



QuickStart guide: Building a community-policy-research ecosystem

Who is it for?

This guide is for **university research institutes, local or regional governments/municipalities** and **community and voluntary sector organisations** who want to experiment with new ways of working together in their places.

How will it help?

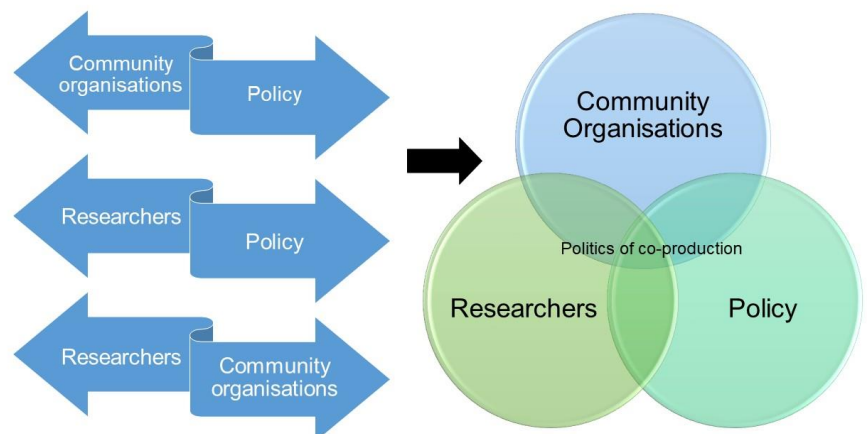
It outlines how to plan for building an ecosystem, with practical steps and ideas for working together to build and sustain effective relationships, based on a case study in the West Midlands.

Why shift from two-way relationships to a relational ecosystem?

There is growing investment in national research infrastructures aimed at engaging with and impacting policy. And a wealth of good practice in community and public engagement among universities and local authorities.

There are fewer examples of efforts to sustain connections between policy makers, community organisations *and* academic researchers or research institutes.

The current decline in public trust in expertise and government institutions, and acknowledgement of the potential limitations of co-production in research and public service design means that we need to move towards more **relational forms of engagement** which brings these voices into one room, builds interdependence, interactions and sustains relationships over the long term.



UK Case study: University of Birmingham

As part of the University of Birmingham's strategic civic university agreement to support the regional economy and wellbeing of local communities, from 2022 the [Centre for Urban Wellbeing](#) has been working in partnership with [Birmingham Voluntary Services Council](#) (BVSC), and the [West Midland Combined Authority](#) (WMCA) to create spaces for research, policy and community voices to connect and build relationships, to share knowledge, evidence and understanding, to co-develop solutions and recommendations on place-based health and wellbeing inequalities.

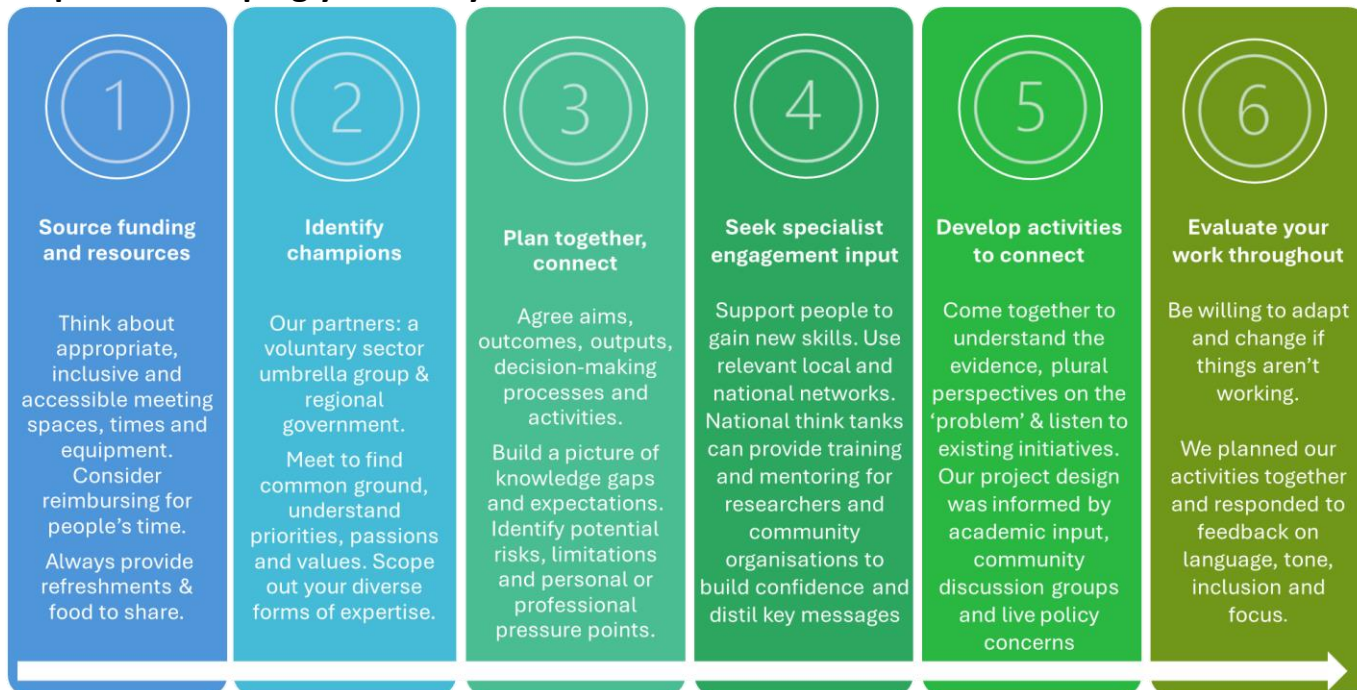
Plan for building relationships

Cross-sector working can often feel transactional, focussed on getting the job done. To avoid this, it is essential to identify the challenges, acknowledge hierarchies of power and potential points of conflict, and carefully nurture points of connection. Some of our key recommendations include:

- **Enhance** and practice your skills in facilitation, dealing with conflict, holding inclusive spaces for people.
- **Build Momentum:** Capture and share stories from your work about what people valued, what worked and what didn't, any actions taken or changes being made.
- **Design Meetings for Connection:** Be aware of your language, make invites and spaces welcoming and inclusive, use community spaces, use movement and activities to connect with people.

- **Adapt as you Learn:** Don't wait until the work is done before you use what you are learning. Change things as you go even though it may be messier and harder – keep the focus on the outcomes and forge ahead.
- **Imagined Future:** Be aware of historical interactions and also move forward to an imagined future together. Have a shared vision for what wellbeing could be.

Steps to developing your ecosystem



Keep up the good work

Building a relational ecosystem involves long-term cross sectoral partnership working. We know that working across large organisations is challenging, so working across sectors can seem daunting. To sustain this work, you could try:

- **Co-create:** Seek a joint commitment from all participants to share the framing of the problem(s) to be addressed and to formally consider any recommendations which emerge from the activities
- **Listen and Learn:** Seek feedback on the process from all participants to learn from diverse perspectives and question your own assumptions about what is working well or not.
- **Ask for Help:** Invite opportunities to shape the next steps together and be realistic about the level of funding, time and resources needed
- **Experiment:** How about establishing your own policy fellowship scheme, developing a community of practice, planning a policy commission? You could involve students in work placements and co-host events with your public affairs, public engagement, community involvement or public relations teams.

Useful resources: There are many specialist networks and organisations building an evidence base and guidance on effective knowledge exchange. In the UK, examples include: [Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement \(CAPE\)](#) - supports engagement between academics and policy professionals; [NESTA](#) – UK innovation agency for social good, created the [engaging with evidence toolkit](#); [Universities Policy Engagement Network](#) - aimed at UK policy makers seeking to engage with universities including a [Place-Based Toolkit](#) for working at a regional level; and [Centre for Science and Policy \(CSAP\)](#) which runs a successful policy fellowship scheme. The [International Network for Governmental Science Advice \(INSGA\)](#) offer thematic communities of practice, resources and training, while the [EU Joint Research Centre](#) strengthens partnerships with research institute. Many learned societies also offer support, funding and secondment opportunities for academics. You may want to work with social innovation and infrastructure bodies such as the [Institute for Community Studies](#), [National Council for Voluntary Organisations](#), [Locality](#) or [National Association for Voluntary and Community Action](#) to connect with local community groups.

Share your experiences: We would love to hear from you if you are putting this guide to use, doing something similar or take a different approach. Please contact us at urbanwellbeing@contacts.bham.ac.uk. You can read our full report here: <https://bit.ly/CUWb-reports>.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to Susie Drummond at Rebel Kindly, Tom Lingard at the Remote Assistant, Simon Hall and Jessica Tagliani from WMCA, and Jo Dalton, Fran O'Leary and Amy Nash from Lodestone, and Claudia Wood, former CEO of Demos, independent research consultant. We also thank all the participants in our masterclasses and training workshops.