



Regional Areas of Research Interest: Challenges, opportunities and next steps

Authors: Charlotte Campbell, Rob Davies, Melissa Hawkins, Max French, Charlotte Pell – February 2026

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Executive summary

In July 2025, UPEN and Northumbria University convened a peer-exchange event in York to explore the future of Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) in regional contexts across the UK.

Key insights

Evolution and purpose: ARIs have progressed from basic “statements of evidence needs” into a diverse assortment of tools used by government departments, parliaments, councils, and combined authorities across the UK. Rather than transactional devices, they often facilitate ongoing relationships between knowledge producers and consumers, provoke strategic conversations, and address knowledge gaps during a period of societal challenges and university sector instability.

Impact and evaluation: A lack of systematic evaluation for ARIs to date makes demonstrating value challenging.

Involvement and inclusion: Many ARIs are moving beyond academic-policy engagement to include communities as co-creators.

Isolation and duplication: The risk of duplication and overload is increasing as separate ARIs develop, often in similar geographic or thematic areas, without coordination.

Barriers to progress: Structural obstacles include inaccessible funding schemes favouring academic institutions, mismatched timescales between policy development and academic cycles, and capacity constraints across local authorities and community organisations.

Calls for Action

- 1. ARI-aligned funding models**
Developing “rapid” funding that matches policy timescales and enables non-academic institutions to lead grant applications
- 2. Evaluation frameworks**
Creating clear definitions of impact that capture both process changes and substantive outcomes
- 3. Peer support network**
Establishing ongoing convening opportunities for knowledge exchange, problem solving, and reducing duplication
- 4. Collective Theory of Change**
Developing shared understanding of the purposes of and pathways to impact for ARIs.
- 5. Integrative approaches to ARIs**
Testing community-engaged and collective models across multiple locations
- 6. Integration tools**
Expanding databases, creating collaboration frameworks, and enabling thematic clustering

Introduction

The adoption of 'Areas of Research Interest' to strengthen the use of research evidence in public policymaking is increasing across the UK, from national governments and legislatures to mayoral strategic authorities, local councils, and other public bodies.

This comes at a time of increasing focus on how best to deploy limited public funding to improve lives across the UK. Meanwhile, universities are (rightly) under greater pressure to demonstrate their wider societal value. Harnessing the insights and potential of the UK's research base to inform policy development and decisions is one way to address both challenges.

It is also the case that many of the intractable challenges that the UK is currently facing will require different ways of working across the research-policy ecosystem – by national government and by regional and local authorities. With the advent of regional devolution, there is arguably an unprecedented opportunity to build capacity at multiple levels of government and embed new structures to draw on academic (and other external) expertise.

The UK is failing to harness the potential of publicly funded research to inform policymaking. ARIs can help to address two key questions to better leverage research expertise: how do we know what we already know? and what more do we need to know? In other words, ARIs can both be a tool to enable knowledge mobilisation, and a means of co-creating research agendas between researchers, policy actors, and others.

This workshop has its roots in work undertaken through the [Capabilities in Academic-Policy Engagement \(CAPE\)](#) project (2020-24), which included several Policy Fellowships that supported the development of ARIs in different contexts. We have seen considerable, and rapid, growth of ARIs since 2017.



We are now at an inflection point: ARIs are no longer a novel and experimental mechanism, but one with significant potential to embed systematic evidence use within public policy organisations and to enable greater collaboration to address cross-cutting questions.

UPEN is embarking on a new phase to become a national 'connective infrastructure' which can mobilise research evidence across the UK to inform public policymaking at all levels. This includes an expanded programme of work on ARIs, to understand how they can best add value in different regional contexts and explore distinctive place-based approaches. UPEN will enable shared learning and identify opportunities for better collaboration. Above all, we need to ensure that the use of ARIs is not just a technocratic exercise but a meaningful tool to support the use of diverse evidence in policymaking.

I am grateful to Charlotte Campbell, Rob Davies, Max French, Melissa Hawkins, Charlotte Pell and Rich Pickford for convening this workshop discussion at such a timely moment, and bringing together a powerful community who, collectively, have the ability to advance ARIs to their next stage of development.

Sarah Chaytor

**Co-Chair and Director of Programmes,
Universities Policy Engagement Network
(UPEN)**

Director, UCL Public Policy

Context

Areas of Research Interest are a tool used by a range of policy organisations to identify and address their knowledge needs and engage with the research community.

While they originated in UK central government departments, ARIs are now used by an increasingly diverse cast of organisations, including UK government agencies, devolved governments, parliaments, combined authorities, and local councils¹.

In July 2025, UPEN and [Northumbria University's Public Policy and Management Research Group](#) (Newcastle Business School) brought together over 50 practitioners in York to discuss and collaborate on the future of ARIs across regional contexts.

¹Throughout this report, the terms 'combined authority', 'strategic authority', and 'mayoral strategic authority' are used interchangeably to refer to the same governance structure.

This event built on the launch of the CAPE-Northumbria University ['Areas of Research Interest: A Practical Guide'](#) in December 2024.

The workshop began with a summary of recent Northumbria University-UPEN research on the challenges and opportunities involved in developing a North East 'regional' ARI, which might span multiple agencies and bridge different ARIs active in the region. ARI practitioners shared insights and innovations from cities, regions, parliaments, and public bodies across the UK, followed by facilitated roundtable discussions for knowledge exchange and networking with peers. This report summarises the rich input, insights, and calls for action from participants.





What is UPEN doing on Areas of Research Interest?

UPEN is

- working to further embed Areas of Research Interest in policymaking processes across the UK and integrate them with other mechanisms for academic-policy engagement such as fellowships, seed funding, and co-produced initiatives.
- creating resources that support the effective delivery of Areas of Research Interest in different policy contexts.
- developing Areas of Research Interest and engagement programmes with regional and local policy organisations to understand better what works.
- creating an Areas of Research Interest Community of Practice to facilitate peer learning and exchange between policy organisations and the academic community.
- working with the Young Foundation on integrating community insights into framing and responding to Areas of Research Interest.

What we heard

Evolution and purpose

“ARIs are no longer just a transactional tool. They are moving towards being relational mechanisms as part of a movement that is hungry for change.”

Rob Davies

Areas of Research Interest began as a basic academic engagement tool for policy organisations, having been conceived as “statements of evidence needs” from central UK Government departments in the [Nurse Review](#) over 10 years ago. They have since evolved into potentially transformative relational mechanisms for evidence-informed policymaking used by parliaments, councils, and combined authorities. ARIs have focused internal discussions about evidence needs and gaps, helped to facilitate ongoing relationships, and provoked honest conversations.

The development of ARIs sits within a broader political context of societal challenges and polycrisis, to which some argue that academia has a moral obligation to respond. Concurrently, universities are facing their own crisis of proving their worth and value in an increasingly unstable sector. ARIs represent an opportunity to strengthen academic-policy relationships at a time when both sides are facing existential pressures, with devolution creating opportunities for these relationships to develop increasingly at sub-national levels.



“We’re at a point where it is difficult and it will get harder before it gets better, but we’re also at a stage where we can ‘just do it’. ARIs are tools to help strategic authorities make good decisions and make good use of public money.”

Sarah Chaytor

Challenges for ARIs at the regional level include:

- **Isolation:** There is a risk of overload and duplication of work if hundreds of separate ARIs exist and academics can't navigate between them or prioritise their responses.
- **Impact:** If ARIs are acting as “black boxes” and those engaging are not receiving feedback on their engagement, how will they see, measure, or realise impact?
- **Involvement:** If people aren't involved in creating ARIs, why would we expect them to care about them? ARIs need to move beyond being a vehicle to engage with academics to invite community and citizen engagement and hear marginalised voices.

Based on interviews with a range of audiences interested in regional ARIs in the North East of England, Charlotte Pell outlined six conditions necessary for establishing a regional ARI:

1. Being clear about the purpose of the ARI - why should we use an ARI and what do we hope to achieve?
2. A relational approach to developing the ARI - how can we use an ARI to strengthen long-term relationships between researchers and public service professionals?
3. Resources within policy organisations - what kind of resources and capacity will we need and who can we draw on for support?
4. Confidence that the ARI will make a difference - how will we consider the impact an ARI makes, and what type of impact could this be?
5. Avoiding duplication with other work in this area - how can we find out who else is working on overlapping ARIs?
6. Voluntary, community, social enterprise, and business involvement - how will we ensure our ARI includes and invites a range of perspectives?





Impact and evaluation

“What is policy change?
What is evidence?”

Impact Table discussion

Evaluation and measuring the impact of Areas of Research Interest remains a significant challenge. There have been few evaluations of ARI impact across the UK, with part of the challenge being that there is no consensus around what ARIs should achieve.

ARIs are creating change and having real outcomes and impact. However, more visible examples of outcomes and impact are necessary to progress the thinking about evaluation and gain wider support for ARIs across the landscape.

What's working

The University of Leeds has invested approximately £1 million into projects stemming from the [ARI published by Leeds City Council since 2022](#). The Council are now working to evaluate change brought about from the ARIs.

What's working

West Midlands Combined Authority has developed a [comprehensive ARI](#) focused on Mayoral priorities. They have used this ARI to develop an internal research plan, establish purposeful relationships with academic partners, raise the visibility of research staff within the organisation, and connect teams with shared goals and projects.

“Where are the great examples of ARIs shaping decision making?
There's no visibility.”

Impact Table discussion

There are tensions between different types of impact and whether ARIs should focus on immediate policy changes, relationship building, or longer-term social transformation. Evaluation frameworks need to capture both systems and process outcomes (such as stronger academic-policy relationships) and substantive changes to decision-making.

“We need to clarify what we mean by impact. Value, engagement and outcomes all count.”

Impact Table discussion

Involvement and inclusion

“If people aren’t involved in shaping the research agenda, why would they care about the outcome?”

Involvement Table provocation

There was broad consensus on the need to bring citizens and communities into research processes as genuine knowledge co-creators, rather than purely as subjects or beneficiaries. However, there are challenges in expanding involvement in ARIs beyond academic engagement, with fundamental tensions around what counts as legitimate evidence and how different types of knowledge should inform research priorities.

Moving beyond an “anecdote vs evidence” divide towards wider involvement in ARIs may require “different forums for different types of evidence, so academics aren’t the only owner of the word” and exploring the role of different types of evidence at different stages of the ARI process (i.e. during development or response phases). Additionally, it is important to ensure that “vocal and loud voices” don’t drown out marginalised perspectives, while acknowledging the risk of “politicising research” when communities become involved.

“Peer research and youth-led engagement are powerful. We must not miss the voices of children and young people.”

Involvement Table discussion

Innovative ideas for engagement models in ARIs include peer research approaches, which can work particularly well with children and young people. Power dynamics can also be shifted by moving community engagement “on to the street” rather than relying on formal consultations, which currently predominate the development of ARIs. However, resource limitations are a barrier to meaningful involvement in ARI processes.

Some stakeholders, particularly within the voluntary sector, are already overstretched and their engagement is limited by short-term service delivery contracts. Sustainable models are needed to facilitate meaningful engagement. For example, organisations developing and deploying ARIs could commit resources to cover paid time for communities to participate in ARI processes and longer-term contracts for policy staff to enable relationship building.

The consensus was clear: while we “always need to involve people, it has to be meaningful, not tokenistic.” Achieving this requires tackling fundamental questions about evidence, governance, and the “ownership” of ARIs.

“We need to flip the system. Communities shouldn’t just be beneficiaries; they should be co-creators.”

Involvement Table discussion



Isolation and duplication

The rapid proliferation of ARIs presents both opportunities and challenges. With dozens of [ARIs now operating across the UK](#), there is a growing danger of overlap and duplication.

“We’re at risk of ARI overload. We need to find ways to join up efforts without losing local relevance.”

Isolation Table provocation

An ARI can function as a “multi-tool” serving different purposes for different organisations. This diversity makes standardisation problematic but also reflects the adaptability of ARIs to local contexts. Successful integration requires moving beyond isolated institutional approaches towards identifying “shared priorities amongst institutions in sectors, systems or places” that can enable knowledge transfer across traditional boundaries while maintaining local ownership and relevance.

Two distinct approaches to integration emerged from the discussion, each offering different advantages for addressing the coordination challenge.

Regional coordination mechanisms through combined authorities and existing networks could provide formal structures for alignment, establishing contracts and collaboration agreements that would enable authorities to co-develop regional priorities while respecting local autonomy.

Dedicated convening roles and structures could help to facilitate ARI coordination, recognising that “there are always regional ecosystems/networks – even if [there is] not an official knowledge broker” involved.

“Could we create ‘Super ARIs’? Thematic clusters that bring together related priorities across regions?”

Isolation Table discussion

More ambitious integration could convene multiple related ARIs from different regions around specific topics. Thematic clustering around shared challenges like child poverty or coastal communities was seen as particularly promising, as “there are specific challenges, interests, [and] similarities across similar types of areas” that might benefit from knowledge transfer across contexts rather than just geographic proximity.

A more joined-up knowledge mobilisation infrastructure would support the coordination of efforts around ARIs, for example expanding the existing [ARI database](#) (that hosts ARIs from UK governmental bodies) to include local and regional ARIs, and therefore allow searches both across and within localities.

Barriers to progress

Despite the growth in ARIs, considerable structural and systemic barriers to their deployment remain. Dedicated funding streams associated with ARIs are extremely limited. Where public research funding is available, it is not accessible to non-research organisations which many find a barrier to involvement and inclusion.

“Local authorities and VCSEs are often locked out of funding – we need to rethink eligibility and access.”

Other Issues Table discussion

Funding is an area where the mismatch between academic and policy timescales is particularly clear, with participants calling for funding schemes for ARIs to be responsive to match policy urgency. Even when funding opportunities exist, local authorities and community organisations lack clear frameworks for costing grants, and face challenges with gaining ethics approval and other processes that are more straightforward in academic settings. The fundamental challenge is that current funding infrastructures have been designed around academic research cycles and institutional structures. It would require systematic reform to support the collaborative, inclusive, and responsive approaches that effective ARIs demand.

“We need more rapid funding schemes for ARIs – real rapid, not academic-rapid.”

Other Issues Table discussion

Capacity constraints affect stakeholders throughout the ARI ecosystem, but particularly within local authorities and community organisations. This applies both at the stage of ARI development and creation, and in managing responses to them. Many organisations don't have dedicated staff or systems to manage this process. This highlights a need to upskill staff in policy organisations (e.g. local authorities) in areas like grant writing, fellowship applications, and managing research relationships – skills that are core to academia, but which likely require systematic development in policy organisations. The capacity challenge extends to institutional capabilities for managing cross-sector relationships and translating between different professional cultures and expectations.

“Capacity and infrastructure to respond to ARIs is an issue. We can't just leave them to rot so need to do something with responses.”

Other Issues Table discussion



Calls for action

Six calls to action to ensure the evolving ARI landscape supports and enables meaningful knowledge exchange and decision making.

1. ARI-aligned funding models

Funding models privilege the involvement of academic institutions and operate on timescales at odds with policy urgency. There is a need for “rapid” funding schemes that can respond to policy timescales instead of academic grant cycles, alongside long-term core funding for ARI infrastructure and facilitation. Some systemic reform is required to allow non-academic institutions (e.g. local government) to be eligible for funding, for non-academics to serve as Principal Investigators and Project Leads, and create clear frameworks for costing grants for non-academic recipients.

2. Evaluation frameworks

The current lack of systematic evaluation makes it difficult to demonstrate the impact of ARIs and learn from experiences across the landscape. We need clearer definitions of what impact means in different contexts, distinguishing between impact on processes and systems versus substantive outcomes. ARI evaluation frameworks need to capture both short-term relationship building and longer-term social change, as well as accommodating the “multi-tool” nature of ARIs, which serve different purposes for different organisations. Building a visible evidence base of success stories and evaluated examples would help make the case for continued investment and enable learning across sectors.



3. Peer support network

The rapid proliferation of ARIs at the national and local levels has created both opportunities for connecting and collaborating and risks of isolation and duplication, with practitioners often working without visibility of others' activities. Regular convening opportunities (like the workshop underpinning this report) provide essential space for knowledge exchange, problem-solving, and mutual support.

A peer support network that includes the full range of organisations in the regional ARIs landscape could facilitate ongoing dialogue, reduce duplication of effort, share practical resources, and create a collective voice for advocacy with funders and policymakers.

4. Collective Theory of Change

There is not currently a shared understanding of what ARIs are trying to achieve, leading to varied interpretations and difficulty evaluating success. Developing a collective theory of change, or multiple theories reflecting different ARI types and contexts, would clarify purpose, identify key mechanisms and assumptions, highlight different pathways to impact, and provide a framework for evaluation. Such a framework shouldn't require rigid standardisation of ARIs. Instead, it would provide a shared language about what ARIs can and can't do, how they differ from other engagement mechanisms, and what conditions enable them to be effective.

5. Integrative approaches to ARI

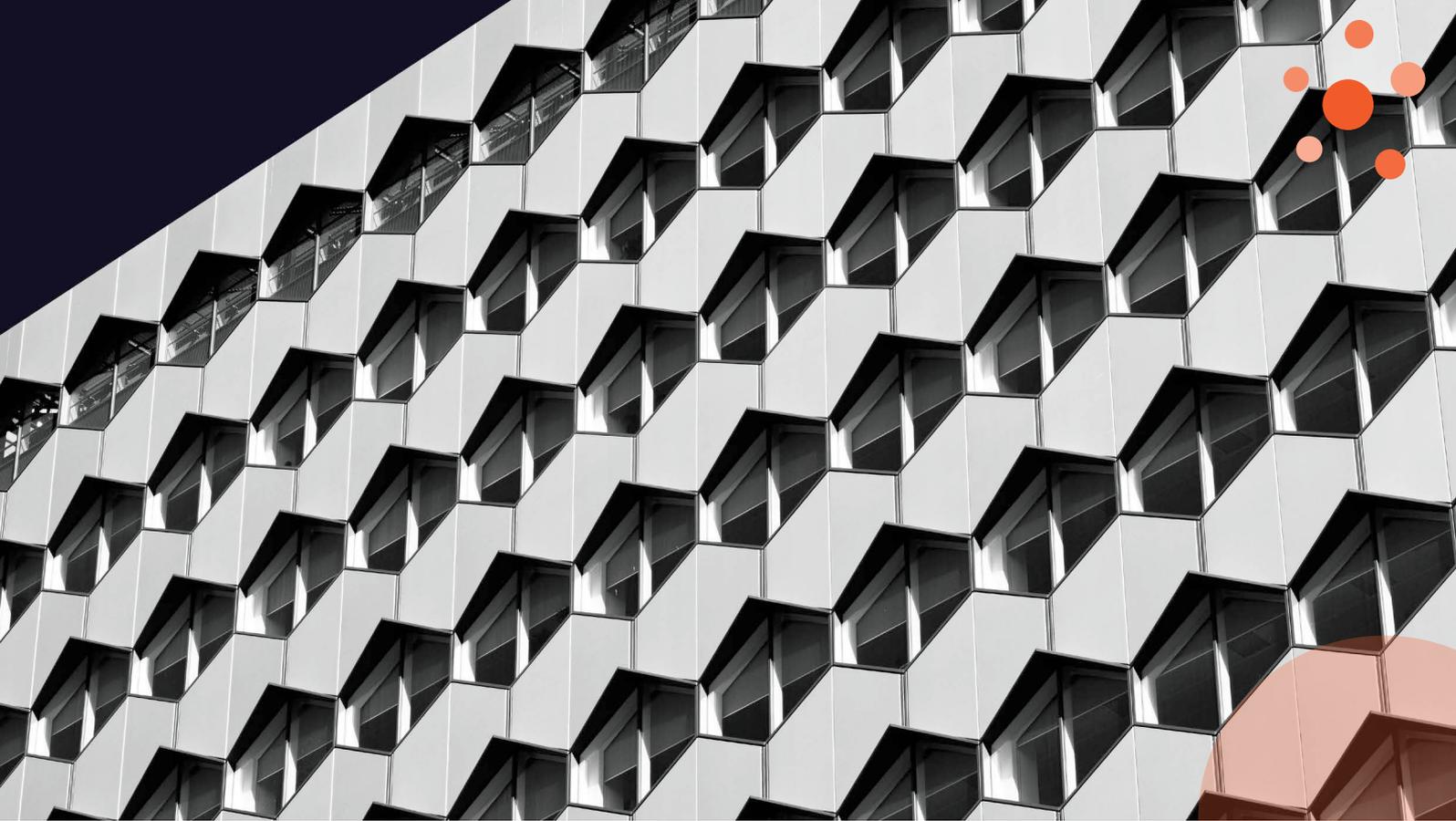
ARIs have the potential to evolve towards more inclusive, community-engaged approaches that go beyond traditional academic-policy partnerships. Piloting integrated approaches across multiple locations could test different models for community involvement in ARI development and response, experiment with thematic clustering and regional coordination mechanisms, investigate rapid funding schemes, and build evidence about what works in different contexts. Evaluation should be built into these pilots, so they can be iterated and adapted based on outcomes.

6. Integration tools

Navigating the expanding ARI landscape requires better coordination and knowledge sharing. Short-term priorities should include:

- expanding the ARI database to include local and regional ARIs and extending the search function to locality, theme, and status.
- creating frameworks and guidance for multi-institutional collaboration, including example agreements and memorandums of understanding.
- developing thematic clustering tools to identify shared priorities across regions.
- establishing mechanisms for knowledge flow both up and down governance scales.

Such tools would make it easier to find relevant ARIs, avoid duplication, identify collaboration opportunities, and share learning across the landscape.



About UPEN

At the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN), we believe that the use of research in public policymaking leads to better outcomes for people across the UK. Our mission is to support collaboration between researchers and policy organisations to make this happen.

To do this, we bring together academics, university professionals and people in policy organisations who undertake academic-policy engagement.

Our approach is informed by evidence and practice, drawn from our 120 Member Institutions, representing two thirds of the UK university sector. From 2025-2028 we are supported by UKRI funding.

About the Public Policy and Management Research Group

The Public Policy and Management Research Group, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University equips policymakers and service professionals with the tools and ideas they need to meet long-term public service challenges. We specialise in applied, policy-relevant research undertaken in partnership with organisations across the public, private and third sectors. We work as a hub for North East academics, policymakers and service professionals to mobilise the public sector as a major driver of economic and social advancement.



Authors and contributors

Authors:

Charlotte Campbell - University College London

Rob Davies - University College London

Melissa Hawkins - Northumbria University

Max French - Northumbria University

Charlotte Pell - Northumbria University

Contributors:

Nicky Buckley - University of Cambridge

Sarah Chaytor - University College London

Rich Pickford - Nottingham Trent University

Clare Stainthorp - University College London

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