Transforming Evidence
for policy and practice

The Areas of Research Interest

A mechanism to improve evidence - policy/practice connections

March 2025

Introduction

Many governmental, policy and practice organisations struggle to access the evidence they need to improve their decision-making. While there is often a strong desire to inform decision-making by drawing on research evidence or expertise, it can be difficult to find and interpret relevant evidence. Research evidence frequently does not address policy or practice priorities directly. In addition, organisations' evidence needs are not well-articulated, meaning it is hard for those within, and for research producers outside to know how best to support effective decision-making. Within policy and practice organisations, this can result in a haphazard research and engagement strategy which fails to deliver the knowledge needed to support better public services.

The Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) are a mechanism to organise this process more effectively. Used well, ARIs can help policy and practice organisations ensure that their policy and practice operational priorities are reflected in research and engagement budgets and activities. Externally, ARIs help external stakeholders such as funders and universities understand how they can constructively support policy and practice organisations' work. ARIs can improve system functioning and connection and help deliver better public value for money from our services, and from our research spend.

These insights come from the experiences and insights of two social science experts in evidence use in policy. Between 2019-2023 we were seconded into the Government Office for Science, which owns the policy for Areas of Research Interest across UK government.

We were tasked with:

(a) optimising the production of ARIs across government and

(b) supporting effective and ethical engagement with ARIs across academic, intermediaries and funders.

During our time as Fellows, and subsequently, we have worked with most UK government departments, the devolved administrations, including Parliaments and Select Committees, public agencies and bodies, and local authorities interested in developing Areas of Research Interest. Increasingly, we are working with other organisations across the public sector to support the development of more effective research and engagement strategies aligned with policy and practice needs. Insights in this report and other resources have been shared and sense-checked with key stakeholders, and all responsibility (including for any errors) remains with us.

1. The Origins Of the Areas of Research Interest

The areas of research interest came from a review of UK's research councils by Sir Paul Nurse (Nurse, 2015). This review observed that "while many of Government's research needs were met by internal research and analysis or by public sector research establishments such as the National Laboratories", more could be done to support a more "focused national conversation between research, industry and government bringing more clarity regarding shared national priorities; and the ability to respond to new and emerging challenges in a prompt and co-ordinated way" (p.22). Nurse recommended a more strategic approach to R&D, partly budgetary, but particularly "maintaining 'statements of need' in terms of the most important research questions confronting the Department" (p.23). These recommendations were adopted by government, and since 2016, all UK government departments and some arms-length bodies have been asked to produce ARIs, which are usually refreshed every 2-3 years (GOS, 2024).

In the UK, ARIs have now been produced by most UK government departments and are increasingly being produced by other parts of the public sector, by the devolved administrations, by Westminster and devolved Parliamentary Select Committees, and by local authorities. Internationally, the US Federal Government and Agencies (the Learning Agendas) and regional and national governments globally have or are initiating ARI-like processes.

2.
What are Areas of Research Interest?

Areas of Research Interest are documents which summarise the topics, themes and questions about which policy and practice organisations are seeking input. They can be thought of as a set of expressed 'evidence needs'. When they are regularly updated, ARIs can be an effective way of communicating current policy and practice priorities. Not all knowledge and evidence needs felt by departments are, or can be expressed through ARIs; for example, where knowledge needs are politically sensitive, represent a security risk, or simply are being addressed through other mechanisms such as the Public Sector Research Establishments (Nurse, 2015). To date, over 2455 individual ARI questions have been produced. These vary greatly in terms of content, production and associated activities (Haddon and Sasse, 2018).

ARIs are intended to improve connection and discussion between departments and with other stakeholders and are one of the main ways by which organisations communicate their evidence gaps to external stakeholders like universities and funders. Knowledge can make many kinds of contribution to the policy process, such as help with problem-framing, comparing options, providing historical context, implementing, and evaluating. Getting important stakeholders - from industry, academia, funders, or public/private sector - involved in developing the ARIs can help them be more usable, and reflective of existing bodies of evidence and knowledge or gaps. Working in this way can help to build a community around the ARIs, which in theory will be more easily understood by groups who might respond to them.

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2455

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(Haddon and Sasse, 2018)

Policy and practice organisations often approach ARIs in different ways, depending on their specific needs.

ARIs can be:

- **Evidence needs reflecting organisational policy or practice priorities,** which helps external stakeholder to understand how problems and solutions are framed
- **An articulation of organisational research and engagement opportunities and activities,** which can improve transparency, coordination and accountability
- **Topics on which policy and practice organisations are soliciting input from external stakeholders,** which helps researchers, funders and intermediaries respond in a timely and constructive way.

It is helpful for policy and practice organisations to be clear about the aim(s) of their ARIs, whether that is trying to improve cross-departmental connections within government, bringing some coherence to internal R&D strategy, or prompting external stakeholders about useful foci for research and knowledge exchange. Because ARIs are regularly updated, the aims of the ARI can evolve according to the organisational needs at the time of preparation.

3
How do organisations use ARIs as a mechanism and what benefits do they bring?

The overall aim of ARIs is to enable decision-makers to access more relevant evidence and expertise. Policy and practice organisations use ARIs in several different ways, depending on the local context (see Table 1). Factors which might affect how organisations use their ARIs include whether there is leadership of the science system within the organisation such as a Chief Scientist, the size of the team and budget, the relationships between science/analysis and policy teams, history and ongoing practices of engagement with external stakeholders, and the political sensitivity or security concerns around public sharing of knowledge needs.

Table 1: Summary of approaches to ARIs, how they are used, and the benefits they bring

To identify research needs reflecting policy and practice priorities

Use:

This offers external stakeholders (including other policy and practice organisations) a window into how an organisation frames problems and solutions, and communicates cross-government, or cross-departmental priorities internally

Benefits:

- More collaborative work: improving knowledge of other depts science systems will allow for better collaboration
- Opportunities to reduce waste through shared problem framing, collaboration and mutual learning

To articulate research and engagement opportunities and activities

Use:

- Increases internal and external visibility and coordination of research and engagement activities
- Identifies processes and structures by which evidence informs decision-making

Benefits:

- A more accountable and transparent decision-making process
- Research, data and evidence-positive culture within decision-making settings

To solicit input from external stakeholders

Use:

Allows policy organisation to arrange research and engagement activities strategically; identifies opportunities for collaboration with researcher and funders

Benefits:

- Access to clearer and more relevant evidence
- More effective use of research and engagement resource with less waste

The process of ARI development and publication can help organisations to **improve coordination and collaboration within and between policy and practice organisations.** Within the UK government, there is network of ARI Officials who meet regularly to share updates and best practice around the process of producing, publishing and using ARIs. This forum provides opportunities for government departments to learn about shared interests, including instances where one department has already commissioned research which addresses an ARI raised by another. ARIs enable organisations to identify and create opportunities for collaboration and mutual learning , as well as joint research and engagement activities around shared interests. ARIs therefore provide a mechanism to reduce waste and duplication of effort. This process is helped by the ARI database which brings all ARIs into one place and allows identification of shared interests.

ARIs can **improve how policy and practice organisations organise their science and analysis:** As policy or practice teams, and senior leaders are engaged in the process of soliciting, prioritising and agreeing ARIs, it becomes easier for evidence teams to argue for resources, and make the case for evidence and data within decision-making. The process of ARI production helps to build relationships and improve communication about evidence, building a research-positive culture.

ARIs (and Science Systems) are a very effective mechanism to support development of R&D strategy for policy and practice organisations. It is often difficult for a policy organisation, such as a government department or a local authority, to have a clear overview of what research has been commissioned, what research/expert engagement activities are ongoing, and where gaps are. By producing ARIs, organisations can improve connections between policy and evidence teams and enable more strategic decisions about how research and engagement budgets and capabilities are spent. The ARI process helps organisations to articulate and operationalise a science strategy which improves transparency and accountability (Oliver et al., 2022).

Finally, **ARIs help policy and practice organisations connect more effectively with research, funding and other external stakeholders.** ARIs can be a statement of research areas around which they would welcome collaboration or input, or a set of topics around which input would be welcome. ARIs are a very useful tool to organise stakeholder engagement and be more effective in influencing key partners (Boaz and Oliver, 2023). For example, ARIs could form the basis of a conversation on a policy topic, scope out a futures-thinking exercise on a specific topic, or illustrate the organisational research portfolio.

It is important to note that most ARIs can probably be at least partly addressed using existing evidence, so often focused discussion (i.e. knowledge mobilisation) with experts is a useful first step. Where there is a body of published research, evidence synthesis can also be a helpful response. ARIs can also be indications of likely research commissioning priorities, which allows researchers and universities to prepare for commissioning calls e.g. setting up discussions and collaborations. Where new research is needed, ARIs can be a useful way of communicating priorities to funders.

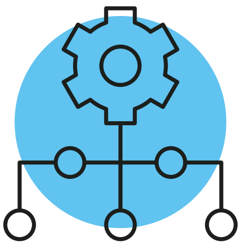
4. How do organisations produce ARIs?

While every organisation takes a different approach to develop their ARIs, depending on their needs and resources, there are some common stages outlined below (see Figure 1).

These steps are not intended as a 'how to' guide, and government readers should refer to the ARI guidance produced by the Government Office for Science.

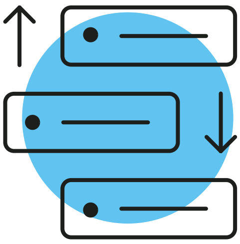
ARIs are intended to improve connections, but it takes significant work, resource, and skill to make this happen consistently. Policy and practice organisations different in their capacity to produce ARIs and undertake related engagement work. Where resources and skills are limited, departments rely on external partners for engagement activities, which risks becoming research rather than policy-led.

Figure 1: Summary of common stages in the ARI process



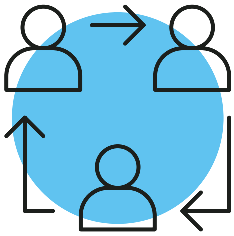
Finding

1. Create and lead a process to build ownership for the ARIs across the organisation.
2. Embed ARIs within the other research and engagement activities.



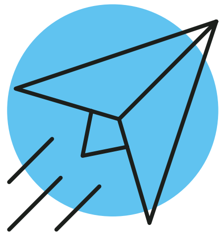
Prioritising

3. Solicit knowledge needs from all policy and practice teams to build awareness and ownership of the ARIs
4. Use a transparent process to finalise a shortlist for the ARIs



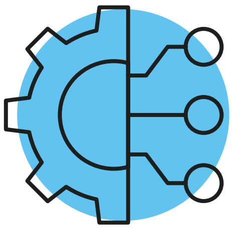
Engage key stakeholders

5. Raise awareness of the new ARIs relevant to the organisation amongst key research, funding and other partners.
6. Use engagement to identify existing relevant evidence or ongoing work.



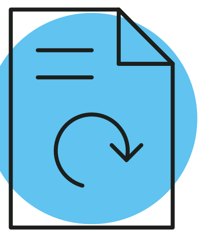
Publishing and sharing

7. Senior endorsement of the ARI helps give credibility and traction.
8. The ARI database can help raise awareness and identify useful next steps, as can communicating with knowledge brokers.



Using the ARIs

9. Choose an appropriate, cost-effective engagement approach (e.g. commissioning a policy brief, evidence synthesis, or hosting a knowledge mobilisation event).
10. Work with key stakeholders to identify resonable next steps for individual ARIs



Refreshing ARIs

11. Refreshing offers an opportunity to reconnect with stakeholders and assess new evidence relevant to the organisation.
12. Regular updating keeps the ARIs relevant and credible, offering more traction with partners

Assessing impact

13. Identify clear goals for ARis to help organisations evaluate whether they have had a positive impact.
14. Work with stakeholders to gather information about how ARis are being used

5.
What helps policy and practice organisations get the most from their ARIs?

ARIs work best for policy and practice organisations where they are connected to existing systems and structures within the organisation. If organisations can connect ARI production with other regular processes (such as budgetary reviews), they are more likely to have resource considerations incorporated. Allocation of internal resourcing for engagement with researchers and intermediaries helps policy and practice organisations make the most of their connections, and the ARIs helps structure this resourcing allocation.

Connection with regular organisational cycles also helps ARIs to be regularly updated, remaining relevant. This also helps the ARIs to reflect policy agendas, which in turn increases the ownership felt of the ARIs by departments.

If done correctly, ARIs should naturally flow from a good research and engagement strategy which articulates useful opportunities for users to respond to. This helps organisations articulate a clear 'offer' and 'ask' for each ARI (e.g. an 'offer' commissioning of research and an 'ask for proposals, or an 'offer' of closed-door roundtable, and an 'ask' for experts to bring broad representation of knowledge. This connection between the policy and evidence functions also helped external stakeholders to understand where ARIs come from.

Engaging early with relevant stakeholders can also help the final ARIs be more accessible to outside experts. Often, stakeholders find ARI difficult to work with as the background and context is not always obvious, and/or the particular knowledge gap was not easy to identify. By spending time discussing and re-framing the problems ARIs can reflect existing knowledge and policy or practice priorities.

To make the ARIs work well, teams with policy and practice organisations need the skills and time to connect with colleagues in policy teams, and with external stakeholders. The Government Office for Science offers support and advice to UK government departments and devolved administrations to develop and publish their ARIs, as well as providing formal networks to share best practice and raise awareness.

6.
What common challenges do organisations face around their ARIs?

It can be tempting for busy policy and practice organisations to 'outsource' the work of producing ARIs to researchers. While it is a valuable experience for researchers and other stakeholders to be involved in the ARI process, it is important that the ARIs remain policy-led to ensure that the activities stimulated by ARIs are relevant to topical policy and practice priorities.

Similarly, most research production and knowledge mobilisation is driven by researcher priorities, rather than by policy or practice needs. Where funding is available to support knowledge mobilisation, it is often used to drive researcher-led knowledge mobilisation, rather than being focused on the ARIs. All engagement has a cost implication for policy and practice organisations, so more care needs to be taken to ensure opportunities are used wisely.

Many policy and practice organisations have a limited resources for research and engagement, and staff are not always trained to identify and use engagement mechanisms effectively. This kind of relational work is skilled and time-consuming. This can cause organisations to over-rely on certain R&D or engagement approaches (e.g. fellowships), which might not always be the most cost-effective approach. There is often duplication in the research and engagement activities undertaken by policy and practice organisations. It can be difficult to identify shared areas of interest which offer opportunities to work together, which can lead to competition between external stakeholders for limited policymakers or practitioners' time.

7.
What is needed to optimise the ARIs as a mechanism to support evidence for policy and practice?

The ARIs are stimulating useful connections across the public sector and are being used strategically by funders to inform their work, such as the 2024/2025 investment in Global Evidence synthesis infrastructure by the ESRC and Wellcome. There is emerging evidence that researchers are responding to ARIs, using them to shape research proposals. However, the potential impact of ARIs as a mechanism to unlock the value of research for policy and practice is not yet fully realised.

ARIs can be usefully responded to by funders, universities, researchers, intermediaries. Skilled triaging and close working between all stakeholders would be needed to identify and act on these opportunities. Systematic analysis of the ARIs can identify: opportunities for new research addressing evidence gaps, opportunities to mobilise existing datasets (e.g. cohort studies) or evidence (through synthesis or knowledge mobilisation), coordination of knowledge exchange, identification of skills and methods required to inform future policy-relevant curricula. In addition, the existence of the ARIs offers an opportunities for (a) departments to jointly engage with academia and external stakeholders around areas of shared interest (e.g., jointly commission a research programme) or (b) for more co-ordinated problem-framing to influence policy discussions, based on ARIs.

Effective responses to ARIs require joint working across funders, intermediaries, universities and government. To make this happen, leadership of ARI engagement would enable allocation of resources, and indicate importance of these cogs e.g... to the rest of the science system. At present, this only happens where there are unusually motivated or well-resourced individuals, but more could be done to embed ways of working systemically.

8. What do we still need to know?

The ARIs are still a relatively new intervention in the UK's science and policy environment, and there are outstanding questions for about how to make these work as well as possible:

- It would be useful to get more data about the uptake and use of ARIs by external experts. Understanding barriers to their use by academics, universities and other external stakeholders could inform more effective production of ARIs by public sector organisations.
- Policy and practice organisations often want to make more strategic use of their engagement resource. It would be helpful for policy and practice organisations to have clearer guidance about when and how to engage with external stakeholders and when other approaches offer better value for money. One approach might be a toolkit for engagement, which helps organisations articulate their goals from the ARI process and identifies appropriate cost-effective engagement mechanisms to support realisation of these goals.
- There is no clear consensus on the effectiveness, costs and benefits of different engagement mechanisms. This is an area for experimentation (Heckels, 2020). A systematic review of types of engagement mechanisms and how they work, for whom, and in which way would be very useful.
- A clear priority is to investigate funder institutional capacity to support this work, by mapping existing work across funding councils against ARIs, and facilitating greater engagement between departments and UKRI colleagues. Funders may also wish to investigate how to support better use of existing evidence and expertise and extract more value from the research community to prevent the risk of duplicating existing evidence.
- Finally, methods to track and evaluate the impacts of ARIs would help policy and practice organisations understand how to refine and use them more effectively and would help funders and researchers develop a more sophisticated understanding of what evidence is useful, when, and how.

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