



A year in the life of UPEN

Introduction

This has been a year of learning, growth and development for UPEN.

We are continuing to strengthen capacities and capabilities for academic-policy engagement across the UK and develop UPEN as an organisation which offers an effective national brokerage infrastructure. Through our Programmes activities, we have been developing new insights into how to build knowledge mobilisation competencies and skills needs across UPEN members; enhancing our understanding of institutional capacity; supporting regional academic-policy engagement; advancing practice in engagement and knowledge mobilisation; developing UPEN's brokerage functions and capacity; and working hard to improve how we engage with and support our members.

What have we learnt about academic-policy engagement, and how UPEN can support, this year?

- **Capacity building remains vital:** capacity within institutions and policy organisations and to coordinate academic-policy engagement enables better outcomes in a challenging environment.
- **Benefits are long-term and systemic:** Effective academic-policy engagement occurs over the long-term and is highly relational and trust-based. Upstream investment in the enabling conditions is needed to deliver downstream impacts on policy problems.
- **There is a thirst for sharing and improving knowledge, and a commitment to shared learning:** Both academic and policy communities want to better understand how to improve engagement and make better use of expertise and evidence in policymaking.
- **Mechanisms for academic policy engagement are valuable, and valued:** Policy organisations are increasingly embracing routes to support academic engagement and evidence use, with for example ARI expanding across multiple levels of government.
- **Connecting systems and scales is essential:** The academic-policy ecosystem in the UK is crowded and constantly evolving, with new initiatives and practices emerging regularly, at multiple scales. It will be important for UPEN to think carefully about how to respond to this evolving landscape as we build new activities and services.

Sarah Chaytor, Co-Chair and Director of Programmes, Dr. Chris Hewson, Co-Chair and Programmes Co-Director (Business Development and Partnerships, Professor Andrew Brown, Co-Chair and Programmes Co-Director (Academic).



A year in the life of UPEN

2025-2026



The evolving landscape

Contributing evidence and expertise to address societal challenges and partnering with policy actors and wider stakeholders to turn evidence into action remains a crucial endeavour. But it is also one which can be overlooked in core university missions, and (mis)characterised as a ‘nice to have.’

Within an external landscape seemingly in constant flux, and increased pressures, financial and otherwise, on the university sector, we must continue to make the case for, and demonstrate the value of, academic-policy engagement as a key function which universities must embrace as part of their societal contribution.

UPEN plays a key role within this challenging context: providing a streamlined route to academic expertise in response to increasing policy appetite for evidence; convening universities and wider stakeholders to address knotty problems; and providing collective mechanisms for academic-policy engagement and impact that deliver mutual benefits and better outcomes.

We are extremely grateful to all those individuals and organisations who have contributed their time, energy and insight to UPEN’s work. We are embarked on a complex journey, and it isn’t always easy. But it is one in which, by working together, we can get so much further.





Developing UPEN as an organisation

Membership & Network Development

Member Engagement

UPEN's membership has continued to grow steadily, reaching nearly 130 institutions in total, with 15 new members joining since 2025. The network's reach across the English higher education sector is particularly strong, underlining its position as the primary network for academic-policy engagement across the sector.

Member Consultation

UPEN's sector-wide member consultation has drawn a substantial response from across the network. The Member Consultation will be run biennially, to track engagement, develop a deep understanding of the HE academic-policy engagement landscape, enhance and develop our member offer, experience and activities, and ensure our services and direction are informed by the members.

UPEN's Renewed Membership Offer

UPEN is committed to maintaining an inclusive membership model which is accessible to all. At the same time, we need to take steps to secure the long-term sustainability of our network. We are working with members to understand what is possible and feasible and map a clear offer.

- Nearly 130 member institutions
- 15 new members in 2025
- First sector-wide member consultation



Communities of Practice

Following a period of consultation with members, and as ratified by the newly formed Executive Board in April 2026, UPEN has refreshed its structures.

We have reconstituted our former sub-committees into Communities of Practice (CoPs), collaborative spaces for sharing best practice, running dedicated events, and producing reports and activity that contribute to key areas of interest in the academic-policy engagement ecosystem.

They are chaired by UPEN members and made up of knowledge brokers, academics, policymakers and external partners.

We have received 200 expressions of interest to join communities of practice across 100 different organisations and universities.

The UPEN Conference

The UPEN Conference 2026, **In Evidence We Trust**, demonstrated the growing momentum behind academic-policy engagement and knowledge mobilisation, bringing together more than 370 delegates for two days of discussion on trust, evidence and policymaking.

The scale of attendance reflects a strong and widening appetite for better connections between research and policy, and for spaces where academics, policymakers, knowledge mobilisers and other practitioners can share learning across sectors. The conference also showcased the breadth and quality of the field, with speakers drawn from a wide range of geographic contexts and professional backgrounds, spanning universities, government, intermediary organisations and the wider policy and evidence ecosystem.

Six new CoPs:

- ARI Practitioners
- Arts and Humanities
- Place
- International
- Research Communication in Curriculums
- Knowledge Mobilisation



Communications and Impact

Our communications work supports UPEN's mission by enabling:

- Higher visibility for policy-engaged research and practice across the UK
- Faster brokerage of opportunities and knowledge, increasing member participation
- Stronger cross-institution collaboration
- Improved alignment with partners and policymakers through timely, accessible outputs.

Over the past year, UPEN has scaled its communications to match a growing, UK-wide mandate to connect research and policy, and invested in foundational processes, platforms, and analytics to both professionalise communications and track visibility, engagement and influence.

The strategic focus of UPEN's communications is shifting away from the *curation* of sector news towards the *creation* of original, evidence-led content, generated through UPEN Programmes.

Over the next year, we will be focusing on:

- Widening contributor voices
- Growing policy-facing engagement via a clearer offer to policy professionals
- Developing impact stories which highlight outcomes from UPEN Programmes and reinforce UPEN's role as the go-to interface for academic-policy engagement.

Four key comms objectives:

- Establishing UPEN as the interface between academia and policy
- Deepening member engagement
- Driving participation through Programmes
- Building a trusted, salient brand

UPEN Update (fortnightly newsletter) subscribers up 40% in past year

72% LinkedIn growth

38,000 active website users



Governance

As part of our Research England funding we are redeveloping our governance structures to make them more robust, to support UPEN's expansion and to move towards being a formal organisation, informed by our growing membership. This is supported by an internal Executive Board, and an external Advisory Board.

Executive Board

UPEN has recently launched its Executive Board, which will support and advise on strategic direction and internal policies, working with UPEN leadership to build a long-term organisational model and to critically engage with and offer advice on activities and programmes of work.

The Executive Board helps UPEN retain expertise from those involved in growing UPEN from the beginning – and to help ensure clear focus on our core mission. Its role is to help steer the development of UPEN into a sustainable organisation, including considering optimal financial and operating models.

Executive Board Members:

- Jonathan Breckon, UPEN Fellow
- Nicky Buckley, University of Cambridge
- Hannah Durrant, Cardiff University
- Giles Giles, University of Southampton
- Arlene Holmes-Henderson, University of Durham
- William Pryor, University of Oxford
- Muiris MacCarthaigh, Queens University Belfast
- Andy Mycock, University of Leeds
- CR Stocks-Rankin, Scottish Policy Research Exchange

Advisory Board

The primary role of the Advisory Board is to advise Sarah Chaytor, in her capacity as Director of UPEN Programmes and as Chair of UPEN's Strategy Group. This advice will include, but need not be limited to, the progress and delivery of UPEN's Programmes to meet the objectives of £5.9 million funding received from Research England, the ESRC, and UKRI.

The Advisory Board is chaired by Professor Graeme Reid (UCL) and membership comprises senior leaders from central government, devolved legislatures, local government, funding bodies and higher education.

Advisory Board Members:

- Graeme Reid, CHAIR, Professor of Science and Research Policy, UCL
- Sarah Carter-Bell, Knowledge Exchange Lead, POST
- Ann Fielding, Head of Research Engagement, DSIT
- John Gleek, Head of Research, Local Government Information Unit
- Sara Gracey, Head of Engagement, Darlington Economic Campus
- Ted Hayden, Director, Go-Science
- Francesca Lace, Economic and Social Research Council
- Tamsin Mann, Associate Director of Social Research Council
- Dominic Munro, Head of Policy Profession, Scottish Government
- Kiran Trehan, Pro Vice Chancellor for Enterprise, Partnerships and Engagement, University of York



Key Work Programmes

Building capacity for academic-policy engagement

Understanding institutional capacity

Via an initial literature review of the multi-faceted and interconnected nature of institutional capacity for academic-policy engagement, we identified 5 key dimensions which underpin capacity:

- Intermediary roles
- Leadership and strategic recognition
- Time and flexible funding
- Skills and learning activities
- Incentives and career pathways

The 5 key factors that underpin institutional capacity for academic-policy engagement:

- Intermediary roles
- Leadership and strategic recognition
- Time and flexible funding
- Skills and learning activities
- Incentives and career pathways

The review has also found that there is growing awareness of the importance of brokerage and relational infrastructure – yet such capacity remains fragile. Work is currently exploring differential needs across UPEN's members and understanding how UPEN can best add value.

Supporting regional academic-policy engagement

Regional networks are an increasingly important part of the ecosystem, but specific evidence needs and models for engagement vary according to regional context, and the maturity of initiatives across the country remains patchy.

UPEN has been working with regional networks, including the North West Policy Partnership, Yorkshire Policy Engagement & Research Network, and Policy South West to strengthen collaborative capacity and understand differential evidence needs.

A series of workshops with funders, Scottish Cities, and North West universities have explored key issues for enhancing academic-policy engagement at different levels of sub-national government. A forthcoming toolkit will capture learning and support practical actions to support place-based academic-policy engagement.



Enhancing national brokerage capability: meeting a system-wide challenge

An estimated 1.7-2 million civil servants work across the UK policy system. While appetite for evidence-informed policymaking is high, they often face barriers to identifying, accessing, and applying relevant research in fast-moving environments.

At the same time, universities hold significant expertise, but routes into policy engagement can be fragmented and difficult to navigate.

We are developing **UPEN Connect** to connect public policy professionals with academic evidence and expertise at the speed and scale required by government.

Through analysis of historical engagement requests managed by UPEN alongside reviewing academic and grey literature, we have been building understanding of the patterns of policy demand and types of evidence need.

This is informing the development of a flexible ‘menu’ of options for policy professionals and the testing of practical approaches to evidence brokerage, including a rapid-response tool connecting policy professionals with relevant expertise, rapid evidence snapshots, and policy-focused events.

Alongside this, we will continue to expand our convening and relationship-building to support a more responsive, trusted, and embedded relationship between universities and the UK policy system.



Evidence needs for AI

AI has been a dominant theme in evidence needs this year, which UPEN has explored via:

Co-delivering three seminars, with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), as part of the **One Big Thing** government programme, focused on AI Innovation and public service efficiency – bringing together researchers from across the UPEN network with over 600 attendees from across government.

Partnering with GO-Science to assemble and deliver at pace rapid evidence snapshot of 'Using AI in Science Advice', drawing together expertise from across UPEN's network.



Advancing knowledge mobilisation

Knowledge Mobilisation Competencies

The past year has seen an intensive evidence-gathering phase, including a member survey, interviews with training and CPD providers, and a 'what works in effective CPD' evidence review.

There is a clear need to focus on supporting knowledge mobilisation skills, while recognising that knowledge mobilisation is delivered across a diverse set of roles, including academics, professional services staff, 'third-space' practitioners, policy professionals and leaders, each with different needs shaped by context, career stage and institutional mission.

UPEN's approaches to developing competence must reflect this diversity, and be adaptive, reflective and tailored.

Key principles for strengthening knowledge mobilisation competencies

- UPEN's approach will be diversity-aware, role inclusive, recognising variation in organisational maturity, non-linear career pathways, and uneven opportunities across different groups, including differences linked to seniority and role type
- Equity, diversity and inclusion are embedded in all development activities, with a focus on addressing structural barriers, ensuring accessible delivery, and amplifying a diversity of voices

- That we will move beyond one-off training towards approaches that drive sustained behavioural change – such as mentoring, coaching, peer-learning and reflective practice – and place a stronger emphasis on evaluation and impact
- That there is clear value in experiential, practice-based learning rooted in real-world policy engagement, supported by communities of practice and cross-career support.

What's next?

We have identified ongoing support needs around navigating career pathways, particularly for hybrid roles. UPEN is beginning to address this through:

- Developing shared language on skills
- Curated career examples
- Visibility campaigns
- A light-touch competency framework, to be tested later in 2026.



Community of Practice on Knowledge Mobilisation

Knowledge mobilisation is a practice that aims to connect research and policy to support better decision-making and outcomes.

UPEN Programmes launched its Community of Practice on knowledge mobilisation in September 2025 to explore what practices work to mobilise evidence for policy and understand the impact of this practice on evidence use in decision-making processes.

The CoP is open to anyone for whom knowledge mobilisation is part of their role – whether they are based within a university, independent research organisation or charity, national, regional or local government, or research funding body in the UK and beyond. Over 300 people have registered as members.

The CoP has co-created an agenda with six priority areas for focus and delivery:

1. exploring good knowledge mobilisation practice and what works
2. increasing the reach and impact of knowledge mobilisation through innovative methods
3. capturing and communicating impact
4. determining what to work on by identifying evidence needs and topics
5. understanding and connecting
6. raising the profile of knowledge mobilisation work.

These will be addressed through two interlinked projects, to identify and embed ‘what works’ in real-world knowledge mobilisation practice, and to understand, capture and communicate knowledge mobilisation impacts.

Outputs from these will inform UPEN’s resources hub.

- 300 registered members of the Knowledge Mobilisation CoP
- Six priority areas for focus and delivery
- Two interlinked projects – what works, and capturing and communicating impacts.



Advancing academic-policy engagement

UK-Wide Areas of Research Interest

UPEN has continued to strengthen the ARI ecosystem across the UK, focusing on shared learning, practical support, and building connections between policy organisations and academic expertise.

A learning workshop in July 2025 brought together over 50 practitioners to reflect on regional ARI development, with insights captured in [*Regional Areas of Research Interest: Challenges, opportunities and next steps*](#). The report highlights the need for ARI-aligned funding, stronger evaluation frameworks, and a peer support network to underpin future practice.

Over the past year, we have supported a wide range of organisations, including the Welsh Government and West Midlands Combined Authority, to design, refine, and evaluate their ARI programmes. This has included tailored development workshops and capacity-building sessions for teams newly responsible for ARIs, as well as continued collaboration with GO-Science, such as contributing to the ARI Officials Network 2026 Symposium.

We have also co-designed pilot ARI projects with the East Midlands Combined County Authority and Swansea Council, each receiving strategic support from UPEN to embed their first ARIs.

Alongside this, we launched a central ARIs Hub to improve visibility of ARIs published by combined and local authorities, and we have supported engagement events for

departments including the Ministry of Justice, Department for Transport, and the Office for Product Safety and Standards.

The transition of the ARI Subcommittee into the ARI Practitioners Community of Practice marks an important step in building a more connected and resilient ARI landscape.

The CoP will continue to test new approaches to peer learning, evaluation, and shared tools, with upcoming work including the October 2026 Learning Workshop and the recruitment of fellows to lead pilot ARI projects.

- Major report on regional ARIs published
- Launched central ARI Hub
- Established ARI Practitioners CoP
- Joint engagement events with central government
- Strategic support for and co-design of ARI programmes with central, and local government, and combined county authorities



Place Community of Practice

UPEN's newly-established Place Community of Practice will support networking between members, facilitate peer learning and knowledge exchange across institutions, build capability and capacity across the membership, identify and co-develop solutions to shared challenges, strengthen relationships between universities and policy stakeholders, and develop resources, guidance and outputs that support the wider network.

Different models of place-based academic-policy engagement across diverse regional contexts, providing opportunities to test how universities can work alongside policymakers, communities, and partner organisations to strengthen the use of evidence in local decision-making.



Regional demonstrator projects

Exploring place, data, and visualisation opportunities in Nottingham: Preparatory work has focused on understanding and addressing violence against women and girls and youth violence through data science, spatial mapping, and visualisation approaches developed in collaboration with local, regional, and national partners.

Reimagining regional policy through creative engagement in the Tees Valley: Bringing together policymakers, researchers, community organisations, and residents to explore how qualitative and creative approaches can contribute to place-based policymaking.

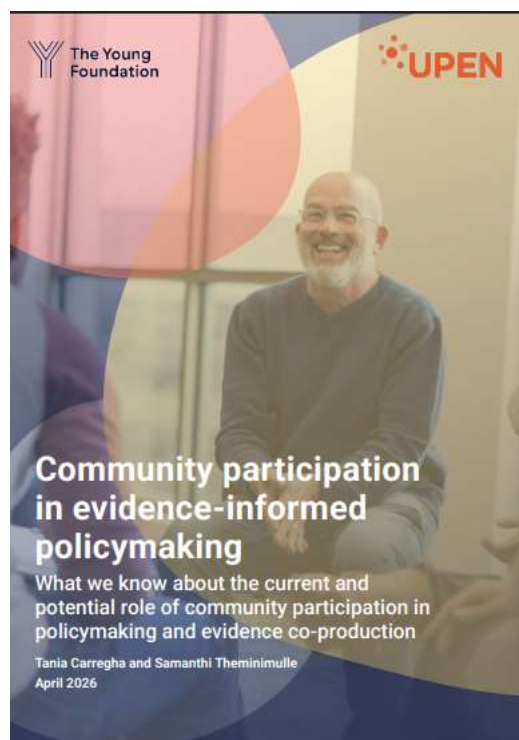


Strengthening community participation in academic-policy engagement

There is growing awareness of the importance of embedding community evidence in policymaking. UPEN is keen to understand how to strengthen capabilities and infrastructure that supports for community participation in evidence-based policymaking.

The report [*Community Participation in Evidence-Informed Policymaking*](#) considered existing evidence on how communities are involved and identified a gap in knowledge around practical resources and approaches. It also emphasised the importance of developing skills, capacity and infrastructure for individuals and institutions to support meaningful engagement.

The Young Foundation has been leading engagement with national and local government partners to develop collaborative pilot projects which can consider practical means of addressing this, including DCMS, Welsh Government, Cornwall Council, Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority, and West Midlands Combined Authority.





Contributors:

With thanks to:

- Laura Bea (UPEN/ University of Southampton)
- Nicky Buckley (University of Cambridge)
- Tania Carregha (Young Foundation)
- Sarah Chaytor (UCL)
- Eleanor Conway (UCL)
- Rob Davies (UCL)
- Hannah Durrant (WCPP)
- Azadeh Fatehrad (Teesside University)
- Neil Heckels (University of Durham)
- Chris Hewson (University of Huddersfield)
- Elizabeth Hudson (UCL)
- Ayden McKeating (UCL)
- Peter O'Brien (Yorkshire Universities)
- Rich Pickford (Nottingham Trent University)
- Hannes Read (University of Birmingham)
- Bec Riley (University of Birmingham)
- Abi Rowson (University of Leeds)
- Clare Stainthorp (UCL)
- Olivia Stevenson (UCL)
- Lindsay Wright (UCL)

UPEN, 2026