



UPEN

A review of place-based academic-policy engagement in the UK

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October 2026

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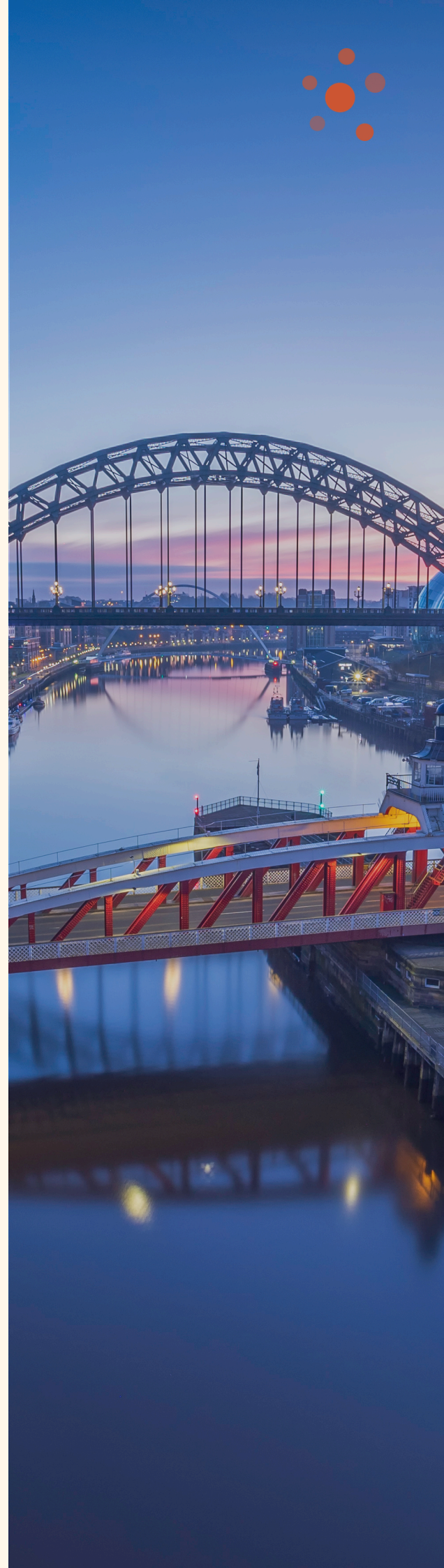
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Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Chris Hewson, Rebecca Riley, Peter O'Brien and Abigail Rowson for their comments on earlier drafts of the review.

Thanks are also due to Eleanor Conway, Lindsay Wright, Robyn Parker and Stuart Mitchell for their support in preparing the review for publication.





Executive Summary

Growing attention to evidence-informed policymaking in the UK has coincided with a stronger emphasis on place-based approaches to economic development and public service reform.

There is increasing recognition that tackling challenges relating to weak national growth and entrenched spatial inequalities requires context-specific evidence. At the same time, the renewal of regional devolution in England has created new governance structures and policy accountabilities.

This creates a role for universities in supplying expertise and analytical capacity to regional decision-making. New institutes, networks and partnerships supporting place-based academic-policy engagement have emerged across the UK.

This review synthesises the evidence on place-based academic-policy engagement to inform the work of the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) in strengthening academic-policy engagement across the UK.

What the review finds

Place-based academic-policy engagement is becoming more important as devolution accelerates, increasing the need for local and strategic authorities to access and apply evidence in policymaking. Yet this engagement remains underdeveloped at the local level, especially when compared to national policymaking. Local and strategic authorities face resourcing constraints that push engagement to low on their priority lists. Academic incentive structures under-value place-based work and academic-policy engagement. Universities could play a bigger role, but support and infrastructure remain inconsistent.

More fundamentally, thinking about what good engagement looks like – relational, co-produced and rooted in context – has moved faster than the structural and financial conditions needed to facilitate this.

Emerging models of place-based engagement suffer from funding fragility, structural imbalance and geographic unevenness. Long-term, sustainable funding remains a significant challenge, leaving many initiatives in a constant state of flux, and growth has not always been well-coordinated with established national structures.



Priorities for advancing place-based academic-policy engagement

Our key conclusion is that embedding and maturing academic-policy engagement systematically will require an ecosystem approach amongst funders, universities and policy organisations - moving beyond individual initiatives towards a joined-up view of how to support evidence use in place-based policymaking, strengthen capacity across the UK, and enable shared learning.

UPEN is keen to build more detailed understanding and work with wider stakeholders, including funders and local and regional authorities, to embed and develop an ecosystem approach and support increased strategic coordination across initiatives. To this end, we have identified six initial priorities required to enable an ecosystem approach:

1. **Improve strategic coordination** across funders, government and universities to avoid duplication and missed opportunities.
2. **Shift focus from time-limited projects** to funding the underlying connective infrastructure - the people and processes that sustain relationships and activity.
3. **Strengthen capacity** in under-resourced local/strategic authorities and universities, including shared services and joint shaping of research agendas.
4. **Support a varied mix of mechanisms, structures and processes**, rather than a one-size-fits-all model, to reflect the diversity of geographical and institutional contexts.
5. **Build shared ownership of interventions** across universities, funders, government and civil society, including shared measures of success to demonstrate the collective value of this connective infrastructure.
6. **Improve recognition of place-based engagement** in funding and assessment frameworks such as Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF).

Introduction

The use of research evidence in policymaking has received growing attention in the UK over the past decade, with a greater focus on how knowledge is produced, interpreted and mobilised across different levels of governance. Over a similar period, national government, research funders and subnational institutions have increasingly emphasised place-based approaches to economic development, public service reform and innovation.

This shift has been driven by renewed momentum behind devolution, as well as widening spatial inequalities and sluggish national economic growth. At the same time, there has been a growing recognition that effective policymaking to address these complex and inter-related challenges requires context-specific evidence rooted in the economic, social and institutional realities of different places.

These shifts in thinking around evidence use and the importance of place in policymaking point to a key role for universities in contributing expertise, data and analytical capability to support local decision-making and to help build stronger regional evidence ecosystems.

This is not a new observation, but the accelerating pace of devolution, sustained pressure on local government finances, and a widening gap between the scale of local challenges and local analytical capacity mean that realising this role now demands a more deliberate and sustained response than in the past. New institutes, networks and partnerships which support place-based academic-policy engagement are emerging across the UK, and regional systems of knowledge production now increasingly involve actors and organisations from across universities, government, business, and civil society.





But this growth has been uneven and largely uncoordinated with insufficient knowledge of the strengths and constraints shaping engagement. There is still no clear picture of the current academic-policy engagement infrastructure rooted in place or of the implications for evidence-informed policymaking at local and regional levels of government.

This review synthesises the available evidence on place-based academic-policy engagement to inform the work of the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) to strengthen academic-policy engagement at all levels of government. The review is structured as follows: the context for place-based academic-policy engagement (Part 1); the institutions supporting engagement in place (Part 2); the system dynamics shaping engagement (Part 3); and conclusions and implications for the future (Part 4). The review is written against a fast-moving political backdrop, including a change of Prime Minister within the current Parliament and a series of devolution reforms during 2026; readers should note that specific institutional and funding details will continue to evolve.





1. Academic-policy engagement and why place matters

Academic-policy engagement refers to the people, processes, systems, and structures that support the integration of research evidence into policymaking.¹ It encompasses formal mechanisms such as government consultations and policy fellowships as well as the informal relationships and cultures that shape how evidence is shared and used.² Engagement operates across a spectrum, from the dissemination of findings to the active co-production of knowledge between academics and policymakers.³

Academic discussions of academic-policy engagement have shifted over several decades, from early approaches which adopted broadly linear models of knowledge transfer and focused on better communication and strengthening evidence quality to drive use in policymaking,⁴ to emphasising the relational, political, and contextual dimensions of how evidence is produced and used.⁵ Sustainable academic-policy partnerships are now increasingly understood to depend on interpersonal relationships, organisational alignment, and sufficient capacity to support sustained interaction over time.⁶ Knowledge brokering has come to emphasise the broker as a trusted intermediary who understands both research and policy cultures, speaks both dialects, and can navigate tensions between them.⁷

1.1. How does national academic-policy engagement infrastructure interact with considerations of place?

Many national government departments have established internal research services, analytical units and advisory councils, providing a baseline of in-house capacity. Beyond these, structured opportunities for external academic input have developed over time, including colleges of experts, scientific advisory committees, select committee inquiries, and policy fellowship schemes.⁸ Since 2013, a network of What Works Centres has been developed to synthesise and communicate evidence to practitioners and policymakers.⁹ Alongside this, Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) were introduced in 2017 to improve transparency around government evidence needs and to better align academic research with government priorities.¹⁰



While this architecture has helped build a relatively mature national infrastructure for evidence-informed policymaking in the UK,¹¹ it is one whose orientation remains overwhelmingly towards national government. Currently, there exist a number of national intermediary infrastructures, comprising membership networks, observatories, evidence centres and university-policy partnerships. These include UPEN, the Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub (LPIP Hub), the What Works Network, the Civic University Network and its successor National Civic Impact Accelerator, and other sector-specific research investments such as the Productivity Institute. Across these, four broad roles can be identified: building and connecting capacity across the higher education sector; connecting policy evidence ‘demand’ and academic research ‘supply’; moving evidence across scales of governance; and translating evidence to support policy decision-making. Many undertake more than one of these functions.

Table 1: Summary of intermediary organisations roles and functions

Role	Key functions
Convening and capacity-building	• Strengthening and connecting the supply-side of the system • Supporting the sharing of good practice • Developing skills, structures and networks
Providing an interface between academia and policy	• Mobilising evidence in response to defined policy needs • Strengthening research understanding of policy needs
Connecting evidence across scales	• Integrating evidence across scales of governance • Providing local/regional insights to inform national policy • Adapting national evidence to local contexts and vice versa
Translating evidence to supporting policy decision-making	• Generating evidence • Producing toolkits • Guiding evidence-based decisions



More recently, mechanisms developed within national government are being adopted by local and regional authorities. Several local and city councils – including Southampton and Oxford – have appointed Chief Scientific Advisers which echo departmental Chief Scientific Advisers within national government. Some local and regional authorities – including Leeds City Council, the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Greater London Authority - have developed their own ARIs to capture local and regional evidence needs.¹²

“While a small number of universities have built established, resourced policy engagement functions, for most universities activity remains ad hoc and dependent on individual academics.”

Within universities, academic-policy engagement infrastructure remains uneven and relatively under-developed. While a small number of universities have built established, resourced policy engagement functions, for most universities activity remains ad hoc and dependent on individual academics. This leaves some universities in a demonstrably stronger position than others when it comes to mobilising their research within local policy systems.¹³

Much university activity is driven by the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which informs the allocation of annual institutional ‘Quality-Related’ research funding.¹⁴ Whilst REF incorporates the evaluation of the significance and reach of impact beyond academia (through its Engagement and Impact component), its approach to evaluating specific disciplinary outcomes favours instrumental impacts of research rather than the development of infrastructures. It also explicitly excludes geographic location from assessment.¹⁵ The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) does incorporate explicit place dimensions, but does not include policy engagement specifically and at present has no explicit link to funding.¹⁶ Moreover, the Local Growth and Regeneration component of KEF – one of the seven key perspectives evaluated - is self-reported rather than linked to agreed metrics.

More promisingly, the UK’s largest research funder is increasingly recognising place as a meaningful dimension within research funding.¹⁷ Over the last decade, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has launched several place-focused initiatives, comprising both intermediary infrastructures and place-based research partnerships within specific regions. These include Local Policy Innovation Partnerships (LPIPs), Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council Place-Based Impact Acceleration Accounts, and Research England’s Regional Innovation Fund alongside

investments in place-based networks such as the West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute (WMREDI), Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (YPERN) and Insights North East. In 2025, UKRI committed £500 million to a Local Innovation Partnership Fund (LIPF) to foster collaboration between local and strategic authorities, business and researchers – but one in which innovation, rather than evidence-informed policymaking – is the primary focus. Notwithstanding these investments, the persistence of funding which is predominantly short-term and project-based creates difficulties in sustaining the relationships and infrastructure that effective engagement requires.¹⁸

1.2. Devolution and the implications for policy demand for academic expertise

The devolution of political authority from Westminster and Whitehall to different parts of the UK has created a highly varied governance landscape of institutions, powers, and capacities, with implications for academic-policy engagement in place.

The first major wave of devolution in the late 1990s established new legislatures and executives in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, alongside the Greater London Authority in England. A second, more bespoke wave followed from 2011 onwards in England, centred on combined authorities, more commonly (though not universally) led by directly elected metro mayors, operating with more circumscribed and variable powers.¹⁹





This proceeded through an ongoing series of bespoke, centrally negotiated deals rather than a coherent and comprehensive legislative framework.²⁰

The 2026 English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act²¹ introduced a standardised structure for English devolution, creating a new tier of ‘strategic authorities’ and devolving further powers to Mayors. As part of this, strategic authorities have been required to produce Local Growth Plans setting out priorities for their areas and work with government agencies and funders to deliver them.²²

“Devolution is not a straightforward gain for academic-policy engagement. Whilst it creates new opportunities by giving strategic authorities fresh powers and evidence needs to meet, it also adds complexity for engagement.”

A Cabinet Statement in July 2026 following a change of Prime Minister within the current Parliament set out a further wave of reforms, confirming an ambition for every area in England to have, or be in the process of establishing, a strategic authority by the end of 2027, with full coverage by the end of 2028.²³ The UK Government has also committed to a significant programme of fiscal devolution, with Mayors set to retain a share of local income tax from April 2028 and a greater share of business rates from April 2027, alongside a wider transfer of powers, including over the 16-19 education budget, transport and housing. A white paper setting out the full timetable for implementation is expected in autumn 2026.

However, strategic authorities are still relatively young and emerging institutions, with capacity that remains limited overall and varies between regions,²⁴ while local authorities continue to operate under severe and long-standing financial and capacity pressures.²⁵ Central government civil service staffing has grown in recent years as subnational government workforce capacity has declined. Central government employment overtook local government in total staffing around 2011, and by 2025 was double that of local government.²⁶ As a result, the sub-national governance landscape in England supporting academic-policy engagement is under-resourced and unequal.

It is not yet clear whether advances in devolution will enable more sustainable placed-based academic-policy engagement or stimulate strategic authorities to increase their capacity for evidence use. Devolution is not a straightforward gain for

academic-policy engagement. Whilst it creates new opportunities by giving strategic authorities fresh powers and evidence needs to meet, it also adds complexity for engagement.

These complexities include more actors and relationships to manage, new and immature institutions with no established channels, inconsistent powers across different areas, and fragmentation of the evidence landscape. Regions with greater inherited institutional capacity and maturity are arguably better positioned to take on additional devolved powers and attract further investment,²⁷ which in turn may underpin capacity for engaging with academic expertise.

In contrast, less-resourced or more peripheral areas - peripheral in terms of geography, connectivity, economic structure and/or the extent of devolution powers - with limited staffing and weaker engagement infrastructure, depend more often on episodic engagement driven by individual champions rather than formal partnerships.²⁸ As further strategic authorities are established, the role of universities as key partners for accessing and mobilising evidence and expertise to inform policymaking will become an increasingly important question.





Examples of evidence initiatives within strategic and local authorities

- The Greater Manchester Combined Authority research team undertakes research and analysis across all GMCA priorities and build the evidence base for the GMCA's regional strategy. The GMCA also hosts an Open Data Hub to share available data from local authorities in the region.
- The West Yorkshire Scientific Advisory Group (WYSAG) brings together academic expertise and available research to give independent evidence-based policy advice across health, economic, environment, inclusion and equity.
- Liverpool City Region Data observatory is an open data-sharing portal which provides place-based economic and data insights to support strategy and policy development across the region.
- The North East Evidence Hub brings together thematic data and evidence about the region which is made available in accessible formats, with the aim of building a regional evidence base.
- Health Determinant Research Collaborations are funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research to strengthen research capacity and capability within local government and inform policymaking on health and health inequalities.

1.3. Universities and academic-policy engagement in place

Universities perform the majority of publicly-funded research in the UK and act as 'anchor institutions' within their localities,²⁹ with the ability to convene partners across academia, government, industry and civil society. This makes them well-placed to mobilise knowledge to address local challenges and contribute to long-term regional development. They are increasingly recognised as credible sources of insight into local economies and communities, contributing to knowledge-exchange frameworks, civic university agreements and wider place-based policy ecosystems, alongside relationship-based collaboration and acting as partners in experimentation, innovation, and evaluation.³⁰



A number of collaborative initiatives now seek to harness the analytical depth and insight which universities can offer to address complex policy challenges.³¹ University policy engagement units orientated around local and regional priorities enable strategic and local authorities to access a deeper understanding of place - for example, by providing evidence on the specific economic, social and institutional dynamics that shape a locality and are not always visible in national datasets - and to trial new approaches to service delivery, economic development, and community engagement.³²

As recent analysis highlights, universities must now demonstrate tangible local relevance and rebuild trust by contributing to the everyday concerns of citizens.³³ This context heightens, rather than diminishes, the strategic importance of universities' place-based engagement as part of their civic infrastructure.

“Universities must now demonstrate tangible local relevance and rebuild trust by contributing to the everyday concerns of citizens.”

However, this role continues to be performed unevenly across universities, reflecting variation in strategic priorities and institutional capacity. Some universities have made place-based engagement a strategic priority, backed by dedicated staff, funding and senior leadership sponsorship; in others, as previously mentioned, it remains a peripheral activity that depends on individual academics' interests and relationships rather than institutional infrastructure. The wider higher education funding crisis - characterised by contraction, job losses, and a growing questioning of universities' societal value³⁴ - raises challenges for sustaining visible and resourced academic-policy engagement. At the same time as highlighted above, local and strategic authorities face their own acute financial constraints, capacity losses, and increasing demands, intensifying reliance on external evidence and analytical support.



2. The institutes supporting academic-policy engagement in place

This section turns to the institutions through which academic-policy engagement in place is actually delivered - the bodies that bring researchers and policymakers together in practice and support the use of academic evidence by local and regional decision-makers. Place-based engagement takes multiple organisational forms, reflecting the varied governance arrangements, research capacities and civic cultures within which it operates. One characterisation of regionally-based policy engagement functions identified distinct approaches ranging from a network model; sustained collaboration to address specific policy needs; convening cross-system stakeholders; and providing focused consultancy.³⁵ Another introduced six distinct models of civic and policy engagement: Civic-Embedded Regional Development Institutes; Civic Engagement and Public Policy Institutes; Networks Regional Policy Collaboratives; National Performance Institutes; Interdisciplinary Public Policy Think Tanks; Translational Policy Communication Platforms.³⁶

These typologies offer valuable ways of understanding the diversity of purpose, activity and stakeholder configuration that place-based institutes can adopt. The intention here, however, is not to add a further layer of classification, but to provide an accessible entry point into this landscape, organised according to their structure. Single-university embedded institutes provide stable, sustained analytical capacity for their regions, drawing on the depth of a single host university. Multi-institution networked consortia bring multiple universities together with local and strategic authorities and other partners, building shared analytical capacity across a region. Each has emerged in response to different opportunities and pressures within the wider policy and academic engagement landscape, and offer a different route to producing place-responsive evidence and supporting co-production between researchers and policymakers.

2.1. Single university embedded institutes

Embedded institutes¹ located within a single university provide stable, sustained analytical capacity anchored in a particular region. They tend to be focused on regional growth and development, both of their home region and more widely. They are

¹In this review, 'institute' is used as a broad label for single university embedded activity. Individual bodies use a variety of names – including units, centres and institutes – and this terminology does not itself denote a fixed scope, scale or disciplinary reach.



supported through mixed funding models, including from research funder investment, their host university, and project research and consultancy. In some cases, they have become nodes in wider national infrastructure, connecting regional focus to national agendas. For example, the City-Regional Economic Development Institute (City-REDI), University of Birmingham, hosting the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) LPIP Hub and the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR), Sheffield Hallam University, hosting the ESRC's Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness.

Where they have endured, embedded institutes often operate over many years and sometimes decades, navigating complex policy-research systems, maintaining relationships with decision-makers across political cycles, and developing deep contextual knowledge of local economic, social and institutional dynamics. This depth is difficult to replicate through project-based initiatives.

Table 2: Examples of single university embedded institutes

Name	Brief description	Key features
Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) at Newcastle University. ³⁷ Founded 1977.	Research centre focused on urban and regional change, development and policy.	Undertakes research for international, national, regional, urban and local organisations. Key areas of research include people and place; evolution and transition; governance, institutions and inclusion.
Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. ³⁸ Founded 1986-87.	Applied policy research and evaluation centre with a strong regional focus.	Focused on the impact of social and economic disadvantage on places and people. Expertise includes multidisciplinary expertise and methods covering housing, inclusive economy, sustainable futures and policy evaluation. Funders and partners comprise national government, local authorities, charities and private sector.



Name	Brief description	Key features
Heseltine Institute for Public Policy at the University of Liverpool. ³⁹ Founded 2013.	Interdisciplinary research institute focused on urban policy.	Focused on the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions. Expertise includes public policy, local economic development, devolution, urban governance, co-production. Also undertakes convening and brokerage with a strong emphasis on co-production.
City-REDI at the University of Birmingham. ⁴⁰ Founded 2015.	Research centre focused on regional analytics, strategy, and economic modelling.	Focused on regional economic development, UK labour markets, skills and employment, inclusive growth. Expertise includes business cases, economic modelling, qualitative research. Offers specific research and consultancy services.
Brunel Centre at the University of Bath in partnership with the University of West of England. ⁴¹ Founded 2025.	Research centre focused on sustainable and inclusive economic growth.	Focused on inclusive and sustainable growth in West of England. Expertise includes economics, policy and business research. Provides an 'evidence and insight hub' offering real-time data; connects decision-makers to academic expertise; consultancy services.
Bennett School of Public Policy at the University of Cambridge. ⁴² Founded 2025.	A flagship, multi-disciplinary policy school.	Carries out research activities, teaches postgraduate programmes, and engages with key collaborators and decision-makers. Expertise includes spatial inequalities, place-based policymaking, innovation and productivity, economic growth and wellbeing, and decision-making structures.



The examples in Table 2 do not capture the wider population of university policy engagement units - such as Policy@Manchester, University College London Public Policy, The York Policy Engine and Policy Leeds – which often perform many of the same connecting and brokerage functions but are typically smaller and work with other research investments.

2.2. Multi-institution networked consortia

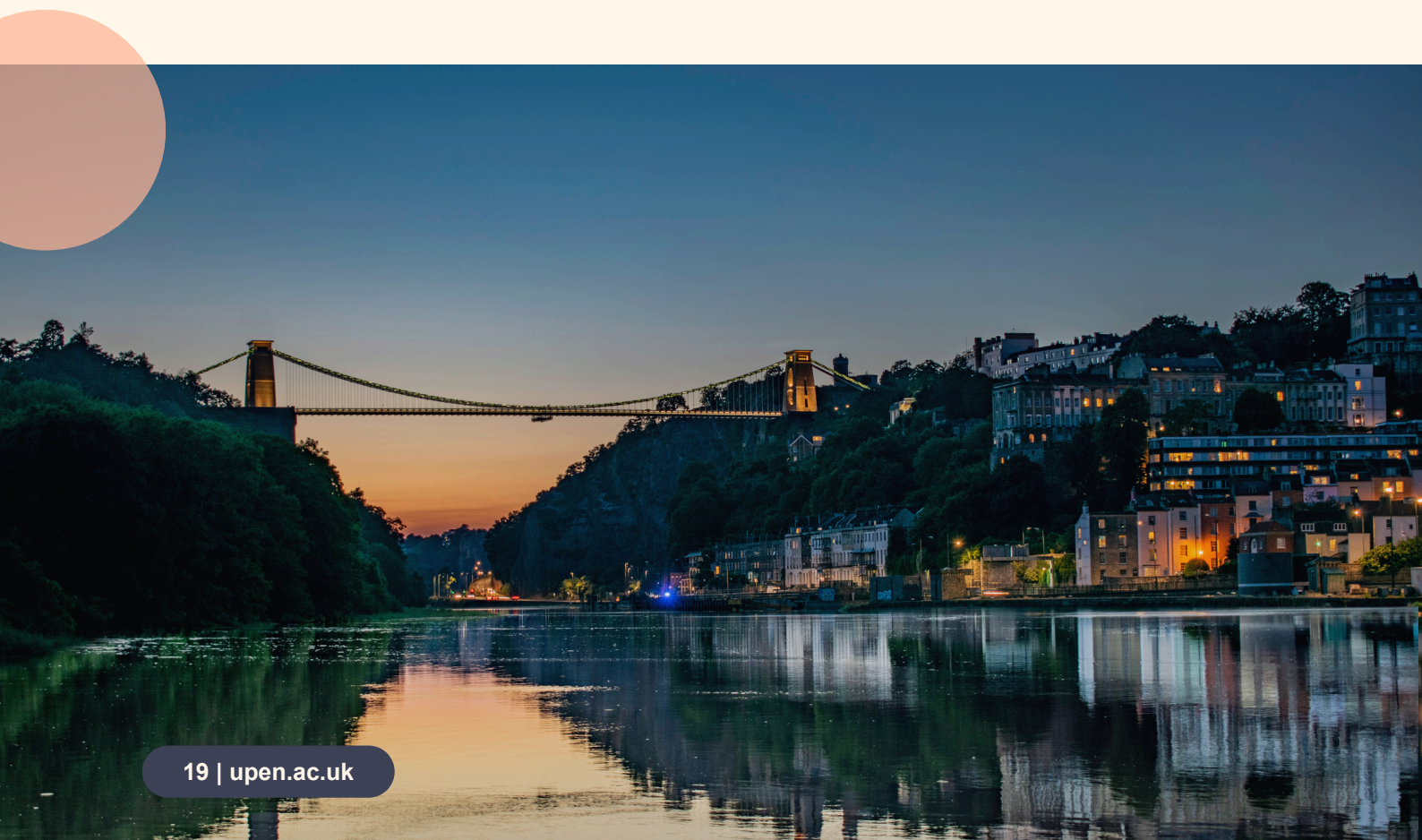
Multi-institution networked consortia bring together multiple universities, often with local and strategic authorities and other public and third sector bodies, to build shared, system-level research capacity across a region. By pooling expertise and developing shared infrastructure, these foster cross-institutional collaboration and create more distributed forms of place-based analytical capability. However, a reliance on time-limited research funding investment can pose challenges for their long-term sustainability. The size and capacity of different institutions can also enhance or limit engagement.

Table 3: Examples of multi-institution networked consortia

Name	Brief description	Key features
London Research and Policy Partnership (LRaPP). ⁴³ Established 2021.	Promotes collaboration between London government and academic researchers to build a systematic approach to engagement.	Joint initiative between Greater London Authority, London Councils, London Higher and UPEN. Co-production of London ARIs; brokerage service; fellowships; a knowledge mobiliser network.
Yorkshire Policy Engagement & Research Network (YPERN). ⁴⁴ Established 2022. Received £3.9m from the Research England Development Fund, and £2.7m from regional partners.	Brings together researchers from the region's 12 universities with, policymakers and wider stakeholders to support place-based policymaking in Yorkshire. Underpinned by a memorandum of understanding between Yorkshire & Humber Councils and Yorkshire Universities.	Coordinates policy fellowships, demonstrator projects, systems-based applied research and network convening. Particular emphasis on embedding ARIs.



Name	Brief description	Key features
Insights North East. ⁴⁵ Established 2022. Received £2.8m from the Research England Development Fund.	Transitioned from a formal multi-institution partnership to a collaborative hub based at Newcastle University generating place-based policy insights.	Established during transition to new strategic authority. Bringing together academic research, practitioner and policy insight and lived experience. Foregrounds a relational approach. Offers workshops, rapid briefings, and collaborative projects.
Local Policy and Innovation Partnerships (LPIPs). ⁴⁶ Established 2023.	Four networked regional consortia across the UK with an explicit place-based policy innovation remit; LPIP Hub to provide overall coordination.	Thematically-focused regional initiatives alongside a national hub to draw together insights and stakeholders and connect local to national policy.



3. System dynamics affecting place-based academic-policy engagement



Place-based academic-policy engagement in the UK has seen some expansion in recent years. The evidence reviewed in Parts 1 and 2 points to system strengths, including mature national mechanisms, an emerging layer of intermediary networks, a growing infrastructure of regional delivery, and rising civic ambition across many universities. But it also begins to reveal significant constraints across the academic-policy ecosystem. This section sets out three interlocking dynamics shaping the effectiveness, distribution and future direction of engagement. It closes with the argument that these dynamics need to be addressed in a systematic way rather than as a series of discrete problems.

3.1. An expanding but fragile and incoherent infrastructure

The proliferation of institutes, networks and consortia at national and subnational levels across the UK illustrates a dynamic field of practice that has begun to professionalise academic-policy engagement and broaden access to academic expertise.⁴⁷ The ESRC/Innovate UK's investment in LPIPs between 2023 and 2026 connected four place-based consortia with a national Hub designed to translate between local evidence and national policy. This multi-scalar orientation, where it works, is one of the more promising recent developments in the field - though it is recent, time-limited and uneven, and not yet sufficient to compensate for the structural weaknesses set out below.

The first is the fragility of the funding base for academic-policy engagement. Embedded institutes typically rely on mixed funding portfolios - a blend of university core funding, competitive research grants, commissioned projects, philanthropy and programme-level awards - that spreads financial risk and provides resilience but rarely produces rapid expansion. Embedded institutes tend to be concentrated in larger, research-intensive and comparatively well-resourced universities, whereas smaller and specialist institutions typically have less capacity to build or sustain this kind of infrastructure. Networked consortia, by contrast, typically run on larger, time-limited programme grants (e.g. UKRI investment in the LPIPs, Research England investment in Y-PERN) enabling faster scaling but creates exposure when those grants end. These structural differences in funding shape what each institute/network can do, and how they weather changes in the wider political and funding environment.



The second is an imbalance in established structures at the national and regional level. Nationally, there is a relatively mature evidence infrastructure within the UK government and Parliament (alongside some similar structures in the devolved nations). However, structures for evidence intermediation and evidence use remain thin within English strategic authorities. Where local authority capacity exists, it is often reliant on external research funding (e.g. the National Institute for Health and Care Research's Health Determinants Research Collaboration and Local Authority Research Practitioners programmes). Some authorities, however, have managed to build analytical teams independent of these funding streams (e.g. Leeds City Council and Kirklees Council).

“Uneven coverage [...] means that decision-makers in some parts of the UK have access to substantially richer and more responsive evidence than those in others, ”

The third is geographic. Whilst this review has identified academic-policy engagement institutions in northern England, the Midlands and London, other areas - notably much of the South West outside Bristol and Bath, the East of England, and coastal and rural areas across the country - lack equivalent analytical infrastructure. Uneven coverage is not merely an equity concern: it means that decision-makers in some parts of the UK have access to substantially richer and more responsive evidence than those in others, with implications for the quality and legitimacy of place-based policymaking. This unevenness partly reflects the underlying geography of the university sector itself, which is concentrated in a relatively small number of city-regions, leaving other areas without large research-intensive universities on which embedded institutes might be built.





3.2. Structural asymmetries between research supply and policy demand

A persistent and underacknowledged feature of the current landscape is the imbalance, insufficiency, and lack of coordination of place-based academic-policy engagement capacity. Universities have increased investment in engagement infrastructure at the same time as local/regional authority capacity has contracted. Academic incentives continue to under-value policy engagement work. Evidence capability is highly variable across strategic and local authorities. There exists no systematic means of identifying and understanding policy evidence needs or of shaping research agendas accordingly.

This asymmetry has several effects. Engagement is frequently shaped more by available research than by articulated local evidence needs. Local and regional government bodies often struggle to articulate and sustain evidence demands and manage responses to them. Continued reliance on external consultants to deliver one-off projects⁴⁸ fails to build the sustained internal capability needed for evidence-informed policymaking over time.

Effective evidence use requires not only high-quality research but also absorptive capacity within local institutions: analytical expertise, organisational stability, and routines for translating evidence into decisions. Investment in building this capacity on the 'policy-demand' side has been more limited than investment in 'research-supply'. Closing this gap is a prerequisite for more equitable and effective engagement. These dynamics also suggest that the field's conceptual evolution toward relational and contextual engagement has run ahead of the structural conditions needed to support it.

3.3. From individual initiatives to ecosystem design

The dynamics above interact. For example, insufficient capacity within local and strategic authorities can mean that academic-policy engagement becomes overly supply-side-driven and extractive in approach. Similarly, fixed-term funding cycles combined with institutional churn prevent the system from learning across initiatives. Variation in capacity across geographies leaving the places which may be most in need of evidence-informed policymaking the least equipped to access or shape it. Tackling these dynamics as discrete issues, in the way that successive funding decisions have tackled them to date, is unlikely to produce a coherent system.

The future development of academic-policy engagement infrastructure would benefit from moving beyond the logic of individual initiatives towards a more deliberate ecosystem design. This means attending not only to what each initiative does, but to how different models complement one another across scales and functions: where genuine coverage gaps remain; where duplication creates inefficiency without adding value; and how the connective tissue between institutions - the brokerage, translation and convening functions identified in Part 2 - is adequately resourced. The infrastructure reviewed here has been built largely through a series of discrete funding decisions.

Making it work as a system will require a different kind of strategic attention. This review does not set out to resolve exactly how such ecosystem stewardship should be exercised, but Part 4 proposes a starting point: agreeing shared measures of success and building the collaborative governance arrangements needed to sustain them.

Treating the engagement landscape as a system requires funding schemes to recognise the importance of sustained investment in the connective tissue which enables academic-policy engagement as well as the need to build 'demand-side' capacity within local and strategic authorities. Alongside this, there is a need to strengthen learning from what is already in existence and from ongoing developments, in order to inform future funding programmes and decisions to ensure that they build on existing strengths. Part 4 sets out the practice and research priorities that follow from this diagnosis.



4. Implications for strengthening place-based academic-policy engagement

This section outlines key conclusions from the evidence set out in this review into priorities for practice and future research.

Firstly, place-based academic-policy engagement is increasingly important. Ongoing and intensifying devolution, championed by the UK Prime Minister, makes the capacity of strategic and local authorities to identify evidence needs and access and apply evidence to support robust policymaking, increasingly salient.

However, academic-policy engagement at the place level remains immature and uneven. Compared to national policymaking, structures and capacity for academic-policy engagement and evidence use are less developed and less well-resourced in local and regional policymaking. Local and strategic authorities continue to grapple with resourcing and set-up constraints which leave academic-policy engagement low down in their list of priorities. At the same time, place-based work is under-recognised in assessment frameworks which drive academic incentives. Universities have a valuable role to play but initiatives and resourcing are variable and the infrastructure to support it is under-developed and inconsistent.

There are emerging models of place-based academic-policy engagement, but the infrastructure suffers from funding fragility, structure imbalance and geographic unevenness. Long-term, sustainable funding is a significant challenge meaning that many initiatives are in a constant state of flux. Whilst there has been some growth in place-based academic-policy engagement initiatives, coverage varies by geography and they have not always been well-coordinated with established national structures.

4.1. Priorities for advancing place-based academic-policy engagement

Based on this evidence review and the conclusions set out above, this section identifies an overarching approach and six resulting priorities for UPEN to advance, working with wider stakeholders across funders, universities, local and strategic authorities and intermediary networks to strengthen practice and capabilities.



Our overall conclusion is that embedding and maturing academic-policy engagement systematically will require an ecosystem approach amongst funders, universities and policy organisations.⁴⁹ This needs to go beyond individual initiatives to take a joined-up ‘system’ view of how to support and enhance evidence use within place-based policymaking; strengthen capacity in places across the UK; and enable shared learning. An ecosystem approach can help to improve the system overview and develop shared understanding and alignment of activity across research funders, governments at multiple levels, and universities.

“Universities have a valuable role to play in place-based academic-policy engagement but initiatives and resourcing are variable and the infrastructure to support it is under-developed and inconsistent.”

UPEN is keen to build more detailed understanding and work with wider stakeholders, including funders and local and strategic authorities, to embed and develop an ecosystem approach and support increased strategic coordination across initiatives. To this end, we have identified six initial priorities required to enable an ecosystem approach:

1. Strategic coordination between organisations, initiatives and investments seeking to strengthen evidence use within regional and local government.

Recent developments and investments in different national and place-based initiatives to strengthen interaction between academic research and public policy are welcome. However, there is a risk that insufficient coordination between initiatives leads to inadvertent duplication, overlooking of gaps, and missed opportunities to maximise synergies and benefits across investments. A dedicated focus on connecting across different components of the ecosystem can maximise the benefits of collective efforts and support more holistic approaches across multiple stakeholders.

2. Shifting focus from delivering projects to supporting infrastructure. Efforts to enhance academic-policy engagement should better recognise the importance of long-term connective tissue and infrastructure that underpin relationships and activities. Further work is needed to build the case for stable and long-term investment in this infrastructure (both people and processes) alongside specific (and time-limited) projects.



3. **Strengthening capacity in local and strategic authorities and in universities where academic-policy engagement is under-resourced.** This should include:

ensuring analytical capabilities and capacity to both better articulate evidence needs and make use of academic knowledge; and jointly shaping research agendas to enable authorities to gain more from the UK's research base. It must also, crucially, incorporate dedicated capacity for building and maintaining relationships and supporting collaborative working that builds trust and underpins effective working. For universities experiencing constraints, exploring the potential for greater collaboration and shared services or activities to support academic-policy engagement can more efficiently build capacity.

4. **Support a varied mix of mechanisms, structures and processes to facilitate academic-policy engagement.** The significant variation across geographical and institutional contexts requires flexibility and agility to respond to different policy and organisational contexts. This requires the deployment and adaptation of appropriate mechanisms for specific needs rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. This can also support a layered approach which builds and reinforces strategic engagement through multiple smaller interactions.



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5. **Building shared ‘ownership’ of academic-policy interventions.** By definition, interventions need to secure buy-in and collaboration across interested parties – including universities, funders, governments and civic society organisations. Collaborative governance structures or delivery teams offer potential means. This also helps to support the integration of a diversity of evidence needs and knowledges to ensure that evidence and responses reflect local lived experience and support the legitimacy and resilience of activities and interventions. Agreeing shared measures of success across partners would also help make the value of this connective infrastructure more visible, and strengthen the case for sustained investment in it.
 6. **Improve recognition of placed-based academic-policy engagement within funding, assessment and other incentive frameworks.** Currently, academic-policy engagement is not explicitly recognised in university assessment frameworks such as the REF and KEF. Equally, such work is rarely specifically rewarded and encouraged for policy professionals. Greater recognition would strengthen institutional incentives to support activity and respond to the needs of local and regional policymaking and support its strategic embedding in organisations.





A research agenda for place-based academic-policy engagement

Six research priorities follow from the evidence in this review:

1. Devolution maturity and impact on academic-policy engagement outcomes
2. Capability for evidence use in local and strategic authorities
3. The geography of engagement and institutional inequality
4. Funder design choices and place-based academic-policy engagement
5. Evaluation of learning efficacy, long-term outcomes, and system-level architecture
6. Legitimacy, responsible engagement, and the inclusion of community knowledge



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About UPEN

Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) is a central space for academics, policy actors, and professional services staff who undertake and support academic-policy engagement. We champion academic policy engagement to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking in the UK.

UPEN is hosted by University College London (UCL), with co-chairs located at UCL, University of Huddersfield and University of Leeds.

UPEN Programmes

This report was produced as part of UPEN Programmes. UPEN Programmes is led by UCL in partnership with the Universities of Birmingham, Cambridge, Durham, Huddersfield, Leeds, Nottingham Trent, Southampton, and Teesside, and the Wales Centre for Public Policy at Cardiff University and Insights North East. Additional key collaborators include the Institute for Community Studies, the Institute for Government, and Yorkshire Universities.

UPEN Programmes is funded from 2025-2028 by Research England, ESRC, and UKRI.

