

Building new bridges between research and policy during a national lockdown

Annette Boaz and Kathryn Oliver are social scientists with expertise in production and use of evidence for, policy. In this blogpost, they reflect on their recent experiences putting their knowledge into practice at the heart of government during a national lockdown. They describe the significant changes they had to make to their planned programme of (face-to-face) engagement work and how it was possible to build relationships and get a significant programme of work underway online to mobilise existing evidence in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK government's Areas of Research Interest framework.

Responding to the findings of the 2015 Nurse Review of UK research councils, which found weaknesses in the UK's research/policy interface, UK Government Departments are asked to identify and publish priority evidence gaps called Areas of Research Interest (ARIs). ARIs present an opportunity for government to engage academics in conversations about how to meet their evidence needs. In 2019, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Government Office for Science (GOS) came together to set up two one-year Fellowships as an intervention to improve academic engagement with ARIs. We started this secondment in December 2019, little did we know the impending disruption 2020 had in store.

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We had a clear plan. We would spend 2-3 months getting to know colleagues across government who worked on the ARIs. With their help, and with our funders at the ESRC, we would identify a set of priorities to take forward. We would work over the summer to design and test a series of engagement exercises to learn more about how to promote better government-academic engagement – ultimately, to help us think through how to better support a well-functioning research-policy system. We carefully budgeted for nice sandwich lunches to encourage policy makers, analysts, researchers, and funders to attend a series of face-to-face workshops discussing and finessing ARIs and possible responses to them. We planned to bring people together from all over the UK and internationally to engage in this work. Much research shows that building [authentic, trusting relationships](#) are central to successful engagement, we hoped to realise this in our own work.

By March it was clear that the networking lunches and in-person chats would not be possible. Government colleagues were turning all their attention to the growing COVID-19 crisis; their operational and research priorities were shifting towards thinking through responses to the pandemic. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funders were keen to play their part by funding COVID-relevant research. Our work programmes would have to drastically adapt.

Working closely with the Chief Scientific Advisers (CSAs) and their teams, we took another look at our prioritised ARIs. Much of the rapid response activity was focused, understandably, on the clinical aspects of the disease. Where we felt we could help was around the [medium to long-term issues](#). As one CSA put it to us, 'In three years, five years – what would we wish we'd asked now?'. Revisiting the ARIs made clear that many **existing priorities had been made more urgent** by the pandemic, for example around how to support low-carbon working, or how digital services could be used to support vulnerable communities. Many of these ARIs were focused not on health issues but on social, trade, R&D, or other public policy areas. It was clear that **government departments often shared similar or related priorities**, and there was scope to avoid duplication and explore cross-government research and policy creation through the COVID response.

These responses highlighted the need for synthesis and co-ordination; with that in mind, we designed a programme of work aiming to collate existing evidence, surface key policy and practice messages, and identify research gaps. We organised the ARIs into 9 themes:

1. Vulnerable Communities,
2. Supporting Services,
3. Trust in Public Institutions,
4. Crime Prevention,
5. Supporting Lower-Carbon Local Economies,

6. Land Use,
7. Future of Work,
8. Local to National Growth, and
9. Trade and Aid.

For each theme, we identified ongoing programmes of work (such as the British Academy's seminar series and working group on Vulnerable Populations), key organisations, and – with the help of our UKRI colleagues – key investments relevant to the ARIs. We worked with colleagues in the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN), UKRI, the What Works Centres and the National Academies to draw up lists of potential experts to join 9 Task-and-Finish groups. Throughout May and June, we identified chairs, issued invitations and prepared for an opening plenary on the 2nd July.



We knew little at the time about online working, and in particular the types of online engagement activities which might be needed to support multiple stakeholders to have meaningful discussions in the context of a national crisis and a rapidly changing environment. The launch of our Rebuilding a Resilient Britain programme on the 2nd July was a leap into the unknown.

Meeting several times over the summer, with support from GOS colleagues, each Task-and-Finish produced a report collating existing and emerging evidence, and provided expert reflection about the nature of the challenge before government. The results, produced in a matter of months at an extremely challenging time for everyone, are testament to the public spirit and shared commitment of all involved.

The process itself has increased connections between policy and academic communities – by having the opportunity for repeated and sustained conversation we have seen relationships develop, and conversations continue. Participants have shared with us other impacts, such as improved systems to produce ARIs within government; contributions to large funding bids through the Strategic Priorities Fund; on how government departments request money for their own research needs through the spending review.

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Whether we managed to support engagement activities online that achieved similar results to face to face interactions remains unclear. Our initial reflections are that while the online environment may not build new relationships as effectively as a face to face meeting, new connections were made and sustained. There were also advantages in terms of access and efficiency, as academics could join the conversations from across the UK for each relatively short working group session. These benefits point to a post-COVID world, where more can be made of these opportunities to decentralise and diversify research-policy interactions, but what we save on sandwiches will certainly be made up for by the need to support and develop effective forms of online working. There are certainly more lessons to be learned here, but for us, the next task is to make sure the outputs of these engagements are put to good use.

Like everyone involved, and likely most people working across government and research today, we feel pretty exhausted. However, there is more to do. We see this work as a first, admittedly difficult, step on the way towards improved conversation between government and academia. We have shown how it is possible to build new relationships, to engage with a wide range of stakeholders, and to get a significant programme of work underway online – although it would still be nice to thank people in person for their contribution over a cup of coffee!

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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