



# Evaluating the 'Buddying Scheme'

## Assessing the efficacy of a pilot scheme to pair Rights Lab researchers with Home Office policy officials

***Pairing of anti-slavery academics with policy officials shown to be beneficial where research interests align, but greater structure and guidance for participants and longer timeframes deemed necessary for its success.***

### An overview of the pilot scheme

Between April and October 2020, a 'buddying scheme' was piloted in which five academic researchers at the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham were paired with five civil servants in the Home Office Modern Slavery Unit and, what was then, the Department for International Development (DfID). The pairs were matched based on their areas of research/policy interest.

The scheme sought to transform policy officials' understanding of how to work with academia and make best use of research, and to provide researchers with an understanding of the policy environment and how best to craft and pitch research papers for use by Government.

During this six-month period, it was expected that the pairs would each meet a minimum of three times, and upon commencing the scheme identify specific areas of interest and knowledge gaps that they wish to fill with the support of their partner.

### Evaluating the pilot

A light-touch evaluation was undertaken in order to understand the impact of the scheme on participants: whether knowledge of each others' role and organisations had increased; whether the scheme was deemed worthwhile for both parties, taking into consideration the time commitment required; and, whether the scheme should be rolled out wider.

Data was gathered at two points during the pilot. Firstly, through an initial baseline survey identifying previous experience and individual goals, and secondly through a final feedback form completed by each participant once the scheme had ended.

### Key findings

Across the pairings, there was significant variation in the number of meetings held, and the structure and focus of the meetings, with the majority of the pairs favouring informal, 'organic' conversations rather than setting a formal agenda. Only one pairing chose to concentrate their partnership on working towards a specific project. Participants continued their conversations outside of these in-person meetings: corresponding via email, telephone and in one instance via a Home Office 'Lunch and Learn' event.

All but one pair found participating in the buddying scheme beneficial. In particular, six participants commented that participating in the scheme was an educational experience and that they learnt about the work, timescales, goals and issues of their partner's organisation. Seven of the ten participants felt that they had achieved the learning goals they set for themselves at the start of the pilot, with one commenting that they 'are still learning'.

When asked whether the buddying scheme should be rolled out wider, the response from participants was unanimously positive; however, the majority of participants had constructive feedback and suggestions to offer the scheme moving forwards, centring around the need for greater guidance and structure for participants, and longer timeframes for involvement in the scheme.

### Rollout recommendations

- Host organisations should run an orientation session with interested participants prior to the scheme's commencement, which details what is expected of them and their buddy.
- Interested participants should complete 'Expressions of interest' detailing their areas of research/policy interest and their reasons for wanting to take part in the scheme to enable accurate pairing.
- Participants should identify clear and realistic objectives with their partner at the first meeting, if not in advance, including identifying specific projects to work on with their buddy that are of mutual interest.
- Host organisation should consider introducing semi-regular "catch ups" with the entire cohort. Regular meetings between pairs should be mandatory.
- Extend the timeframe of the scheme to a minimum of 1 year.

## Evaluation overview

The ten participants in the scheme were matched on the basis of relevance to each other's work. It was hoped that partnering in this manner would aid and improve target requests for research from the Modern Slavery Unit, and equally support the academics involved in understanding the priorities and challenges faced by policy makers.

The baseline survey was tailored to both types of participant—academics and policy officials—and asked each to outline their goals for the scheme. In addition, the form included five questions relating to their previous experience and views on collaboration.

The final questionnaire at the end of the pilot consisted of nine questions relating to the overall experience of participating in the buddying scheme. This included the pilot's structure, partner communication and suitability, outcomes and benefits, and the impact of Covid-19.

## Key findings

The amount of in-person meetings the buddies engaged in varied hugely from pair to pair. Only two of the pairs actually agreed on the number of times they met their buddy and two of the five pairs failed to meet the minimum requirement of three meetings. But with the exception of one pair, all managed to also communicate outside of their arranged meetings, regardless of how many they had. Participants corresponded via email, telephone and in one instance via a Home Office 'Lunch and Learn' Event.

Most of the pairs reported adopting a fairly relaxed approach to their meetings, with no fixed agenda. However, one pair opted to concentrate their time on a specific project, namely an 'Investigation into the Moldovan diaspora in the UK'. This narrow focus lent this particular pair's meetings a sense of structure but it is also the most pertinent example of buddies identifying shared research interests.

In terms of the other groups' shared interests, one academic participant agreed that whilst their partnership was complimentary they felt there was 'an expectation of more research being in existence' at the beginning. Similarly, a Home Office respondent remarked that a significant difference in the pace of work between the two organisations made collaboration 'difficult'.

## Benefits of participation

Overall, participants from both institutions reported a largely positive experience of the scheme. Many suggested that the discussions that took place with their buddies were particularly educational and useful, with one civil servant describing it as lifting their head 'above the parapet'. They enjoyed discussing 'broader modern

slavery issues' with their partner and found their work 'interesting and useful' in relation to their own projects.

Another policy official found their discussions particularly useful as they were able to test their ideas 'about the policy area with an expert' giving them greater confidence that they understood the 'current state of thinking'.

In one instance, the participant saw benefits emerge from the scheme that went beyond individual learning to impact upon future policy, remarking that the scheme enabled them to do 'a piece of work that has the potential to help us understand the scale of an issue and potentially lead to a rethink about how we prioritise resourcing between Romania and Moldova'.

Of all the pairs that participated, only one expressed no interest in meeting beyond the end of the pilot, with the other four pairs all showing enthusiasm for varying levels of continued contact. Many lamented the negative effects and limitations the Covid-19 pandemic had imposed on achieving their original learning end goals.

## Scheme rollout

When asked to offer constructive criticism and feedback on the scheme's future potential, there were several recurrent themes in the responses. One was the importance of the relationship between the buddies. It is clear that **careful and well-matched partnering is crucial to the scheme's success**. A respondent opined that 'it needs genuine curiosity and openness on both sides' for the relationship to thrive.

Another theme was regarding the structure of the scheme. One member of the pair who had a negative experience overall suggested that 'more structure needs to be set in advance including guidance for conversations/clarity on purpose'. This was reiterated by another two participants who also implied that they would have benefited from a having a clear framework or consensus on what the desired outcomes of undertaking the pilot were.

Crucially, there seemed to be a consensus that the **scheme would benefit from a longer duration**. Several participants suggested that changing the timeframe would help to build and maintain tangible collaboration and results. One participant felt that 'it would be great to extend it to a year, rather than 6 months – they [their partner] were very busy and it was difficult to pin down time for a proper catch up, and 6 months wasn't much time for progress to be achieved'.