

Leeds City Council Areas of Research Interest evaluation



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Executive summary

Since 2022, Leeds City Council (LCC) and the University of Leeds have worked together to trial Areas of Research Interest (ARI) as a mechanism to mobilise the considerable research expertise of the Universities in Leeds to address the complex challenges facing the city.

LCC was the first local authority to develop ARI, building on the example of national government departments. The University of Leeds then supported work to address the ARI, including funding projects through their allocation of Research England policy support and participatory research funding. In this way, Leeds has helped shape emerging practice nationally and provided learning since adopted by other places.

The purpose of this evaluation is to understand if the ARI mechanism works in a local government context and the value of this approach for the Council.

It draws on evidence from 15 projects completed between 2022 and 2024, interviews with 11 LCC and 5 University of Leeds colleagues, and an evaluation workshop with the first projects.

Key findings

A positive story

- **ARI work at Local Authority level:** Progress has been made towards all of the expected outcomes of increasing LCC's access to high quality and timely research, maximising the use of resources, and building a culture of collaboration.
- **Valuable way of working:** The ARI have given the Council a strategic, coordinated and systematic space to consider their future evidence needs and direct the research community to where their expertise can make the biggest difference.

Opening doors

- **Levelling the playing field:** The ARI have provided welcomed clarity and transparency on the Council's research priorities and routes to engage, enabling connections to be made strategically and based on relevant expertise.
- **Academic research projects play an important convening role:** The research projects responding to the ARI brought together colleagues from across LCC, third sector organisations, regional and national policy partners, and businesses. This extended the expertise the Council was able to access and builds solutions in partnership.

Tailoring research to need

- **Research is more strategic and tied to local need:** Projects responding to the ARI were seen by LCC colleagues as more strategic and delivering value in terms of data, insights, different ways of thinking, providing options and testing feasibility.
- **Coproduction can be challenging:** Coproduction provided a safe space for constructive discussions with partners and connected the research to local need, but different priorities and approaches meant some outputs were challenging to implement.
- **Engagement focused on new research:** Outside the projects, the ARI did not attract researchers to share existing research. This may be a particular issue for local government, who don't have the same impact draw as national government.

Translating evidence into outcomes

- **Outcomes take time:** Some projects show potential to lead to service improvement, but outcomes are still at early stages due to research delays, where the research fits into the cycle of Council work, and changes in the policy landscape.
- **ARI projects not seen as immediately critical:** Projects were viewed as longer-term strategic investments rather than activity linked to immediate operational or statutory pressures, reducing the impetus to follow up on findings.

Changing culture

- **ARI support a change in culture:** The ARI supported more researchers to engage with LCC and Council colleagues to diversify their networks. Relationships were sustained and led to new collaborations. Professional development was cited as a key benefit of joint work. Investment in networking was seen as foundational for collaborative work.

Institutional capacity is a vital enabler

- **Institutional capacity is a vital enabler:** The hub-hub model provided a clear and resilient connection point that protected against churn, enabled the development of diverse and strategic connections, and drove engagement with the ARI. However, due to austerity, Council colleagues have limited time to engage with research, restricting their ability to participate, shape, and assimilate or implement findings.
- **ARI don't automatically generate engagement:** A number of ARI areas received no response. This may be partly due to the bilateral collaboration limiting research supply during the pilot, but similar findings have been reported for national government ARI.

Targeting resource

- **ARI direct resource to priority needs:** The University of Leeds has directed over £1m of Research England funding over 3 years to projects responding to the LCC ARI, with time in-kind provided by LCC, demonstrating the utility of the ARI to inform resourcing.
- **Lack of funding opportunities aligned to local need:** Projects reported that they would not have occurred without the Research England funding. Those seeking further external funding noted a lack of suitable opportunities, despite targeting a wide range of funders.

Building a distinctive University offer

- **Universities offer distinct value:** Compared to consultancy, academic research was valued as being more robust and trustworthy, more flexible and suited to exploratory work, helping shape conceptual thinking, and developing richer and more sustainable relationships that gives greater access to research insights over time. The convening power of the University to bring in wider perspectives was also particularly valued.

Areas for future consideration

The evaluation shows that ARI can support mobilising Universities' research expertise to address local government policy challenges.

The following provide some areas for future consideration for local government, academic institutions and research funders to ensure that ARI reach their full potential to deliver value.

Local government

- **Develop capacity to engage with research:** Empower colleagues to prioritise time for research and by drawing in external resource.
- **Embed use of research and evidence in processes:** Local government processes should support realising and communicating the benefits of research.
- **Actively drive engagement with the ARI:** Any engagement plan should include proactive measures to reach the wider research community and to monitor uptake.
- **Provide a diversity of ways for researchers to contribute:** To gain the best overall insights give routes for diverse inputs, including constructive challenge.
- **Bridge the gap between ARI priorities and critical and short-term need:** Consider the prioritisation and framing of the ARI to better connect short- and long-term needs.

Academic institutions

- **Support institutional capacity to mobilise research expertise:** Provide a resilient connection point to support identifying strategic opportunities and build relations.
- **Develop models to support evidence synthesis as a route to impact:** Explore models for evidence synthesis provision, including the potential for a paid-for service.
- **Articulate the distinctive University offer:** Support local government to understand where academic research can offer the best fit and value to answer knowledge needs.

Research funders

- **Consider how funding can support research for ARI:** As part of the place agenda, funders should consider how they support sub-national government ARI.





1 Introduction

1.1 Background and context

Leeds has set out its **Ambitions** to be a sustainable, prosperous, socially inclusive, and healthy city. We take a **Team Leeds approach**, with everyone doing their bit to make Leeds a better place. As well as being **Leeds anchor institutions**, major employers and contributors to the city, the universities in Leeds hold considerable and world-class research expertise.

The Leeds City Council (LCC) Areas of Research Interest (ARI) provide a mechanism to direct this research excellence towards the city's critical knowledge needs to drive evidence-informed policy development that improves the lives of the people of Leeds.

Areas of Research Interest (ARI) are a mechanism for public policy organisations to articulate their evidence needs and to invite the research community to engage with them. They were introduced by UK Government departments in response to recommendations by the **2015 Nurse review of research councils** to better connect policy makers and publicly funded research. ARI have since been adopted by UK and devolved Parliaments, devolved government, public bodies and regional and local government.

Leeds City Council (LCC) was the first local authority to develop ARI in 2022, supported by the University of Leeds. The LCC ARI were developed in response to a recommendation to identify research priorities following a **review of collaboration** in 2020 between Leeds City Council and the University of Leeds.

The first two iterations of the LCC ARI were piloted with the University of Leeds over the academic years 2022-23 and 2023-24 respectively. A total of fifteen projects were funded over these two years to address the LCC ARI, supported by the University of Leeds allocation of Research England policy support and participatory research funds.

The **University of Leeds and Leeds City Council Research Collaboration Framework** (published in 2024), further supported the work by highlighting the ARI as a key mechanism for identifying strategic priorities, and identifying institutional contact points and routes for engagement.

Since April 2024, the **LCC ARI have been published on the Leeds Observatory**, making it easier for researchers from other academic institutions to find them and also contribute their expertise. The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) subsequently included them in their **list of Local Authority ARIs** in the summer of 2025.

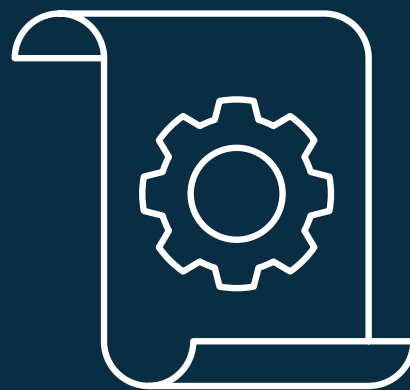
1.2 Purpose of the evaluation

This evaluation seeks to assess the impact of the LCC ARI in connecting policy colleagues with research evidence to inform more effective policy making. It is the third in a suite of reports, each with a distinct focus. The first two reports share learning on the process of developing local authority ARI and review the literature on ARI respectively:

- **Academic-policy engagement at the local level: The Leeds approach to developing Areas of Research Interest**
- **A review of 'Areas of Research Interest' as a mechanism for research-to-policy engagement**

Readers are directed to the companion reports for topics not covered here.

In this report, section 2 sets out the evaluation methodology, section 3 shares key findings against the anticipated outcomes, section 4 draws out successes, challenges and lessons, and section 5 provides considerations for local government, academic institutions, and funders.





2 Evaluation methodology

2.1 Theory of Change

A codeveloped theory of change, presented below, provides the framework for the impact evaluation. It considers the ARI within the context of the **University of Leeds and Leeds City Council Research Collaboration Framework**.

The Theory of Change reflects activity between 2020, following publication of the '**Unlocking the potential of civic collaboration**' report, up until the evaluation in 2025.

Context for the Theory of Change

This work has taken place over a time of great challenge for local government, with increased need for services juxtaposed against years of austerity and constrained finances. Against this backdrop, LCC has a vision to make Leeds the best city it can be, working closely with partners.

- **Leeds Ambitions** – Sets out four ambitions to make Leeds a healthy, growing, thriving, and resilient city, and deliver LCC's mission of reducing poverty and inequality.
- **The Team Leeds approach** – Defines how we work in Leeds, with anchor institutions pulling together to make a difference and everyone helping where they can.

This vision for partnership working is echoed by the University of Leeds strategy.

- **University of Leeds strategy 2020-2030** – The University of Leeds is committed to its research having local and regional impact, working with policy, civic and city partners, and embracing **the University's role in the city and region**.

This commitment has been reinforced by Secretary of State Bridget Phillipson who in November 2024 called on Universities to play a greater civic role, including working in partnership with local government, and to make a stronger contribution to economic growth.

In addition, universities are measured on their research engagement and impact by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF), the former informing the amount of quality related funding a university receives.

Theory of Change overview

As anchor institutions, Leeds City Council and the University of Leeds both have strong stake in the city's future success. Within the above context, it is our desire that the University of Leeds's research informs more effective policy making at Leeds City Council, to tackle the most pressing challenges in our city and improve outcomes for Leeds's citizens and communities.

To do this we have:

- Established effective governance to oversee the collaboration and drive the research collaboration forward, providing strategic direction and leadership.
- Developed Areas of Research Interest (ARI) to articulate the priorities for collaborative work centred around LCC's strategic knowledge needs.
- Built capabilities and capacity for collaboration, promoting cross institutional understanding through more visible routes and support for engagement.
- Stimulated activity through the use of gateway funding to support projects responding to the ARI, drawing on Research England policy support and participatory research funds.

We anticipate that these activities will lead to the following three key outcomes that will contribute to our desired impact:

- **High quality and timely research better targeted to have impact:** LCC colleagues will have access to good quality relevant research at the time they need to take evidence informed decisions.
- **A culture of collaboration:** The University and Council will have a shared language and co-owned approach through which to collaborate. Academic engagement with LCC will be better aligned to LCC's needs and priorities as a result.
- **Maximised resources:** Resourcing is targeted to strategic priorities enabling additional resourcing to be acquired and saving efficiencies to be realised.

Figure 1 sets out the Theory of Change in more detail, including 11 intermediate outcomes that we expect to contribute to our key outcomes and against which findings are presented in section 3. Table 1 sets out some of the underlying assumptions that have been made.



Figure 1. Theory of Change: LCC ARI and University of Leeds and Leeds City Council strategic research collaboration, 2020-2025

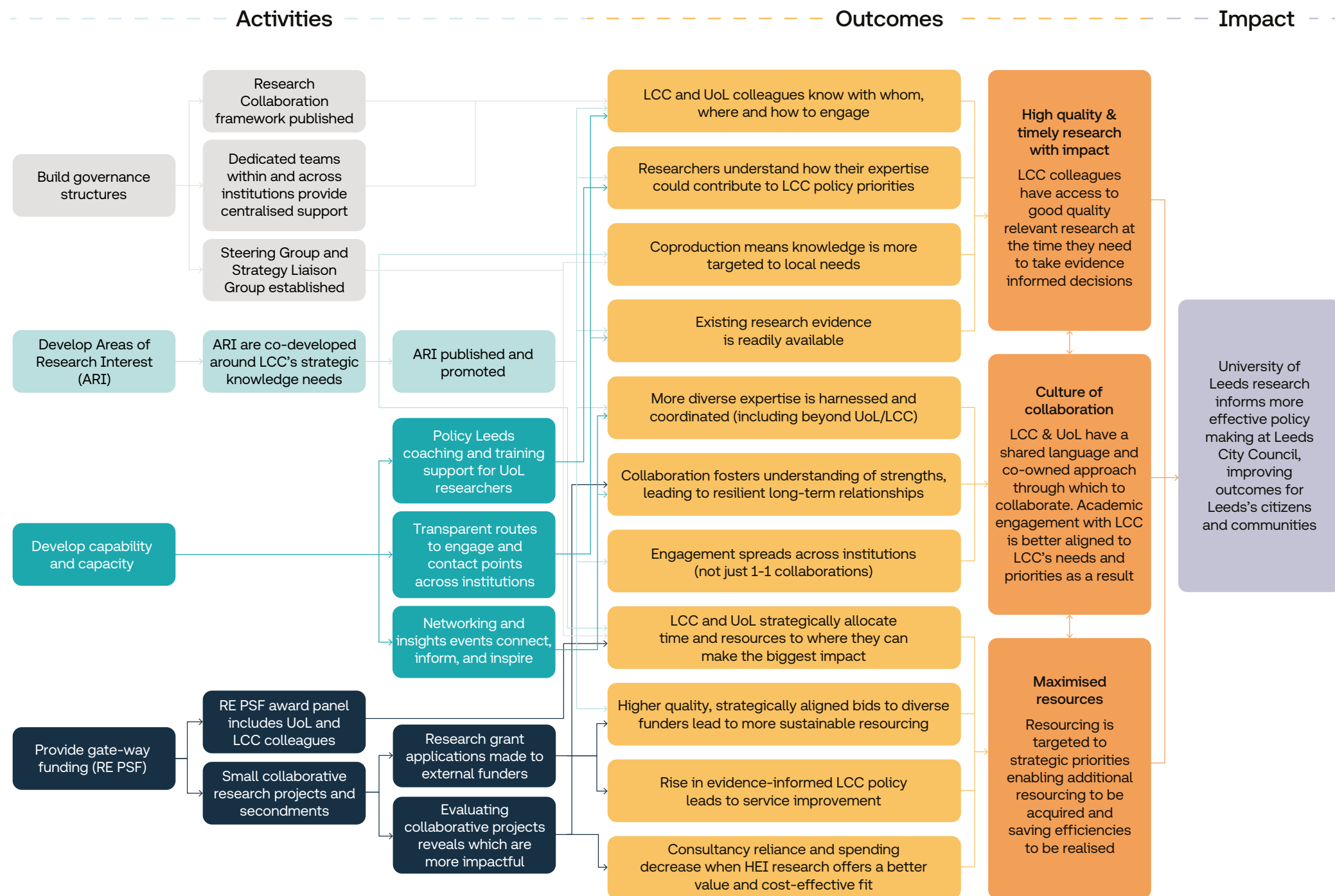


Table 1. Assumptions identified in the Theory of Change for key outcomes in the LCC ARI and research collaboration. *Abbreviations:* Leeds City Council - LCC, University of Leeds - UoL.

Outcome	Underlying assumptions
High quality and timely research with impact	• Access to evidence makes better policy • Research developed to address the ARI answers the Council's needs • Academics are acting in the best interests of the public • Academics have an understanding of local issues • UoL colleagues understand how evidence is used in policy making • UoL has relevant expertise in the areas needed by LCC
Culture of collaboration	• Buy in from institutions' senior leadership teams • Academics are motivated and incentivised to engage with civic and institutional strategies • The potential for research impact will incentivise researchers to engage with the publication of ARI. • LCC and UoL colleagues know how to undertake effective co-production, where appropriate • Academics are able to give time to synthesise current knowledge • Council officers and academics understand each other (translational) • Moving from transactional to relational approach delivers mutual benefit • Council staff have time and willingness to invest in relational approach • Higher Education sector financial health and incentives enable policy engagement
Maximise resources	• Academic evidence is high quality and useful • Universities can contribute resource or can raise external funding • Relevant funding calls are available

2.2 Evaluation evidence base

The impact of the LCC ARI have been assessed against each of the intermediate outcomes using the following evidence sources:

- **Project evaluation workshop**, July 2023. This workshop brought together 13 projects (2022-23), of which 10 addressed the LCC ARI. 23 participants (20 University of Leeds, 3 LCC). The workshop examined lessons learnt in relation to delivering collaborative projects, ARI, and building relations.
- **Project report review**. Reporting from 15 projects addressing LCC ARI (2022-23 and 2023-24) was reviewed. Reports were written at the end of the project funding period, with 7 of the projects also submitting update reports in spring 2025.
- **Interviews**. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 LCC and 5 University of Leeds colleagues, with questions aligned to the Theory of Change. Interviewees included colleagues involved in the development of the ARI process, and those setting ARI priorities. Also included were 3 project case studies selected from the project reporting as showing signs of progress towards impact: a researcher and LCC official were interviewed for each project.

2.3 Contributors

The evaluation working group consisted of: Mike Eakins (LCC), Marc Eatough, Juliet Jopson, Andy Mycock, Abi Rowson, and Claire Smithson (all University of Leeds), with extra support from Luke Andrews (formerly LCC) and Inés Soria-Donlan (University of Leeds).

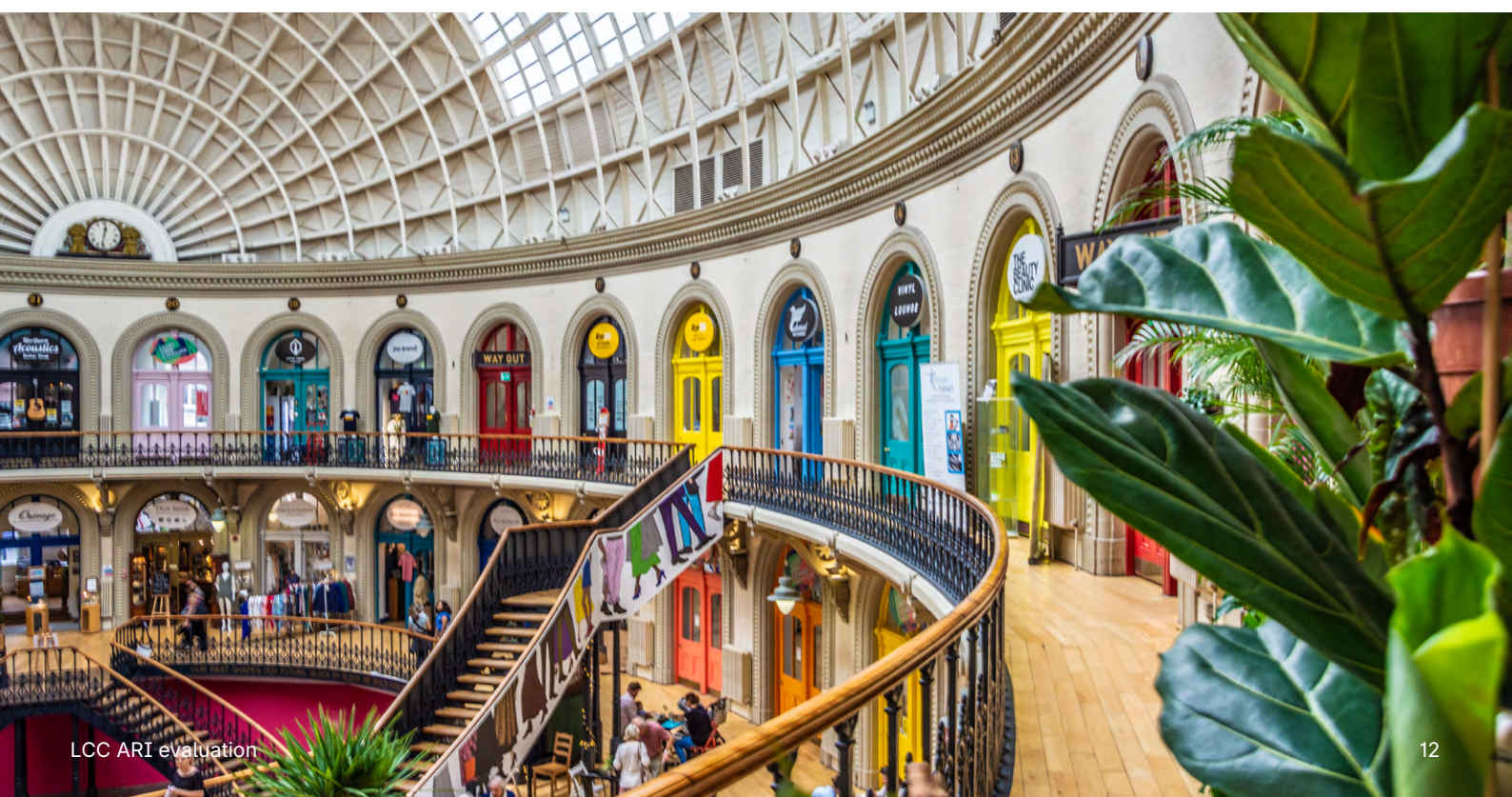
Chris Carbery, Leeds Beckett University, conducted the interviews and initial analysis (additional analysis by Juliet Jopson). Sealey Associates reviewed the project reports and provided independent assessment and insights on initial findings.

Thank you to all the interviewees, workshop participants, and project report authors, for their contributions. Thanks also to Nicky Buckley (CSaP, University of Cambridge) for review of the evaluation report.

2.4 Funding acknowledgement

Projects addressing LCC ARI were funded through the University of Leeds allocation of the Research England policy support fund (PSF) and participatory research fund (PRF) in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

This evaluation has been supported by funding from the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement Research Network, Y-PERN.





3 Key findings

3.1 High quality and timely research with impact

Outcome 1: Colleagues know with whom, where, and how to engage

There were two main routes that were intended to support colleagues knowing with whom, where, and how to engage.

- The LCC ARI set out how the ARI are intended to facilitate engagement, listing the LCC Policy and Intelligence team as the main contact. Policy Leeds was identified as the University of Leeds contact point in early iterations published via Policy Leeds website.
- The **Research Collaboration Framework** identifies Policy Leeds and the LCC Policy and Intelligence teams as contact points for respective colleagues at their own institutions.

Policy Leeds and the LCC Policy and Intelligence teams act as hubs, connecting to each other and reaching out across their own organisations to facilitate engagement. Connective capacity was bolstered through the placement of Abi Rowson, University of Leeds, with the LCC Policy and Intelligence team for one day a week (2023-2026).

Capacity to connect is critical

The hub-hub model for institutional connection was seen by interviewees as critical capacity to support engagement. The hubs also provide an anchor for relationships, protecting against connections being lost through staff turnover.

“You know, any sort of question I get about ‘could the University help with XYZ’. The first thing I’m doing is straight on the phones... She’ll then go away and tap into all of those internal networks and then come back to me kind of with an answer” (LCC)

“We go through that right channel rather than going directly just to make sure that, you know, because people move on too quickly.” (LCC)

In addition, contact points were used as a source of institutional knowledge and sounding board, for instance to check how proposed research aligned with Council strategy.

Balance is required between trusted relationships and widening networks

Whilst contact points were identified as a starting point for some colleagues, the same number (n4) said that they would turn first to their own established networks, or more specialist networks such as the Leeds Academic Health Partnership.

That such personal networks exist is to be celebrated and demonstrates that fostering long-term relationships is achievable (outcome 6). However, reliance on personal networks may run counter to the ambition to draw on more diverse expertise (outcome 5) and can create vulnerabilities when staff move on. As such, more may need to be done to promote the role contact points can play in facilitating more diverse or strategic connections.

Outcome 2: Academics understand how their expertise could contribute to LCC's policy priorities and knowledge needs

A stated aim of the ARI was to set out LCC's priority knowledge needs and make it clear what research would be of interest.

ARI provide welcome transparency on Council priorities

Researchers were unanimous in welcoming the ARI as providing a clear and transparent understanding of Council priorities (interviews, and project evaluation workshop 2023).

"For me, individually as a researcher, the ARIs are really interesting and really important because they give me the pulse of, you know, what the Council is thinking." (UoL)

"The phrasing of the ARIs just gave me a way to articulate what we'd been talking about and a way to justify the project and how we even talked about it. So, I found them incredibly useful." (UoL)

Workshop participants stressed that the strategic context for questions, including the desired outcomes/impacts and timeframe for action, is necessary to enable researchers to respond appropriately.

ARI support strategic engagement

The ARI facilitate a more institutional and strategic approach to engagement as they allow individuals within and across each institution to coordinate and connect expertise and opportunities with the Council's priority needs. An example given was a university colleague connecting LCC to a consortium grant bid that aligned with the ARI.

"I reached out to our colleague who was supporting that grant bid and said 'Pull Leeds City Council in, there will be interested in this opportunity.'" (UoL)

In this way the ARIs' explicit statement of need provide a more level-playing field for identifying opportunities – something that the literature review found was especially important for early career researchers and those without established contacts. In addition, the approved ARI provides colleagues with confidence to make strategic connections.

"I think the formalised agreement has been really helpful to feel like it's not just a conversation that might not go anywhere" (LCC)

ARI enable deeper and wider conversations

The ARI also provide a starting point for deeper conversations, as found for other ARIs ([Oliver et al 2026](#), [Campbell et al 2026](#)). This included providing a moment of reflection for Council colleagues to consider future policy and service needs and how evidence could help.

"It led us to ask deeper questions about how we were framing things, definitely." (LCC)

Once set, the ARI enabled researchers to open discussions with Council colleague to really dig into and test understanding of the research question.

"The ARI formed a really useful starting point to just say 'OK, this is what we [are] interested by, what do you understand?'... And that was a really enlightening conversation and we actually ended up doing quite a different thing as a result." (UoL)

The ARI have also provided a foundation for wider conversations between the Council and all the Universities in Leeds as to their role in the citywide Leeds Ambition plan, laying the foundations of future partnership work.

"I think having that almost as a sort of precursor to conversations has really helped... the Best City Ambition and the ARIs are a brilliant way of really clarifying that shared priority focus." (LCC)

Defining ARI doesn't necessarily lead to engagement

Having ARI doesn't necessarily lead to engagement with various ARI being flagged as not receiving any approaches.

"We've had no interest, so we've had no engagement." (LCC)

"I don't think we've had people coming back" (LCC)

This patchy engagement is consistent with national ARI (**Waddington 2024**) and shows the need to actively monitor ARI responses to identify cold spots where further engagement is required to drive action. It may have been a particular issue for the first two pilot iterations of the LCC ARI, where activity was focused on the bilateral collaboration, as the supply of research was limited to the University of Leeds.

"A lot of the researchers were involved who could be contributing to that [ARI]... [but they were] very busy contributing at the regional level... Unfortunately, we can't duplicate them as much as I'd like to." (UoL)

This highlights that Local Authorities may need to reach out beyond their strategic relations with local civic Universities to bolster and complement the expertise they can draw on for their ARI. The UPEN ARI webpage now lists all regional and local authority ARI, which makes it easier for researchers across the country to identify where their expertise might help. Local and regional authorities may wish to push for their ARIs to being included in the **searchable ARI database** in the future to extend their reach further.



Outcome 3: Co-production means knowledge is more targeted to local needs

The review of project reports found clear evidence of co-production in 14 out of the 15 projects funded to address the LCC ARI. This included approaches being tailored through conversations with LCC officials and, for some projects, with local community actors and groups. In most projects coproduction appears to have led to better outcomes, however, for some it was less clear (n5).

Research is more aligned to strategy and local need

The ARI were viewed as being successful in aligning research to strategy and for developing local knowledge by the interviewed LCC strategy leads involved in setting the ARI (n3).

“[Have the ARI been a success?] that’s a resounding yes, I would say.” (LCC)

“I would absolutely endorse ARIs as a means of developing that place-based intelligence.” (LCC)

Operational level Council colleagues involved in projects responding to the ARI also reported it was easier to see how the projects aligned to LCC priorities and consequently their own work, enabling them to justify devoting time to the project.

LCC interviewees articulated definite value for Council and city from the projects, such as establishing evidence bases, developing deeper understanding, supporting partnerships, or contributing to e.g. Council planning guidance.

“We’ve got a product which I think is richer and more thorough and more closely relevant than we thought... [the researcher] demonstrated a real understanding of Leeds and the issues we face.” (LCC)

“I think that was seen as really big, even though it was quite local in scale... almost like a bit of a flag bearer in terms of what can be achieved when the Council kind of comes to the table and agrees to support a project of that kind.” (LCC)

Secondments were found to support genuinely co-productive relationships, in line with previous findings from Y-PERN, and enabled Council colleagues to more easily see the value and impact. They also permitted ongoing knowledge exchange, with Council colleague being able to access to the researcher’s expertise to contribute to wider work.

“It was maybe less effort for us to kind of be able to demonstrate the impact because they were there, and they were doing it. They were directly delivering the impact.” (LCC)

“I did a lot of contributing to team meetings and workshops, and I suspect that was more useful or access[ed] more than anything I wrote up at the end” (UoL)

However, even where projects and secondments were seen as adding value, they didn’t necessarily meet the full need of the ARI. Some ARI were too large to be addressed by a single project, however, some of the issues may connect to the nature of coproduction and Council colleagues having less experience of coproduction (see: Outcome 3 – Unexpected outputs; Outcome 11 – Different relationship).



Connecting research to community partners

Coproduction can align the response to ARI even more closely to local needs by including community partners, which six out of the fifteen projects did.

No community partners were directly interviewed for the evaluation, however, two of the case study projects did involve community partners. Interviewees from both projects reported that they facilitated a safe space for constructive conversations and to break down impasses.

“[the community partners] was like, there are things that I was able to tell Council members that I’ve been telling them for 20 years, but because of this triangulation of coproduction, it was a safe space” (UoL)

“I was invited... a public meeting, really, where a lot of these attend representatives of community groups had come together... [I thought] I’m gonna get it both barrels... [but] people were so polite and people were really kind of like appreciative... that’s differed a lot from some of the other residents meeting I’ve been to in my lifetime.” (LCC)

Conversely, project reports highlighted where researchers didn’t already have established relations with relevant groups, they could struggle to build these within quick turnaround projects, especially where those groups were distrustful of the Council.

Unexpected outputs

The coproduced projects led to unexpected outputs in some cases that the Council would find challenging to implement.

Coproduction allows for more equitable working by allowing all groups involved influence on the design and delivery of the work. As a result, the outputs are defined as part of the cocreation process rather than rigidly define at the outset. As one researcher succinctly put it:

“One very necessary ingredient, which is often overlooked in coproduction, is the right to not know what’s gonna be the result” (UoL).

The unexpected nature of the outputs was noted in two projects in particular, although both appear to have been welcomed.

“[It’s] something that we came up together and that none of us had anticipated... [the LCC participant] said, you know, I’m very thankful for this project... it has certainly shifted my perspective in loads of ways.” (UoL)

“We were sort of thinking ‘I’m not sure what we’re gonna get here, is it going to be remotely useful to us?’... [but the research] tell us a lot more than we even thought we needed to know.” (LCC)

However, there is potential for disconnect between the cocreated outputs and their useability to inform policy or service change:

“So when scoping a project we’ve seen, I think, opportunities for where this could land [and] influence a piece of policy development work or service design work... [but] what we’ve ended up with is a product that has gone for a really good process that we’d all kind of advocate, but the outcome at the end has then been more difficult to apply.” (LCC)

This may reflect that easy wins are not always possible when addressing complex problems, especially when working across multiple stakeholders, but may also be a result of researchers taking a longer-term view and driving for more transformational change.

Role of independent researchers within coproduction

A repeated theme raised by interviewees was that researchers have individual approaches to both their research and how they view their role working with the Council. Researchers can see their role in coproduction as taking a long-term view and challenging both the question set and the solution sought, even when providing such independent challenge is not necessarily the easy option.

“We really wanted to pick apart what’s causing the struggle before we put new information, you know, new methods in... I think it’ll be slower before it has an impact, but hopefully it’ll be deeper... It’s hard, it’s emotional work, challenging how people work” (UoL)

“Yes, we’re going to work together along the lines of your research interest and the problems that you’re trying to tackle. [But] we’ve also provided with some space for them to think outside the box... planted some seeds of transformative thinking in their head, which I am hoping in the long run might make more of a difference.” (UoL)

Council colleagues were often open to researchers taking a more independent stance and saw the value in constructive challenge.

“Maybe the question I was asking you at the beginning wasn’t the right question. Maybe I needed to take several steps back.” (LCC)

“It never really derailed things. It was just, well, how can we work?” (LCC)

However, tensions could arise where a researcher’s approach didn’t fit with the current political or institutional landscape.

“I don’t think we got to where the university [researcher] really, really wanted to be... but that you know can just come from a simple just clash of aspiration versus reality.” (LCC)

“Politically at the time, [we] didn’t want to adopt [the intervention] as the Leeds model, we wanted something different. And in the discussions with the research team, they kind of got that, but... they kind of couldn’t set it aside to answer the brief.” (LCC)

A more mixed approach to knowledge exchange mechanisms for ARI, rather than solely focused on coproduction, might provide more space for researchers to take different disciplinary approaches or roles within the research-policy engagement ecosystem – such as critical friend, broker, collaborator, or advocate (for example, see **Mark Reed, 2025**) – providing a more rounded and robust system overall.

“Whether its coproduction or there’s a more critical friend [role]... we shouldn’t prioritise one over the other but recognise that they bring different values.” (UoL)

Coproduction should start from cocreation

A strong theme from LCC interviewees was the need to be involved from the start and to have sufficient time to set clear objectives for the project.

“So the ones that work better are where we’ve coproduced something and we’ve really bought into it... and which is the whole point, isn’t it, of having the Areas of Research Interest, but people still operate outside of that” (LCC)

“I think [it’s about] having those early discussions around, well, what are the parameters? what’s the framework for that?” (LCC)

“[Be] absolutely clear at the very, very beginning, and that you keep track of that, though an iterative process is good, you regularly check in on the policy element, which is the root I think of the research partnership.” (LCC)

Provision of guidance at the outset of the coproduction process would be helpful to better manage expectations around roles and outputs. This could be reinforced by having regular check in points with the ARI leads to keep the project on track and aligned to the policy goal.



Timeliness of research

Whilst not an individual outcome on the Theory of Change, the overall outcome anticipated that the ARI would increase Council colleague's timely access to research. However, there is little evidence that Council colleagues view ARI projects as more timely, and most suffered delays.

In the few times that timeliness was mentioned during interviews, there were mixed views:

"It was really timely that [the researcher] was able to come and help us." (LCC)

"I'm not sure they've made a massive difference in that area." (LCC)

"It's not necessarily a quick answer that academics are able to give." (UoL)

All three project teams included in the interviews identified delays that impacted on the timely delivery of outputs.

"This took a long time but, you know, and there was, I think delays on both sides." (LCC)

"We're one year down the line... but we're still developing the outputs" (UoL)

The project evaluation workshop in 2023 found that the logistics of delivering short rapid-turnaround projects to be the biggest challenge teams faced. Delays were due to a combination of external factors (working to build trust with stakeholders, availability of partners, competing priorities) and internal research processes (contracts, recruitment, ethics approval, payments, data management). Whilst Universities can always more do more to smooth research processes, delays will be inevitable when working with capacity stretched civic partners. Having more flexibility for research funding to align with the period work requires, rather than an annual budget cycle, would go some way to avoid delays escalating and ensuring projects deliver.

Outcome 4: Existing research evidence is readily available

There is little evidence that the ARI have helped make existing research evidence more available to Council colleagues outside of the funded projects.

Eight projects reported carrying out reviews of existing evidence relevant to the ARI as part of their research activity. It is known from project outputs that other projects did draw on existing research, so it is likely the project reporting under represents this activity.

Where projects did review existing evidence, this added value by providing LCC colleague access to an overview of the current research base that wasn't readily available to them otherwise.

“One of the big chunks of the work ended up being demonstrating to them that [the intervention] are possible because they’ve already been done elsewhere... we can show colleagues that not only that we’ve had this crazy idea, but [others have done it]” (UoL)

However, the lack of mention of prior research being surfaced outside of the projects indicates that the original assumption that researchers would come forward with existing research is unsubstantiated.

Part of the reason may have been this expectation was not appropriately communicated. Initial promotion of the ARI questions was integrated into the call for projects, which may have set the expectation that responses should be tied to new

activity (although the funding guidance allowed for that activity to include “facilitating the use of existing research”). However, subsequent publications of the ARI have consistently explicitly stated that engagement can include sharing of existing research without appearing to generate a response.

More likely, as discussed in the literature review and further evidenced here, this deficit is tied to a lack of professional or institutional incentives for researchers to mobilise insights from the existing research base and a lack of capacity to do so outside of funded project time.

“The other issue is incentivising academics to give it. So even if they have that evidence somewhere, you know, it’s not the top of their agenda because they’re working on their shiny new project over here on something else, you know, why would they spend time now?... It’s not going to get me any funding. It’s not going to get me a promotion... [and] I’ve got thirty other things I need to do this week” (UoL)

This may be particular issue for local authorities, where the potential for the reach of research impact (as defined and incentivised by the Research Excellence Framework) is smaller than for national government departments. Where research incentives and funding aren't aligned with the needs of the Council, there may be the need to consider other routes to surface existing research, such as a paid-for evidence-synthesis service.



3.2 Culture of collaboration

Outcome 5: More diverse expertise is harnessed and coordinated

Diversity of engagement was considered only in the extent of establishing new connections, rather than considering protected characteristics or disciplinary diversity.

Increasing diversity of engagement

As the literature review highlights, the Ministry of Justice, Senedd, and Sports England have previously reported increased number of engagements from the ARI, including from those who haven't engaged before. Here we also found increased diversity of engagement, with researchers applying for Research England funded projects with LCC who hadn't previously thought to engage:

“Without the ARI, I maybe wouldn't have had the confidence to go for [research funding]... I wouldn't have the confidence to think ‘Oh yeah, my research really is relevant to Leeds City Council’.” (UoL)

In addition, they encouraged Council colleagues to consider extending who they engage with.

“I think prior to being involved in understanding that there was this partnership set up around the ARI, I would just go to the colleagues I'm aware of.” (LCC)

However, unless researchers were introduced via institutional contact points, LCC colleagues weren't necessarily aware of the background to why or how a researcher had got in contact with them and so couldn't report if the ARI have diversified engagement.

Convening role of ARI projects

Almost all of the reviewed projects played an important convening role, drawing in a greater diversity of expertise as a result. Projects included third sector and public sector organisations (such as regional and national government), and businesses. Cross-university collaborations were limited, in part because the Research England funding is internally managed and so University of Leeds LCC ARI project calls did not cover funding for external academic partners, who were expected to apply for their own internal funding.

The convening power of the projects extended to cross-departmental engagement within LCC, with projects linking across policy areas such as public health, sustainability, and financial inclusion.

“They just engaged marvellously and pulled in people in different parts of the Council.” (UoL)

“That work allowed [the researcher] to then reach out and start working with [] team at Leeds City Council and also input onto a couple of task forces.” (UoL)

However, working across LCC departments was not always easy, as their different drivers and pressures could lead to sensitivities and fractious relationships that stalled projects (Project evaluation workshop, 2023).

Facilitating greater engagement of diverse groups

Both sides raised the issue that communication of ARI needs to be more inclusive of groups who are less familiar with research-policy engagement and how local government works.

“I would say that it needs to not be assumed that the people you're working with understand what an ARI is, what the remit of it is, when it starts and when it ends.” (LCC)

“Recognising that we can't just put up this document and expect people to understand where we're coming from... so that we're not speaking to ourselves and people who already privileged to be able to interact with and understand the system.” (UoL)

Outcome 6: Collaboration fosters understanding of strengths, leading to resilient long-term relationships

Establishing long-term sustainable relations

The review of project reports found that most projects demonstrated either ‘early progress’ or ‘firm progress’ in developing relations, with only two projects being seen as exemplars, demonstrating deep and long-term mutually beneficial relations.

Both interviewees from LCC and UoL confirmed that relationships have continued, and in some cases even expanded, beyond the end of projects.

“My team here has got a much stronger relationship with [the University institute] as a result of us kind of doing that project together. And you know, our relationship there now is kind of sustained for the future.” (LCC)

“I still see some people. I mean, they’re in different jobs, but I still see some of the people that I met during [the project] now... [we] just see each other, you know, as professional peers really.” (UoL)

“[the secondment] built those relationships and showcased [the researcher’s] expertise so that other [LCC] teams then started to be able to tap into that.” (UoL)

Time and funding were repeatedly mentioned as being needed to sustain relations:

“It takes so much time to build that trust... as long as you can continue bidding and continue producing research you can continue working together, but obviously it doesn’t take much, one unsuccessful bid, for the relationship to be disrupted.” (UoL)

“[They] instigated it and then [they’ve] just sort of run out of capacity... sometimes it takes their deputy, sometimes it takes funding, sometimes it takes both.” (UoL)

“Developing relationships takes time... So, we need to find a way to sort of carve out that time. Capacity to really focus on relationships to build collaboration.” (LCC)

In addition, the project evaluation workshop 2023 found that it is often the research assistants or fellows who develop deep relationships during the delivery of the project, but when they finish there is a risk those relations don’t transfer to the project’s principal investigator.



Developing capacity for research-policy engagement

Collaborative work was highly valued as a personal and professional development opportunity by both Council and University participants, including at team level.

“I think the greatest success actually, which is a bit of a spin-off of the ARI’s, was how being involved supported the development of my team... just built their knowledge and their awareness... I think [it] was invaluable.” (LCC)

“It’s done a lot for [them] personally in terms of developing [them] as a researcher so that [they’re] now looking at [their] research to make it much more actionable.” (UoL)

Within project reports, the benefits to researchers were reported more often than benefits to LCC colleagues. Whilst this is not surprising, since reports were written by the researchers, the interviews revealed that Council colleagues also highly valued the development opportunity. This highlights the need for monitoring and evaluation to capture activity and value from both the Council and University to be able to build a complete picture.

An additional capacity-building dimension was seen in several projects that involved Masters-level students, contributing to student experience.

Institutional cultural understanding

There is also evidence of greater understanding of different institutional cultures from both sides.

“It was really interesting to go into a university environment and to understand ‘Oh, actually they care what’s going on in the wider city as well’. So that was a real take away for me.” (LCC)

“I remember the first couple of times I spoke with colleagues at the university, I had to... almost like think twice to sort of understand what was being said, but that’s just natural. But then we’re equally potentially as guilty with acronyms or different terms from our perspective as well. Then, in time, we’ve obviously found a middle ground.” (LCC)

“It gave me the confidence to think ‘Oh well, you know, if there’s lovely people like this within the team in Leeds, they’re probably the same’. You know, really build my confidence up in terms of approaching people in those roles all over the country.” (UoL)

This increased understanding has been facilitated by extended investment in networking opportunities over the first three years, providing regular opportunities to come together.

“I think that groundwork we put in was invaluable. Actually, I don’t think we’d have been able to do what some of what we’ve done there more recently had we not made that real investment in understanding.” (LCC)

However, whilst progress was evident, so too was the need to continue to support understanding in how to work together.

“Somebody from the team has come back really disengaged from an academic workshop... The individual came back just like ‘I don’t know why I went, you know, they didn’t want me there and didn’t value, sort of, the input.’” (LCC)

Due to continuous churn on both sides, the provision of structured engagement opportunities to build and enhance intersectoral understanding should be seen as an ongoing requirement rather than a one-off intervention.

Outcome 7: Engagement spreads across institutions

The ARI work was structured with the intention to make it open to other Universities and city partners. The first two iterations, as part of the pilot phase, were published via the Policy Leeds website. Since 2024, the ARI have been hosted on the LCC-owned Leeds Observatory website.

Academic partners

There is limited evidence of the ARI promoting engagement past the bilateral relationship between the Council and University of Leeds in the first few years. Since early communications focused on this partnership and there was limited capacity for extending engagement, this is not surprising. It may also be, as one LCC colleague confessed during their interview, that such distinctions aren't particularly important to LCC colleagues:

“To be honest with you, I often just get confused who I’m working with and I can’t remember whether it’s [Leeds] Beckett [University], whether it’s the University [of Leeds], I’m afraid I paint you all with a similar brush” (LCC)

However, since summer 2025 LCC has seen an increase in approaches, mostly from the other Universities in Leeds, but also from Universities across England (n6). This may be the result of the publication and promotion of the Leeds approach to developing ARI case study via the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) in April 2025, and subsequent listing of the LCC ARI on [the UPEN ARI webpage](#).

Non-academic partners

During the interviews, both University and Council colleagues flagged the potential for ARI to provide a direct mechanism to engage with both community partners and businesses.

“Voluntary and community sector organisations have come back to us and said ‘Oh, we actually have found this helpful too... We’ve got our own, you know, knowledge that can contribute here.’” (UoL)

As discussed under Outcome 5, the ARI projects have already provided an important convening role. However, there is a question as to whether engagement should be mediated through academic partners or whether the ARI should widen the invite to other knowledge owners.

3.3 Maximised resources

Outcome 8: LCC and University of Leeds strategically allocate time and resources to where they can make the biggest impact.

Allocation of research funding

Over a £1m of funding over 3 years has been directed at projects responding to the LCC ARI, demonstrating the potential for the ARI to direct resource allocation to areas with the highest potential for impact.

Some projects came from pre-existing ideas, originally generated independently of the ARI. However, their selection for funding indicates the utility of the ARI to help prioritise resourcing.

However, the projects funded in response to the ARI so far have been reliant on internally managed Research England funding (policy support fund and participatory research fund), which is anticipated to finish in 2027.

Where asked, all projects reported that they would not have happened without support from this funding. This was corroborated by LCC colleagues during the interviews, who indicated that they didn't have alternative funding to conduct this work.

“This piece of work wouldn't have been done if we'd had to find the money for it, or we'd had to use our own budget to do it.” (LCC)

“I think funding hasn't felt like a barrier, but only because the University's dipped their hand in their pocket” (LCC)

Alternative funding sources may not allow for such a close alignment of funding to LCC's strategic research need, which may limit how much influence the LCC ARI have on determining funding allocation.

Contribution of LCC resource

Project reports from five projects contained clear evidence of resources committed by LCC partners beyond initial introductions and support. Support included access to land and data, in addition to staff involvement.

The interviews indicated LCC colleagues' level of their involvement varied dependent on the project requirements and their capacity.

“[the LCC team] and I spent substantial amount of time together. I mean we had rolling appointments... Dedicated, you know, collegiate time, supervisory time.” (UoL)

“I've been here more as a, I suppose, in a guide capacity and an information sharing capacity.” (LCC)

LCC colleagues' limited capacity was a repeated theme, limiting their ability to collaborate on anything outside of their day-job, even if it aligns with Council objectives.

“The ARI work has been absolutely brilliant... but it's difficult alongside your day job” (LCC)

“Time, capacity and funding. These are the three key issues at the moment.” (LCC)

This potentially makes the ARI even more important as a way of determining which projects the Council devotes time and energy. Similarly, it highlights the need to seek opportunities and funding that builds or releases capacity at the Council to actively engage with shaping research and realise the ambitions set out in the Leeds City Research Strategy.

Outcome 9: Higher-quality, strategically aligned bids to diverse funders lead to more sustainable resourcing

Access to research funding

Five projects reported that they planned to or had already submitted funding applications, with a broad range of funders cited e.g., UKRI, NERC, AHRC, Leverhulme Trust, Ofgem, as well as internally managed ESRC IAA. However, at the time of evaluation only a minority reported actually securing funding, with a lack of suitable funding opportunities being noted by researchers and Council colleagues alike.

“Some of the things we want to look at might be quite small in terms of overall research. So they don’t really match, I suppose, the research grant... You’ve got two teams who want to do it, but actually the funding becomes the barrier to it.” (LCC)

In addition, developing big bids is time consuming and lack of capacity to develop more ambitious funding bids was also mentioned as a barrier by both researchers and Council colleagues, suggesting support might be needed to unlock larger funding.

Access to alternative forms of funding

The opportunity to access alternative (non-research) funding was identified as a possible, but not yet realised, benefit of collaborative research work for LCC. Examples included supporting third sector partners access funding to support work contributing to the Leeds Ambitions or putting funding cases to central government.

“When we’re seeking, for example, to win money from government to do that work, being able to back it up with a robust academic assessment of its potential impact significantly increases the likelihood of us being successful.” (LCC)



Outcome 10: Rise in evidence-informed LCC policy leads to service improvement

Project outcomes

The project reports and interview data indicates that even with coproduced projects targeted at ARI questions, it is not necessarily straight forward for projects to quickly lead to change. The most mature examples given were a LCC colleague noting that two projects have contributed to updated planning guidance, and one project reporting early indication that a new policy may be introduced supported by the data generated in the project.

However, none of the three projects selected as case studies for interview have generated outcomes as yet. This was due to delays in the output, implementation not being straight forward, scope creep, and changes in the institutional and political landscape.

“There’s been quite a few changes, which means that sometimes our work’s had to pause, or certain things had to be dropped, and so that’s totally out of our control and the University’s control” (LCC)

In particular, for two of the projects the implementation of the project recommendations required bigger changes to ways of working than originally envisaged. One of these is pending capacity within the service to consider how to

implement. The other requires a case being made to more senior leadership, particularly as upscaling will have resource implications. However, the project was seen as having put new options on the table by piloting the intervention and providing evidence for a possible business case, such as the potential cost savings available.

“She did the little exercise of actually calculating how much it had saved the Council, and she reckons that it’s about 50K per year” (UoL)

Integrating research into Council process

Several interviewees noted the need for clearer processes downstream of the ARI to integrate the ARI and their outputs into Council work and realise its value.

“My feeling is that the ARIs are a brilliant way of summarising our research interests and the things that we really need to understand to make our decisions. Alongside that, we need to have really clear processes.” (LCC)

In addition, evidence from both the interviews and project reports highlighted the need for all projects to have a sponsor or owner at LCC who will take responsibility for overseeing that the evidence generated is fed into Council work at the right moment, as this may take place some time after the end of projects.



Outcome 11: Consultancy reliance and spending decrease when HEI research offers a better value and cost-effective fit

The interviews provided no evidence of any impact on use of consultants by LCC. This is perhaps unsurprising since, as the literature review highlights, consultancy differs to ARI in both mode and aims.

The interviews did, however, give insights on the different offer provided by academic research compared to consultancy, and how this was valued by LCC colleagues, as outlined below. In addition, the project reports review found many of the projects would have been difficult to deliver under a typical consultancy model given their emphasis on community engagement, long standing relationships, trust and adaptability.

Perceived value of University research

LCC interviewees valued academic research as being more robust and trustworthy. In addition, local Universities were viewed as having a vested interest in doing high quality work for their area, leading to higher quality collaborations.

“There’s much more robustness and, kind of, moral approach with the university.” (LCC)

“It felt more independent, less biased, and trusted” (LCC)

“My absolute preference would actually be to use local universities and local academics where possible, sometimes partnering with those consultants as and when necessary... there isn’t a vested interest for those universities that aren’t local to have that sort of solid, cohesive, collaborative relationship.” (LCC)

Exploratory nature of projects

Coproduced research with University researchers was seen by LCC colleagues as being more flexible than consultancy, suiting more exploratory work.

“We were a lot more flexible in terms of consider what the product was... we’ve got a product which I think is richer and more thorough and more closely relevant than we thought to the problem that we set out than we would have got had we gone to a planning consultant or a national consultant.” (LCC)

“It felt more fluid and flexible than working with a consultant who might have so many hours available... it was quite open learning research and felt more of an equal partnership” (LCC)

However, this exploratory nature makes it harder to manage expectations, with researchers highlighting that projects felt quite risky and intangible at times.

Providing further guidance on how to manage more exploratory coproduction projects may help project teams set expectations and increase the useability of outputs.

Thinking differently

Projects were mentioned as helping shape Council colleague’s thinking both through providing new perspectives and providing time and space to think differently (also see Outcome 3 – Role of independent researchers, and Outcome 6 – Developing capacity). Such conceptual aims are rarely the territory of consultancies.

“[The project] brought a whole of the wealth of information that I would never have come across and it kind of challenged me to think differently about things.” (LCC)

“When you encourage staff to think about what this piece of research means in terms of the way you are writing material and having discussions with people... and they think, ‘Oh yeah, I haven’t really thought about that before, you know.’” (LCC)

Different relationship

Coproduction allows for a more equal partnership with both sides influencing the direction of the work, rather than the pre-defined work of a consultant. As a result, the relationships developed were noted as being richer and more sustainable than the more transactional relationship with a consultancy, giving greater access to a breadth of research insights.

“It was quite a rich relationship because it was sharing and shaping at all times.” (LCC)

“I’m sure we all work together again in a way you, kind of, don’t get necessarily with a transactional consultancy piece of work.” (LCC)

However, the difference in tone of relationship wasn’t always expected by Council colleagues, who are maybe more familiar with working with consultants.

“I don’t think I differentiated nearly enough as I needed to between a consultant and a research partner... I didn’t feel I could or should pull [the researcher] back to the brief because it’s a shared journey... that’s the difference with the consultant.” (LCC)

LCC colleagues may benefit from guidance to understand and manage this difference so they can better navigate the transition from working with consultants to coproduced research.

Critical versus additional

For more critical and time-sensitive work, such as for statutory services, consultants were more trusted than University research to deliver on time. The external funding model and longer-term nature of many projects meant they were often perceived as complementary to, rather than substitutes for, work linked to immediate service delivery pressures.

“We weren’t paying for it, it wasn’t as critical that we had it.” (LCC)

“We simply just don’t have these pots of money sat around to, kind of, support these nice to haves and that’s the reality” (LCC)

It was acknowledged that academic research wouldn’t suit all the research needs of the Council, for example when they needed a rapid light-touch piece of work as “quick and dirty’s not the academic way”. However, better recognition of the trade-offs, what can be expected from academic projects, and how they are delivered would allow Council colleagues to recognise where University research provides a better fit to working with a consultancy.

“There probably is more we could do to make use of university expertise rather than consultants, but it needs to be really well understood, kind of, what’s expected, how it’s to be delivered, really frames the right way” (LCC)

The points raised above indicate that universities do offer distinct value that is different from traditional consultancy but that this distinct offer needs better articulating to increase the value of current collaborative work and identify where paid-for services could provide competitive value for the Council and sustainability for the University.



4 Discussion

In the financially tougher situation that both Local Authorities and Universities find themselves, for ARI to be a sustainable mechanism it will need to demonstrate the added value and benefits to senior leaders and funders – being precise about the value of the benefits it brings, and to whom they accrue.

This evaluation provides insights on both the value of the ARI and the challenges that need to be overcome to unleash the full potential of ARI to mobilise University research to support robust evidence-informed place-based policy making that improves people's lives.

4.1 A positive story

Overall, the LCC ARI evaluation offers much to be positive about with signs of progress towards all of the major outcomes envisaged and significant examples of where the ARI have added value, as discussed further below.

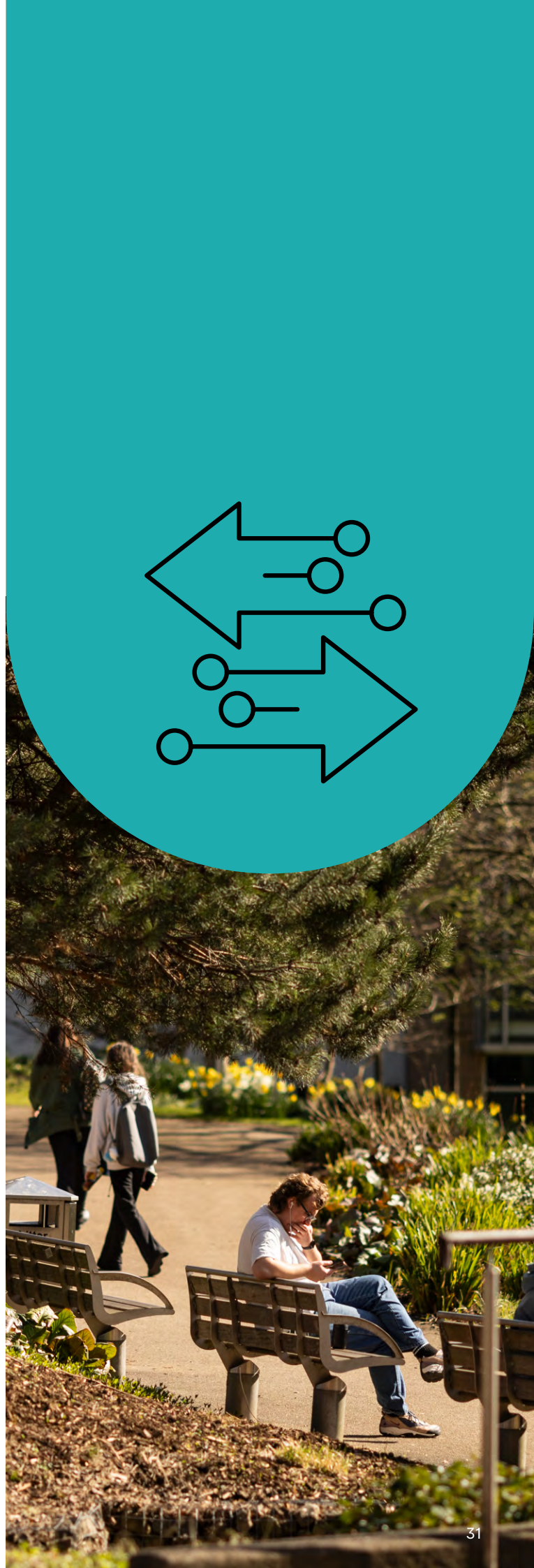
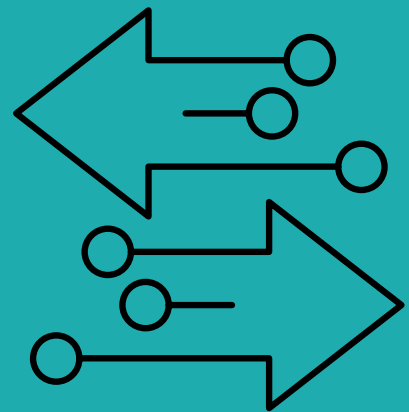
One aspect that has shone through the results is the value of ARI as a way of working. It has provided a strategic space for the Council to think about their evidence requirements in a systematic and future looking way. They have enabled the Council to be more coordinated and directive in setting out their research needs and aligning collaborative work towards Council priorities – legitimising Council staff participating in relevant research and empowering them to say no to misaligned research. This has then facilitated wider conversations between Council and local Universities on the role of research in the city, with the result that research is now an explicit part of the Team Leeds approach in the refreshed Leeds Ambitions (2025).

4.2 Opening doors

The ARI have provided clarity and transparency on the Council priorities for researchers and a visible door for starting conversations. This has levelled the field by expressing needs that were opaque before and providing an avenue to approach for those who don't have prior connections – paving the way for an increase in approaches from other Universities since the summer of 2025. It has enabled researchers to recognise where they could add value, direct their expertise to priority issues, and for strategic connections to be facilitated.

The ARI facilitated more than just connecting to academic researchers. Research projects played an important convening role bringing together colleagues across teams within LCC, third sector organisations, regional and national policy partners, and businesses. This extends the expertise the Council is able to access and builds solutions in partnership. There is the potential in future for ARI to support more direct community and business engagement, recognising the data held by and research capacity of other organisations.

Given the wider audience that the ARI have found, there is a need for ARI communications to be more inclusive of groups who are less familiar with the structure and remit of local government, its use of evidence, and the role of ARI in connecting research to strategic needs (which also needs to be clearly communicated within the Council).



4.3 Tailoring research to need

The research projects responding to the ARI were judged by LCC colleague to be more strategically aligned to LCC priorities than where researchers had approached LCC without the ARI for guidance. In addition, the projects were felt to deliver value in terms of data, insights, different ways of thinking, providing options and testing feasibility. This shows that the ARI have been successful in their aim of channelling research to areas of strategic need and that, through collaborative working, this then translated to defined value for the Council.

Coproduction also allowed community voices to be included, bringing additional insight and evidence into the mix, and creating a safe space for constructive conversations between the Council and community members. This enables the research to be directly informed by and tailored to local community needs, increasing the salience of the findings.

However, coproduction can raise challenges. There can be tensions between what communities see as priorities (participatory representation) and the overall position of the Council (as led by elected representation). In addition, researchers may take a long-term view with their work, pushing for transformational change that might deliver better

outcomes in the future but struggle to compete with short term priorities. In some projects, these tensions have led to outputs that are challenging for the Council to implement. Opening up alternative routes for researchers and communities to engage with the ARI, in addition to coproduced projects, may enable a balance between diverse and actionable insights.

It should also be noted that the ARI did not attract researchers to share existing research, outside of the projects. This indicates a disconnect between policy needs and research incentives that may be particularly felt by local government as it lacks the research impact draw of national government. Researchers do have an incentive to share research they are currently working on to increase its impact, but the timing of this may not sync with when policy partners need the evidence. Policy professionals often favour evidence syntheses as providing a timely insight into current knowledge. However, unless the research question is particularly novel, researchers can struggle to find funding or publish such work. The ESRC React pilot provides a new funding route to support evidence syntheses, and it will be interesting to see whether it gets used for such. There is also a question as to whether there is sufficient value to Local Authorities and other policy partners in timely delivery of directed evidence synthesis that this could form the basis of a sustainable paid-for service.



4.4 Translating evidence into outcomes

Outcomes from the projects are mostly still at early stages but show potential to lead to service improvement in some cases. More often, the principal contribution of projects was to influence thinking, strengthen evidence bases, build relationships and inform future policy development, with tangible service changes expected to emerge over longer timescales.

As outcomes can be delayed for various reasons – either through delays in the research process or because of where they fit into the Council’s cycle of work – it is important that Council processes support realising and communicating the benefits from research post-project. This is not a trivial consideration as it requires ownership and institutional memory to ensure the Council is able to leverage the research for their work at the right moment. Even with the best set up, in the fast-moving world of policy there will be instances, as seen in this evaluation, where subsequent changes to the policy landscape and resourcing mean the outcomes of the research are never fully realised.

Despite the ARI directing the research to priority needs, they were mostly viewed by LCC colleagues as complementary activity rather than critical to their immediate work. This reduces the incentive for Council colleagues to take ownership and support outcomes being realised. There are various reasons why the projects were not more closely aligned to critical needs, such as uncertain funding due to a competitive open call, the two-way nature of coproduction, or Council officers not understanding how to the ARI connected to their immediate work. However, ARI are intrinsically open invitations with no guarantee of returns and are focused on medium to long term objectives. This gap between uncertain response and criticality needs to be bridged, alongside ensuring research addressing longer term objectives also has immediate salience.

4.5 Changing culture

The ARI have been successful in both encouraging more researchers to engage with LCC and LCC colleagues to expand their networks of research contacts. Relationships have been sustained with engagement continued past the end of many projects and, in some cases, leading to new projects. This is a step forward to a more relational and inclusive way of working, putting in place the right relationships to respond quickly to new opportunities or changes in the policy landscape. However, both time and funding were repeatedly mentioned as being needed to sustain relations further, with the latter freeing up the former and providing a joint focus.

One of the key benefits of joint work that both LCC and University colleagues reported was for professional development. This included expanding knowledge and professional networks, with Council colleagues additionally valuing the head space projects gave to think about things differently. Secondments were seen as particularly facilitating such knowledge exchange, with researchers benefiting from a deeper understanding of the realities of Council operations and Council colleagues being able to draw on researchers’ knowledge in ‘real time’ for ongoing work. Further consideration should be given on how to intentionally build-in and maximise the opportunities for professional development as a benefit of engaging with the ARI.

University and Council colleagues both reported a greater understanding of different institutional cultures, with the extended investment in networking opportunities considered foundational for this. However, building connections and shared understanding of ways of working should be viewed as an ongoing requirement of building a collaborative culture so as to reach colleagues who have not previously been involved and continue to spread best practice.



4.6 Institutional capacity is a vital enabler

Institutional capacity to support engagement was seen as critical on both sides to enable the development of diverse and strategic connections. Here a hub-hub model was used, providing a clear and resilient connection point that protected against churn on both sides.

Institutional capacity is also needed to drive engagement with the ARI as it was found that, even with extra incentive of ringfenced funding for projects, the ARI don't necessarily lead to engagement on their own, with some LCC ARI receiving no approaches. Whilst this may be partly a result of the initial bilateral collaboration limiting supply of research, it does underline the need to actively monitor engagement with the ARI to identify and tackle cold spots.

Even with the support of the hubs, Council officers and researchers still need to have capacity to engage and collaborate around the ARI. It was repeatedly raised that the funding cuts to Local Government since 2010, and resultant staff cuts, mean that Council colleague had little capacity outside of their core day-to-day priorities to engage with research. This impacts on their time to shape research, to assimilate and act on findings, and their appetite for risk other than for incremental change. For the ARI to scale, capacity within the Council to engage with and use research needs to be considered as much as universities' capacity to supply the research. This may be through different ways of working or by drawing investments into the Council that provide more capacity for research, as LCC has done with their recent NIHR Local Authority Research Practitioner (LARP) award.

4.7 Targeting resource

The utility of the ARI to prioritise resourcing has been demonstrated by the University of Leeds being able to direct over £1m of Research England funding over 3 years at projects responding to LCC ARI. All projects who were asked reported they would not have happened without the award, indicating the need for dedicated resourcing to facilitate this work. However, Research England policy support and participatory research funds are not expected to continue past 2027, meaning that any future projects will need to be resourced in a different way.

A lack of suitable external funding opportunities was identified as a barrier by colleagues seeking further funding, with few awards being granted despite applications being submitted to a diverse range of research funders. Becoming dependent on finding funding streams that align with the LCC ARI, where other factors set funding priorities, risks future work becoming opportunistic rather realising the potential for ARI to strategically direct research activity and funding to areas of greatest need and maximum impact. As emphasised in the literature review, this disconnect between funding and ARI exists at all levels of government. However, it could be argued that it will be felt most acutely at local authority level which, after years of austerity, lacks the resource to commission research and the influence to sway national research funding agendas.

4.8 Distinctive University offer

To secure the sustainability of local government ARI work, Universities need to be able to articulate where they can offer distinctive value compared to working with consultancies or other partners in order to make the case for co-investment or paid-for services.

In line with the **Y-PERN evaluation findings**, coproduced academic research was seen as being more robust and trustworthy, more flexible and suited to exploratory work, helping shape conceptual thinking, and developing richer and more sustainable relationships that gives greater access to research insights over time. The value of the convening power of the University was also reflected across the evaluation. However, consultants were more trusted to deliver critical and time-sensitive work, such as for statutory services.

The need to understand the difference in relationship between coproduced research and consultancy was also highlighted by both this and the **Y-PERN evaluation**. Council colleagues more familiar with consultancy struggle with knowing how much they could push back within the bounds of coproduction to keep projects on track. Better support and regular check ins with the project would help keep projects on track and the policy target in sight, ensuring tractable outputs for the Council.





5 Areas for future consideration

This evaluation finds many reasons to support the use of ARI at local government level as a mechanism to mobilise Universities' research expertise to address pressing policy challenges: research is more targeted at local needs, resource is strategically directed, engagement is increased and diversified, relations are deepened and professional development supported.

ARI provide a firm basis on which to build but, as argued for in the literature review, should be considered as one part of the evidence ecosystem. The following provide some areas for future consideration for local government, academic institutions and research funders to ensure that ARI reach their full potential to deliver value through impactful evidence-informed policy.

Local government

- **Develop capacity to engage with research:** Capacity is needed to provide a resilient connection point and for colleagues to have time to participate, assimilate and implement findings. This may be supported by empowering colleagues to prioritise time for research and by drawing in external resource.
- **Embed use of research and evidence in processes:** Local government processes should support realising and communicating the benefits of research, accepting that this will take place after the researchers' involvement has ended. Colleagues should be given guidance on navigating coproduced research to give the best outcome.
- **Actively drive engagement with the ARI:** Any ARI engagement plan should include proactive measures to reach the wider research community and to monitor uptake in order to identify and address cold spots.
- **Provide a diversity of ways for researchers to contribute:** Not all researchers take approaches that fit comfortably within current political or operational constraints as they may take long-term perspectives or look to challenge the status quo. To gain the best overall insights ARI engagement plans should consider how to channel diverse perspectives to balance between pragmatic collaboration and constructive challenge.
- **Bridge the gap between ARI priorities and critical and short-term need:** ARI focus on the medium- to long-term and anticipate potential needs. However, for research and findings to gain traction and generate impact, they need to speak to critical and short-term needs. Consideration should be given during the prioritisation and framing of the ARI to better connect short- and long-term needs.

Academic institutions

- **Support institutional capacity to mobilise research expertise:** Institutional capacity to support engagement with the ARI can maximise opportunities for researchers by providing a resilient connection point, identifying strategic opportunities, and facilitating networking to build inter-sectoral understanding and relations.
- **Develop models to support evidence synthesis as a route to impact:** Evidence synthesis can be seen as timely by policy partners and increase research impact, but they are not currently incentivised or supported. Models should be explored to fill this gap, including if a paid-for evidence synthesis service would be viable and sustainable.
- **Articulate the distinctive University offer:** Academic research fills a different role to consultancy research. Support local government to understand where academic research can offer the best fit to answer knowledge needs and build the business case for where co-investment or direct funding offers the best value.

Research funders

- **Consider how funding can support research for ARI:** To address the priority knowledge needs set out in ARI, research will need to be funded. Local government in particular have limited resources to fund research or influence national funding agenda but are on the forefront of service delivery. As part of the place agenda, funders should consider how they support sub-national government to shape the research they need to tackle the urgent challenges they face.

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