

# Stepping Out:

## An Early-Stage Evaluation of the 2021 ESRC Policy Fellowships

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# Acronyms

ADR UK	Administrative Data Research UK
AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
ARIs	Areas of Research Interest
BBSRC	Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
BEIS	Dept. for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
CAPE	Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement
CO	Cabinet Office
DEFRA	Dept. for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DfT	Dept. for Transport
DSIT	Dept. for Science, Innovation and Technology
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FLIER	Future Leaders in Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Research
HO	Home Office
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
Moj	Ministry of Justice
POST	Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology
P2R	Policy to Research
R2P	Research to Policy
SG	Scottish Government
UKRI	United Kingdom Research & Innovation
WG	Welsh Government

## Executive Summary

- **The ESRC Public Policy Fellowship scheme was launched in June 2021 as a pilot initiative.** The aim was to facilitate mobility at the nexus between research and policy in order to ensure that (i) policymakers had access to cutting-edge research and data, and (ii) researchers gained insight and experience from working in a non-academic but research related policy environment. Twenty-four fellows were appointed across ten policy host organisations in the first cohort.
- **The main finding of this early-stage evaluation is that the Public Policy Fellowship scheme has been very successful and has achieved and exceeded its original ambitions.** Research has revealed a clear evidence base of positive and significant impact across three areas (individual impacts, policy impacts and systemic impacts). It is also important to note that further impacts are likely to accrue over the medium and long-term.
- **All of the fellows interviewed (18 out of 24) stated that they had not only enjoyed their fellowships but that they had gained high levels of professional insight and understanding about the nexus between research and policy.** They had also been able to develop valuable professional relationships with policymakers that would continue to have value long after the fellowship had been completed. The first cohort dropout rate was zero.
- **Representatives from host interviews were equally positive about the value of the scheme, with a range of benefits being cited.** These included the provision of expert knowledge and methodological insight and training, through to contributions in terms of critical thinking and positive challenge. Fellows had also played an important connective role; introducing policymakers to new areas of research or specific researchers, while also often helping to forge connections within and across policy teams and units.
- **Opportunities for further refinement and the development of the Policy Fellows initiative exist, and nine evidence-based insights and recommendations are made in this report** (see Table 1, below). Greater clarity around the expectations of fellows and hosts is required, especially in relation to fellowship outputs and publications. A stronger focus on the absorptive capacity of both universities and policy host to fully utilise the learning and insights arising from this scheme is also necessary. Even greater impacts are likely to occur from a more strategic approach to nurturing positive cohort effects.
- **It is hoped that the evidence and insights provided in this report will be used to support the current (second) cohort of Policy Fellows (2023-2025), while contributing to longer-term strategic thinking.** The report ends with six strategic reflections which seek to emphasise: the specific contribution of the social sciences vis-à-vis policy-making; the need for variety in secondment structures and modes of working; the value of a full medium and long-term evaluation framework; the role and potential of nurturing cohort effects; on expansive thinking in relation to recruitment; and whether there is a need for greater central co-ordinating capacity across the fellowship/secondment landscape.

**Table 1. Evidence Based Insights and Recommendations**

	<b>Insight</b>	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
1	Clear Expectations	<i>Expectations need to be clear, transparent, and aligned with those of the policy host.</i>	Greater support and training for prospective fellows and hosts about expectation management, and different sorts of policy fellow functions.
2	Competing Pressures	<i>Tensions can emerge between the academic emphasis on publications and the hosts' requirements around confidentiality and data security.</i>	Establish clearer expectations around fellows' ability to produce publications as a critical aspect of the fellowships. Work with hosts to understand and navigate potential barriers to publication.
3	Managing Complexity	<i>Policy settings are complex and learning to navigate them takes time.</i>	All fellows to have two key link people to militate against staff churn, establish minimum standards for induction. Consider making the inception phase more time intensive.
4	Boundary-Spanning	<i>Working in a boundary-spanning manner generates significant additional professional and cognitive demands.</i>	Provide guidance to institutions that fellows should be released from all but the most essential academic duties, with teaching a particular priority. Offer the option of full buy-out during the placement phase.
5	Strategic Support	<i>Training, support, and community can enrich the fellowship experience.</i>	Increase opportunities for the cohort of fellows to engage at both a departmental and cross-scheme level. Ensure alignment of schedules between fellowship sub-streams.
6	Co-production & Compromise	<i>Fellowships involved a mixture of collaboration and compromise.</i>	Develop guidance around co-production including examples of successful approaches used in the pilot phase. Case studies should be utilised during host training.
7	Absorptive Capacity	<i>Capacity-building and systems-wide thinking is needed for the policy fellowship scheme to achieve its full potential.</i>	Uplift systemic capacity by promoting research-to-policy and policy-to-research opportunities. Invest in long-term cohort activities. Connect and collaborate across existing fellowship/secondment schemes.
8	Outsider/ Insider	<i>Being an 'outsider on the inside' creates opportunities as well as frictions.</i>	Greater support and training for prospective fellows and hosts about embedded fellowships or placements. Simple things matter – such as access to information, clarity of role and relationships, internal email address, etc.
9	Entry & Exit	<i>Transitions 'in' and 'out' of the fellowship are important to get right.</i>	Transitional arrangements are critical, and flexibility is key. Simplification of contractual arrangements and the provision of templates is necessary, as are 'exit interviews' to collect knowledge and insight.

# **PART I - OVERVIEW AND APPROACH**

# Introduction

## Programme overview

Launched in June 2021, the ESRC Policy Fellowships represented a significant investment and key element of the council's strategy for realising the potential of social and economic research and expertise to inform public policy. The fellowships responded to a number of challenges to achieving ESRC's vision for policy engagement and impact. These includes raising awareness of mobility opportunities and increasing the absorptive capacity of hosts within the policy community, while at the same time seeking to address a number of potential barriers and blockages within academe.

Geared toward early to mid-career academics, the programme aimed to "fund a cohort of policy fellows to provide research and expert advice on the host's policy priority areas, and to support wider knowledge exchange between government and academia".<sup>1</sup> During the pilot year, 25 fellowships were offered across ten UK government departments and devolved governments.<sup>2</sup> Four of the fellowships were co-funded by AHRC.

Each fellowship award was designed to last up to eighteen months, consisting of an inception phase (up to 3 months), a placement with the host organization (6-12 months), and a knowledge exchange phase (up to 3 months). Placements could be undertaken full-time or part-time (minimum 0.6 FTE), while the inception and KE phases allowed a 0.2 FTE buyout for researchers to remain at their home institutions.

The 2021 scheme received 96 applications, ranging from one to twelve per fellowship opportunity. At least three applicants were offered alternative placements. Ultimately, 24 fellows from 20 UK higher education institutions were placed across 10 different hosts. This total includes two ADR UK Data Science Fellows, a scheme originally advertised as two separate calls but later combined and fellows treated as a single cohort. There was no attrition from the programme, although one fellow relocated to another government department. Seven 'no-cost' extensions were granted due to delays in start dates, personal reasons, and project successes.

In February 2023, a second expanded round of the scheme was launched, rebranded as 'UKRI Policy Fellowships' to reflect a wider rollout across research councils (ESRC, AHRC, BBSRC). Responding to significant increased demand from continuing and new host partners - including 'What Works' centres - this phase included 49 advertised placement opportunities across 26 hosts and received 153 applications. The second cohort of Policy Fellows were therefore undertaking their placements as this report on the first cohort was being written, and within UKRI strategic planning is taking place with regard to the recruitment of a third cohort in 2025.

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<sup>1</sup> UKRI. (2021, July 8). ESRC policy fellowships 2021. UKRI. <https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/esrc-policy-fellowships-2021/>

<sup>2</sup> See Cabinet Office (2023) *What Works Network Strategy*. London: HMSO. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6565ed1462180b0012ce8318/What\\_Works\\_Network\\_Strategy\\_November\\_2023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6565ed1462180b0012ce8318/What_Works_Network_Strategy_November_2023.pdf)

## Evaluation Approach

The existing knowledge and evidence base around successful academic-to-policy fellowships is remarkably thin. As a result, and has been noted in leading studies, a high degree of uncertainty exists in relation to understanding of ‘What Works’ when it comes to facilitating the mobility of knowledge, talent and individuals across institutional and sectoral boundaries.<sup>3</sup> At the broadest level, research by the Institute for Government found that “most policy secondment schemes do not collect basic data or feedback from participants.”<sup>4</sup> A small seam of research is emerging in an attempt to fill this gap with key contributions including the evaluation of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology’s (POST) multi-levelled fellowships scheme,<sup>5</sup> the sophisticated evaluation framework that has tracked the impact of the Academy of Medical Science’s ‘Future Leaders in Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Research’ (FLIER) fellowships,<sup>6</sup> and the 2022 guide for academic institutions hosting policy fellows produced by Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE).<sup>7</sup>

The main aim of this early-stage evaluation is to contribute to this broader body of insight and understanding, in general, and to identify potential improvements to the UKRI Policy Fellows scheme, in particular.

Feedback on the programme was initially gathered by ESRC through online surveys with fellows and hosts in November 2022 and March 2023. Engagement with these surveys was relatively low (nine fellows and two hosts responding to the first survey; five fellows and two hosts responding to the second survey). However, thematic analysis of this data, in combination with a review of the existing literature on the research-policy nexus, provided a useful guide for the design of semi-structured interviews with fellows and hosts. Twenty-five fellows and 28 host staff members from the first cohort were then invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Excluding ten individuals who were on long-term leave or no longer in their positions, and with the addition of two newly generated host contacts, 18 fellows and 11 host staff chose to participate. In total, 29 individuals were included across 28 interviews in February and March 2024.

Prior to the interviews, participants received an information sheet, consent form, and an outline of the interview questions (see appendix 2 on page 50). The video conferencing software Google Meet was used to conduct the interviews, which were auto transcribed, and separately audio recorded. Fellow interviews averaged 45-60 minutes, while host staff interviews lasted around 30 minutes. After the interviews, the automated transcripts were manually cross-referenced with the audio recordings to improve accuracy.

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<sup>3</sup> Cairney, P., Boaz, A., & Oliver, K. (2023). Translating evidence into policy and practice: What do we know already, and what would further research look like? *BMJ Quality & Safety*, 32(5), 251–253. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjqs-2023-015911>

<sup>4</sup> Sasse, T., & Haddon, C. (2019). *How academia can work with government*. Institute for Government.

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/how-academia-can-work-government>

<sup>5</sup> Parry, D. J. (2021). Report to the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology: Understanding the outcomes and impacts from the PhD policy fellowship schemes. University of Southampton.

<https://post.parliament.uk/understanding-the-outcomes-and-impacts-from-phd-policy-fellowship-schemes/>

<sup>6</sup> Aleron Partners and Freshney Consulting. (2022). *Programme Evaluation: Future Leaders in Innovation, Enterprise, and Research (FLIER) Programme*. The Academy of Medical Sciences. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/77477962>

<sup>7</sup> CAPE. (2022). *Hosting Policy Fellows*. CAPE. <https://www.cape.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Hosting-Policy-Fellows-a-guide-for-Higher-Education-Institutions.pdf>



A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was then conducted using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. This systematic approach allowed us to identify key themes and patterns across the participant responses. For the protection of participant confidentiality, all direct quotes within this report have been anonymised and are presented with the express permission of the individual.<sup>8</sup>

In this report we provide an initial review of the kinds of impacts achieved by the pilot phase of the scheme, and the contexts in which these impacts were generated, which could be used to inform a larger and more longitudinal impact evaluation. This is a critical point. Policy fellowships facilitate the development of professional networks and insights that may deliver benefits in the short, medium, and long-term. There is also an element of structured serendipity about fellowships in the sense that opportunities and insights can emerge through indirect and unexpected channels. A full evaluation of the impact of the scheme will therefore require longer-term analysis. With that caveat in place, we considered the early impact of the fellowships at three levels:

1. **Impacts on the fellows.** What new skills, knowledge, connections, or opportunities did participating academics gain from taking part in the fellowship? In what ways did it strengthen their ability to effectively engage with the policymaking process?
2. **Impacts on policy.** What kinds of policy impacts were achieved during the fellowships? What was the nature of these impacts: direct or indirect, formal or informal, immediate or anticipated in the future?
3. **Impacts on the academia-policy ecosystem.** What connections between academia and policy did the fellowships catalyse beyond the fellows themselves? What evidence is there of the scheme contributing to wider knowledge exchange?

Evidence is provided to support early impacts across all three of these levels, and wherever possible this report lets the research ‘talk for itself’ by providing extracts and insights from the semi-structured interviews with policy fellows and representatives of host organisations.

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<sup>8</sup> This research project received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield (Ref. 057381).

## **PART II - SUCCESS AT SEVERAL LEVELS**

# Successes and Benefits

## 1. Impacts on People

Almost without exception, the fellows from the first (i.e. 2021) cohort felt that the experience of spending time and working in a policy environment had been a beneficial professional experience that had achieved its core ambitions in terms of supporting people to be able to navigate the nexus between research and policy (and vice versa). Specific individual-level benefits included:

- Policy-related skills and insight across and within institutions;
- Clearer understanding of the role of research in policy;
- An understanding of enabling mechanisms and the importance of inter-personal relationships;
- An ability to understand political signalling and the significance of timing;
- Experience in framing evidence insights to align with policy needs;
- Insight into translational skills (scientific to policy ‘speak’) and being a ‘knowledge broker’;
- New professional networks beyond academe;
- Increased personal and professional confidence; and
- Research grant success and promotions.

During interviews, many fellows talked about having a completely new level of understanding and insight about the machinery of government and the complexity of the policy process. This allowed them, it was suggested, to understand not only the nuances of getting research insights into policy but also *who* to engage with and talk to about challenges. An awareness of the policy-cycle and how it affected *when* and *how* to present research was also highlighted by several fellows. The main outcome was a far stronger sense of personal efficacy around an ability to engage effectively with policy makers. Although boundary-spanning across and between research and policy is not easy, the majority of fellows highlighted increased personal confidence in their professional abilities as a central benefit of the scheme.

One interesting finding was that several former fellows noted that they had not realised how much research was actually being conducted in government. It was not just a research-to-policy transition that occurred but often a shift from academic research to ‘in-government research’ which was itself then translated into policy-making discussions. Fellows spoke of understanding the role of different ‘players’ in the research-to-policy environment, including consultancies.

An understanding of and commitment to bridge different ‘research worlds’ on the part of several individuals was a central success of the scheme.

What's also clear from the early-stage evaluation is that it is not just the policy fellows who benefitted at an individual level. Interviews with representatives from the host institutions revealed a large number of benefits including:

- Greater awareness within policy teams of specialist studies or data sources;
- Insight into how to structure and categorise different types of problem, or the value of different pieces of information;
- Understanding the non-linearity of policy-making and the importance of high-trust interpersonal relationships;
- The identification of opportunities for hosts themselves to participate in fellowship opportunities that take policy-makers into academe;
- Instruction and training in new methods and approaches; and
- Critical challenge and positive questioning to militate against 'group think'.

Some of the most basic individual-level impacts on hosts were achieved by incredibly simple initiatives. 'Academic Advice Surgeries' or 'Ideas Surgeries' were trialled with great success in several host organisations. These were informal 'drop in' sessions where policy-makers could discuss issues, themes and challenges with fellows and, through this, generate fresh perspectives, identify new data sources or be told about a subject specialist in academia they could contact for support.

*"It definitely gave me a good insight into what a career in the civil service could look like and the fact that actually they do a lot of research. I don't think it's going to necessarily mean leaving research altogether... but even if I stay in Academia [I have] a much better understanding of how to do useful research for policy makers. I know now how to approach them. I know now how to understand their problem. How to frame research in a way that is both academically sound but also useful. Sometimes you see these things as either very theoretical - very academic and very Ivory Tower - or practical but it can be both. This fellowship helped me to understand how to bridge these two visions of research, applied or very theoretical - it can be both. And that was brilliant. So I think the lasting impact is in the way I will frame my work going forward."  
(Fellow01)*

*"[It definitely gave me] that confidence at being able to work across different environments and appreciate how it's possible to work across both spheres to transfer ideas and learn from one to the other. You know academics look for different things. We look for things we can publish, we look for topics that are having enduring value, as opposed to immediate policy returns. But being exposed to real policy issues is absolutely invaluable in informing the types of things and appreciating the topics which might not come across your radar."  
(Fellow03)*

*"I think the research mobilization 'knowledge brokering' - how academics do what we do - that's where I think most of my value was. Is that tangible? Have I got anything to demonstrate that I've done that? Absolutely not. But did it mean that people trusted, came to, and established a reputation [with my policy team] ... that ultimately is the longevity of the departmental science awareness, understanding, that kind of thing, then absolutely. But it wasn't based on that kind of project model."  
(Fellow07)*

*"My understanding of the technicalities of what counts as impact has definitely changed and I've become more precise about what the research council's actually want you to do. And I wouldn't say I'm 100% an expert but I feel like my understanding of that has grown and of course that's really useful for my career. I think understanding how academia affects policy... I suppose I feel like I have a bit more of again a quite intangible, informal understanding of how some of that can work."  
(Fellow18)*

*“Sometimes when we do research in academia we do studies, we write papers, and we wonder if we are just talking to the academic community - is there any kind of external listeners out there who are reading our work? But I’ve been kind of parachuted into the policymaking process [and] it took all of those kind of question marks away of my mind. The work I was doing on a day-to-day basis... I could see how I was practically feeding into positive development, and it gave me a great sense of professional fulfilment too... Being able to have a look back on and think that the work that I completed in those 18 months helped to distribute 400 million pounds worth of public funding towards what I think is a reasonably noble social goal of decarbonizing the transport sector and trying to avoid the worst climate change.” (Fellow06)*

*“One hundred percent! I came out completely different person. In a good way. As a skillset. So the last week when we were within the new cohort and they said ‘What skills do you think you’ve developed?’ and for me it’s the understanding of how I do knowledge brokering, and what that means for me. Not just doing knowledge brokering but really breaking that down to say, ‘But what does that tangibly mean to me?’ ‘How do I engage in that?’ ‘What’s my systems and processes?’ and ‘What works for me in the context that I work within?’” (Fellow07)*

*“[B]ecause I was there and living and breathing their [the policy maker’s] challenges... impact was almost gradual. I developed impact every day, during my fellowship. It’s not something that arrived at the end... Yes, I did achieve direct impact, but less direct and more [through] a set of enabling mechanisms that the scheme provided.” (Fellow01)*

## 2. Impacts on Policy

This is an early-stage evaluation and, as such, it is not possible to offer a full account of the policy impact of the fellows. It can also be very difficult to pin down specific impacts and causal links due to the manner in which the policy fellows very often fed into and contributed to broad discussions at the beginning of a policy review process. That said, there is already substantial evidence that high levels of positive impact on policy have occurred, across a range of dimensions. This ranges from supporting the establishment of new Memorandums of Understanding with foreign governments, contributing to multi-decade environmental planning, through to the work of fellows being cited in Parliament in order to support policy change. Other examples include:

- The creation of new online tools that can be used by every department in Whitehall;
- Supporting the transparency agenda across government to facilitate policy-making;
- Providing data expertise around the social and economic value of major infrastructure investments;
- Contributing to Futures and Foresight analysis through the production of evidence-based recommendations;
- Injecting insight and challenge around clean air policy, and profile raising within and beyond government;
- Utilising inter-disciplinary research to highlight new policy options around reducing food waste; and
- Nurturing the development of new collaborations and partnerships between policy-focused organisations.

The research also suggests other forms of less direct but no less important policy impact. Several hosts talked about how hosting a fellow had affected the culture of policy-making in their team by challenging embedded assumptions and offering critical challenge in a constructive manner, while also encouraging a focus on the broader policy landscape beyond a single department or policy team – a ‘whole policy approach’ as one fellow described it. In this sense the policy fellows appear from the evidence to have very often provided a ‘stretching’ role within their host organisation that was widely welcomed. There is also a clear ‘range’ based dynamic that accrued from the manner in which fellows very often worked across several policy teams, and in some cases even held ‘drop in’ style clinics to provide insights and advice to policy makers from right across their host organisation.

The policy impact of the first cohort fellows is reflected in the way a large number of them are now continuing to work with their policy host organisations, either informally or as members of project teams or advisory networks.

*“The biggest impact I think I’ve ever had was reported to me by a colleague in the [host department] - it was the biggest compliment I’ve ever been paid – they said that after my time there [as a policy fellow] the majority of analytical teams I [had] worked with asked better questions. Which was amazing for me. But that was my career development. It wasn’t something that I managed to mobilize. It was a genuine effect that those conversations had had on what’s going on.”*  
(Fellow02)

*“Actually, the impact doesn't come immediately. It's a long-term thing very, very much so. I mean, there is a lot of critique around academia taking quite a long time to get publications out but the reports that I've written within government are still within the approvals processes, and I finished back in August.”*  
(Fellow17)

*“I definitely feel like I have some impacts but it's of course a relatively sort of intangible process of having small conversations here and there, feeding in on emails, doing the more formal sort of briefings and writing reports or research papers, doing sort of teachings on subjects. I feel like most of the time I've done any of those activities I've got positive responses from people who seem to find it useful and sometimes they've been times where I've seen then that been reflected in the policy work that they've done.”*  
(Fellow18)

*“I had a chance to train that team - three, four people in the team. They needed some training on survey sampling, design essentially. So I developed around 40 slides in a presentation to give a holistic idea about what are the things to consider, along with helping developing the methodology itself. And this has direct policy connotations.... and I heard from a meeting that the wider project work was cited in a parliamentary debate. That was great to know.... although my contribution was on the methodological side.”*  
(Fellow16)

*“Have I had direct impact? I mean my fellowship hasn't finished yet...so it's quite difficult to see the direct impact of my project because I haven't even published a report with recommendations to trace that impact. But a person came from [a government department] to give a presentation and talked about how I had changed the way that he thought about the way that policymakers use evidence. So there are lovely narratives of this kind of softer intangible impact.”*  
(Fellow14)

*“I think as an academic you're whole modus operandi is critical thinking and so I think we sort of naturally bring an element of that just by being there. I suppose it's sort of a freshness of coming in from lectures and dealing with the subject in a very critical way and really trying to challenge students. You can bring a bit of that mindset into the civil service space.”*  
(Fellow18)

*“I think my policy fellowships was very successful with regards to placing research where it's needed. So things like giving people literature reviews, roundtable academic lists, etc. I recall meeting with somebody talking about the homelessness grant. Completely nothing to do with what I was there to officially do but because we were trying to build those relationships and that trust in science, and that trust in social science, particularly, there was a lot of knowledge brokering that went on there.”*  
(Fellow07)

### 3. Impacts on the Ecosystem

The third level of impact assessed in this early-stage evaluation focused on systemic benefits and change – above and beyond any specific individual benefit or contribution to policy. These broader ‘ecosystem effects’ are arguably the hardest to evidence in an audit-style evaluation process but also possibly the most important in terms of structural benefits and investment value. Impacts on the ecosystem are also likely to become more apparent in the medium to long term as cultural changes and evidence of increased mobility become more evident. Nevertheless, clear and evidence-based systemic impacts included:

- Horizontal ‘join-up’, spanning teams, directorates and departments to align policy thinking and share data;
- Upskilling officials in terms of theory, methods and approaches (and very often cultivating long-term ‘two way’ learning);
- Creating positive space for policy-makers to engage in reflective practices about their role and skills;
- Promoting understanding as to the value of academic partnerships and the complementarity of knowledge and value of collaboration;
- Contributing to the creation of new networks and task forces that span several sectors and add policy capacity at an infrastructural level;
- The creation of new placement, secondment and fellowship opportunities to further facilitate the mobility of knowledge and skills;
- Forging new professional relationships that can be sustained and developed in the future;
- Acting as ‘knowledge-brokers’ or ‘boundary-spanners’ to connect academic experts or new areas of highly relevant research; and
- The injection of ‘structured serendipity’ opportunities that very often produced unexpected insights and opportunities.

One the main impacts of the first cohort of policy fellows was simply the infusion of new skills, talents, and perspectives. Across all policy hosts this injection of ‘fresh thinking’ was widely welcomed and seen as an organisational or systemic contribution that should be maintained and built upon. The impact in terms of ‘stretching’ the policy debate and injecting a degree of ‘range’ that looked beyond the immediate needs of a discrete issue or challenge has already been highlighted. A related contribution, however, was simply the injection of an element of time and space in which busy policy-makers could engage in some ‘slow thinking’ about *what* they were doing, *why* and *how* they might develop their professional toolkit. To put the same point slightly differently, the existence of a policy fellow within a policy team created not only a little more practical capacity but it also legitimated an investment of time in engaging with that fellow in ways that had broader impacts on the ecosystem.

Structured serendipity was also a key contribution at the systemic level. Simply bringing people together who would not normally have had the chance to meet in their professional lives very often produced unexpected insights or opportunities, many of which were completely unconnected to a fellow’s main project or role. A fellow based in the Department of Transport, for example, identified that some of their research from a previous project may be of value to a Foreign Office project and was able to develop an advisory role. What is sometimes referred to as ‘making your own luck’ is therefore more accurately referred to as ‘structured serendipity’. World class research-to-policy environments *structure* serendipity by proactively cultivating relationships and experiences that seek to forge new



perspectives and insights. The serendipitous breakthroughs that occur have not ‘simply happened’ but have in fact been encouraged, incentivised and facilitated. This dimension of policy fellow activity and impact demands greater analysis and discussion.

A final impact on the ecosystem that arose out of interviews with fellows and hosts was a contribution to building trust in science. Several fellows highlighted how they went out of their way not simply to present the scientific evidence but to explain how that data had been developed, discuss potential issues or gaps in the knowledge base, etc. Overall, to open-up academe and the science base, just as hosts opened-up the messy realities of policy-making. The skills of ‘translation’ from scientific to policy language and fulfilling the role of a ‘knowledge-broker’ came through as major contributions to the ecosystem.

In many ways the evidence suggests that the first cohort fulfilled the initiative’s core ambition in terms of achieving a ‘diffusion effect’ whereby policy makers gained access to new skills, methods, insights, and academic networks, while the fellows gained experience and insight in a non-academic but research-related environment.

*“I think there are things around what counts as research and evidence and policy [in government] and beginning to push the boundaries around how they conceive and understand those topics. My research methods are quite different from a lot of the researchers that [policy makers] might engage with: I don’t do big surveys. I do very participatory grounded action research and it’s usually with small groups of people and understanding lived experience and valuing that knowledge and more so bringing that more into the policy space. But there’s still resistance to it. Seeing the research and on the ground and how that was going... I think that when people see and understand it.”*  
(Fellow10)

*“The fellows did provide expert advice in particular policy areas in line with the Areas of Research Interest but also in line with their interests - in their areas of expertise. And they certainly helped with the sort of ‘Government-Academia’ collaboration type knowledge exchange... For example, we did advice surgeries which worked really well where [department] colleagues could go to an advice surgery with one of the fellows who provided advice on evaluation, research projects, research design or existing evidence. We got really, really good feedback on that. They also delivered seminars of their research findings outside of the fellowship, but also what they were delivering in the fellowship.”*  
(Host06)

*“There’s working with academic experts and having them be embedded within teams with [government] email accounts, access to the data and the meetings and the conversations the researcher wouldn’t usually be able to attend. I think that has hopefully had the impact of opening up people’s eyes to how we can utilize academic expertise. Now people hopefully will feel less averse to working with academic researchers. Hopefully they can see the benefit of bringing in that outside expertise. So I think there are softer impacts like that.”*  
(Host06)

*“I think for a number of individuals there was – and the fellow as well - I think there was some useful learning around just how to go about engaging with academics and policy makers... bringing them together in terms of the sorts of questions that we need to ask, and what format is helpful to ask things in. We did some work previously which highlighted that quite reasonably large proportion of [policy makers] felt they didn’t really know how to engage with academics. So I think just yet building people’s confidence a bit more on that so that they feel comfortable talking to an academic in future.”*  
(Host07)

*“I think it’d been very successful, to be honest. I thought it worked incredibly well. And I think it worked very well for the fellow as well. We got that benefit of the expertise. I think there’s a general issue across government, where a lot of people working on research in particular areas and policy in particular areas don’t have that built up expertise on that subject area. I think it was hugely valuable for a lot of people to have that external voice that became internal through this process. So I think from that perspective, it worked very well. And I’d like to think, yeah, the knowledge exchange side of it worked well, as well, we were able to engage policy colleagues more directly with research and give external research a more comfortable face.”*  
(Host10)

*“I think some of the bigger impact that I had wasn’t to do with the project itself and the research that I was doing, but in how I built bridges... between academia more broadly, and not just academia, but practice and policy as well... I think that was one of the most impactful things I could have done because a lot of the conversations that go on in the internal research processes within government are within those walls, it’s within government spaces, and they don’t have much opportunity to get out into the ‘real world’ and see what it looks like on the ground. And I think that was really beneficial for them to do that.”* (Fellow17)

## **PART III - NINE KEY INSIGHTS**

## Evidence-Based Insights

The ESRC Policy Fellows initiative was launched in 2021 as a pilot scheme. The aim of this early-stage evaluation is really twofold: first and foremost, to assess whether the investment appears to be fulfilling its high-level ambitions in relation to facilitating effective mobility across the nexus between academic research and policy (which the evidence presented in the previous section suggests it is); and secondly to identify areas for investment improvement and refinement. This section outlines nine evidence-based insights which each in their own ways flow through into actionable recommendations. These are summarised in Table 1 (below).

**Table 1. Evidence Based Insights and Recommendations**

	<b>Insight</b>	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
1	Clear Expectations	<i>Expectations need to be clear, transparent, and aligned with those of the policy host.</i>	Greater support and training for prospective fellows and hosts about expectation management, and different sorts of policy fellow functions.
2	Competing Pressures	<i>Tensions can emerge between the academic emphasis on publications and the hosts' requirements around confidentiality and data security.</i>	Establish clearer expectations around fellows' ability to produce publications as a critical aspect of the fellowships. Work with hosts to understand and navigate potential barriers to publication.
3	Managing Complexity	<i>Policy settings are complex and learning to navigate them takes time.</i>	All fellows to have two key link people to militate against staff churn, establish minimum standards for induction. Consider making the inception phase more time intensive.
4	Boundary-Spanning	<i>Working in a boundary-spanning manner generates significant additional professional and cognitive demands.</i>	Provide guidance to institutions that fellows should be released from all but the most essential academic duties, with teaching a particular priority. Offer the option of full buy-out during the placement phase.
5	Strategic Support	<i>Training, support, and community can enrich the fellowship experience.</i>	Increase opportunities for the cohort of fellows to engage at both a departmental and cross-scheme level. Ensure alignment of schedules between fellowship sub-streams.
6	Co-production & Compromise	<i>Fellowships involved a mixture of collaboration and compromise.</i>	Develop guidance around co-production including examples of successful approaches used in the pilot phase. Case studies should be utilised during host training.
7	Absorptive Capacity	<i>Capacity-building and systems-wide thinking is needed for the policy fellowship scheme to achieve its full potential.</i>	Uplift systemic capacity by promoting research-to-policy and policy-to-research opportunities. Invest in long-term cohort activities. Connect and collaborate across existing fellowship/secondment schemes.
8	Outside & Insider	<i>Being an 'outsider on the inside' creates opportunities as well as frictions.</i>	Greater support and training for prospective fellows and hosts about embedded fellowships or placements. Simple things matter – such as access to information, clarity of role and relationships, internal email address, etc.
9	Entry & Exit	<i>Transitions 'in' and 'out' of the fellowship are important to get right.</i>	Transitional arrangements are critical, and flexibility is key. Simplification of contractual arrangements and the provision of templates is necessary, as are 'exit interviews' to collect knowledge and insight.

# 1. CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Expectations need to be clear, transparent, and aligned with those of the policy host

Interviews with fellows and host staff involved in the scheme suggest a diversity of expectations around the primary aim of the fellowships. In some of the settings, the aim of ‘providing research and expert advice on the hosts policy priority areas’ had been interpreted as the fulfilment of a distinct research project or projects over the course of the fellowship. In others, it had been interpreted as getting involved in a range of research activities, essentially working as a civil service analyst. Other fellowships included a mixture of both, although some expressed uncertainty about the correct balance between these – should the fellow’s time be ‘protected’ or should they make the most of the experience by immersing themselves in the work of the department?

The extent to which the fellows were expected to ‘support wider knowledge exchange between government and academia’ varied. While many fellows reported some kind of knowledge exchange activity (such as organising roundtables and facilitating connections with external academics), a number of hosts expressed that they had not anticipated wider ecosystem building to be an outcome of the fellowships. On the other hand, a small number of the fellows had understood a core goal of the scheme to be about building networks between policy and academia and enabling knowledge mobilisation. This lack of clarity meant that expectations between hosts and fellows were at times misaligned, causing frictions. In a few settings, unclear expectations were also raised in relation to the position of the fellow within the team, in particular how they should be line managed and the extent to which hosts could shape their work.

*“I’d read the bid as a brokerage role. Whereas I think the way it had been pitched within government was, ‘Tell us a topic you want some research done on and we’ll provide some deep expertise on this area and write you a report.’”*  
(Fellow02)

*“I think I generated and tested the knowledge ecosystem that I set out to do. And the majority of people I worked with really valued that and thought it was really interesting, I think. I’ve got some really nice comments back, some really nice review materials. But my line manager, I think, left with a disappointed air because I haven’t delivered a report for this topic area.”*  
(Fellow02)

*“The downside of that is I didn’t actually deep-dive into anything. But I don’t think a policy fellowships should... I think we should be understanding the context and adding as much value as we can in kind of golden threads across the board.”*  
(Fellow07)

*“I do think there was some areas where the team saw me as doing my project and didn’t necessarily call on me to help on areas where they could have done. So they didn’t necessarily utilize me. I think again that was them trying to make sure they didn’t encroach too much and call on me too much.”*  
(Fellow10)

*“I had loads of meetings at the beginning, which for my career has been very good because I met a lot of people. But practical work I didn't really do anything for a few months in terms of data science, which is what I'm meant to be good at.”*

*(Fellow09)*

*“I think there's still a little way to go in terms of, on both sides, being clearer on expectations, ways of working, better oversight of what the fellows are doing.”*

*(Host06)*

*“One aspect I need to make sure is that the publications are coming out so that there will be the kind of academic outputs that are expected. That took a bit longer in part because I wanted to make most of it, understand as many things as possible. So I was involved in different activities that the civil servants would normally do and that took time away. Of course, I very much read that as an objective of the fellowship; the more I immerse myself into these things the richer the experience. I'm not sure to which extent that is appreciated by the universities, but they were certainly important to me.”*

*(Fellow04)*

## 2. COMPETING PRESSURES

Tensions can emerge between the academic emphasis on publication and the hosts' requirements around confidentiality and data security

One area where lack of clarity and misalignment of expectations was particularly pronounced was around publication. Publications are a major aspect of the recognition and reward systems in academia. For many fellows (although not all) being able to produce publications out of their time on the fellowship was critical, both as a key metric against which their career progress would be assessed and in relation to demonstrating the scientific and public value of the investment. However, the need to publish was often at odds with civil service priorities of security, confidentiality, and political neutrality. More broadly, these security concerns could create barriers which slowed the progress of fellows' work, including aspects like gaining clearances, navigating data sharing, collaborating with external contacts, and physical access to buildings.

Successfully navigating the question of publication seems to have worked best where expectations were clear from the outset and hosts had considered, in advance, how dissemination could be achieved. While not a universal experience, for a number of fellows a lack of citable outputs and continued uncertainties around the potential for academic publications arising out of the fellowships was a significant cause of concern. Some worried that the fellowship represented a 'CV blank' in which they had not been able to tick the boxes required for academic promotion. In a number of the interviews, impact case studies were discussed as an alternative way of deriving an output from the fellowships that is valued by academic institutions. At the same time, the often indirect and intangible nature of policy impact meant that these could not always be counted upon.

*"There have been some slightly stickier issues around expectations around publication and data sharing... because [the fellow] didn't finish their analysis before they left we're now having to put data sharing agreement in place... I'm still a bit nervous about even when the data sharing agreement is put in place what it means for how we're publishing this. Does it go on GOV.UK or is it an academic journal? ...I think the grant agreement sets this out at a high level, but there are details that are potentially not as clear."*  
(Host06)

*"I think if you're going to try and attract academics, you need to be you need to tell them actually, you will get citeable resources out of this. Because as it stands, I don't have anything externally citable at the moment..."*  
(Fellow13)

*"They were very supportive of publications. They understand the need to do this. I am working with confidential data. So it isn't yet fully clear what kind of approvals [will be needed]."*  
(Fellow04)

*"There was a more traditional academic impact in the sense of a journal article output from [the fellowship]. I think this is where the challenge comes, in bridging the gap, is that in some of the projects that they were involved in the impact could only ever stay internal... I had that in mind from the start as being a potential negative for the policy fellows, so that's why we carved out that opportunity."*  
(Host10)

*"It's really hard to collaborate because [host] was always very guarded and quite risk averse. So it was like they don't want you to share information with outsiders and so on... it's just sort of sensitivity, an awareness - don't say anything wrong which might snowball into some big political scandal."*  
(Fellow08)

*"We did set up a Steering Group that involved a couple of senior academics from [institution] that I worked with and [host] people, but I think again there was slight hesitancy sometimes that it wouldn't necessarily always be appropriate for the external academics to come to some of these meetings."*  
(Fellow12)

*"... verbally, it's acknowledged as being a very good thing, and in that sense, it has opened doors. I've met new people and different people within the university are really interested about it. But what we lack is the recognition of what this work is within our processes. It is all very well that its said, oh, yeah, it's fantastic that you did that, but actually I've had 18 months with no publications, which, on paper and within our processes, is problematic. And so in that sense, it's seen within the process world in academia as being a pause in my career, actually."*  
(Fellow17)



### 3. MANAGING COMPLEXITY

#### Policy settings are complex and learning to navigate them takes time

Across the interviews, a number of comments highlighted the scale, complexity, and shifting nature of the civil service (and wider public governance systems) as a key contextual factor affecting the experience of fellows. This transition to a completely new kind of organisation represented a ‘steep learning curve’ for some, as they learned to navigate unfamiliar structures, bureaucracy, and accepted ways of working. Some fellows commented that they never fully ‘got to grips’ with the workings of their department, and perhaps to an extent this is unavoidable, but the interviews also suggest a need to review the quality and content of induction processes. The culture shock that might be expected from moving from an academic to policy context was not experienced by all fellows, and this may be due to how commonly fellows were based within a team of analysts (i.e. researchers, often with a background in academia). In other fellowships, issues arose in relation to fellows going outside of the standard protocols in order to progress a project. Basic questions often seemed to lack clear answers, such as ‘Who is positioned internally as ‘the client?’’, ‘Which team talks to which team and in what order?’ Here, hosts commented on lessons learned around the importance of making more explicit ways of working that may in the past have been implicit.

A few of the fellowships were impacted by high levels of staff turnover within the host organisation. Changes to a fellow’s key point of contact, when not well managed, could leave them feeling disconnected and slow down the progress of the work. This churn could be both individual in nature (a line manager leaving) and structural (a policy priority moving on and a team being dismantled). Some fellow’s expressed the feeling that regular staff churn meant understanding of *who* they were and *what* they were there to do became lost and demanded significant work on their part to re-establish and maintain. Lack of institutional memory as a feature of the civil service at times impacted the progress of fellows’ work, and for some caused them to question the likelihood that the projects would continue to have impact after the fellowships ended. In a few cases, changes to a fellow’s direct contacts lead to misaligned expectations about the aims and objectives of the work which lead to frustration.

*“The upheaval of such a tumultuous time I think was a gift for me. I mean, to see the amount of prime minister’s we had. The effect that was on the department. How many secretaries of State we had, what that impacted on in the working relationships, on the policy directions. I mean, the machinery of government, to see that. If I could choose it, I wouldn’t have had my policy fellowship at any other time.”*  
(Fellow07)

*“So the specification was developed by one person who then left. By the time the fellow arrived they were being managed by another person who then went on long-term leave. They were then managed by a third person who didn’t really get who this person was, why they’d come in, and weren’t bought-into the piece of work they were doing because they didn’t create it. It meant for that one we really didn’t make the most of it, through that situation that was quite hard to control for.”*  
(Host03)

*“It took me quite a while to sort of understand who’s who, how does it work. I mean, I’m not even sure if I completely got it until the very end to be honest. There were a lot of changes as well that complicated things.”*  
(Fellow08)

*“Yeah, it’s not a great institutional memory. People move on from team to team and then somebody who takes over and of course it needs to be all there...it’s a bit ironic then that it’s so difficult to find things. So, I mean you need to somehow know how to do it, but this is quite a protocol... The research, which took a lot of time, that was the easy thing because I knew exactly what I was doing.”*  
(Fellow08)

*“We had quite a high turnover in our hosts... the manager changed the week before I started the inception phase...so we had the new manager, obviously he had to get started, so for the first month of the inception phase, we effectively didn't really do anything... So they changed twice in the first few months and then the third person we had, she was great, but I think she was quite junior, quite new to the team. So she had less of a broader perspective of the knowledge of the what the priorities were.”*  
(Fellow09)

*“So I think it was just a bit of naivety and not making the implicit explicit. I don't think we explicitly said you need to do these steps, but we were just assuming things would go along the normal for us path of how a project would run. So we should have probably said, do  $x \propto y \propto z$  for the reasons outlined. It probably is just that implicit/explicit ways of working thing that again this time we're much more on top of.”*  
(Host03)

## 4. BOUNDARY-SPANNING

### Working in a boundary-spanning manner generates significant additional professional and cognitive demands

The tendency for two part-time roles to add up to a greater workload than one full-time role was discussed by a number of the fellows. Across those interviewed, buy-out during the placement phase ranged from 0.6 to 1 FTE. For many, there was an inherent additional mental load associated with keeping one foot in academia, which generally required handling two email inboxes, two calendars, two laptops, and managing relationships with two sets of colleagues. For some fellows, this included navigating both institutional and civil service ethics review processes. Most fellows had some ongoing commitments to their home academic institution, such as supervision and marking, even where they were completely bought-out. While it was uncommon to have teaching responsibilities during the placement phase, a small number of fellows were expected to teach, and this created additional pressures. In some cases, the timing of the fellowships exacerbated this, for example starting part way through an academic year when teaching loads had already been allocated.

Those who had been released from all or most academic duties, in particular teaching, seemed to have the best experience. However, even where this was the case, some fellows discussed commitments outside of their institution that required continued work during the fellowships, such as external research contracts and publication revisions. An extra element of the academia-policy juggle for a number of fellows stemmed out of the precarious nature of employment for early career researchers. Short, fixed-term contracts meant that some academics entered into the fellowship knowing they had to secure a new contract before it ended, or be jobless, which was both a source of anxiety and significant additional work.

*“I think it was valuable to be bought out of teaching, I think that gave me breathing space. Even though the university wasn't necessarily very good at respecting the buy-out. We all know that you could constantly get asked to do extra things... being a woman and a woman who's not very good at saying no, maybe I took on things I shouldn't have taken on having been bought out... I think maybe it being full time would have been better, because then you can simply say no to everything, because you're bought-out full stop. There's no wiggle room.”*  
(Fellow13)

*“In my case I was always anxious when the fellowship was ending because I didn't have a job at the end of it, which meant that I needed to be looking for something.”*  
(Fellow15)

*“I'm supposed to be online, doing meetings etc for four days a week. But then to prepare a course for teaching really requires more than one day a week, especially if you're frontloading most of the work before the term starts. And again my colleagues in the research analyst team have been really supportive; when I've needed to rebalance time they've accommodated that. But it's definitely the most difficult thing about the fellowship, I think, just juggling those academic demands. And the student deadlines are very hard, those no real flexibility...”*  
(Fellow18)

*“I would say 80 plus 20 didn't equal 100...120 or 125% maybe because you have to manage two email addresses, two sets of colleagues are contacting you, two calendars...”*  
(Fellow06)

## 5. STRATEGIC SUPPORT

### Training, support, and community can enrich the fellowship experience

During the first cohort the Institute for Government (IfG) was commissioned to provide a training and development network that would offer the fellows a form of collective support. Feedback on the training and development activities was generally very positive. Fellows found the trainers to be highly engaging and discussed the value of the training for giving them insight into the wider context of the UK government. Some directly applied the awareness and advice they had gained, for example by giving oral evidence to a select committee for the first time. Suggestions for improving training included: featuring insights from past policy fellows (e.g. from other schemes); reducing content that is likely to be repetitive or redundant (e.g. about ‘getting in’); ensuring that all streams (ESRC, AHRC, ADR UK Data Science) are able to participate fully (e.g. aligned timelines, adequate notice about events). A common theme in the feedback on support and training was that fellows would have found it useful to have more interaction with the wider cohort facilitated during the fellowships, with suggestions here including more time to network and opportunities to work collaboratively (i.e. less ‘training’ and more informal ‘development’ opportunities). Some fellows spoke about forming ‘local’ cohorts with the other fellows based within their hosts which were a source of community; one of these local cohorts published a co-authored working paper.

The interviews included a number of positive examples of academics and hosts feeling that the fellows were well embedded within the department. Factors that contributed to a sense of embeddedness included having a civil service email address, being added to email circulation lists, being involved in the day-to-day work of the team, and having a designated line manager with the capacity for regular check-ins and meaningful involvement in the fellow’s project. More broadly, a number of fellows commented on finding the work culture of their host environment to be supportive, collaborative, collegial, and encouraging of a healthy work-life balance. A small number of fellows expressed feeling a lack of integration, and contributing factors here included not being allocated an official email address, working remotely, and periods of irregular contact and inconsistent line management linked to staff turnover. Views were mixed on the effect of hybrid/remote working on fellows’ level of embeddedness. Some found it hugely beneficial to be able to work on-site regularly, others felt that working remotely had no negative effects on their integration. Certainly, the ‘new normal’ of hybrid working in the civil service enabled a number of fellows to participate who would have otherwise been excluded, due to factors such as geography and caring responsibilities. Overall, comments suggest that different models of hybrid and remote working can work well but adequate host capacity and commitment is a critical element.

*“[A] benefit that I didn't expect was that we built our small cohort with the other policy fellows in [host department]... we had our online coffee meetings every month and we also worked on a working paper at the end. So that was really good that we had this own little community...that was really a bit of a lifesaver as well to get the experience of other policy fellows and especially policy fellows in the same organisation.”*  
(Fellow08)

*“One thing that I know that worked well for us is that there were two people in the team... we were both sort of able to understand what the fellow was doing and also had the time to guide and help him and point him towards the different opportunities that might be helpful... thinking about who manages the fellow, that's quite an important aspect.”*  
(Host05)

*"It was lovely to go down the IfG and have coffee with people and hear about how government is set up. But then you go back to your ordinary job again... if the cohort were doing work together as opposed to just training or experience together that would have made a fundamental difference."*  
(Fellow02)

*"I'd say an enabler was that and the fellows were embedded. They had a home in the [team], they weren't floating. They had a line manager. Also if they couldn't get what they needed from their line manager they could come to me. They came to team meetings. We got really good feedback that they really felt part of [the team] and really part of [the unit]."*  
(Host 06)

*"[I]'s quite a new team, very busy, very good. I really liked getting to know them. But I wouldn't say I was embedded with them. Particularly because of the turnover, for some time we would go weeks and weeks and even months without really talking with them."*  
(Fellow09)

*"By the end of it, I think some policy colleagues wouldn't have even been aware that the fellow wasn't a regular [department] member of staff. I don't think we ever faced any issues with trust, even with external stakeholders as well".*  
(Host10)

*"I think just having more space. It was difficult because it was post-pandemic, and getting people together was often kind of problematic, a lot of these things were on Teams. But just having a space where there wasn't anything structured, necessarily, but where we brought the fellows together in an environment where we were just by ourselves, with no other ears in the room, if you like, whether that's ESRC, or the Institute for Government, or anyone else, to have honest conversations with each other, and share our experiences as we went along, I think would have been really, really helpful."*  
(Fellow17)

## 6. CO-PRODUCTION AND COMPROMISE

### Fellowships involve a mixture of collaboration and compromise

Feedback from fellows and hosts indicate that, on the whole, fellowships involved a high level of collaborative working. Where fellowships were focused around a discrete research project or projects, participants generally felt that these had been developed in a co-produced manner. There were some cases of collaborative projects coming about in a serendipitous way, through fellows being ‘in the room’ (i.e. being included in informal meetings or networks which involved a range of perspectives). There was no ‘one size fits all’ approach - different ways of ‘doing’ coproduction worked in different fellowships - but most commonly the approach taken was some variation of a back and forth between fellow and host. This tended to start with the host identifying a range of policy-relevant projects the fellow could potentially work on and the fellow then narrowing this down in line with their own research interests and expertise. In a minority of fellowships, the projects were more predefined by hosts leaving less scope for co-production.

While the openness and flexibility built into the design of the scheme was generally welcomed by hosts and fellows, some interviews highlighted the need for this to be supported by ongoing communication, clear expectations, and sufficient host capacity to identify potential projects and work with the fellow to develop these. In a small number of cases, tensions arose in negotiating the balance of co-production and the pull between fellows’ and hosts’ priorities. Beyond this, a few hosts described needing to compromise on the anticipated expertise or academic background of their fellow in order to be able to recruit from available applicants. There were mixed feelings about the effect of this, with some seeing it as beneficial to bring a different perspective to the team and others finding it more of a ‘compromise than an opportunity’ which may have made the fellowship less useful.

*“The credit has to go to my host organization. They were brilliant. They were really open to my approaches my ideas and they were providing feedback, constructive challenge. So it wasn't just me providing research and them just saying yes, we can do that, or not. It was a truly collaborative approach and that was very refreshing.”*  
(Fellow01)

*“The people I work with said, this is the fellowship, we advertised it for this reason and the main questions that we really would like to understand are one, two, three, how could one address those? I picked one... and then it was left to me. It was quite a broad question... I suggested three projects that might contribute to answering this question and they said, okay very good, project one is the one we want. And then basically, it went like that. We narrowed it down step by step.”*  
(Fellow04)

*“There was definitely an element of co-production in identifying the projects for me. It was never the case of me just telling them what I want to work on or them just telling me this is what needs to get done. So it was always either I'd come up with an idea and run it past them to see if that would be feasible or they would have a requirement and run it past me to see if I'd be interested to do that. And in the end the two main things that I worked on, one kind of originated from them [and] one kind of originated from me. So it was a good balance that way.”*  
(Fellow15)

*“I'm really glad in hindsight that I took my time with that [initial] phase because, how I see it, it wasn't me going in with a research project planned that was grounded in what I wanted to do as an academic. It was about going in understanding the different policy questions that were being asked and then trying to develop a project that would speak to those questions in a way that drew on my experience.”*  
(Fellow17)

*“I can't remember what the guidance was about how clear we should have been and how much you're mentally open. Because obviously, the more prescriptive you are, the fewer people that you'll get applying and the less you might have these kind of happy accidents where you actually get something that's a much better fit. But I don't think we thought, this is great that actually we haven't really considered this. It felt more like a compromise than a kind of opportunity had presented itself.”*  
(Host08)

*“We put in the person specification the type of person that we wanted and then throughout the process of bringing them in we then match-made them to specific teams that had projects available at that time... the benefits of that meant that there's a high degree of intellectual co-creation that the fellows were able to have into their own work programme, rather than you're coming in and you're doing x y z.”*  
(Host03)

## 7. ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY

Capacity-building and systems-wide thinking is needed for the policy fellowship scheme to achieve its full potential

Drawing upon a model of research-policy engagement as knowledge *exchange*, rather than as a linear knowledge *transfer*, highlights the two-way nature of initiatives like the fellowship scheme. While many of the interviews provided examples collaboration and co-production, some comments reinforced the critical importance of hosts having the right capacity and systems in place to fully utilise the fellow. This could be summarised as impacting at three different stages:

- *Before* the fellowship, host capacity to prepare for the incoming fellow and identify policy-relevant projects that have the potential for impact;
- *During* the fellowship, host capacity to collaborate with, support, and integrate the fellow; and
- *After* the fellowship, host capacity to apply, maintain, develop and complete what the fellows had produced.

Related to this, some fellows and hosts voiced reservations about the likelihood of lasting impact from the fellowships because of a tendency to influence individuals, rather than systems. More thought is needed about how the work of the fellows can be embedded into systems and processes to have enduring effects; just as it is required into how policy fellows can disseminate and share their insights and learning to upskill the broader research community.

*“I think it's an ethics thing... being clear on the potential impacts, that's the ethical side, but also with what happens with the research now. Because obviously, I want it to have an impact, not just because that might be good for me in one way or another, but because the impact comes from those participants, if you like. I want them to have an impact as well. So if this ends up being a project that gets written up and not published and sits on a shelf and doesn't have any impact at all that for me is a bit of an ethical issue in that people give up their time to part of it.”*  
(Fellow17)

*“A classic challenge with all this stuff is how you then take that individual knowledge and experience and actually embed it within an organization and help change the kind of culture of it. Not least because in the civil service, people move departments and teams quite a lot. So you could have a lot of people who are quite comfortable working with academia today and then in two years a lot of them might have moved on.”*  
(Host07)

*“The difficulty with government is always, how do we deploy all of this? So if it is sitting in a document, or even if it's sitting in a framework that has been developed... it's only as good as our continuing engagement with the political teams to keep feeding those insights into the policy process... and unless their work has been fully embedded, in a way that is part of the ongoing process of the policy teams, and they wouldn't dream of doing things in a different way anymore, it then requires somebody's efforts to keep doing that reminding. It doesn't mean that the effort is wasted by any means, because we're taking steps towards that right direction, but it just means that we have to have that resource.”*  
(Host09)



*“So because we didn't go in with the project that was predefined, it was quite difficult to come up with projects... the team I was working with in [department] was extremely busy... perfectly understandably, they had limited capacity to deal with finding a project that I could work on for the next 10-12 months or so.”*  
(Fellow09)

*“If I were in the same position again, I think I would probably be a bit more involved in the early stages of setting the parameters of the work. I sort of did some of that but I also stood back a little bit from it to help give the fellow the opportunity to see where they felt they could add value based on their experience. Which I think is an important part of it, but I think it needs to be coupled with slightly more input in terms of yes, but how would that be used, and how do we show it as being essential rather than, ‘nice to have but when push comes to shove we’re all busy and people sometimes can't quite engage to the extent needed’?”*  
(Host07)

## 8. OUTSIDER/INSIDER

### Being an ‘outsider on the inside’ creates opportunities as well as frictions

Interviews suggest that the placement-based design of the fellowships, which situated academics within policy host settings, bought a range of benefits (as outlined in Part II, above). These included serendipitous encounters, where being ‘in the room’ enabled the fellow to hear about an issue or make a connection. Being internal also facilitated a completely different level of access compared to that of an academic trying to work with government departments from the outside. On a basic but important level, having a ‘gov.uk’ email address was felt to open doors, both within the civil service and externally. From a professional development perspective, several fellows commented the benefits of an insider-perspective for gaining insight into the policy-making process. There was also a sense that the fellows’ independence enabled a greater degree of criticality, challenge, and reflection which hosts found useful.

At the same time, the unusual position of the fellow as an outsider on the inside could create frictions. One aspect of this was uncertainty around the status of the fellow within the department and the extent to which hosts could intervene in the fellow’s work day-to-day.

On one level, this was about the research project itself and ensuring an outcome that was useful from the hosts’ perspective. On another level, it related to ways that the fellow was going about their work and ensuring these met with prescribed ways of doing things in the civil service to avoid ‘stepping on toes’ (e.g. following the correct lines of sign-off). In many cases, this scheme was the host’s first experience of having a fellow or secondee in place, and some finer details about how to approach line management needed to be ironed out. Finally, questions remained for some hosts about the life of the work once the fellow was again an outsider, and how the fellow would navigate ongoing use of data and publications.

*“If you’re asking people to be interviewed, like I did because I was doing interviews for my research, through a government email address - phew! All doors open. It’s much easier because people notice you, they just say yes. So having that was a huge asset.”*  
(Fellow01)

*“I think the independence as well that I mentioned earlier. I think people react differently if they know that this is somebody who’s being brought in for the specific purpose from a university who’s got this kind of rigorous approach and is inviting you to be part of this piece of research that will benefit the government more widely... I think that meant that people sat up and took more notice of this... And I think it also meant [the fellow] could have probably frank discussions with people that people didn’t feel they couldn’t express themselves.”*  
(Host02)

*“I’d say [the fellow] kind of got very involved in the general work of the team and kind of came to our team meetings and said in a lot of kind of [their] thoughts about the kind of the ways that we were working in general. So it was very helpful having that kind of external voice who came from outside government and could actually provide some of that challenge... So that was effective and I think kind of helped us to reflect on whether we were kind of doing the maximum that we could.”*  
(Host08)

*“I think the other thing that has helpful is having somebody who's a little bit from the outside and I think then able to be perhaps a bit more critical. Part of a research analyst role is a challenge function, so this tends to be very accepted and relatively welcome by policy colleagues. But I think probably not needing to have long-term relationships in the institution frees you up a little bit to challenge...and probably a little bit happier to be perhaps a little bit stronger about it.”*  
(Fellow18)

*“I mean obviously academics that haven't had any experience of the civil service won't know the processes that we have to go through the hoops and the red tape sometimes that we have. So, it takes a little while to set those ways of working, those expectations. But equally, civil servants, because it was a new model, may not necessarily know the best way to manage an academic. Sometimes I don't know if they kind of knew how much they could... Whether they could tell them what to do or not. Where do the boundaries lie in terms of letting them get on with what they want to do versus trying to actually shape and manage them?”*  
(Host06)

## 9. ENTRY AND EXIT

### Transitions ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the fellowship are important to get right

One area where interviewees – both fellows and hosts - highlighted an opportunity for improving the experience of the scheme was the beginning and end of the fellowships. A number of participants raised the process for agreeing contracts for the fellowship as a frustration, in particular the complexity of these and time they involved. At the same time, there was a general sense that at least some of this difficulty was attributable to the pilot nature of the scheme with an expectation that it would improve in future years. Similarly, within hosts, bringing in an external fellow in a R2P model was generally a new initiative and a lack of pre-existing ‘tried and tested’ structures created delays (again, something that is now expected to improve). There were mixed views on whether having a one day a week inception phase was useful, with some feeling it would have been better for fellows to ‘jump straight in’ to a full-time placement. Some hosts felt that they would be able to utilise the inception phase more effectively in future fellowship schemes, as they would now be better prepared for the timings involved (e.g. in organising a laptop, security clearances, etc).

At the end of the fellowships, a number of fellows described experiencing a ‘cliff-edge’ of access. Losing access to civil service systems overnight in some cases created significant issues with finishing work. Interviews suggest that the matter of how fellows will continue to access data once they were outside of the organisation, not only to complete projects but also to produce academic publications over a longer timeframe, is an important aspect of transitions *out of* the fellowships that needs further attention. In several of the fellowships that were framed around a discrete research project, these were not completed within the original time frame and had been granted non-cost extensions. Feedback on the process of extending was generally positive, although some hosts suggested that the process could be made more straightforward and that it would be beneficial to build greater flexibility into the fellowships to reflect the difficulty of predicting precise timeframes for a project that is not predefined at the outset but that will be co-designed *within* the fellowship. A few hosts expressed frustration with how long projects were taking to complete and felt greater steer was needed from ESRC about what should happen in these situations.

Returning to their institutions, the majority of the fellows interviewed felt that their fellowship experience had been valued and was being utilised, such as being involved in developing impact case studies, helping other staff with policy fellowship applications, and providing advice on working with government. Others were disappointed, though typically not surprised, that the insights and skills they had gained did not seem to be understood or recognised by their university. For a small number of fellows, the transition back into academia was a particularly negative experience in which they felt penalised for taking up the opportunity.

*“My home institution was great. They kind of left me to it, trusted that I was cracking on and didn't really worry too much about what I was doing. They were very interested and curious. You know a little bit like wow, can you tell us what the hell that is, because we don't know. So I was a bit of a curiosity and that's continued. They are interested in what I've done and want to learn from it.”*  
(Fellow07)

*“There's been a lot of things, so my chancellor when he's speaking in things like our policy engagement network across the university, he will highlight the work that I've done here, he'll encourage people to come and approach me to ask questions about working with government. The university has tasked me with kind of specific people that they want me to develop and pass on my skillsets and help navigate so they really have been, 'you, your different, let's literally drain you for everything that we can' but in a nice way, a beneficial way for other people.”*  
(Fellow07)

*“People were really supportive of it when I wanted to apply... and I think since doing it, people refer to it quite a bit. It's the sort of thing that people say actually like [fellow] did a fellowship or [fellow] used to be at [government department]. So I think it definitely wasn't just seen as I've gone away for a year and nobody knows what I'm up to.”*  
(Fellow12)

*“When you finish the fellowship, you are more tired than people think you are. It was intense. I mean, I loved it, and as I said it was the best thing, but every day bloody hard... it's draining to change environment so drastically, going in and out, and I don't think people appreciate that. So they think that you're coming back from a nice holiday. And that's not true. So they think that you're ready to push, to start again in seventh gear, and I really wasn't.”*  
(Fellow01)

*“Maybe clearer expectations also on universities on the fact that once this finishes we can't be penalized for having done something of this calibre. It should be... a positive thing, not a problem.”*  
(Fellow01)

*“We've got another fellowship - it's not another UKRI, it's from another partnership - but the fellow is nearly a year late in delivering what they said they would... what do we do with that? Do we just continue to let them stay on until they've delivered it or do we cut the fellowship short?”*  
(Host06)

*“The issue was around bringing [fellow] into the government because it was something that we haven't done before. All of these agreements needed to be reviewed by lawyers internally in government, contract lawyers, employment lawyers. And that was quite difficult because the proposals didn't really align to existing frameworks that we had in government... So I think now that we've got essentially an agreement that works, I think that will make things much smoother.”*  
(Host02)

## **PART IV - CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

## Conclusions and Final Reflections

As the Executive Summary and main contents of this report underlines, the ESRC Public Policy Fellows initiative has succeeded in its core aim of facilitating mobility across the nexus between research and policy. In doing so it has supported wider knowledge exchange between government and academia, at several institutional levels, while also establishing positive boundary-spanning relationships that will be of huge value long after the formal fellowship has been completed. The ESRC should be congratulated (notably James Canton and members of the Public Policy and Engagement Team) for piloting this initiative and taking it beyond the ‘proof of concept’ stage so smoothly. The expansion and uplift of the Policy Fellows scheme for the second cohort is indicative of the positive value of the investment that was widely recognised by both fellows and hosts. This is why this report has largely let the ‘evidence speak for itself’ through the inclusion of interview evidence and insights.

*This was the best thing I've ever done professionally. No doubt about it. (Fellow01)*

*I came out a completely different person. In a good way. (Fellow07)*

*I think ESRC is a very good organization to work with... I think that the minister was really pleased as well with the work. Bringing in that kind of academic perspective on what we're doing shows that we're evaluating what we're doing all the time. (Host02)*

*I think the work that they [the fellow] did is highly valued. The experience of encountering them and working with them, highly valued by both policy and research colleagues... a hugely valuable scheme from our perspective. (Host10)*

The aim of conducting this early-stage evaluation of the first cohort was to generate an evidence base that would highlight opportunities for further changes or refinements to the scheme. Although Table 1 above (final column) makes a number of recommendations it is important to recognise that aspects of the fellowship scheme have already been changed for the second post-2023 cohort. The key changes are: (i) in order to ensure tighter alignment and clarity of expectations between fellows and hosts the recruitment process was altered to include a formal host interview after the initial review of applications by the ESRC; (ii) whereas hosts were expected to contribute 50% of the fellow’s costs for the first cohort this was changed for the second cohort with UKRI providing full funding; and (iii) the training element of the fellowship was expanded to include a mentoring element, although access was limited to around a quarter of the fellows in the second cohort.

The general conclusions of this early-stage evaluation are therefore extremely positive and the aim of this final fourth section of this report is to offer some final reflections very briefly. More specifically the remainder of this report reflects upon: (i) the specific value and contribution of the social sciences; (ii) on the need to progress to different sized STEPs; (iii) on medium and long-term evaluation frameworks; (iv) on the importance of the cohort effect; (v) on the importance of expansive thinking; and (vi) how to cope with an increasingly fragmented fellowship/secondment landscape.

## 1. Social Science Specifics

The Policy Fellowships initiative has been expanded beyond its original disciplinary range, as recognised in the redesignation of ‘ESRC Policy Fellows’ to ‘UKRI Policy Fellows’. Although this is a positive development the broader long-term implication may well be that if more research councils join the scheme without a concomitant increase in the scale of the investment the spread of policy fellowships across the full scientific spectrum will become increasingly thin. The risk being that the capacity of the social sciences to add a distinctive and crucial dynamic to policy-related discussions will be diluted in a manner that adds to broader funding patterns. As James Wilsdon and his colleagues note in their *Reimagining the Recipe for Research and Innovation* report of May 2024:

“[A] striking feature of recent initiatives and announcements is the visible priority they place on new technologies and STEM-related R&I, and the limited amount that they say about the role and contribution of the social sciences. In some technology fields, there are sound reasons for this targeted focus, but UK R&I policy and strategy is now at risk of becoming lopsided and missing an equivalently rich, textured and ambitious agenda for the many ways social science research and expertise contribute to addressing the UK’s economic, social and environmental priorities.”<sup>9</sup>

The report goes on to highlight four specific ways in which the social sciences add a distinctive ingredient to discussions at the nexus between research and policy. First, social science is said to enable and facilitate whole-systems thinking (including economies, productivity, institutions, skills, training and cultures) as well as playing a role in understanding and improving the R&I system itself. Secondly, the social sciences play disproportionately significant role in policy development, especially through the injection of critical or connective thinking. The third reason the social sciences offer a distinctive value is due to the way the social sciences can be viewed as offering the foundational knowledge which is likely to maximise the value of developments in STEM or broader innovation policy. Societal challenges very often depend not simply on the creation of new vaccines, medicines or technology, for example, but also on an understanding of the role of culture, history and social values on the likely public utilisation of scientific breakthroughs. ‘Upstreaming’ policy interventions through positive behavioural change – addressing the root issue rather than the ‘downstream’ symptoms of a societal challenge – can very often be the most effective response but this places a premium on social understanding and therefore social science. This explains why Wilsdon’s fourth point about the specific value of the social sciences highlights the international significance in terms of forging connective and catalysing capacities at the international level.

What’s interesting is that this early-stage evaluation of the first cohort – largely a social sciences cohort – resonates with Wilsdon’s arguments about ‘the secret sauce of social science’. This came out very clearly in relation to host comments about the manner in which policy fellows injected a degree of positive challenge into discussions, and also offered a wider degree of ‘range’ than would normally have occurred. The simple argument of this sub-section is therefore that there is a need to promote and protect the specific value and contribution of the social sciences as the Policy Fellows initiative develops.

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<sup>9</sup> Wilsdon, J., Weber-Boer, K., Wastl, J. and Bridges, E. (2023). *Reimagining the recipe for research and innovation: the secret sauce of social science*. London. Sage/Academy of Social Sciences. <https://acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads//Reimagining-the-recipe-for-research-and-innovation.pdf>



## 2. *Different sized STEPs*

The Policy Fellows initiative is essentially a graded STEP-based opportunity (i.e. a Short-Term Experiential Placement). The gradations relate to the three stages of the fellowship, and the varying levels of commitment at each stage. But as the 2022 UPEN *Guide for Hosting Policy Fellows* makes clear, there is need to constantly reflect on all STEP opportunities through an equality, diversity and inclusion lens. Seen from this perspective the Policy Fellows initiative could well be seen as a medium or long-term experiential placement due to the manner in which it involves an eighteen-month commitment and at least some change of physical working location. Added to this are the additional administrative and cognitive loads (Issue 4, Part III, above) that may in some situations have to be weighed against the existing personal or caring responsibilities of prospective applicants.

There are lessons to be learned from the existing research and data on inclusive placement learning amongst students in higher education. As Thompson and Brewster (2023) have illustrated through a focus on anxiety, uncertainty and opportunity, there is a continuing need for a conversation about inclusion and inclusive practice. Part of this conversation might include a review of the value of small STEPs, possibly down to one or two-day monthly or quarterly placements. Forms of ‘yo-yo’ shadowing where the researcher simply moves in and out of a policy environment at various points in time to observe the complexity and pressures of policymaking through ‘snapshots’ could also offer a low-cost but high-gain form of STEP. Such an innovation could be tied to a mirror-image emphasis on policy-to-research (P2R) whereby civil servants, local government officials, etc. get the chance to spend some time working in an academic environment.<sup>10</sup>

The simple argument of this sub-section is that if the full richness of talent within both academia and policy environments is to be identified and utilised then a positive focus on the equality, diversity and inclusion *opportunity* needs to be sustained.

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<sup>10</sup> See Buckley, N., & Oliver, K. (2024). Evaluating Policy to Research Fellowship programmes. *Evidence & Policy* (published online ahead of print 2024). Retrieved May 8, 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.1332/17442648Y2024D000000023>

### 3. *Medium and Long-Term Evaluation Frameworks*

As the ESRC ‘Fit for the Future’ report of 2020 underlined through a focus on research leadership capacity, investments in training, skills and particularly cultural change and development generally take at least five years to have a full effect.<sup>11</sup> In the private sector this gap between investment and effect is known as ‘the leadership lag’ but when transferred into the context of facilitating mobility across the research-policy nexus it does raise questions about effective evaluation frameworks. Indeed, this early-stage evaluation has been explicit about the need to capture the short, medium and long-term impacts of the Policy Fellows initiative across at least three dimensions (i.e. individual, policy and systemic, see Part II, above).

As the Policy Fellows initiative moves beyond its pilot phase there is an opportunity to place it within a more sophisticated evaluative framework. As has been noted, capturing the full impact of researchers’ engagement with policy is rarely easy due to its somewhat fuzzy and often indirect nature. Direct causal accounts are uncommon. But sophisticated evaluative frameworks have been designed to monitor and chart the impacts of fellowship-based initiatives in a way that can cope with complexity. The evaluation of the Academy of Medical Science’s FLIER scheme with its focus on short-term ‘outputs’, medium term ‘enablers’ and long-term ‘impacts’ would seem to provide a rigorous model for evaluative analysis.<sup>12</sup> The Association of Commonwealth Universities also provides advice and guidance on the evaluation of fellowship programmes.<sup>13</sup>

This report is very much an early-stage evaluation or pilot study. Given the scale of investment, the positive collaborations being fostered, and the catalysing capacity of the policy fellowships in terms of new skills and maximising the societal impact of existing public investments in research then the design and delivery of an ongoing evaluative framework should be considered.

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<sup>11</sup> Flinders, M. 2020. Fit for the Future. Swindon: ESRC. <https://www.ukri.org/publications/fit-for-the-future-research-leadership-matters/>

<sup>12</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences. (2022). *Programme Evaluation: FLIER*. Aleron Partners/Freshney Consulting.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.acu.ac.uk/news/methodologies-for-evaluating-short-fellowship-programmes/>

#### 4. Cohort Effects

One of the benefits of putting a formal evaluative framework in place is that it would facilitate the identification of a range of outputs and outcomes, which would themselves range from the individual to system-wide benefits. These could then be quantified to produce a baseline value-investment score. The aim of this sub-section is simply to highlight how the benefits of STEP-based initiatives can be nurtured and sustained long-after the ending of the formal fellowship. What this focuses attention on are ‘cohort effects’, and the informal linkages and networks shared by people who have been through similar experiences. The basic insight being that increased levels of *intra*-group trust, knowledge and cohesiveness can be sustained and utilised with systemic value. Facilitating networking events or regular contact occasions, commissioning reflections, weaving former cohort members into future training or mentoring opportunities, etc. are ways of maximising the value of cohort-based initiatives. The way in which the Scottish Crucible facilitates ongoing links with and activities for previous cohorts – known as ‘Crubilists’ – provides a very clear example of the creation of long-term research infrastructure and boundary-spanning research cultures.<sup>14</sup>

The need to recognise and resource cohort effects is an issue any evaluative framework should seek to acknowledge, and opportunities exist to nurture positive interactions across cohorts at different levels – PhD. Students, Future Leadership Fellows, etc. – to foster inter-generational support structures and shared learning as part of an integrated ‘full career’ approach to talent management. The first cohort of ESRC Policy Fellows has already started to demonstrate the value of sustaining long-term linkages and activities, specifically through organising a writing retreat in 2024. The purpose of drawing attention to cohort effects in this sub-section is that to some extent the need to nurture post-fellowship engagement needs to be factored into the design and resourcing of the initiative. Putting the same point slightly differently, the pilot phase focused on getting the policy fellowships up and running but there is now an opportunity to think about longer-term community building to fully maximise the impact of the investment.

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://scottishcrucible.org.uk/alumni/>

## 5. *Expansive Thinking*

Thinking about cohort effects reintroduces the need to be constantly aware of the EDI challenge (and opportunity). Cohorts can by their very nature become exclusive networks which, in turn, focuses attention back on recruitment processes, and the rippling-out of insights and support systems across the whole academic and policy community. The main argument of this sub-section is that the case needs to be constantly made for ‘expansive thinking’ in the sense of recruiting policy fellows who want to gain experience and knowledge from spending time in a policy environment, *even if this would be a completely new experience for them.*

This is a critical point. The original rationale for the ESRC Policy Fellows lay in a recognition that (i) a lot of social scientists had no experience in engaging with policy makers; (ii) a lot of social scientists were keen to develop skills and experiences in a policy context; but (iii) no structural opportunities existed to fund research to policy mobility. The Policy Fellowships were therefore designed as a bridging mechanism to facilitate the mobility of knowledge, people, and talent. As Part II (above) demonstrates, it has proved to be an incredibly successful investment but there is a risk of recruitment bias slipping into the scheme in a manner that could, if not addressed, reduce its benefits and even become problematic.

What was surprising from the interviews with fellows from the first cohort was how many of them had significant previous policy engagement experience. This was often very beneficial as it meant that the transition into a policy context was not as challenging as it might have been, and basic differences in terms of language, working procedures, cultural expectations, etc. were already broadly understood. But the obvious issue is that the Policy Fellows scheme was not intended to support researchers who were already active, visible, and embedded in policy communities. It was designed to create opportunities for researchers who had no experience but wanted to fill this skills gap. The key reflection being whether a review might usefully be undertaken of the application criteria and review process to ensure that a full range of both experienced and inexperienced applicants are being seriously considered. The introduction of a host interview for the second cohort (i.e. 2023-2025) resonates with this point as there is a need to ensure alignment between the hosts’ selection criteria and the research community’s possibly wider need to increase opportunity of access.

‘Expansive thinking’ for the purposes of this sub-section is simply intended to underline the original aims and ambition of this investment, and it is completely understandable that policy hosts may want to recruit fellows who have at least some understanding and experience of working in a policy context. It may well be, for example, that an opportunity exists to think about how provision can be made for researchers with no or very little experience or working in a policy-focused environment to ‘STEP-up’ to the level where they are credible candidates for a full Policy Fellowship. An open access online module made and presented by former Policy Fellows – possibly accredited by UKRI – could provide a simple and positive first step in this process.

## 6. *Landscape Review and Strategic Capacity*

The sixth and final reflection simply highlights the significant increase in policy-focused fellowships and secondments opportunities that have been launched in the last 24 months. In their 2022 study of research-to-policy (R2P) engagement activities - which included policy fellowships - Oliver and her colleagues identified no less than 1,923 individual activities conducted by over 500 separate organisations.<sup>15</sup> Buckley and Oliver's 2024 review of policy-to-research (P2R) fellowship programmes included 24 separate schemes.<sup>16</sup> The success of the ESRC Policy Fellows pilot scheme has also led to new schemes being established, all with an emphasis on facilitating mobility at the nexus of research and policy.

What seems to be emerging is a highly congested and fragmented fellowship terrain, and the final reflection simply wonders whether the time may have come to conduct a full landscape review of both R2P and P2R fellowship and secondment schemes. A review of this type – and more specifically the database emerging out of it - would offer many benefits which include:

- The establishment of a simple database of opportunities;
- Prevention of unnecessary duplication;
- Providing a launchpad for new initiatives;
- Ensuring the provision of different sized STEPs;
- Accurate data collection and cross-sectoral evaluations;
- Learning from evidence and theory;
- Shared awareness of innovations and 'what works';
- Maintained focus on equality, diversity and inclusion;
- Targeted recruitment initiatives;
- Greater capacity to track and support cohorts;
- Expansion into, for example, Research-to-Business; and
- Boundary-spanning collaborative, connective and catalysing capacities.

A lot of the data and material for the initial landscape review has already been collected but the suggestion is less about the need for a one-off review and more about the need to create, maintain and utilise a database or central repository about fellowship opportunities. The database would act as a 'strategic brain' or hub which connected and co-ordinated a vast range of mobility focused fellowships for the benefit of the national science base.

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<sup>15</sup> Oliver, K., Hopkins, A., Boaz, A., Guillot-Wright, S., & Cairney, P. (2022). What works to promote research-policy engagement?. *Evidence & Policy*, 18(4), 691-713. Retrieved May 8, 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16420918447616>

<sup>16</sup> Buckley, N. and Oliver, K. 2024. 'Evaluating Policy to Research Fellowship Programmes', *Evidence and Policy*, <https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/view/journals/evp/aop/article-10.1332-17442648Y2024D000000023/article-10.1332-17442648Y2024D000000023.xml>

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Application characteristics

Table 1: Number of applications per region

Region	Total
<b>England</b>	
East Midlands	10
East of England	3
London	19
North East	5
North West	2
South East	8
South West	12
West Midlands	5
Yorkshire and the Humber	12
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	0
<b>Scotland</b>	16
<b>Wales</b>	4
Total	96

Table 2: List of applicant institutions (awarded fellowships indicated in brackets)

Institutions	
Aston University	University of Bath (1)
Bangor University (1)	University of Birmingham (1)
Bournemouth University	University of Bristol (1)
Cardiff University (1)	University of Cambridge (1)
City, University of London	University of Dundee (1)
Coventry University	University of Edinburgh (1)
Cranfield University	University of Exeter (1)*
Durham University	University of Exeter (1)
Imperial College London (1)	University of Glasgow (1)
King's College London (1)	University of Greenwich (1)
Lancaster University	University of Leeds (1)*
London School of Economics	University of Leicester
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	University of Liverpool
Loughborough University (1)	University of Nottingham
Newcastle University	University of Reading
Northumbria University	University of Sheffield
Nottingham Trent University (2)	University of Southampton
Open University	University of Stirling
Royal Holloway, University of London	University of Surrey
SOAS University of London	University of Sussex
Swansea University	University of the West of England (2)
The University of Manchester	University of York (1)
University College London (3)	York St John University

\* ESRC ADR UK No.10 Data Science Fellowship

## Appendix 2: Interview question guides

### ESRC Policy Fellowships Evaluation: Indicative Interview Questions for Fellows

- Very briefly, could you tell us a bit about the project you were doing, and how it felt to be embedded in a policy context?
- The ESRC Public Policy Fellowship scheme that you were part of was intended to ‘provide research and expert advice on the host’s policy priority areas, and to support wider knowledge exchange between government and academia’ (ESRC 2021). To what extent do you think it was successful?
- To what extent did you (or do you) feel your work had a direct policy impact? Were the impacts, for example, formal or informal, immediate or longer term? Did it alter your understanding of what ‘impact’ means?
- What were the benefits of the fellowship in terms of your personal and professional development?
- Thinking about the fellowships as a kind of ‘structured serendipity’, what were the *unexpected* benefits or opportunities that arose out of the fellowship?
- What were the issues that either facilitated or impeded your capacity to provide research and expert advice on the hosts’ policy priority areas? E.g. design, structure, processes, training, support, fit, culture, staff turnover.
- Thinking about the emotional labour that may be experienced in boundary-spanning, how difficult was it to straddle two professional domains and was this emotionally demanding?
- On reflection, do you think that the fact you did a policy fellowship has been valued within your own university and enhanced your career prospects?
- What is the really important question that we have not asked you or a critical theme that has not been discussed?



## ESRC Policy Fellowships Evaluation: Indicative Interview Questions for Policy Hosts

- Very briefly, could you tell us a bit about the project you were on with a fellow and your experience of being involved in this initiative?
- The ESRC Public Policy Fellowship scheme that you were part of was intended to ‘provide research and expert advice on the host’s policy priority areas, and to support wider knowledge exchange between government and academia’ (ESRC 2021). To what extent do you think it was successful?
- To what extent did you (or do you) feel your work had a direct policy impact? Were the impacts, for example, formal or informal, immediate or longer term? Did it alter your understanding of what ‘impact’ means?
- What were the benefits of the fellowship in terms of personal and professional development (capability or capacity vis-a-vis research) for individuals from the department or the policy team as a whole?
- What were the *unexpected* benefits or opportunities that arose out of the fellowship?
- What were the issues that either facilitated or impeded your capacity to utilise the policy fellow to their full potential? E.g. design, structure, processes, training, support, fit, culture, staff turnover.
- On reflection, do you think that the fact you hosted a policy fellowship has been valued within the organisation/department?
- What is the really important question that we have not asked you or a critical theme that has not been discussed?