

How to engage with policy makers

A guide for academics in the arts and
humanities



Contents

Forewords	4
Summary	6
Part 1: The landscape of policy making	7
Part 2: How to engage	14
Conclusion	24

Forewords

The Institute for Government has for a long time sought ways to improve the relationship between the government and academia, but old problems remain.

Pressure of time means that ministers and civil servants often fail to explore what academic research might bring to their decisions, or build lasting links. At the same time, academics may be unsure how to make contact with government or what they can contribute to fast-paced decisions. Those in government shaping policies often have different ways of working from those in universities, as well as different priorities and incentives. This often leads to poor communication, confused deadlines and misunderstandings over what work is most valuable at a given time.

Where people in government do seek out academic evidence, they tend to turn to a narrow range of disciplines, favouring science and quantitative data over qualitative evidence from arts, humanities and social sciences. The government's response to Covid-19 and the questions now being asked about the role of the state and the future of the economy has heightened the need for new ideas, new insights and new evidence. Any government needs to ensure that a wide range of academic thinking is included in the policy making process.

Our experience of working with the Arts and Humanities Research Council on the Engaging with Government programme shows that researchers from the arts and humanities can make an immensely valuable contribution to policy making. This guide distils some of the conclusions from that programme, with case studies from our alumni that show how they have put those into practice.



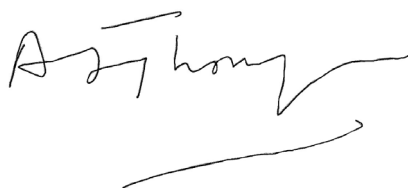
Bronwen Maddox
Director, Institute for Government

Forewords

Arts and humanities research comprises a wide range of disciplines, united by the aim of exploring identity, behaviour, expression, and what it means to be human. They draw on perspectives from other times in history and other cultures, which can enable us to reflect on our own traditions, values and core beliefs. They link with and support the creative industries, in design, the creative arts, museums, libraries, galleries, and performing arts, enhancing the development of brilliant new ideas. And they are concerned with concepts of value which can be challenging to define, including the value of culture, of the environment, of a diversity of opinions and worldviews.

Like the arts and humanities, the remit of public policy is broad and diverse, and ultimately relates to the human experience. Policy makers aim to understand and improve the prosperity and wellbeing of the people they serve. They are interested in the way that current circumstances affect the population as a whole, and the different demographics within it, and they seek to project to alternative futures that could come about as a result of today's decisions. As this guide demonstrates, policy makers do not operate in a vacuum, politicians must take account of many other interests and voices. In order to do this policy makers draw on many resources including evidence from medical research, the social and behavioural sciences, the STEM subjects, and the arts and humanities. In this guide you can read case studies on how arts and humanities research has informed policy around pregnancy and bereavement, about how religious and cultural studies have helped MPs to understand the lives of British Sikhs, and about how a 'philosopher in residence' at the Cabinet Office has helped guide civil servants through some tough ethical questions.

The Institute for Government has an unparalleled reputation for providing impartial evidence to inform government. Its versatile and unprejudiced method, synthesising different sources of evidence, contributes to its trustworthiness as a policy adviser and influencer. It is with great pride that I reflect on the many years of partnership between the Institute and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and particularly the excellent *Engaging with Government* course for researchers in the arts and humanities. This guide enables the insights shared at the *Engaging with Government* course to reach a wider audience of researchers, and inspire future collaborative working between researchers and policy makers.



Professor Andrew Thompson
Executive Chair of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the UK
Research and Innovation (UKRI) International Champion

Summary

The Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Institute for Government have been working in partnership for six years on the *Engaging with Government* programme – a three-day course for researchers in the arts and humanities. This programme helps academics develop the knowledge and skills they need to engage effectively with government and parliamentary bodies at all levels, along with the other organisations involved in the policy-making process. We, in turn, have learned a huge amount from our participants, who now form an active alumni network brimming with expertise about how to engage with policy in practice. This guide brings together some of that learning.

Arts and humanities researchers tend to have fewer formal and established routes into government than scientists. But they can, and do, engage productively in policy making. They contribute both expertise (advice based on knowledge of a field) and evidence (facts and information) and provide new ways of framing policy debates that draw on philosophical, cultural or historical perspectives.

As this guide shows, there are steps that academics can take to improve their engagement with public policy and to make it meaningful for their research. While these activities may involve an investment of time, they offer the opportunity to make a tangible difference, and are often a source of great satisfaction and inspiration for further work.

The first part of this guide describes the landscape of policy making in the UK and some of the common ways academics can engage with it. Part two sets out six lessons from the *Engaging with Government* programme, illustrated with practical examples from our alumni and speaker network. These lessons are:

- Understand the full range of individuals and groups involved in policy making – who are the key players and who do they talk to?
- Be aware of the political context – how does your research fit in with current thinking on the issue?
- Communicate in ways that policy makers find useful – consider your audience and be prepared to make practical recommendations.
- Develop and maintain networks – seek to make connections with people who share your policy interest, both in person and online.
- Remember that you are the expert – be prepared to share your general knowledge of a subject as well as your specific research.
- Adopt a long-term perspective – you will need to be open-minded and patient to engage successfully.

Part 1: The landscape of policy making

Policy making is a political process, informed by values. It involves setting a vision, mobilising support and managing opposition. Assembling and interpreting evidence is part of the process, but the extent of this depends on many factors. Time, budget, capability, political narratives and parliamentary arithmetic all create a complex process that can be hard to follow for those on the outside. This section describes the key players in UK policy making and highlights some of the ways you can engage with them.

There are three main layers of government that make policy:

- Central government – government and Parliament, along with certain other public bodies with policy making responsibility
- Devolved and local government – including the devolved administrations, local councils, and metro mayors such as the Mayor of London
- International organisations – for example the EU, the UN, the World Bank

This guide will focus on UK government, though many of the lessons apply to international organisations and governments as well.

Central government – Whitehall

“Whitehall” is the shorthand often used to describe the executive branch of government, made up of ministers and civil servants. Ministers are drawn from the political party that can command a majority in the House of Commons. There are over 100 ministers in total, 22 of which currently make up the Cabinet, the principal decision-making body. The policies of the elected government are implemented by the civil service, a permanent and politically neutral body. There are about 400,000 civil servants in total, of whom around 18,000 describe their role as “policy making”.

The business of government is organised by department, with each department led by a minister (usually known as the secretary of state) and a senior civil servant, known as the permanent secretary. Departments vary greatly in terms of their headcount, budget and responsibilities, and also in their working culture and the type of work that they do. In addition to the main government departments, there are approximately 400 public bodies that have a role in designing and implementing policy (see explainer box below).

Engaging with Whitehall

Engaging with ministers and civil servants provides the potential for wide-ranging policy impact. This is where policies are conceived and developed, from agreement to tackle a problem through to working out detailed implementation plans. However,

Whitehall is one of the most challenging parts of government to engage with, for the following reasons:

- Responsibility for making policy in a particular area can reside within one or more departments, executive agencies or other public bodies, and this makes it difficult to identify the people and organisations in charge of policy for a particular area (see explainer box on executive agencies, non-ministerial departments and other public bodies).
- High levels of staff turnover mean that once you have found a useful contact, they are unlikely to be in position for long. On average, 9% of staff leave the civil service each year, and on top of this there is considerable movement of staff between or within departments, often with officials moving to completely new policy areas.
- A hectic schedule and a long list of competing priorities means policy making civil servants don't always find time to step back and read academic research – particularly if it is behind a paywall. They can struggle to find time for anything that is not directly relevant to their immediate workload.

Despite these challenges, many of our alumni have succeeded in engaging with central government, as you will see in the case studies below. It is also worth noting that many government departments are attempting to engage better with academia and seek input from experts as a matter of course. While our research suggests that their success in doing so remains patchy across government, it is useful to be aware of the various initiatives that are in place. For more information, see [How government can work with academia](#).

Explainer : Executive agencies, non-ministerial departments and other public bodies

As well as the main ministerial departments, there are many other public bodies and agencies that have a role in designing and implementing policy. These enjoy varying degrees of independence from government and range from big organisations employing thousands of public servants and administering billions of pounds of public money, to small advisory committees with no independent budget. Some examples of different types of public bodies include:

- Inspectorates and regulators – these operate outside direct political oversight to demonstrate independence. Examples include Ofsted, the Food Standards Agency, HM Inspectorate of Prisons
- Advisory committees and evidence centres – independent bodies that advise the government on policy issues, for example the Migration Advisory Committee, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

- Bodies responsible for administering projects or policies, generally sponsored by a government department – for example HS2 Limited, the Environment Agency
- Commissions and inquiries – for example the Lammy Review on BAME individuals in the Criminal Justice System
- Cultural and leisure organisations – for example the Natural History Museum, the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

There are approximately 400 non-ministerial departments and public bodies in total. You can browse a complete list of them at www.gov.uk/government/organisations#ministerial_departments.

Parliament

The House of Commons consists of 650 elected MPs, each representing a constituency in the UK or Northern Ireland. The House of Lords has approximately 800 members, most of whom are life peers appointed by the Queen on the advice of the prime minister. There are also 92 hereditary peers and 26 bishops. Both houses are involved in Parliament's three main roles: to create and amend legislation; to provide a forum for debate; and to hold government to account.

Engaging with Parliament

The most obvious route to engagement with Parliament is via the relevant select committee (see explainer box below). Select committees actively seek evidence from external experts and the public and therefore provide a recognised process for providing input. Written evidence should be created specifically for the inquiry (i.e. you can't just submit an academic paper) and the most successful submissions are short, clear and offer a unique perspective on an issue. Once written evidence has been submitted, some people are invited to give oral evidence in person before the select committee.

Members of select committees have usually put themselves forward because they have an interest in its subject matter – so engaging with the select committee can be a good way to interact with high-profile politicians engaged in your field and to establish your credentials. Another advantage is that it is easy to provide evidence of engagement because all submissions and proceedings are made public. However, bear in mind that select committees tend to scrutinise the effects of policies rather than their creation – they are therefore usually more akin to policy influencers than policy makers.

Another approach is to engage with individual MPs who share your area of interest. One way of doing this is via all-party parliamentary groups (APPGs), which are informal cross-party groups for parliamentarians with an interest in a particular issue (see explainer box below).

Explainer: What are select committees and all-party parliamentary groups?

Select committees are one of the main mechanisms by which parliament holds government to account, investigating issues and checking and reporting on the work of government. In the House of Commons there is one to cover each government department along with a number looking at cross-cutting issues such as public accounts or women and equalities.

Lords committees do not shadow government departments but instead investigate specialist subjects such as science and technology or the European Union.

The work of a select committee begins by launching a line of inquiry. Written and oral evidence is gathered in response to the inquiry and the committee sets out its findings in a report. The government must usually reply to its recommendations within 60 days.

All-party parliamentary groups (APPGs) are informal cross-party groups for parliamentarians with an interest in a particular issue. They have no official status within Parliament but must contain members of more than one party. They are run by and for members of the Commons and Lords, though many choose to involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their administration and activities. APPGs vary a great deal in how active they are – some have staff and publish reports (for example the APPG on Yemen) whereas others may meet just once a year. The most recent list of APPGs is publicly available on the Parliament website.

Devolved government

The UK's **devolved legislatures** are the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Each devolved administration has its own governmental structures and the extent to which powers are devolved varies by policy area and by administration. There has been growing political divergence between the four nations of the UK since devolution, meaning the political contexts for specific policy areas may be very different in each nation.

Members of the devolved legislatures scrutinise the work of the government by asking questions of ministers in the chamber and through scrutiny committees. Departmental committees carry out a wider range of functions in the devolved legislatures than in the UK Parliament: in addition to conducting inquiries and producing reports they also play a formal role in the process of scrutinising legislation.

The structure of the civil service is different in each nation. The Northern Ireland civil service is divided into nine main departments, with each led by a minister and a permanent secretary. The Scottish and Welsh governments, meanwhile, operate as single organisations, and the portfolios of their Cabinet ministers do not directly match the structure of their civil service workforce.

Engaging with devolved government

The devolved legislatures were designed to foster a more collaborative, consensus-based politics than at Westminster, reflected in the proportional electoral systems, the physical spaces of their parliaments and the structures of government. In theory, this should make policy making more open and easier to engage with.

The experience of our alumni suggests that devolved administrations do tend to be more accessible than central government, partly for the reasons above and partly because they are smaller in scale and have more transparent organisational structures. They have the power and flexibility to try out new policy ideas, some of which have later been adopted by other parts of the UK – for example, smoking in public places and the levy on plastic carrier bags, introduced first in Scotland and Wales, respectively. Engaging with devolved government may therefore be a productive place to focus, particularly if you are based nearby.

However, a word of caution: devolved administrations are subject to the same time and resource constraints as UK national government – with priorities determined by those with political power. An understanding of the main narratives and agendas of the dominant political parties is therefore just as important in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as it is in Westminster.

Local government

Local government is a complex landscape, with a combination of unitary authorities, combined authorities, county and borough councils, directly elected mayors with bespoke devolution deals and district and parish councils. The exact combination of powers varies by each type of organisation and even according to the details of each devolution deal.

Councils in England, Scotland and Wales are responsible for social care and provide certain aspects of transport, housing and education, along with neighbourhood services such as libraries and waste collection. In Northern Ireland, local government is more limited, with no responsibility for education, libraries or social care.

Councillors are elected for four-year terms throughout the UK, though the electoral systems used vary in each of the devolved nations. Most local authorities in England, and all those in Scotland and Wales, are run by a leader and cabinet from the party that wins a majority in the local elections (or a coalition). Other authorities, including those in Northern Ireland, use a committee system, in which decision making is delegated to committees of councillors from all parties.

Councillors appoint and oversee officers to perform the work of the council, including both policy development and the delivery of services.

Engaging with local government

Physical location matters when building relationships and networks. Engaging with local rather than national governments often allows for easier development of links with a variety of local stakeholders and organisations, simply by virtue of proximity. Local engagement is also more likely to allow you to see how policies are implemented on the ground, providing links with the people affected.

As well as engaging with individual local authorities, you could consider contacting organisations that look to support and promote local government at a national level, for example, the [Local Government Association](#) and [National Association for Local Councils](#).

Influencers

Policy makers do not operate in a vacuum – as well as their parties and constituents, politicians have to take account of many other interests and voices. The same is true for the officials responsible for designing the policy that will meet their objectives.

The following organisations all influence policy makers (this list is not exhaustive):

- Civil society
- Think tanks
- Lobby and interest groups
- Charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
- Industry bodies
- Media – conventional and social
- Constituents
- Political parties
- Academia
- International organisations and governments

Engaging with influencers

Engagement with key influencers may be easier and more effective than attempting to access the decision makers themselves. For example, think tanks enjoy direct links with policy makers, and will seek to match up research on areas they are interested in with people who can act upon it. The same is often true of lobby and interest groups, industries and charities. Collaborating with these groups by putting on events or writing reports gives you access to their networks and helps you to develop your own, which can inform both your research and your engagement activities.

Implementers

Policies may be designed centrally, but they are often put into practice at a local level by a wide range of individuals and organisations. For example, public services are often delivered by private or voluntary organisations, who hold a contract with central or local government. Employers are responsible for policies such as auto-enrolment in pensions, while the national curriculum is delivered in schools by teachers.

Engaging with implementers

Depending on your policy interest, the best way to achieve real impact may be to work with those who enact policy at point of delivery, understanding how people are interpreting policies and their effects on different populations. Getting involved with implementers can also provide stories and case studies that can both bolster your research and strengthen your communications and evidence to policy makers. Of course, many implementers of policy also influence the policy making process, or are policy makers themselves – for example those working in local government, businesses or charities.

Summary

The complex landscape of government affords many different routes for engaging with policy making, from formal routes such as select committee inquiries to informal meetings with people implementing policy on the front line. The remainder of this guide covers practical tips for how to go about this, illustrated by case studies from researchers in the arts and humanities who have attended our *Engaging with Government* programme.

Part 2: How to engage

Lesson 1: Understand the full range of individuals and groups involved in policy making

The most effective routes to engagement may not be the most obvious. Start by investigating the policy areas to which your research may contribute useful insights. Then, map out all the people and organisations with an influence in those policy areas, considering each of the following:

- Who makes the decisions (it may be more than one body)?
- Who influences these policy makers?
- Who will be implementing the policy?

Once you have mapped out all the relevant organisations, weigh up the potential for influence with the challenges associated with working with them. For example:

- Are there some organisations that link to many others?
- Are there some perspectives that would be particularly useful?
- Who do you know that could make an introduction?
- What have you got to offer the people you want to meet?

Case study 1: Dr Sheelagh McGuinness, Reader in Law, University of Birmingham (2015 cohort)

Dr Sheelagh McGuinness works in the field of Health Law on the regulation of reproduction. She has just finished a project on the experiences of stillbirth, miscarriage and reproductive loss, working with a multidisciplinary team including researchers in law, cultural studies, anthropology and linguistics.

One of the tips Sheelagh found most useful from the *Engaging with Government* programme was the idea of mapping out key stakeholders. "For the sort of research we were doing you really need to think about who you want to work with in order to inform and influence policy and practice," she said. The project team considered both key policy makers and the organisations that would be helpful intermediaries and research partners.

The project team made contact and developed partnerships with charities such as SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity), the Miscarriage Association and ARC (Antenatal Results and Choices) and asked representatives from each for

advice on project design and to provide insight into new policy developments as they arose. This was invaluable when the government launched significant new initiatives on pregnancy and bereavement while the project was ongoing, as it allowed the research team to contribute by providing summaries of evidence to those undertaking reviews. The project partners also helped to advertise the project among their supporters and clients and gave feedback on which other organisations to speak to and the most appropriate language to use.

Tips for engagement:

1. Consider the whole policy making process when analysing routes to engagement: who is influencing it, designing it and delivering it on the front line?
2. Look for organisations that are linked to many others, and/or perspectives that will inform your work
3. Engage potential collaborators at project design stage

Lesson 2: Be aware of political contexts and narratives

In order to engage with policy making effectively, you need to understand the political context of the policy area in question. What are the existing narratives around the issue? Which voices do you hear in the media? Who is likely to welcome your conclusions as helpful to their own agenda? Are those people in power or in opposition? Try to vary your sources of information to obtain different perspectives – for example by reading newspapers from across the political spectrum.

Understanding the political cycle is also important. There are certain moments when policy is more open to change than others – at the beginning and end of political office, at the start of a new Parliament, before a spending review cycle, and at certain points where events or public and media pressure create a crisis point, for example. These windows of opportunity occur when attention is drawn to a problem, there are policy ideas to solve it, and political incentives to make them happen – and this is set out in Kingdom's Policy Stream model.

If there is no window of opportunity on the horizon, it is still important to stay engaged with the people whose ideas will be drawn upon if and when the issue becomes salient. This also means that, to achieve impact, you may be talking about a piece of research years after you have completed it.



Case study 2: Dr Frances Holliss, Emeritus Reader in Architecture, London Metropolitan University (2017 cohort)

Dr Frances Holliss studies the architecture of buildings that are used for combined living and working. This has a huge range of policy

implications, from the specifics of housing and planning regulations to broader questions about sustainability, productivity and wellbeing.

Frances has found it challenging to find policy makers with the time and energy to think about such long-term challenges. She recalls a conversation with a Treasury official: when she told him that her research posed fundamental problems for economic policy overall, he replied “that’s never going to happen – in order to do that I’d need to have 30 people in the room and it would be the priority for none of them”.

However, Frances has found other, diverse ways to share her expertise. She has had meetings with local planning officials, was interviewed in conversation with the futurist Anab Jain for a podcast and has given talks to grassroots audiences such as the residents of Lewes and a group of artists in Hackney Wick. By remaining a part of the conversation, Francis is in a good position to influence the debate now that Covid-19 has raised its salience to policy makers.

Tips for engagement

1. Analyse the current political landscape around the issues in your research
2. Consider the political cycle and current preoccupations of policy makers – what could make your issue come to public attention?
3. Stay connected with people and organisations who may provide policy ideas when the issue rises to prominence

Lesson 3: Communicate in ways that policy makers find useful

People often assume that policy makers will actively seek out academic research that is relevant to the areas they are working on. While this may be true of certain types of technical expertise, there are many areas where it may not be obvious to hard-pressed officials that there is research relevant to their policy they could draw on. You therefore need to find ways to communicate that policy makers will have a chance of seeing, in formats that allow them to quickly grasp how you can help.

The most obvious way to do this is to write a report specifically aimed at policy makers – a brief document explaining the background to an issue in simple terms and including some concrete recommendations that can be acted upon. Several of our alumni mentioned that a lot of their contacts and engagement activities were greatly

helped by being able to quickly share these kinds of documents – “nice-looking materials with bullet points” as Sheelagh McGuinness put it. Some examples of how these kinds of documents have been used are given in Case Studies 3 and 5, below.

Tailoring your message for policy makers applies to meeting them in person as well as in written documents. Consider their priorities and be prepared to focus on what is important to them: this could mean sharing your general expertise on a topic or focusing on one small part of your research. Often policy makers want to get up to speed on a topic quickly – understanding the latest thinking and the current debates before getting into the finer detail.



Case study 3: Dr Jasjit Singh, Associate Professor in the School of Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science, University of Leeds (2015 cohort)

Dr Jasjit Singh studies the religious and cultural lives of South Asians in Britain, with a

particular focus on Sikhs. As part of a project on Sikh radicalisation he engaged with people from several government departments, as well as running open public events and consultations with community groups. Jasjit says the most important thing he has learned is to really focus on understanding his audience: “Every time I do an event I spend a lot of time preparing by really thinking about what the audience is interested in particularly – it won’t be the whole story of the research. I think about the key thing I want to get across”.

For the main report on Sikh radicalisation Jasjit wrote with a general audience in mind: “I toned the academic-sounding theory down a little!” After the report was released his tailored approach to engagement has enabled him to build his reputation as an expert. He has since been approached by a wide range of policy makers and implementers. For example, Jasjit has:

- presented his report to the prime minister at 10 Downing Street
- given a presentation on British Sikhs to the APPG at the Houses of Parliament
- delivered presentations to Prevent teams and police forces on the implications of his research
- attended roundtables on Sikhism organised by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Mayor’s Office for Policing And Crime (MOPAC)
- contributed to Department of Education discussions on the place of Sikhism in school curricula

- given advice to a law firm about Afghan Sikh asylum seekers, leading to Home Office country guidance being amended
- facilitated engagement between communities and policy makers through open public consultation events, for example working with MHCLG on a consultation around hate crime.

Jasjit acknowledges that these activities are time-consuming – however, he has found it rewarding to make a difference. “That’s the reason I got into academia and I hadn’t appreciated the value and respect an academic viewpoint gets”.

Tips for engagement

1. Make sure your research is accessible outside academic paywalls.
2. As well as your academic outputs, write up your research in formats useful to the people you want to engage with. You might produce a brief document explaining the background to the issue, your main findings and some recommendations for how to tackle it.
3. Ensure recommendations are practical and realistic – considering resource constraints, government priorities and current political narratives.
4. When meeting people, consider what they will be most interested in and be prepared to tailor your conversations accordingly.

Lesson 4: Develop and maintain networks

In order to engage with policy making, you need to be part of the conversation where policy problems and ideas are discussed. This means meeting people, building relationships and maintaining your networks – even if direct links to your work are not immediately apparent. As Dr Keith Hyams (see case study 5 below) told us “your concerns may not be other people’s priority, but opportunities may open up to put things on their agenda”.

Social media can also be used to develop networks. Twitter provides an insight into the conversations taking place on relevant topics and an opportunity to interact with people who share your interests – this can be particularly useful when your work has an international dimension.



Case study 4: Dr Laura King, Associate Professor in Modern British History, University of Leeds (2014 cohort)

Dr Laura King studies the history of everyday family life, emotional relationships, health and gender in modern Britain. Her current

project, [Living with Dying](#), considers how the history of death, dying and the dead might be used today to encourage people to plan for their own end of life care and death. As part of this work Laura has built a strong local network of collaborators, including artists, bereavement support workers and city councillors.

Laura says that working at the local level makes it easier to build relationships with people: "I just started going to things". Even before the project started she attended the Leeds Bereavement Forum, an annual conference for professionals involved in providing bereavement support services, and met members of the city council who were interested in what she was doing. She was invited to give a presentation to a council committee called the Aging Well board and was then asked to join a group called the Leeds Dying Matters Partnership. This partnership encourages discussion about death and dying, and as part of Laura's work she has co-curated an exhibition on 'Remembrance' with Abbey House Museum and contributed to a range of public engagement activities.

Laura found that engaging with different organisations before the project even started was useful: "relationships built up naturally, so when it came to applying for funding I could chat to people and ask if they were interested in being involved – and put in bids for things they would find useful." She approached conversations with an open mind: "being willing to listen and having a basic respect for different types of knowledge and expertise". Thinking through other people's agendas in advance was also helpful: "what are the needs, what are they working on, how does that overlap with the areas I'm interested in?"

Laura is also the deputy director of [History and Policy](#), a group that creates opportunities for historians, policy makers and journalists to connect and learn from each other. Using the lessons from her local government work, she seeks to entice busy civil servants with refreshments as well as historical insights: "bring the sandwiches and cake and you can get lots of people into the room..."

Tips for engagement

1. Go to events where you will find people with a possible interest in your research. Think broadly about who might be useful to engage with – many groups have influence that are not directly involved in policy making themselves.
2. Set up or join cross-disciplinary working groups. These will give you different perspectives on common research problems and access to a wider range of contacts.

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3. Offer to run training seminars for policy makers or implementers – many organisations invite external speakers in for lunchtime workshops.
 4. Develop relationships in advance of applying for funding – then include collaborative activities in your bid.
 5. Use Twitter as a newsfeed and interact on topics that interest you.

Lesson 5: Publicise your expertise – and make sure people can find you

Academics often play down their levels of expertise, sometimes feeling uncomfortable about offering an opinion outside the area of their specialism. However, there is often a broad range of issues related to your area of study about which you will know a great deal more even than the policy makers charged with making decisions. Most politicians and many civil servants are generalists rather than specialists, and tend to move to a new policy area just as they were getting to know the previous one. Be prepared to offer what you know about a topic and don't feel you have to stick to the confines of your current project.

Dr Frances Holliss (see case study 2) noted that one of the main benefits she got from the *Engaging with Government* programme was that: "It gave me a huge amount of confidence. I was encouraged to think of myself as the expert – I hadn't thought in those terms or used that language before. I used to be very anxious about [fact] checking everything – now I will say things that feel quite risky but I have confidence in my expertise and know that my answers are well-informed.

For their part, policy makers often rely on "the usual suspects" for expertise and will rarely conduct a systematic search for new people to talk to. To increase your chances of being asked for input, consider ways you can raise your profile, and ensure that there is information about you and your research readily available online.

Building a public profile will usually involve engaging with the media – TV, radio, podcasts and print or online newspapers. Getting publicity for your ideas can increase awareness of the issues you're interested in and may influence the context within which decisions are based. It can also lead to being approached by policy makers seeking input on salient issues.

To help people find you, make sure that searching for you online returns a result containing an accessible description of your work. Our experience on the *Engaging with Government* course is that the first (and sometimes only) link tends to be to a university profile page whose primary audience is other academics. Ideally you should list your areas of expertise and explain who your research might be relevant for.



Case study 5: Dr Hannah-Louise Clark, Lecturer in Global Economic and Social History (2018 cohort)

Dr Hannah-Louise Clark is a global historian of science, technology and medicine who specialises in the history of the modern Middle

East and North Africa, with a current focus on Algeria. She became interested in engaging with policy makers following an invitation from the director of Public Health in Algeria to give a lecture as part of a colloquium. While there she realised that many of the contemporary issues had historical roots but that people were unaware of how to use examples from the past as a resource to solve the issues of the present.

After attending the *Engaging with Government* programme, Hannah now considers the possible impact of her research right at the start of a project and is more intentional about how she communicates and publicises her work. "It made me think about how difficult my work was to access for one of my intended audiences: Francophone and Arabophone healthcare professionals and policy makers in North Africa. I have now started to produce summaries of my research in a more accessible format – one of these has already been published online."

As well as editing her university profile page to make it more accessible to non-academics, Hannah overcame her initial scepticism towards having a professional twitter account. "A fellow participant won me over, by explaining how valuable it was for building networks and finding out about events. She was right – I learned about a lot of really important research while settling my children down to sleep!"

Tips for engagement

1. Write articles for blogs and websites, such as [The Conversation](#) and [History and Policy](#). Not only are these read by think tanks and other intermediaries, but articles may well be picked up by other news sources.
2. Look out for current events that your research gives you a unique perspective on – what can you say that nobody else will have thought of?
3. Make sure there is a description of your research activities online that is easily understandable to non-academics, clearly stating your areas of expertise.
4. Tweet about your own work and that of your contacts where relevant.
5. Seek support from your university's engagement or communications teams, who can provide valuable advice and resources.

Lesson 6 – adopt a long-term perspective

Engagement activities are time consuming and the rewards may not be immediate or tangible. However, all our alumni said they had got much personal satisfaction from engaging with policy making, and that their research had improved as a result. Many also stated that it led to new opportunities in both research and impact that they wouldn't otherwise have explored. Impact is achieved by adopting a long-term approach, including engagement activities at each stage of the research process, and being open-minded about who you engage with and how.

Plan time for engagement

All our alumni noted the difficulty of finding time for engagement activities, particularly those that involve travel. Dr Sheelagh McGuinness (see case study 1) noted the difficulty of justifying time for a trip to London for a one-hour meeting when travel took the whole day, especially when it didn't then lead to anything concrete. Even when conversations are valuable, the outcomes of these kind of interactions can be hard to evidence – highlighting a tension that many noted between the kind of impact that contributes to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and that which is less tangible. Nevertheless, Sheelagh says that the meetings she has attended have been “amazing and really interesting – it can be hard to provide evidence of impact but it's the conversations that are the important thing”.

Dr Laura King (see case study 3) found capacity for engagement activities by recruiting an engagement fellow rather than a research assistant. Their role was to focus purely on impact, doing organising events, working with local community groups and co-curating an exhibition.

Focus on building relationships

One particular challenge that calls for patience and persistence is the high level of staff turnover and lack of institutional memory within organisations you are seeking to engage with. Over time you may find yourself having the same conversation with several different people.



Case study 6: Dr Keith Hyams, Reader in Political Theory and Interdisciplinary Ethics, University of Warwick (2013 cohort)

Dr Keith Hyams is a philosopher interested in how to apply the principles of ethics to policy areas such as climate change and international development. Keith's experience has highlighted the opportunities available to humanities researchers to engage with government, as well as the challenge of engaging with central government where high turnover can sometimes require creativity in approach.

Keith was approached by the Cabinet Office to be a 'philosopher in residence', engaging with civil servants on how to think about ethical issues. The leader

of the initiative was keen but was very busy, and with various PhD students on rotating placements working in the Cabinet Office there was a constant influx of new ideas and it was difficult to define the role precisely. However, the conversations paid off: he was invited to lead a workshop based around his research at the Cabinet Office and to brief a team in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport responsible for setting up the new Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation.

Keith found that another challenge was knowing how to express exactly what philosophy has to offer. He found it helpful to explain not only what his research suggested about particular ethical issues, but also how aspects of philosophical methodology could help policy makers think through difficult ethical issues themselves.

Perhaps most importantly, Keith found that building relationships and being persistent were key to finding ways to contribute: “the ethical issues that seemed most important to me weren’t always reflected in policy priorities – so I found out what the [policy makers] were interested in and made sure I explained clearly how my research spoke to those issues. As the relationship developed there were other opportunities to broaden debates and put new things on the agenda.”

Our conversations with course participants and alumni have shown that, despite the challenges, real, tangible impact can be achieved. For every piece of engagement that leads to clear change in policy or guidance, there will be hundreds of conversations that lead people to think differently, find out more, talk to different people or consider new evidence. The more people you interact with, the greater the accumulation of changes that will take place.

Tips for engagement

1. Where possible, be generous with your time and open-minded about what might produce impact in the long-term.
2. Be prepared to explain how you can help – several times if necessary.
3. Seek out colleagues with an engagement role or strong engagement experience, to ask for advice or assistance. You could also consider approaching someone to be a mentor.
4. Consider recruiting an “engagement fellow” rather than a research assistant, to focus purely on impact.
5. Note down your engagement activities and follow-up with people to see what has happened as a result – your prompting might itself spark renewed interest.

Conclusion

Engaging with public policy is not always easy, but as the experiences of our alumni show, it can be very rewarding and can make a significant, positive contribution to policy making.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach. For some academics, achieving good engagement will mean focusing on a key area of policy and specific parts of government; for others, it will require more wide-ranging engagement and a combination of activities. In our course we have helped academics build an individual strategy for engagement, whether for specific research projects or for their whole career.

This guide provides advice on how individual academics can improve their public policy engagement. As our report [How academia can work with government](#) shows, there is much more that others can do to support researchers to engage successfully. Universities, funders and the overarching funding body, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) need to do more to build opportunities for academics to engage, support more training opportunities to help them develop skills and knowledge, and foster greater support to academics when they put these recommendations into practice.

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 instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 +44 (0) 20 7747 0400  +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

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**Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA, United Kingdom**

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