

**Understanding the dynamics of research policy fellowships: an evaluative analysis of impacts and ecosystem effects**

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**Title:**

**Understanding the Dynamics of Research-Policy Fellowships:  
An Evaluative Analysis of Barriers and Blockages**

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**Abstract:**

**Background:**

Despite the increasing adoption of research-to-policy (R2P) fellowships to facilitate mobility, promote knowledge exchange, and support evidence-based policy making, there remains limited evaluation of these initiatives in terms of ‘what works’ in general and more specifically the ‘blockages and barriers’ that inhibit their success.

**Aims and objectives:**

This article presents the results of an evaluative study into the first cohort of the ESRC Policy Fellows (2021-2023). The study aimed to identify the challenges faced by both fellows and hosts in navigating the nexus between research and policy with the intention of providing an evidential base for refining future mobility-focused investments, while also adding to broader debates about knowledge-exchange and boundary-spanning.

**Methods:**

Stage 1: desk-based meta-analysis of the existing research on barriers and blockages vis-à-vis research to policy processes. Stage 2: two rounds of surveys with ESRC policy fellows and hosts conducted at the beginning and middle of the scheme. Stage 3: insights from stages 1 and 2 utilised to design and deliver semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with eighteen fellows (out of 25 in the cohort) and ten representatives from policy host institutions. A thematic analysis of interview transcripts was then conducted using qualitative data analysis software in order to identify key ‘barriers and blockages’.

**Findings:**

Nine main ‘barriers and blockages’ were identified in the research, several of which were either under-acknowledged or absent within the existing knowledge and research base.

**Discussion and conclusion:**

Facilitating the mobility of people within research, development, and innovation ‘ecosystems’ remains a core strategic goal of funders and governments around the world. An increasing number of R2P fellowships (and policy-to-research secondments) are being established, but often on the basis of a weak or non-existent evidential basis with regard to ‘what works’. This article contributes to remedying this gap and identifies new research themes.

## Background

As a vast seam of scholarship demonstrates, bridging the research-policy divide is difficult. ‘The persistent gap between research and policymaking is a multifaceted challenge’ Taylor Scott (2019, 434) and her colleagues note ‘borne in part out of limited interaction between researchers and policymakers’. Daniel Mears (2022, 163) suggests that the ‘longstanding divide between research and policy’ leads to ‘poorly designed and implemented policies, little accountability, and limited effectiveness and cost efficiency’. Paul Cairney, Annette Boaz and Kathryn Oliver (2023) explore the existing research base in relation to translating evidence into policy and ask, ‘what do we know already, and what would further research look like?’ Their answer to this question can be summarised as follows: *what we know* is that (i) many scholars identify a worrying gap between the abundance of high-quality research evidence and its sparing use in policy and practice, and (ii) that a range of sensible sounding measures are often promoted in the hope of ‘closing the gap’ between research and policy. This explains contemporary interest in (inter alia) ‘boundary-spanners’, ‘knowledge-brokers’, ‘intermediary organisations’ and ‘docking points’ (for a review see Neal, Neal and Brutzman, 2022; Breckon and Boaz, 2023). This has led to the emergence of what Kathryn Oliver (2022) and her co-authors describe as a ‘rudderless mass of activity’ as an ever-increasing array of activities and initiatives are launched with a shared emphasis on promoting research-to-policy (hereafter R2P) engagement activities.

But what we also know is that very few of these R2P activities are ever formally evaluated to assess ‘what works’ in terms of spanning the nexus between research and policy (see Oliver et al, 2022). This lack of post-initiative evaluation is often itself a reflection of the way in which most initiatives are launched without a clear framework as to aims, ambitions, goals or even a theory of change. Oliver et al. (2022, 693) therefore conclude:

Ultimately, without more information about the effects of different approaches to research-policy engagement, it is likely that activities *will have limited impact* [emphasis added]. Worse, they risk undermining aspects of the broader system (such as capacity and goodwill to engage) elsewhere. Thus, it is important to answer two main questions: (1) What research-policy activities are being used with the goal of improving evidence use? (2) What is known about the impacts of these activities?

This article engages with these questions in the context of the acknowledged lack of evaluative analyses, while also responding to Smit and Hessels’ (2021, 323) observation that when it comes to assessing the impact of R2P activities ‘conceptual development is relatively weak’. The R2P activity being assessed is the first cohort of the ESRC Policy Fellows (2021-2023), and the aim of this article is to contribute both conceptually and empirically by presenting a two-dimensional evidence base in relation to forms of impact. The first dimension explores evidence in relation to broadly positive impacts across three levels (individual, policy, systemic) and notwithstanding Oliver et al.’s (2022) concern (above) outlines evidence of *significant impact*. Nevertheless, the second dimension’s longitudinal emphasis does – through a focus on absorption and porosity - raise questions about medium and long-term impact achievement (i.e. deeper systemic change) which does, in turn, resonate with Oliver et al.’s main argument about the importance of formal evaluative frameworks and systemic thinking.

This analysis matters for several reasons. From a scientific perspective it responds to the call from Cross *et al* (2023) and others for more academic studies that seek to evaluate boundary-spanning initiatives using explicit and coherent methodologies. It also contributes to Cairney, Boaz and Oliver's (2023) emphasis on *evidence-using systems* rather than focusing solely on *usable evidence*; while also engaging with Buckley and Oliver's (2024) identification of a dearth of data and research about fellowship programmes as a discrete dimension of both R2P and P2R activity. Colson's (2024) analysis of 'bringing the outsider in' identifies just two articles about secondments between academics and central government departments: O'Donoghue, Jenkins and Anstey's (2017) study of two-way secondment in Australia, and Uneke *et al.*'s (2018) analysis of capacity building in Nigeria. More broadly, Lampraki (2022 cited in Colson 2024) reviewed 54 research papers on secondments published between 2001-2021 and found that the main focus was on the benefits to secondees rather than to the host organisation. In identifying a range of positive impacts on both sides of the R2P relationship this article develops understanding in relation to capacity building for knowledge utilisation and translation (see Gerrish and Percy, 2014).

The evaluation of the ESRC Policy Fellows initiative flows into an emphasis on *evidence-using systems* due to the way it has already been expanded into the UKRI Policy Fellowships (2023-2025), with further development planned for post-2025. The perceived success of the pilot ESRC initiative contributed to the launch of new fellowship and secondment schemes, including the Prime Minister's No.10 Innovation Fellowships (May 2022), Department for Science, Innovation and Technology Expert Exchange Programme (April 2023), Cabinet Office Digital Secondment Programme pilot (September 2023), and the DEFRA R&D Fellowships (December 2023). By focusing on the ESRC Policy Fellows initiative and its subsequent evolution this article makes a contribution to broader understanding in relation to 'what works' to promote effective R2P engagement.

## **Activity**

Launched in June 2021 as a pilot project, the ESRC Policy Fellowships represented a significant investment and key element of the council's strategy for realising the potential of social and economic research and expertise to inform public policy (UKRI, 2022a). They also intended to complement UKRI's broader strategic ambition in relation to the facilitation of mobility across traditional disciplinary, institutional, and sectoral boundaries, and their commitment to maximising the social value of publicly funded research (see UKRI, 2022b). Geared toward early to mid-career academics, the programme aimed to 'fund a cohort of policy fellows to provide research and expert advice on the host's policy priority areas, and to support wider knowledge exchange between government and academia' (UKRI, 2021). Nearly 100 applications were received from across the UK (see Tables 1, below), and 24 fellowships were offered across ten UK government departments and devolved governments.<sup>1</sup> The cost of each fellowship were shared on a broadly 50:50 basis between the ESRC and host organisation.

**Table 1: Number of Applications per Region**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>England</b>	
East Midlands	10
East of England	3
London	19
North East	5
North West	2
South East	8
South West	12
West Midlands	5
Yorkshire and the Humber	12
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	0
<b>Scotland</b>	16
<b>Wales</b>	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>

Each fellowship award was designed to last up to eighteen months and was divided into three main stages or phases: the inception phase (up to 3 months); a substantive placement with the host organization (6-12 months); and a final knowledge exchange phase (up to 3 months). Placements could be undertaken full-time or part-time (minimum 0.6 FTE), while the inception and KE phases allowed a 0.2 FTE buyout for researchers. The important distinction between this *policy* fellowship and a more traditional fellowship was that applicant's did not apply to the scheme with a detailed and pre-prepared research proposal in mind but were instead expected to co-design and co-produce a piece of research in collaboration with the policy hosts (i.e. this was embedded research). To facilitate this process fellowship opportunities were advertised on a host-topic basis (see Table 2, below), and interviews and assessments were undertaken by expert sub-panels (see first column, Table 3, below). The total spend on the ESRC Policy Fellowships was just over £2.5m, including host contributions.

**Table 2. List of Applicant Institutions  
(awarded fellowships indicated in brackets)**

Institutions			
Aston University	Loughborough University (1)	University of Bristol (1)	University of Sheffield
Bangor University (1)	Newcastle University	University of Cambridge (1)	University of Southampton
Bournemouth University	Newcastle University	University of Dundee (1)	University of Stirling
Cardiff University (1)	Northumbria University	University of Edinburgh (1)	University of Surrey (1)
City, University of London	Nottingham Trent University (2)	University of Essex (1)	University of Sussex
Coventry University	Open University	University of Exeter (1)	University of the West of England (2)
Cranfield University	Royal Holloway, University of London	University of Glasgow (1)	University of York (1)
Durham University	SOAS University of London	University of Greenwich (1)	York St John University
Imperial College London	Swansea University	University of Leeds (1)	
King's College London (1)	The University of Manchester	University of Leicester	
Lancaster University	University College London (3)	University of Liverpool	
London School of Economics	University of Bath (1)	University of Nottingham	
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	University of Birmingham (1)	University of Reading	

As Table 3 (below) illustrates, some fellowship opportunities were more popular than others in terms of applications, and at least three applicants were offered alternative placements where the initial recruitment process had not yielded a suitable candidate. There was no attrition from the programme, although one fellow relocated to another government department. Seven ‘no-cost’ extensions were granted due to delays in start dates, personal reasons, and project successes. Three initial observations demand brief comment. The first relates to the ongoing debate about regional inequalities vis-à-vis research funding and concern about the existence of a ‘Golden Triangle’ (see Bos et al, 2016; Adams et al, 2024). What’s interesting is that although London and the South of England led in terms of density of applications (Table 1, above) the actual distribution of fellowships (Table 2, above) was far more even in both geographical and institutional terms. The exception (and second observation) being the complete lack of applications from Northern Ireland. A third observation relates to role variance with the fellowship opportunities (Table 3, below). Some

opportunities were more analytically focused and demanded advanced quantitative skills, whereas others were thematically focused but still quite broad in terms of potential project flexibility and range.

**Table 3. Number of Applications Per Fellowship Opportunity**

<b>Expert sub-panel</b>	<b>Opportunity</b>	<b>Number of Applications</b>
Panel A: Net Zero and Behavioural	BEIS Net Zero Behavioural Science	5
	BEIS Net Zero Digital or Data Social Science	6
	DEFRA Behavioural Science and Net Zero	2
	DEFRA Waste Behaviour	3
	DfT Covid Recovery User Focus	3
	DfT Decarbonising Transport	3
	MHCLG Climate Change	1
	WG Environment and Rural Affairs	2
	WG Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning	2
Panel B: Science, Foreign and Security Policy	CO Evaluation Task Force	3
	HO Cyber Crime	1
	HO Economic Crime	3
	MoJ Evidence	4
	MoJ Experimentation and Evaluation	2
Panel C: Evaluation	SG Health Inequalities	12
	SG Social Care	6
	WG Sustainable Futures	5
Panel D: Quantitative Spread	CO National Security	12
	FCDO Foreign Policy and Disinformation	4
	FCDO Geographical Focus MENA	5
	FCDO Geographical Focus Indo-Pacific	2
	FCDO Geographical Focus Europe	3
	FCDO International Trade Law	2
	FCDO National Security and the international digital and telecoms environment	1
	FCDO Non-Proliferation	4

## Methods

As the opening section underlined, the existing knowledge and evidence base around successful R2P engagement activities is remarkably thin, with Oliver *et al.* (2022) finding that just 6% of initiatives were evaluated. As a result, a high degree of uncertainty exists in relation to understanding of ‘what works’ when it comes to facilitating the mobility of knowledge, talent and individuals across institutional and sectoral boundaries. Research by the Institute for Government (2018) found that ‘most policy secondment schemes do not collect basic data or feedback from participants.’ A small seam of research is emerging in an attempt to fill this gap with key contributions including the evaluation of the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s science and technology fellowships (Pearl and Gareis, 2020), the review of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology’s parliamentary fellowship schemes (Parry, 2021), the sophisticated evaluation framework that has tracked the impact of the Academy of Medical Science’s ‘Future Leaders in Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Research’ (FLIER) fellowships (see Aleron Partners and Freshney Consulting, 2022) and the guide for academic institutions hosting policy-to-research (P2R) fellows produced by Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE 2022). The aim of the research outlined in this article was to conduct an early-stage evaluation to assess the success of the ESRC Policy Fellows pilot scheme (outlined above), and to make recommendations for future revisions and refinements to the initiative. This aim was translated into one primary and three secondary research questions:

PRQ1: Does the evaluative evidence suggest that the ESRC Policy Fellows initiative ‘worked’ in terms of its primary ambition to facilitate R2P mobility and mutual understanding?

SRQ1: What does the evaluative evidence suggest in terms of *forms of impact*?

SRQ2: What does the evaluative evidence suggest in terms of the *sustainability of impact(s)*?

SRQ3: What are the implications of this evaluative evidence for understanding *evidence-using systems or ‘ecosystem effects’*?

To answer these questions a multi-methods approach was adopted. Feedback on the programme was initially gathered by the ESRC using online surveys with fellows and hosts in November 2022 and March 2023. Engagement with these surveys was relatively low (nine fellows and two hosts responding to the first survey; five fellows and two hosts responding to the second survey). However, thematic analysis of this data, in combination with a review of the existing literature on the R2P nexus, provided a useful guide for the design of semi-structured interviews with fellows and hosts. Additionally, this research was informed by conversations with contacts at ESRC, within government departments, and reviewing documents internal to the initiative.

Twenty-five<sup>2</sup> fellows and 28 host staff members from the first cohort were then invited to participate in a semi-structured interview (see Table 4, below). This included two fellows who had taken part in a concurrent AHRC policy fellowship scheme. While not recruited as part of the ESRC call, these fellowships were similar in design and fellows were included in training and networking opportunities



with the ESRC cohort. Eight of the original host contacts provided were unable to participate: two had not been involved; four were no longer in the department; and two (from the same department) were only willing to provide comments in writing. Two new host contacts were generated as part of the recruitment process and, overall, civil servants from eight host departments were interviewed. Of the four fellows who were unable to participate, three were on maternity leave. One further fellow opted not to participate in the evaluation on the terms stipulated by her host department (an approved written response). In total, 29 individuals were included across 28 interviews in February and March 2024. To preserve respondents' confidentiality it is not possible to share this data, however study materials are available from the ORDA repository.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 4: Interview Recruitment**

	Contact details supplied by ESRC	Responded to invitation(s)	No response	Unable/declined to participate (see notes)	Participated
Fellows	25	20 (80%)	2 (8%)	4 (16%)	18 (72%)
Hosts	28	14 (50%)	10 (37%)	8 (29%)	11 (39%)

Prior to the interviews, participants received an information sheet, consent form, and an outline of the interview questions. The video conferencing software Google Meet was used to conduct the interviews, which were auto transcribed, and separately audio recorded. Fellow interviews averaged 45-60 minutes, while host staff interviews lasted around 30 minutes. After the interviews, the automated transcripts were manually cross-referenced with the audio recordings to improve accuracy. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was then conducted using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. This systematic approach allowed us to identify key themes and patterns across the participant responses. For the protection of participant confidentiality, all direct quotes within this report have been anonymised and are presented with the express permission of the individual. This research project received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield.<sup>4</sup>

Three methodological caveats must be acknowledged. First and foremost, the evaluation and analysis of any knowledge-exchange focused initiative must concede that impact is very rarely a linear phenomenon. The contribution of science, data, evidence, or forms of 'useful knowledge' into policy-making processes will inevitably form part of a complex and often politicised milieu where the identification of clear causal links is highly problematic (see Smith *et al.* 2020). This generic challenge is even more problematic when researchers are placed in politically salient policy contexts where strict rules exist in relation to official secrecy, official confidentiality, and data security (i.e. most of the policy areas outlined in Table 3, above). In this study the capacity of ESRC policy fellows to claim credit for policy impact through the provision of detailed accounts of activity or evidential documents was very often limited (discussed below). Secondly, this article presents the results of an *early-stage* evaluation. It was conducted in the first twelve months after the first pilot fellowship scheme had formally finished but when several policy-focused projects were still being completed, and when many fellows were still in the process of writing-up their projects. The full impact of the activity under analysis is likely develop over the medium to long-term as, for example, relationships and networks evolve and forms of structured serendipity emerge (see Merton

and Barber, 2004) and as tools of research impact evaluation become more sophisticated (see Boaz, Fitzpatrick and Shaw, 2009).

The third and final methodological challenge takes the discussion back to Oliver *et al.*'s (2022) concern about a 'rudderless mass of activity', and specifically to their observation about a lack of pre-investment precision in relation to specified aims and ambitions. As the previous section suggested, the ESRC Policy Fellows were launched in 2021 with the fairly high-level ambition of 'providing research and expert advice to policy hosts' and 'supporting wider knowledge exchange between government and academia'. Fellows were therefore expected to fulfil five main tasks (Table 5, below), with the fifth task being linked to a range of activities including, 'connecting with related UKRI research portfolios, acting as a pipeline for knowledge exchange between them and government hosts, publishing outputs from analysis produced, subject to clearance processes and knowledge exchange activities with academic institutions and other analytical and policy teams within government.'<sup>5</sup>

**Table 5. Role Specification for ESRC Policy Fellows, 2021-2023**

1. Scope and lead research-related activity with the host
2. Work closely with hosts to ensure alignment of priorities and that analysis is as robust and useful as possible in driving decisions
3. Provide advice and peer review to other aspects of the host's work
4. Support capability building within host in your area of expertise
5. Strengthen engagement between government and academia.

A sixth explicit role was to 'support hosts and funders of this opportunity in the evaluation of the fellowship programme and improvement of future schemes' which explains the origins of the research presented in this article. But a detailed statement in terms of specified intended outputs and outcomes within a short, medium, and long-term framework – or an explicit theory of change – did not feature in the initial investment design, thereby resonating with the broader findings of Oliver *et al.* (2022, 693). To some extent this may reflect the pilot nature of the initiative in 2021, but it also has implications for the engaging with this article's primary research question (above) in the sense that evaluative criteria are inevitably designed and imposed on a post-hoc basis (discussed below).

**Table 6. Research-Policy Impacts: Agency, Programmes and Structure**

<i>Impact on...</i>	<i>Core questions...</i>
<b>People</b> (Individual Fellows or Policy Makers)	What new skills, knowledge, connections, or opportunities did participating academics and policy officials gain from the fellowships? In what ways did it strengthen their ability to effectively engage with the policymaking process?
<b>Policy</b> (broad discussion to detailed planning)	What kinds of policy impacts were achieved during the fellowships? What was the nature of these impacts: direct or indirect, formal or informal, immediate or anticipated in the future?
<b>Systems</b> (wider ecosystem effects)	What connections between academia and policy did the fellowships catalyse beyond the fellows themselves? What evidence is there of the scheme contributing to wider knowledge exchange?

This article draws upon best practice analyses and systemic reviews of impact evaluation studies (see Bornmann, 2013; Smit and Hessels, 2021; Reed *et al.* 2021) to provide an account of three

different kinds of impact that evidence suggests were achieved by the pilot phase of the scheme (see Table 6, above). The next section outlines the main findings of this research.

## Findings

As the opening section outlined, although R2P fellowships are increasingly used with the goal of improving evidence use very little detailed evaluative evidence exists about the impacts of these activities (hence, PRQ1, above). The pilot ESRC Policy Fellows initiative (2021-2023) provides an opportunity to address this situation in terms of *forms* of impact (SRQ1), the *sustainability* of impact(s) (SRQ2), and the meta-governance of *evidence-using systems* or ‘ecosystem effects’ (SRQ3). The central argument of this article is that although the early-stage evaluative evidence suggests that the ESRC Policy Fellows initiative ‘worked’ in terms of its primary ambitions (Table 5, above) significant questions exist in relation to systemic issues that may well limit medium- and long-term impact attainment. The aim of this section is to outline the evidence-base around three forms or types of impact (Table 6, above), while issues relating to sustainability and evidence-using systems are discussed in the next section.

### *Impacts on People*

Almost without exception, the fellows from the first cohort of ESRC Policy Fellows felt that the experience of spending time and working in a policy environment had been a beneficial professional experience that had achieved its core ambitions in terms of supporting people to be able to navigate the nexus between research and policy (and vice versa). "It definitely gave me a good insight into what a career in the civil service could look like and the fact that actually they do a lot of research. I don't think it's going to necessarily mean leaving research altogether... but even if I stay in Academia [I have] a much better understanding of how to do useful research for policy makers' Fellow #01 noted, 'I know now how to approach them. I know now how to understand their problem. How to frame research in a way that is both academically sound but also useful. Sometimes you see these thing as either very theoretical - very academic and very Ivory Tower - or practical but it can be both. And this Fellowship helped me to understand how to bridge these two visions of research, applied or very theoretical - it can be both. And that was brilliant. So, I think the lasting impact is in the way I will frame my work going forward.'

During interviews, many fellows talked about having a completely new level of understanding and insight about the machinery of government and the complexity of the policy process. This allowed them, it was suggested, to understand not only the nuances of getting research insights into policy but also *who* to engage with and talk to about challenges. An awareness of the policy-cycle and how it affected *when* and *how* to present research was also highlighted by several fellows. The main outcome was a far stronger sense of personal efficacy around an ability to engage effectively with policy makers. Although boundary-spanning across and between research and policy is not easy, the majority of fellows highlighted increased personal confidence in their professional abilities as a central benefit of the scheme. Additional individual-level and evidenced impacts included:

- Policy-related skills and insight across and within institutions;
- Clearer understanding of the role of research in policy;

- An understanding of enabling mechanisms and the importance of inter-personal relationships;
- An ability to understand political signalling and the significance of timing;
- Experience in framing evidence insights to align with policy needs;
- Insight into translational skills (scientific to policy ‘speak’) and what being a ‘knowledge broker’ meant in practical terms;
- New professional networks beyond academe;
- Increased personal and professional confidence; and
- Subsequent research grant success and promotions based on the fellowship experience.

One interesting finding was that several former fellows noted that they had not realised how much research was already being conducted *in* government. It was not just an R2P transition that occurred but often a shift from academic research to ‘in-government research’ which was itself then translated into policy-making discussions. Fellows spoke of understanding the role of different ‘players’ in the research-to-policy environment, including consultancy firms. ‘My understanding of the technicalities of what counts as impact has definitely changed and I’ve become more precise about what the research council’s actually want you to do’ Fellow #18 explained, ‘And I wouldn’t say I’m 100% an expert but I feel like my understanding of that has grown and of course that’s really useful for my career. I think understanding how academia affects policy... I suppose I feel like I have a bit more of again a quite intangible, informal understanding of how some of that can work.’

This ‘informal understanding’ about knowledge-exchange emerged as a key individual impact within interviews which, in turn, aided understanding on the part of fellows about the often intangible and fuzzy nature of R2P impact. As Fellow #01 described things: ‘[B]ecause I was there and living and breathing their [the policy maker’s] challenges and basically impact was almost gradual. I developed impact every day, during my fellowship. It’s not something that arrived at the end... Yes, I did achieve direct impact, but through less direct and more [through] a set of enabling mechanisms that the scheme provided.’ An understanding of and commitment to bridging different ‘research worlds’ was a central success of the scheme for a large number of fellows. As Fellow #07 explained, ‘[F]or me it’s the understanding of how I do knowledge brokering, and what that means for me. Not just *doing* knowledge brokering but really breaking that down to say, ‘But what does that tangibly mean to me?’ ‘How do I engage in that?’ ‘What’s my systems and processes?’ and ‘What works for me in the context that I work within?’” Possibly one of the simplest indicators of the positive individual-level impacts is that the ESRC Policy Fellows had a 100 per cent completion rate.

What’s also clear from the early-stage evaluation is that it was not just the policy fellows who benefitted at an individual level. Interviews with representatives from the host institutions revealed a large number of individual-level impacts including:

- Greater awareness within policy teams of specialist studies or data sources;
- Insight into how to structure and categorise different types of problem, or the value of different pieces of information;
- Understanding the non-linearity of policy making and the importance of high-trust interpersonal relationships;
- The identification of opportunities for hosts themselves to participate in fellowship opportunities that take policy-makers into academe (i.e. P2R);
- Instruction and training in new methods and approaches; and

- Critical challenge and positive questioning to militate against ‘group think’.

The chance to work with the fellows appeared to have particular individual-level benefits for host staff who were earlier in their career. In one department, Host #10 commented on the time restrictions of conducting research in the civil service and how this limited ‘more junior researchers’ from getting to ‘flex some of those social research methods skills’ gained in formal education or training. Conversely, being able to work alongside the fellow and learn from an experienced researcher provided ‘the opportunity to see someone who's employing methods that they learned about on these larger projects, and how they would then come in and apply those to more time pressing projects’.

In terms of ‘what works’ some of the most basic individual-level impacts on hosts were achieved through very simple initiatives. ‘Academic Advice Surgeries’ or ‘Ideas Surgeries’ were trialled with great success in several host organisations. These were informal ‘drop in’ sessions where policy-makers could discuss issues, themes and challenges with fellows and, through this, generate fresh perspectives, identify new data sources or be told about a subject specialist in academia they could contact for support. This flows into a focus on policy-related impacts.

### *Impacts on Policy*

As already acknowledged (Part 3, above), this article presents the results of an early-stage evaluative study and, as such, it is not possible to offer a full account of the policy impact of the fellows. It can also be very difficult to pin down specific impacts and causal links due to the manner in which the policy fellows very often fed into and contributed to broad discussions at the beginning of a policy review process or were involved in topics that were subject to high levels of confidentiality. That said, there is already substantial evidence that high levels of positive impact on policy have occurred, across a range of dimensions. This ranges from supporting the establishment of new Memoranda of Understanding with foreign governments, contributing to multi-decade environmental planning processes, through to the work of fellows being cited in Parliament in order to support policy change. Other examples include:

- The creation of new online tools that can be used by every department in Whitehall;
- Supporting the transparency agenda across government to support policy-making;
- Providing data expertise around the social and economic value of major infrastructure investments;
- Contributing to Futures and Foresight analysis through the production of evidence-based recommendations;
- Injecting insight and challenge around clean air policy, and profile raising within and beyond government;
- Utilising inter-disciplinary research to highlight new policy options around reducing food waste; and
- Nurturing the development of new collaborations and partnerships between policy-focused organisations.

The research also suggests other forms of less direct but no less important policy impact. Several hosts talked about how hosting a fellow had affected the culture of policy-making in their team by challenging embedded assumptions and offering critical challenge in a constructive manner. Hosts also suggested that having a policy fellow had encouraged a focus on the broader policy landscape beyond a single department or policy team – a ‘whole policy approach’ as one fellow described it. In this sense the policy fellows appear from the evidence to have very often provided a ‘stretching’ role within their host organisation that was widely welcomed. There is also a clear ‘range’ based dynamic that accrued from the manner in which fellows very often worked across several policy teams, and in some cases even held ‘drop in’ style clinics to provide insights and advice to policy makers from right across their host organisation. The policy impact of the first cohort fellows is reflected in the way a large number of them are now continuing to work with their policy host organisations, either informally or as members of project teams or advisory networks.

The analysis of impacts on policy also reveals the existence of numerous subtle or indirect contributions to policy, thereby exposing the limitations of simplistic linear assumptions. As Fellow #18 commented, ‘I definitely feel like I have some impacts but it’s of course a relatively sort of intangible process of having small conversations here and there, feeding in on emails, doing the more formal sort of briefings and writing reports or research papers, doing sort of teachings on subjects I feel like most of the time I’ve done any of those activities I’ve got positive responses from people who seem to find it useful and sometimes they’ve been times where I’ve seen then that been reflected in the policy work that they’ve done.’ That is not to suggest that direct causal impact chains could never be established. As Fellow #15 explained clarified, ‘I ran certain workshops for one of the projects and I facilitated the workshops. I did the analysis. I produced the report. And then that was used by the [policy] teams in my host Department.’ But on the majority of occasions policy-related impacts tended to be indirect. This quality is captured in the following quote from Fellow #02: “The biggest impact I think I’ve ever had was reported to me by a colleague in the [host department] - it was the biggest compliment I’ve ever been paid – they said that after my time there [as a policy fellow] the majority of analytical teams I [had] worked with asked better questions. Which was amazing for me. But that was my career development. It wasn’t something that I managed to mobilize. It was a genuine effect that those conversations had had on what’s going on.”

Fellow #14 made a similar argument: ‘Have I had direct impact? I mean my fellowship hasn’t finished yet...so it’s quite difficult to see the direct impact of my project because I haven’t even published a report with recommendations to trace that impact. But a person came from [a government department] to give a presentation and talked about how I had changed the way that he thought about the way that policy-makers use evidence. So there are lovely narratives of this kind of softer intangible impact.’ This insight leads into a question about system-level impacts.

### *Impacts on the (Eco)System*

The third level of impact assessed in this early-stage evaluation focused on systemic benefits and change – above and beyond any specific individual benefit or contribution to policy. These broader ‘ecosystem effects’ are arguably the hardest to evidence in an audit-style evaluation process but also possibly the most important in terms of structural benefits and investment value. Impacts on the ecosystem are also likely to become more apparent in the medium to long term as cultural changes and evidence of increased mobility become more evident. Nevertheless, clear and evidence-based systemic impacts included:

- Helping to ‘join-up’ directorates and departments – vertically and horizontally - to align policy thinking and share data;
- Upskilling officials in terms of theory, methods and approaches (and very often cultivating long-term ‘two way’ learning);
- Creating positive space for policy-makers to engage in reflective practices about their role and skills;
- Promoting understanding as to the value of academic partnerships and the complementarity of knowledge and value of collaboration;
- Contributing to the creation of new networks and task forces that spanned several sectors and added policy capacity at an infrastructural level;
- The creation of new placement, secondment and fellowship opportunities to further facilitate the mobility of knowledge and skills;
- Forging new professional relationships that can be sustained and developed in the future;
- Acting as ‘knowledge-brokers’ or ‘boundary-spanners’ to connect academic experts or new areas of highly relevant research; and
- The injection of ‘structured serendipity’ opportunities that often produced unexpected insights and opportunities.

One of the main impacts of the first cohort of policy fellows was simply the infusion of new skills, talents, and perspectives. Across all policy hosts this injection of ‘fresh thinking’ was widely welcomed and seen as an organisational or systemic contribution that should be maintained and built upon. The impact in terms of ‘stretching’ the policy debate and injecting a degree of ‘range’ that looked beyond the immediate needs of a discrete issue or challenge has already been highlighted. A related contribution, however, was simply the injection of an element of time and space in which busy policy-makers could engage in some ‘slow thinking’ about *what* they were doing, *why* and *how* they might develop their professional toolkit. To put the same point slightly differently, the existence of a policy fellow within a policy team created not only a little more practical capacity but it also legitimated an investment of time in engaging with that fellow by officials in ways that had broader impacts on the ecosystem.

Structured serendipity was also a key contribution at the systemic level. Simply bringing people together who would not normally have had the chance to meet in their professional lives very often produced unexpected insights or opportunities, many of which were completely unconnected to a fellow’s main project or role. A fellow based in the Department of Transport, for example, identified that some of their research from a previous project may be of value to a Foreign Office project and was able to develop an advisory role. What is sometimes referred to as ‘making your own luck’ is therefore more accurately referred to as ‘structured serendipity’. World class research-to-policy environments *structure* serendipity by proactively cultivating relationships and experiences that seek to forge new perspectives and insights. The serendipitous breakthroughs that occur have not ‘simply happened’ but have in fact been encouraged, incentivised and facilitated. This dimension of policy fellow activity and impact demands greater analysis and discussion.

A final impact on the ecosystem that arose out of interviews with fellows and hosts was a contribution to building trust in science. Several fellows highlighted how they went out of their way not simply to present the scientific evidence but to explain how that data had been developed,

discuss potential issues or gaps in the knowledge base, etc. but overall to open-up academe and the science base, just as hosts opened-up the messy realities of policy making. The skills of ‘translation’ from scientific to policy language and fulfilling the role of a ‘knowledge-broker’ came through as major contributions to the ecosystem. In many ways the evidence suggests that the first cohort fulfilled the initiative’s core ambitions (Table 4, above) but it is at this point that a second longitudinal dimension to thinking about impact becomes highly relevant. This is because although the evidence suggests the achievement of short-term achievements it also exposed a significant level of concern about the sustainability of those impacts into and across the medium and long-term. This is discussed in the next section.

## **Discussion**

The previous section suggested that the early evaluative evidence does indicate that the ESRC Policy Fellows initiative ‘worked’ in terms of achieving its primary ambition to facilitate R2P mobility and mutual understanding (i.e. PRQ1, above). To substantiate this core claim evidence was presented across three forms of impact (i.e. SRQ2, above). However, the evaluative evidence base presented in this article also contained concerns as to the *sustainability of impact(s)* in the medium to long term (i.e. SRQ3, above) which may, in turn, have implications and offer insights for understanding *evidence-using systems or ‘ecosystem effects’* (i.e. SRQ4, above).

### ***Insights into the sustainability of impact***

Arguably the most important insight emerging out of the evaluation was the role of high-trust low-cost inter-personal relationships in facilitating R2P. Although many fellows felt like ‘an outsider within’ the fact that they had an institutional email account, were formally part of a team, had security clearance, etc. meant that they were able to not only gain experience in a policy-related non-academic environment, but they were able to build relationships with their new colleagues and, through this, navigate some of the challenges of working in a politically salient organisational and professional context. A degree of ‘entrepreneurial thinking’ (see Flinders, 2023) was therefore needed by fellows and this led to a range of impacts in relation to people, policy and the broader ecosystem but one core issue still concerned fellows and hosts and the deeper or longer-term impact of this R2P initiative: churn. The extensive and constant movement of officials across teams, directors and departments was identified as a major impediment to the absorption of insights and the building of relationships. Civil service ‘churn’ – the general movement of staff between roles and specialist areas – is well-recognised as a governing pathology in the United Kingdom. It is widely seen as undermining the build-up of expertise, undermining institutional memory and facilitating blame-games between ministers and officials, as the Liaison Committee report of May 2024 argued.

A significant number of fellows identified coping with high levels of churn as a challenge. Changes to a fellow’s key point of contact, for example, when not well managed could not only impede workplans but also leave the fellow feeling disconnected. This churn could be both individual in nature (a line manager leaving) and structural (a policy priority moving on and a team being dismantled). Some fellows expressed the feeling that regular staff churn meant understanding of *who* they were and *what* they were there to do became lost and demanded significant work on their part to re-establish and maintain. ‘We had quite a high turnover in our hosts’ Fellow09 reflected ‘[T]he manager changed the week before I started the inception phase...so we had the new manager,



obviously he had to get started, so for the first month of the inception phase, we effectively didn't really do anything... So they changed twice in the first few months and then the third person we had, she was great, but I think she was quite junior, quite new to the team. So she had less of a broader perspective of the knowledge of the what the priorities were.'

Lack of institutional memory as a feature of the civil service at times impacted the progress of fellows' work, and for some caused them to question the likelihood that the projects would continue to have impact after the fellowships ended. 'People move on from team to team and then somebody who takes over and of course it needs to be all there...it's a bit ironic then that it's so difficult to find things. So, I mean you need to somehow know how to do it, but this is quite a protocol' Fellow08 suggested 'The research, which took a lot of time, that was the easy thing because I knew exactly what I was doing.' In a few cases, changes to a fellow's direct contacts lead to misaligned expectations about the aims and objectives of the work which lead to tensions and frustration. Hosts recognised the need for greater stability in terms of planning and management.

The specification [to host a fellow] was developed by one person who then left. By the time the fellow arrived they were being managed by another person, who then went on long-term leave. They were then managed by a third person who didn't really get who this person was, why they'd come in, and weren't bought-into the piece of work they were doing because they didn't create it. It meant for that [fellowship] we really didn't make the most of it, through that situation that was quite hard to control for (Host03).

Some fellows enjoyed the 'churn challenge'. 'The upheaval of such a tumultuous time I think was a gift for me' Fellow07 explained 'I mean, to see the amount of prime minister's we had. The effect that was on the department. How many secretaries of State we had, what that impacted on in the working relationships, on the policy directions. I mean, the machinery of government, to see that. If I could choose it, I wouldn't have had my policy fellowship at any other time.' But for many fellows, churn was not only a challenge in terms of designing and delivering a specific project, but also in terms of their sense as to whether any of the short-term impacts would be sustained once they had left. There was a collective concern that unfinished projects would not be completed, or the full potential impact of completed projects realised without a fellow being present to champion the role of research in policy. This insight suggests that some value might accrue from distinguishing between 'thin/shallow/short-term' R2P impacts, as opposed to 'thick/deep/medium-to-long term' impacts (the latter suggesting embedded systemic and cultural change). The core argument of this article is that although the evidence suggests the ESRC policy fellows achieved short-term impacts at several levels (PRQ1, above) the existence of high levels of churn or hyper-fluidity within the policy space was seen as acting as a barrier or blockage to achieving 'thick/deep/medium-to-long term' impact (SRQ3, above). Through what processes of accretion and sedimentation wider 'ecosystem effects' might be detected remains unclear, as do the evidential foundations needed to support such claims.

[O]ne difficulty with government is always how do we deploy all of this? So if it is sitting in a document, or even if it's sitting in a framework that has been developed... it's only as good as our continuing engagement with the political teams to keep feeding those insights into the policy process. And obviously with a fellowship the fellows are here for a limited time, and they have been brought here to do that specific task, and then it falls to others to continue doing that work. And unless their work has

been fully embedded, in a way that is part of the ongoing process of the policy teams, and they wouldn't dream of doing things in a different way anymore, it then requires somebody's efforts to keep doing that reminding. (Host09)

And yet even this insight is useful due to the way in which it encourages us to reflect not only upon the ESRC Policy Fellows initiative but on how that initiative is relevant to far broader debates concerning *evidence-using systems* (i.e. SRQ4, above). In this regard five issues demand brief consideration.

### ***Wider implications for evidencing-using systems***

The first issue worth further reflection relates to the twin-themes of porosity and absorption in evidence-using systems. 'Porosity' relates to the unhindered flow of knowledge and people within the research, development and innovation 'ecosystem' – the lack of systemic 'permeability' highlighted by Sir Paul Nurse underlined in his 2023 review; 'absorption' to the capacity of an organisation to derive insight, learn new skills and distribute opportunities from new initiatives – awareness, as it were, percolating through the system. What the ESRC Policy Fellows highlight is a porosity and absorption challenge for the civil service, which is not helped by very high levels of personnel churn. Going back to Oliver (2022) et al.'s identification of a 'rudderless mass of [R2P] activity' the broader insight for evidence-using systems might be the need to reduce 'churn', create integrated 'docking points' and develop frameworks for systemic learning.

A second insight for evidence-using systems emerging out of this article's focus on the ESRC Policy Fellows is that the social sciences do offer distinctive tools, perspectives and arguments that can be vital to addressing a range of complex societal challenges. As James Wilsdon and his colleagues note in their *Reimagining the Recipe for Research and Innovation* report of May 2024: [A] striking feature of recent initiatives and announcements is the visible priority they place on new technologies and STEM-related R&I, and the limited amount that they say about the role and contribution of the social sciences. [The] UK R&I policy and strategy is now at risk of becoming lopsided and missing an equivalently rich, textured and ambitious agenda for the many ways social science research and expertise contribute to addressing the UK's economic, social and environmental priorities.' The specific qualities that the social sciences are identified as contributing to societal challenges include a whole-systems approach, critical and connective thinking, contextual and cultural understanding, and a focus on preventative or 'upstreaming' approaches. These qualities resonate with the reasons given why organisations generally found it so beneficial to host a policy fellow in this evaluative study.

A third issue focuses on cohort effects. The basic insight being that increased levels of *intra*-group trust, knowledge and cohesiveness can be sustained and utilised with systemic value. Facilitating networking events or regular contact occasions, commissioning reflections, weaving former cohort members into future training or mentoring opportunities, etc. are ways of maximising the value of cohort-based initiatives.

What the evaluative studies on R2P initiatives that do exist consistently reveal is the value in nurturing *intra*-group social capital both within and beyond the formal terms of specific investments (i.e. a networked approach to building capacity) (see MacGregor and Phipps, 2020). Initiatives like the FLIER scheme show the value not only of establishing development networks to offer mutual support and training opportunities to cohorts but also of facilitating

post-initiative activities which sustain links and relationships, facilitate activities and which very often are utilised to sustain future programmes. The way in which the Scottish Crucible facilitates ongoing links with and activities for previous cohorts – known as ‘Crubilists’ – provides a very clear example of the creation of long-term research infrastructure and boundary-spanning research cultures. The first wave of ESRC Policy Fellows has demonstrated the value of positive cohort effects by, for example, writing a detailed guidance document for the subsequent wave of UKRI Policy Fellows, and organising group writing retreats. The implication for *evidence-using systems* is that R2P activities that forge long-term *relationally*-focused networks are likely to generate ‘thicker’, ‘deeper’ and longer-term benefits than short-term project-specific activities.

This flows into a fourth insight which focuses not on fellows but on hosts – who also need training, support and possibly their own development network. This shifts the focus from R2P to P2R (i.e. policy-to-research) and reflects the fact that many of the hosts (i.e. officials charged with line managing a fellow) in the ESRC Policy Fellows scheme were totally unprepared for what ‘hosting’ an academic fellow would involve in practical terms. This was a pilot scheme, so processes, expectations and boundaries were inevitably being developed as projects, relationships and mutual understandings evolved but a large number of hosts suggested that systemic thinking within government was needed if greater mobility was to be facilitated, and if potential medium to long term impacts were to be realised. Clearer guidelines and training opportunities could potentially also help mitigate the impact of ‘churn’ upon R2P activities. Plans announced in June 2023 for a UK Policy Talent Accelerator Network Plus that would ‘enhance the current sector offer and build new capabilities for ‘policy to research’ [P2R, see Buckley and Oliver, 2024] initiatives that facilitate policy makers engaging with research communities as part of their professional development’ underlines the need for greater whole systems thinking which this study has revealed.<sup>6</sup>

This flows into a fifth and final focus on what might be termed ‘the meta-governance of R2P (and P2R) initiatives’ and to Oliver et al.’s (2022, 704) warning about a lack of strategic co-ordination and the risk of ‘harms being inflicted’ (wasted time and resources, reduced goodwill, increased inequalities, etc.). With the ESRC pilot scheme now established as a larger UKRI Policy Fellowship scheme, and with plans to develop this initiative in the future - alongside plans to invest in significant new P2R programmes – the general fellowship/secondment terrain risks becoming increasingly congested, fragmented and ‘rudderless’.<sup>7</sup> A fundamental cross-sector review of engagement activities could usefully flow into the establishment of a national database which could operate as a central gateway and meta-science resource. As a critical piece of research infrastructure, the establishment of a database, especially if located within an existing policy-focused academic unit, would offer many benefits. Box 1 (below) utilises the research on which this article is based to identify some of these benefits.

### **Box 1. Suggested Benefits of Building a Strategic Centre**

- The prevention of unnecessary duplication;
- Providing a launchpad for new initiatives;
- Ensuring the provision of different sized short-term experiential experiences (STEPS);
- Facilitating accurate data collection and cross-sectoral evaluations;
- Opportunities to learning from evidence and theory;
- Data collection for academic scholarship on mobility and knowledge transfer;
- Promoting a shared awareness of innovations and ‘what works’;
- Ensuring a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion;
- Enabling targeted recruitment initiatives;
- Delivering greater capacity to track and support cohorts, and support inter-cohort learning and activities;
- Possible expansion into, for example, Research-to-Business; and
- Additional boundary-spanning collaborative, connective and catalysing activities.

### **Conclusions**

Building on the work of Oliver et al. (2022), Kumpunen et al (2023), Breckon and Boaz (2023), Buckley and Oliver (2024) and others – and returning to a focus on ‘ecosystem effects’, knowledge systems, and ‘deep’ impacts – the early-stage evaluative evidence presented in this article highlights the need to ‘join up’ an increasingly fragmented R2P landscape. Interviews with fellows and policy hosts revealed a range of impacts achieved at the level of the individual, on policy and the wider research-policy ecosystem. However, they also surfaced a number of questions about the longer-term sustainability of these impacts and how the effects of the ESRC fellowships and similar schemes can be harnessed into an integrated endeavour. A lot of the data and material for an initial landscape review has already been collected but the suggestion is less about the need for a one-off review and more about the need to create, maintain and utilise a database or central repository about R2P/P2R opportunities. The database would act as a ‘strategic brain’ or hub which increased systemic capacity and strategic thinking, while also connecting and co-ordinating a vast range of mobility focused fellowships for the benefit of the national science base.

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**Contributor statement**

MF designed the study. JBE lead on desk research, methodological planning, conducting interviews and data analysis. MF led on contextualising the findings and writing the initial draft. JBE and MF reviewed and edited subsequent drafts.

**Conflicts of interest**

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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<sup>1</sup> This total includes two ADR UK Data Science Fellows. This scheme was originally advertised as two separate calls but later combined with fellows treated as a single cohort: <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/developing-people-and-skills/find-policy-fellows/>

<sup>2</sup> One fellow had left academia and their contact details were not provided to the researchers.

<sup>3</sup> <https://doi.org/10.15131/shef.data.27291639>

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 05738.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/esrc-policy-fellowships-2021/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/esrc-policy-talent-accelerator-network-plus/>

<sup>7</sup> In February 2023, a second expanded round of the scheme was launched, rebranded as 'UKRI Policy Fellowships' to reflect a wider rollout across research councils (ESRC, AHRC, BBSRC). Responding to significant increased demand from continuing and new host partners, this phase included 49 advertised placement opportunities across 26 hosts and received 153 applications. The second cohort of Policy Fellows were therefore undertaking their placements as this report on the first cohort was being written, and within UKRI strategic planning is taking place with regard to the recruitment of a third cohort in 2025.