

ARC Wessex Public Policy Fellowship Report

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Introduction

Public policy plays a central role in shaping societal outcomes across a wide range of domains, including health and social care, education, housing, and the economy. For researchers, engagement with public policy offers a critical pathway through which research evidence can inform decision-making, influence legislation, and contribute to meaningful social impact. This report outlines the work undertaken as part of the ARC Wessex Public Policy Fellowship, reflecting on the rationale for policy engagement, the role of Public Policy | Southampton, the activities undertaken during the Fellowship, and key learning points and recommendations for future researchers seeking to engage with the policy landscape.

What is Public Policy?

Public policy refers to the principles, laws, regulations, and actions — or deliberate inactions — taken by governments to address societal challenges and achieve defined goals. It encompasses a broad range of sectors, including health and social care, education, welfare, transport, and economic development. Public policy functions as a roadmap for governance, articulating governmental priorities and guiding the allocation of public resources. Policy development is shaped by a complex interplay of public opinion, political ideology, institutional structures, and available evidence, including academic research and administrative data.

In this context, evidence-informed policymaking seeks to integrate robust research evidence into policy processes, alongside political judgment and stakeholder perspectives. However, the translation of research into policy is neither automatic nor straightforward, requiring deliberate engagement, effective communication, and sustained relationships between researchers and policymakers.

Why is it Important for Researchers to Engage with Public Policy?

Engagement with public policy enables researchers to maximise the real-world impact of their work and is one of the most effective mechanisms for ensuring that research evidence informs decision-making. There are several key reasons why policy engagement is important for researchers.

Driving Impact: doing research that matters

Engaging with policymakers provides a direct route for research to influence government choices, policy design, and implementation. By contributing evidence to policy debates, consultations, and legislative processes, researchers can help shape interventions that improve population outcomes and address pressing societal challenges. Policy engagement ensures that research findings do not remain confined to academic publications but instead contribute to tangible change.

Providing Accountability and Supporting Future Funding

Much academic research is publicly funded, and there is a growing expectation from funders that researchers demonstrate the societal value and impact of their work. Engagement with policy provides a clear mechanism for demonstrating accountability for public investment in research. Furthermore, many major funders now require applicants to articulate credible pathways to impact. A track record of policy engagement can therefore strengthen funding applications and enhance future funding success.

Strengthening Academic and Institutional Reputation

Policy engagement can increase the visibility and credibility of both individual researchers and their institutions. By contributing to policy-relevant discussions and outputs, researchers can build reputational capital beyond academia, positioning themselves and their universities as trusted sources of expertise. This can support career development, foster new collaborations, and help bridge the gap between academic research and real-world application.

More broadly, policy engagement facilitates two-way learning, enabling researchers to gain insight into policymaker priorities, constraints, and timelines, while supporting more evidence-informed policymaking. However, effective engagement requires sustained effort, appropriate skills, and an understanding of the policy environment, including how and when to communicate evidence effectively.

Public Policy | Southampton

Public Policy | Southampton (PPS) is dedicated to creating policy impact by connecting researchers, students, and policymakers. Its core aim is to support evidence-informed policymaking by facilitating meaningful engagement between University of Southampton researchers and decision-makers at local, sub-national, national, and international levels.

PPS delivers this aim through a range of activities, including fellowship programmes, capacity-building initiatives, bespoke event management, policy brief development, training, and targeted communication strategies such as social media campaigns. The PPS team plays a strategic role in building and sustaining relationships with policymakers and in supporting researchers to navigate the policy landscape effectively. Through this work, PPS seeks to enhance the societal impact of academic research and contribute to positive policy change.

The ARC Wessex Public Policy Fellowship

The ARC Wessex Public Policy Fellowship was delivered in collaboration with Public Policy | Southampton and formed part of the wider ARC Wessex public policy work programme. Two Policy Fellows were funded, aiming to:

- Upskill researchers in understanding the types of data, evidence, and messaging required to influence policymakers in their respective fields.
- Enhance the local, sub-national, national, and international public policy impact of the ARC Wessex research portfolio.

Policy Fellows applied with an existing research project that demonstrated potential for public policy impact and alignment with one or more of the ARC Wessex thematic areas: Ageing and Dementia, Healthy Communities, Long Term Conditions, and Workforce and Health Systems.

The Fellowship provided structured support, training, and opportunities for practical engagement with policy processes.

Fellowship Activities

A wide range of activities were undertaken during the Fellowship, designed to build policy engagement skills and support real-world impact:

Mentoring and Training

The Fellows received mentoring from the Head of Public Policy | Southampton (G. Giles), providing strategic guidance on policy engagement and career development. Formal training included a policy masterclass, sessions on using the DeHavilland political intelligence database for stakeholder analysis, guidance on writing policy briefs, and training on how to make an impact at political party conferences.

Stakeholder Mapping and Intelligence Gathering

After training, stakeholder analysis was conducted using the DeHavilland database to identify relevant policymakers, All Party Parliamentary Groups, and organisations aligned with the research focus. This supported targeted engagement and informed communication strategies.

Direct Policy Engagement

The Fellows attended the Liberal Democrat Party Conference with the Head of Public Policy | Southampton, contributing to a deeper understanding of party-political processes and informal policy engagement opportunities. Contributions were made to calls for evidence, and research findings were shared directly with a Member of the House of Lords to inform ongoing debate on a current Bill.

Policy Outputs and Events

A policy brief was developed to distil key research findings into a concise, policy-relevant format in alignment with Government priorities outlined in the recent 10-year Health Plan for England. In addition, the Fellow organised and delivered a policy roundtable event in Westminster, bringing together policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers to discuss evidence and policy implications. Participation in a Leadership Training Programme further supported skill development and professional growth.

Key Learning and Reflections

Policy Engagement and Communication

Effective policy engagement requires clear, concise, and tailored communication. Policymakers have limited time, and communications should be brief, focused, and supported by punchy subject headings. LinkedIn emerged as a key platform for professional networking and policy engagement. Engaging with policymakers is resource-intensive, requiring dedicated time, funding, and institutional support.

Understanding the Policy Landscape

The Fellows significantly increased their awareness of the policy landscape, and this highlighted the differences between policymaker and researcher priorities. Policymakers are often driven by immediacy, feasibility, and political context, whereas researchers may prioritise methodological rigour and longer-term outcomes. Understanding these differences is essential for effective engagement.

Specific insights included the value of engaging with All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) and the distinct role of the House of Lords, where members do not have parliamentary assistants, allowing for more direct engagement. Access to tools such as the DeHavilland database was critical in navigating the political environment.

Institutional Support and Resourcing

Adequate resourcing is essential for meaningful policy engagement, including funding for conference attendance, policy brief development and printing, and event organisation. Regular, scheduled meetings with PPS staff were also valuable for maintaining momentum. Having a named contact within Public Policy | Southampton, in addition to senior leadership, was identified as a gap for providing continuity and ongoing support.

Some examples of costs

Policy event costs:

Hire for central London venue £1000-£3000

Transport (depending on location of event) £50-£300

Catering (per participant for lunchtime event) £25-35

Policy brief costs:

Design of a policy brief £250-£400

Printing of a [Policy Brief](#) (depending on the amount) £300-£400 A3 or A4 size

PPS can also provide support on a policy engagement strategy to run throughout a project to deliver meaningful engagement with policymakers and practitioners, developed before a project is funded. This can include support from Policy Associates (Doctoral students and Postdoctoral Fellows) to conduct stakeholder analysis and policy synthesis, and assist with developing a policy brief, conducting a stakeholder workshop and social media dissemination. This costs approximately £3,000 per research project and can be costed into a research grant at the outset.

The PPS website has further information on costs associated with policy engagement:

- [Pathways to impact | Costs to consider | Public Policy|Southampton | University of Southampton](#)
- [Consultancy costs | Public Policy|Southampton | University of Southampton](#)

Political party conferences:

The cost of attending a political party conference can vary significantly depending on the Party, the specific event and the attendee (discounted rates are often available for those from the third sector/charities). conference as a member of the third sector could cost £275, while business day passes for the Labour conference could be over £5,000.

Attending fringe events may be an additional cost but these can be useful in networking with politicians and stakeholders in a less structured environment as they are informal, often parallel discussions, panels, and receptions held outside the main, official agenda of large party conferences. They are organized by think tanks, charities, businesses, and media to engage policymakers, influence narratives, and network on specific issues.

Practical Recommendations and Top Tips

Based on the Fellowship experience, several practical recommendations can be made for researchers seeking to engage with public policy:

- Be aware that engaging with policymakers is very valuable but is resource-intensive, requiring dedicated time, funding, and institutional support.
- Engage with Public Policy | Southampton early, ideally at the research bid development stage, to embed impact planning from the outset.
- Consider costing a Policy Associate into research bids, recognising that this also requires active input from the research team.
- Take advantage of PPS training opportunities, such as policy masterclasses, which are beneficial for researchers at all career stages.
- Identifying key policy contacts in your relevant subject area is important and this takes time- looking at the list of All Party Parliamentary Groups and their members is a good place to start.
- Actively use professional networking platforms, particularly LinkedIn, to build and sustain policy-relevant connections.
- Policy briefs are a key method to communicate your research findings or analysis of specific issues in a concise way with policy stakeholders. Ensure recommendations are aligned with government priorities and that you have considered costs to the public purse.
- Maintain awareness of the policy landscape, including relevant consultations and calls for evidence.
- Undertaking a grey literature review can help map the current policy landscape by analysing reports, policy documents, guidelines and organisational publications that often capture real-time priorities and practice-oriented insights. Unlike academic literature reviews, which synthesis peer reviewed research, grey literature reviews focus on practical, policy-relevant evidence that may not appear in academic databases.
- Recognise that policymaker priorities differ from academic priorities and adapt messaging accordingly.
- Explore opportunities for ARC representation at party conferences, such as exhibition stands or fringe events, to raise visibility and build policy relationships.

Conclusion

The ARC Wessex Public Policy Fellowship provided a structured and supportive environment in which to develop policy engagement skills, build relationships with policymakers, and enhance the impact of research. The experience highlighted both the opportunities and challenges associated with engaging with public policy, underscoring the importance of strategic communication, institutional support, and sustained effort. By embedding policy engagement within research practice and drawing on specialist support such as that provided by Public Policy | Southampton, researchers can play a vital role in shaping evidence-informed policy and delivering meaningful societal impact.

Key resources

- Public Policy | Southampton: <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/publicpolicy/index.page>
- Public Policy | Southampton training: <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/publicpolicy/what-we-do/policy-training/policy-training.page>
- LinkedIn: <https://uk.linkedin.com/>
- List of All Party Parliamentary Groups: <https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-financial-interests/parliamentary-commissioner-for-standards/registers-of-interests/register-of-all-party-parliamentary-groups/>
- DeHavilland website: <https://dehavilland.co.uk/>
- DeHavilland Portal (contact Public Policy | Southampton to enquire about a log in: publicpolicy@soton.ac.uk)



About the authors



Dr Michelle Myall is an Associate Professor in the School of Health Sciences at the University of Southampton. Her research focuses on improving the health, care and wellbeing of people with complex needs from under-served communities. She leads an innovative research programme on domestic abuse where it co-exists with long-term/life-limiting illness, placing the voices of those with lived experience front and centre, to improve outcomes for patients and families.

“The Public Policy Fellowship has provided an invaluable experience to strengthen my knowledge and understanding to effectively bridge the translational gap between policy and research.

Opportunities to improve my leadership abilities, undertake training and work with members of the Public Policy team have equipped me with skills to engage with parliamentary groups and ministers and increase the impact of my research”



Dr Eloise Radcliffe is a Senior Research Fellow working in the School of Primary Care, Population Sciences and Medical Education, Faculty of Medicine at the University of Southampton. Eloise specialises in Care for Older People and Polypharmacy

“The public policy fellowship has been an incredibly rewarding experience that deepened my understanding of UK health policy and the real-world challenges policymakers face. Working with the Public Policy team has helped me to develop practical skills in policy analysis, stakeholder engagement and writing policy briefs.

A particular highlight was organising and delivering a policy event in Westminster, showcasing our medicines optimisation programme of research directly to parliamentarians and other policymakers.

The fellowship has provided a valuable opportunity to develop my communication skills and build networks, to help translate our research evidence into meaningful conversations to shape policy, and our future research.”