Boaz and Oliver, 2026). Without adequate resourcing and staffing, the potential of ARIs and complementary mechanisms to foster inclusive, evidence-informed policymaking will remain inefficient, replicative, and under-realised.



Conclusions

This review of the current evidence base on ARIs indicates that they are a mechanism with transformative potential but – at least at present – they suffer from some key limitations.

ARIs have constituted a valuable addition to the academic–policy engagement, offering a structured mechanism through which policymaking institutions and public bodies can signal their knowledge needs and shaping research agendas. Importantly, there is emerging evidence that ARIs can and do work both in increasing the strategic impact and value of research

and expertise and broadening the diversity and number of researchers involved in research–policy engagement.

However, current ARI systems and frameworks still lack universal coverage and display considerable variability in process, purpose and anticipated outcomes. There is no coherent mechanism for joining together research interests across central government, the devolved administrations, local government and arm’s length bodies. As a result, overlapping or complementary evidence needs often remain disconnected, making it difficult for researchers to identify shared priorities or for policymakers to coordinate demand across institutional boundaries. Extending the national ARI database to include research interests from

multiple tiers of government would go some way towards addressing this fragmentation, creating a clearer overview of system wide evidence needs.

Crucially, ARIs potential to inform and guide higher education research and knowledge mobilisation funding in line with policy priorities has not been achieved in practice. The absence of systematic funding has constrained the ability of both researchers and policymakers to sustain meaningful engagement with ARIs. Our review raises urgent questions for all those involved in the design and operation of ARI systems as to how research and government funding mechanisms be more systematically aligned with the needs articulated through ARIs.

Even where a strong evidence base already exists for a high proportion of ARI questions, the challenge persists of who has the resource, capability, and capacity to synthesise that evidence and translate it into accessible policy insight. Furthermore, there is an acute need to consider how policymakers and universities can invest strategically in staffing to ensure appropriate, resilient capacity across partners to support the operation and oversight of ARI systems.

A recurring critique of ARIs is that they are a 'black box' in terms of engagement and impact. Researchers typically receive no acknowledgement of their approaches, have limited insight into how submissions are considered and rarely see examples of follow-through. This is further compounded by a fundamental difference in expectations. Policymakers often seek rapid, targeted responses to immediate questions, whereas researchers typically look for opportunities to co-produce longer-term, exploratory projects, or are looking for some evidence that research summaries they share will help inform policy. When these differing aspirations are not explicitly reconciled, ARI processes fall short of expectations for all concerned.

The absence of transparency, feedback and systematic evaluation, particularly where the expectations gap is pronounced, risks undermining confidence and discouraging future engagement. More consistent monitoring and evaluation, coupled with clearer communication about how ARIs are used and more routine sharing of examples where they have led to action, is essential to demonstrate value and build trust across the research and policy communities.



Crucially, ARIs potential to inform and guide higher education research and knowledge mobilisation funding in line with policy priorities has not been achieved in practice.

ARIs should not be viewed in isolation, and our review indicates that greater consideration must be given to their integration within a wider knowledge exchange ecosystem that includes consultancy, fellowships, advisory committees, evidence syntheses and calls for evidence. There is, however, a further challenge here. Should the ARI system itself be enhanced with other initiatives or should it be better integrated as one part of a systematically connected, coherent transparent framework of engagement pathways? This might appear a somewhat conceptual issue, but it is one worthy of discussion.

Finally, to maximise ARIs' potential, ongoing evaluation is essential to better understand activity volumes and the functioning, quality of engagement, outcomes, and policy impacts across the system and within individual institutions, at different scales of government, and amongst other public bodies. A more significant challenge still is to explore what methodologies are best suited to capturing the long-term impacts of ARI-guided research on policy formation, delivery, and evaluation. There is also a need to better understand what barriers inhibit broader engagement across the research community, particularly for less research-intensive universities and research organisations outside of academia.

To conclude, there is an urgent need to sustain the ongoing development of ARIs, including their better resourcing and the introduction of transparent processes to position them as a key component of a more coherent and integrated research-policy engagement. This will involve clarifying issues of ownership and accountability, ensuring this is adequate evidence absorption capacity within policymaking institutions, and the ongoing integration of ARIs with complementary mechanisms such as advisory committees and fellowships. There is also an urgent need to improve cross- and inter-government coordination and collaboration across the existing and emerging ARI systems.

Although the current evidence base indicates the ARI system is somewhat limited in scope, engagement, and impact at this juncture, this should not discourage efforts to realise its potential. With sustained commitment to refinement, reform, structural embedding and adequate resourcing, ARIs can constitute a key component of a more strategic, inclusive, and impactful knowledge mobilisation system. Only through such developments can ARIs contribute meaningfully to a more coherent, integrated and impactful research-policy engagement.



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