



Evaluation of research-policy engagement

Centre for Urban Wellbeing Policy Fellowship Pilot Scheme

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The Centre for Urban Wellbeing

The Centre for Urban Wellbeing (CUWb) is committed to exploring and modelling inclusive and transdisciplinary approaches to urban wellbeing research and practice. We are developing co-productive processes to include people from across a wider urban system to shape wellbeing. We develop mutually-beneficial ways of working with policy and community partners to help ensure local solutions can be informed by the best global research and evidence to address wellbeing inequalities in urban environments.

The Centre for Urban Wellbeing has five working principles:

1. To question the concept of wellbeing, helping to develop more sensitive definitions and increase the impact of wellbeing research
2. To consider the conditions needed for innovation at the interface between research and practice
3. To investigate the use of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methods to develop more rigorous and inclusive evidence to inform systemic and complex policy challenges
4. To seek out, support and sustain meaningful engagement with stakeholders at all levels, evaluating the processes and outcomes of co-productive working
5. To work with humility, encouraging reflection and 'slow' working to overcome the biases that hubris and speed are prone to create

For more information: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/centre-urban-wellbeing/home-page.aspx>.

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Executive Summary

This briefing evaluates the CUWb Policy Fellowship scheme which was a pilot project conducted in 2021-2 with the aim of supporting public policy makers and civic leaders to engage with researchers to enhance collective capacity to address wellbeing inequalities.

This report explores the effectiveness of a pilot policy fellowship conducted by the Centre for Urban Wellbeing during 2021-22. The pilot scheme focussed on collaborative models of work with academics and policy makers in the research of wellbeing in urban spaces.

Research evidence on the usefulness of research-policy engagement is lacking, with descriptions and evaluations of such activity being poorly specified. It has been noted that there may be a mismatch between the aims of researchers and policy makers, and barriers exist in getting beyond the familiar or established aims of participants' own organisational remits and cultures (Oliver et al 2022)



This report has three main purposes:

1. It provides a brief review of the existing literature on policy fellowship schemes
2. It aims to establish the perceived benefits and barriers to the effectiveness of the pilot scheme
3. It offers recommendations for higher education institutions who may be considering developing similar policy fellowship schemes.

In total, 12 policy fellows, who engaged with 12 academics from the University of Birmingham who participated in the pilot scheme. The fellows included policy makers at local authorities and civic leaders in the community and voluntary sector. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a small sample of three participants, and lasted around one hour each. These were transcribed and thematically coded to identify benefits, barriers and best practice recommendations.



Overall we found that the scheme has been beneficial in:

- providing a named research contact at the University whom they felt they could approach for future advice and input;
- introducing new topics/issues to their policy and programme agendas which they hadn't previously considered;
- offering a two-way learning process between practical application and research evidence;
- 're-igniting' an interest in linking back to academic research;
- opportunities to develop current practice within their organisation/team.

The principal challenges or limitations to the scheme were:

- Practical difficulties in making diary arrangements for the meetings;
- The meetings felt to short to provide enough time within an hour to share own on the ground experiences;
- Policy Fellows were often working to more accelerated project timescales to the academics and this could lead to lost opportunities to inform key policy strategies or project/programme activities;
- Differences in use of technical language
- Challenges of creating a more 'symbiotic' long term relationship between the academic and fellow

Recommendations:

1. Create a regular newsletter to act as channel of communication between researchers and policy fellows;
2. Offer opportunities to familiarise with each others terminology in order to bridge the gap between academics and policy fellows, so that communication may be more effective;
3. Co-develop knowledge sharing events which have shared aims and clear briefs, so that academics and stakeholders alike can identify priority gaps in research and how they may get involved;
4. Maintain the network of Policy Fellows by extending the scheme and launching an alumni network with regular events;
5. Provide information and opportunities for Policy Fellows to pursue additional CPD, masters level of professional doctorate qualifications.



Details of the CUWb Policy Fellowship Scheme

The **aims** of the pilot scheme were:

- To support public policy makers working on urban and community wellbeing initiatives, through tailored one to one research meetings with selected academics;
- To gain academic insights on policy and practice relating (initially) to public and community health, local economies, neighbourhood planning, sustainability, social inclusion;
- To provide academic input on the use of wellbeing metrics, innovative methods, data analysis or evidence reviews;
- To provide academics with opportunities to engage with and influence policy makers, understand their programme priorities, knowledge needs and timescales.

RESEARCH PARTNERS



Involvement in the scheme included the following **activities**:

- A scoping interview was carried out with the Policy Fellow to gather background information and develop focus for meetings with academics;
- The Policy Fellow was matched with up to three academics who are briefed on the topic area identified by fellows;
- 1:1 meetings were held, lasting 1 hour using a topic brief/guide;
- Follow up information was sent by the academics or optional further meetings held to discuss specific projects;
- Fellows and Academics were signposted to further UoB research-policy opportunities and attend CUWb events.



Background on research-policy engagement

Policy fellowship schemes provide a platform for policy makers to engage directly with academics, so that knowledge and ideas can be shared, to work towards the creation of equitable urban spaces. They particularly seek to scale up community-based approaches in rethinking these spaces.

There are a number of key benefits to engaging with stakeholders, this includes a greater public acceptance of proposed plans, due to the public being given a voice in the process, in addition to it increasing the likelihood that an impact will be had on the decision-making process and wider dissemination of research findings (Haddaway et al., 2017).

Despite this, it has its limitations, notably the potential for certain groups to be marginalised, in addition to it commanding a significant amount of time and money.

The importance of knowledge exchange is becoming increasingly recognised in the UK, with the government itself asking its departments to produce lists of priority research areas to guide future collaborations between academics and policy makers (Oliver and Boaz, 2019). Currently the UK government sets aside £9 billion a year to fund academic research, highlighting the demand for this type of engagement (Institute for Government, 2018).

Knowledge exchange is not only important due to it informing emerging policies but also due to its scrutinising of existing policies.

The evidence for how effective these strategies are for improving policies and subsequently the lives of communities is limited, with claims having been made that it can be a financial drain rather than an asset. Oliver and Boaz (2019) argue that more work needs to be done setting out how evidence can be produced which is usable in a real-world setting.

The Institute for Government (2018) have made several recommendations for how knowledge transfer between academics and policy makers can be made more beneficial:

- address the disconnect between government data analysts and the policy makers themselves.
- induction schemes could mobilize academics to provide input on key issues or new policy areas
- a database of academics and their areas of specialty should be made for policy makers to view, to enable them to make quick connections.
- departments should be more open with senior government officials about the areas which they are lacking in an understanding of
- academics should be more transparent about where their knowledge would be best placed



Results and Discussion

Benefits

In the interviews conducted with the Policy Fellows, the interviewees were asked why they were drawn to the pilot policy fellowship scheme and what they perceived as the benefits to it. The scheme was described as a 'very enjoyable process' which facilitates 'informal chats', allowing both academics and policy makers to 'fine tune' their knowledge, surrounding the issues facing cities and their wellbeing. The ability for this process to provide a fresh perspective on the policy making process, is highlighted in the following quote:

"When you're practising you don't have a lot of time to keep up with the most current research (...) sometimes you are so engrossed in implementing what you knew in the past about a particular area, that you tend not to keep abreast with the new developments".

The 'flexible' nature of the scheme means it is accessible to policy makers who often find it difficult to incorporate knowledge exchange into their everyday practices. Its relaxed and time efficient format, through short 'brain dump' style meetings, was therefore a key benefit of the scheme to policy makers.

Another recurring theme was policy makers being attracted to the scheme, due to them wanting to be involved in a collaborative model of work with academics, in order to build bridges and strong relations between both sides. This can be seen below:

"I suppose that's the attraction of being involved in this scheme, to look at ways of actually trying to bring the two sides together... bridge 'the gulf'".

Furthermore, the Policy Fellows wanted to keep up to date with academic research in order to somewhat inform their decision making. This was explained here by a policy maker working for one local authority:

"I think that was my main motivation, that you were more current with the research (...) it can feed into something we're working on right now, help determine planning applications and shape the built environment in this area".

This demonstrates the demand for academic engagement and its ability to influence policies which can have a direct impact on communities and their wellbeing. This was flagged by one policy maker as a key benefit of the scheme to academics:

"They can know that their work is having a positive impact on communities, for instance, and on wellbeing (...) I think that's very appealing to an academic".



This highlights the fact that the scheme is not a one-sided exchange, but a mutually beneficial two-way relationship. When asked about the benefits of the policy fellowship scheme, the interviewees responses were positive, with people describing it as potentially having a 'real impact', which in turn, 'adds power to the research'.

The feeling that this fellowship scheme can unite professionals from different backgrounds was mentioned throughout the interviews. This is demonstrated in the following comment of a policy official:

"The connections, the networks, the access that you will have, to be able to draw on other relevant policy research or other areas of research that you can draw and add to this."

There is a belief that the connections and network which is being built can help create discussions which will have a real impact on policy making surrounding urban wellbeing, in addition to policy makers having access to new organisations and ways of thinking through the University's wide range of contacts.

Furthermore the scheme's direct approach to knowledge transfer was valued by participants, as it has the ability to influence planning policies in real-time rather than there being a time delay, and to reach 'policy-workers' as well as policy-makers and managers . This is demonstrated in the statements below:

"I think that's the key benefit to us from that discussion, that it can feed into something we're working on right now and help determine planning applications and shape the built environment in this area".

"I wanted to make sure that this was more of an open scheme and targeted at local authority officers and managers. Because quite a lot of it is directors who are talking to each other which seemed quite a closed circle, so I think this is as you mentioned, a much more direct scheme".

Another emerging theme was the ability of the scheme to provide an opportunity for the creation of new relationships between academics and practitioners. One interviewee shared their hope of *"a network of fellows forming who have all met, who have all had that kind of experience"*. Not only does it facilitate relationships between the matched policy officials and academics, but it also opens the doors for connections to be made with organisations who may not have previously been accessible, through the University's wide range of contacts.



Barriers

Although the scheme has many perceived benefits, academics and practitioners also pointed out that there are barriers which need to be overcome in order to improve the process. The main barriers seem to relate to time. Academics and policy makers often work to different time frames, with their workplace requiring different tasks to be achieved within different lengths of time. Whilst local councils have to address pressing issues in their council, academics frequently work to longer time scales, allowing them to go into more depth with their work. This was mentioned in an interview with a local government policy maker, who pointed out the difference in expectations and time frames, as seen below:

“What is your timetable?” (...) “As soon as possible (laughs), that’s how it always works in a local authority and the NHS, it should have been done yesterday. If there’s been a need identified in the population, the sooner you are able to demonstrate that you are addressing that need, the sooner everybody will be at ease. There’s an inherent sense of urgency”.

This sentiment was shared by another policy maker who’s had past experiences with the challenges of these differing time frames:

“I think what we’ve found is that there are these time issues in terms of the kind of timescale that academics work to which is often quite different to that of practitioners”.

These differences could cause issues for the policy fellowship scheme as it might be hard to get both parties involved on a similar time frame. Due to this, it is important to put in place means to improve communication between the parties and continue championing the flexible nature of the scheme, so that policy makers have access to knowledge as and when they need.

However, this could also be turned to an advantage, by developing a more symbiotic and long-term relationship between Policy Fellows and academics. For example, one Policy Fellow flagged the *benefit* of academics having longer project time-frames, due to it allowing topic areas to be covered in more depth and current debates to be kept up to date on. One practitioner was particularly interested in getting academic grounding on the impacts of Covid-19 on local plans they made pre-Covid, to ensure they still meet the current needs of communities. This demonstrates the motivation amongst policy-makers to stay up to date with research and emerging ideas, something which is facilitated through the conversations with academics provided by CUWb. The importance of knowledge exchange was also seen as important due to the lack of time that policy officials have in their everyday work, to stay up to date with the current research. This is outlined below:



“When you're practising you don't have a lot of time to keep up with the most current research... you sometimes are so engrossed in implementing what you knew in the past about a particular area, that you tend not to keep abreast with the new developments... so, I thought that would be very useful”.

Another perceived barrier which was mentioned by a lot of practitioners was the differences in language used by the two parties. Although the academic and the practitioner work in a similar field and are often trying to achieve similar things, the way they go about it and the language they use can be different. This view is shared below:

“I think some basic things around different ways of communicating. The way language is used, and just basic things. Although we're working in a similar field the way we express ourselves and communicate seems to me to be quite different.”

This could cause confusion when trying to use each other's work. Further work to establish a common 'lingo' would be beneficial to break down this language barrier, as although academics share their research and papers, it is not always accessible to those who aren't from an academic background.

Furthermore, some policymakers felt as though they weren't on the same level as academics, feeling as though they were potentially less knowledgeable. This created a perception that the policy makers were only there to learn from academics, rather than having interesting insights to add of their own. This is demonstrated below:

“It definitely felt like they were the experts that we were coming to interview and find out more from. And there was so much that we could learn from them. But we were also there to also share our experience and knowledge. And I guess that kind of came out toward the end of both conversations where they were like, oh, you've also got something to add here. They just kind of felt we were coming to take things from them and actually we were also offering.”

Although the collaboration ended up being mutual, the perception that academics are only there to help the policy makers might deter stakeholders from getting involved, as they might not feel as though they want to just learn from academics. Advertising the policy fellowship scheme as mutually beneficial would potentially encourage more individuals and organisations to get involved as they might feel as though they have more to offer.



Additionally, a lack of knowledge about policy fellowship schemes resulted in a lack of openness and enthusiasm from some partakers. One interviewee expressed their concerns about how the scheme would actually take shape, as seen below:

“I couldn’t really picture, I guess I wasn’t really clear what it was that we were going to do with them, during the meetings with academics. I think the initial 15-20 minutes was a little bit like what am I here for and how are we going to do this?”

Advertisement and communication before the meetings would make the process clearer to policy makers, explaining what they are there for and how best to go about using the allotted meeting times. Creating a general document with questions to guide the conversations could be done to help overcome this uncertainty.

The last theme which emerged from the interviews was specific to regional cities such as Birmingham. Practitioners who worked in Birmingham felt that being in the Midlands has a direct impact on their work. They feel that if this scheme was happening in London, it would gain a lot more traction, as demonstrated below:

“And I often begrudgingly say, if we were in London some of what we’ve done would probably have national traction, in a way that it just doesn’t get here because we’re in the Midlands.”

They also felt as though they do not have access to the influential figures, who could have a real impact, and saw the Policy Fellowship scheme as providing some potential value in enabling them to do so:

“We don’t always have access to the right leadership, or we don’t always have access to the most influential decision makers. So, you kind of need to get on the ladder to get to those audiences.”

Enrolling key leaders the Policy Fellow scheme would therefore help promote it, increasing its visibility and ultimately improve the benefits of networking for scheme alumni.



Best Practice Outcomes

Many of the themes emerging from the interview analysis aligned with the Institute for Government's recommendations (2018). The need for the creation of a network allowing different parties to communicate and reach out surrounding specific topics would be greatly beneficial. In the specific case of this policy fellowship scheme, a policy maker highlights the need for the creation of a network of academics and policy makers who care about urban wellbeing. Through the creation of this network, academics and policy makers pointed out that a lot of measures could be put into place in order to get involved and have a positive impact. One of the ways to do so would be through the creation of a newsletter for the people involved in the policy fellowship scheme. This would enable policy makers to hear about and attend seminars and research groups that are relevant to their work and research, whilst also allowing them to become more embedded in the University community.

The importance of not only having one-to-one meetings, but those that incorporate a wider range of academics from several disciplines was recommended. This would allow policy makers to engage in conversations with people with a range of perspectives at once, as described here below:

"If you add other people into the mix, it can really take the conversation into really interesting directions (...) So having a wider range, a wider pool of academics to match with and meet every time."

This sentiment of incorporating a more diverse range of people was also expressed by one of the centre's board members, who shared their desire for the fellowship scheme to be targeted towards local authority officers and managers as it can be quite hard for them to gain information from a select few directors who tend to be involved in schemes of this type. This can be seen below:

"I wanted to make sure that this was a more of an open scheme and targeted at local authority officers and managers. Because quite a lot of it is directors who are talking to each other which seemed quite a closed circle, so I think this is as you mentioned a much more direct scheme."

This focus on involving people from all levels of policy making would contribute to more advancement and education than if the scheme was only targeted at the top officials. Furthermore, this would enable a greater number of people to get involved in the scheme. This openness and wide-reaching nature of the scheme is therefore an important characteristic to progress with as the scheme grows.



Another recurring recommendation with regards to how the meetings and conversations should be structured, was to have a generalised framework written up, to guide the meetings and prevent confusion, which could eat into the allotted discussion time. One policy maker felt confused about the input they were supposed to offer at one of the talks set up by the Centre and subsequently one of the board members recommended that a brief be sent out to academics, so that they know what to expect from the conversation and where their insights could be best placed. This is seen below:

“What we want to try and avoid is that you have to keep repeating yourself when you meet each academic (...) potentially draw together a little briefing for the academics, so that they've got a good expectation of where the conversation would go and potentially how they could prepare for it.”

Policy Fellows had several ideas as to what format this conversation should take. One described the exchange as an ‘informal’ conversation between academic and policy maker which is ‘framed’ by pre-written questions, finishing by drawing together all the points which were made during the conversation. This model would allow policy makers and academics alike to prepare for the conversation whilst alleviating the pressure of formal talks.

There were also, however concerns from Policy Fellows as to whether too much directiveness would however *“limit the conversation”*. They instead favoured a guiding document that would include:

“some big, broad areas as in how to structure a conversation, but not overly prescriptive at all. So, something really general that would fit everybody and that you could stray from as much as you wanted”.

This demonstrates the desire of policy officials to have a scheme that is flexible. Other ideas favoured by the Fellows were more knowledge sharing events, which would bring a larger number of academics and stakeholders together, perhaps on an annual basis, and written reports of the meetings with academics would also be of value.

“A knowledge sharing event, I think, would be quite good, to bring some of the people who are coming from an academic perspective and those of you who are doing it every day, to explore what the priorities and gaps might be. So that could be something we could work on together.”

“We talked also about maybe having some sort of written response and whether that's a summary of our discussion, or even just lists of further reading or things that are relevant to our discussion”.



Conclusion

The pilot policy fellowship scheme has been effective in providing a platform for policy makers and academics to inform each other on their respective knowledge. Policy makers expressed that due to their work being limited by time constraints, they lack time themselves to keep up to date with current research, making this scheme particularly important.

Participants described a divide between the worlds of academia and policy making, partly due to differences in the way they communicate. Another limitation of the scheme is that it doesn't reach enough people.

The creation of a newsletter would allow anyone to join and stay informed on the work the Centre is doing, giving them the option to get involved if they feel as though they may bring value to the project. Using this newsletter, academics and stakeholders alike would be able to find materials to prepare for upcoming conferences, making the conversations at said conference more effective, rather than having some people feel underprepared. This would promote the scheme as being open and wide-reaching.

Overall the scheme's success lies in the up-to-date theoretical grounding which the knowledge exchange process has provided policy makers with. It has been labelled a 'direct' scheme which is accessible to policy officials of multiple levels, facilitating the creation of relationships and networks, that for years to come seek to aid in the making of policies which are thoughtful, inclusive, and impactful.

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