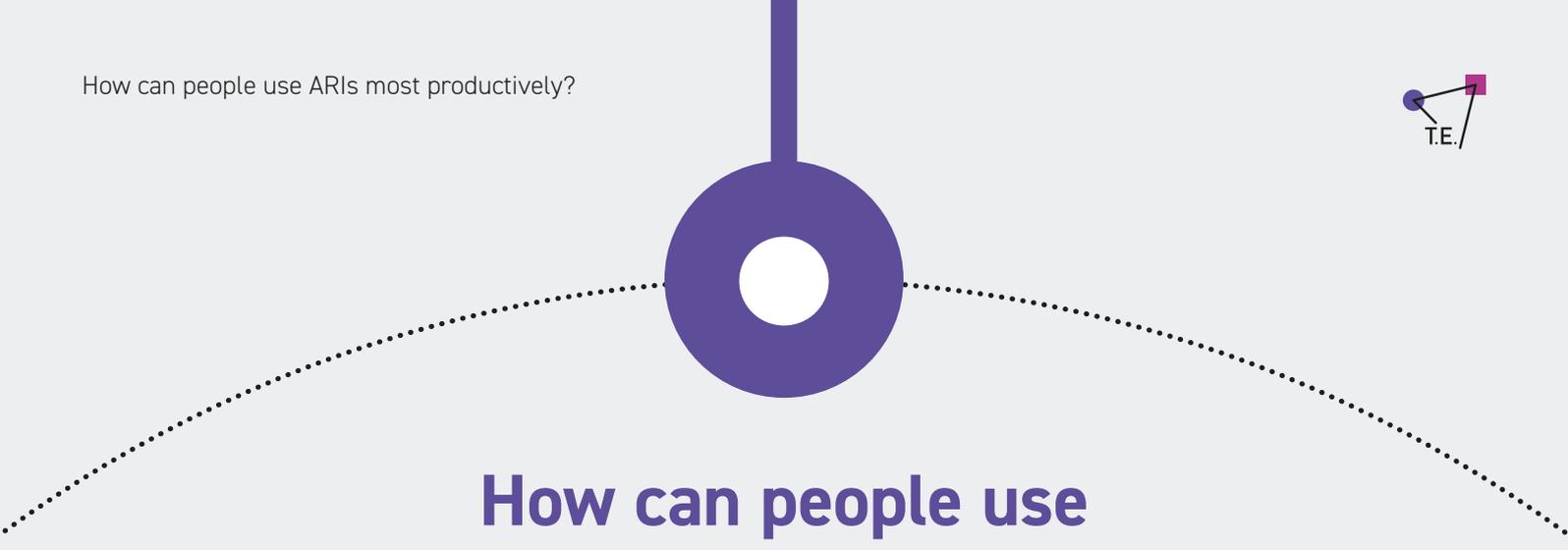




How can people use ARIs most productively?

March 2025

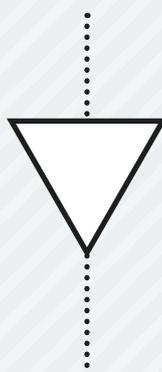


How can people use ARIs most productively?



Since 2019, we have found increasing interest from government, funders, intermediaries, and research organisations in the ARIs. These stakeholders view them in the context of their own agendas and interests, and are variably equipped to make use of the ARIs. There is therefore scope to improve stakeholders use of ARIs, and how stakeholders work together to strengthen the science system overall.

It is important to think about how to use ARIs most productively, because engagement between policy and practice organisations and their research, funding and other stakeholders is not cost-free. Engagement between policymakers and researchers is often viewed as an unqualified benefit, but of course it also has costs, even where engagement activities yield positive outcomes for all involved (Oliver et al., 2019). ARIs can stimulate useful academic-policy engagement initiatives, research funding, or convening – but these all draw on limited resources to run, which should be spent as efficiently as possible (Hopkins et al., 2021).

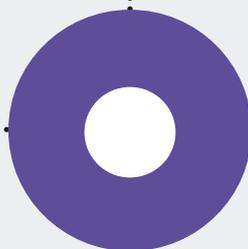


Working with ARIs: Opportunities for analysis

UK government ARIs are available in the freely searchable [ARI Database](#). While many users will be looking for specific ARIs which match their work interests or expertise, there is value in looking across all ARIs to identify trends, themes and gaps. While there is no centralised 'home' for this analysis at present, many would benefit from such insights to help:

- **Identify shared priorities,**
i.e. themes or topics by government departments, and/or other public sector organisations (including internationally). This helps joint working and mutual learning, as well as increases the potential for more efficient use of R&D budgets. Opportunities to do cross-departmental work are relatively rare and often project-based (e.g. through the Strategic Priorities Fund, or the ESRC's Project X).
- **Mobilise existing data:**
Opportunities exist to maximise the value of existing investments in data infrastructures, including existing ESRC investments (ADR-UK and the Life course studies, CLOSER, etc.) where relevant to ARIs
- **Identify new research area:**
Strategic working with funders could identify opportunities to support ARI-related projects and investments
- **Co-ordinate knowledge exchange activities:**
Streamlining of the proliferation of KE initiatives would enable more effective collaboration reducing duplication of offers, better focusing of knowledge exchange resources on topics of policy relevance, rather than research projects, and opportunities to focus on sensitive topics in more closed sessions

- **Identify ARIs or groups of ARIs for which there is a substantial evidence base or gaps,**
e.g. by comparing ARIs with grant or research output databases. This helps to reduce funding waste and can funnel resources to evidence gaps. As potentially relevant UKRI grants can be identified for over 80% of ARIs it seems likely that evidence synthesis and mobilisation are underused approaches in delivering evidence for policy.
- **Analyse the skills and methods required to address policy and practice priorities.**
Some ARIs clearly state the approaches required whereas for others the methodological approach needs to be inferred. Analysis of the ARIs can help funders and educators plan and invest in training courses to build a workforce capable of effective public service.
- **Provide a mechanism to scrutinise government research and engagement activities, and research and funding.**
If ARIs are being used effectively (see REF for a good practice guide), they should reflect and shape policy and practice organisations' research and engagement activities. Thus, scrutiny bodies such as Select Committees could use them to assess the effectiveness of their research and engagement strategy. Similarly, funders and researchers can be examined to assess the overlap between their activities and the ARIs .





Working with ARIs: Policy and practice organisations

Policy and practice organisations can use the ARIs to shape their research commissioning and engagement activities. They can explore the needs and activities of other departments to identify shared interests. Their own ARIs are a way of inviting conversation from others, often through engagement with funders, researchers, or intermediaries.

Engagement does not always deliver on its planned objectives. Wasted time on both sides can lead to reduced goodwill and willingness to take future opportunities to engage with evidence and academia. Because there are costs, organisations should think carefully about who they engage, how, and what the goals are. Often, lack of resource on all sides leads to opportunities being taken up without strategic planning and with little guidance on how to make best use of people's time and expertise.

Policy and practice organisations should seek to follow good practice, e.g. by following the principles of responsible [knowledge exchange](#), and learning from existing expertise within government (Science Systems team, Chisholm report on secondments (2020) and from relevant academics (e.g. [Transforming Evidence](#) initiative), and funders (e.g. UKRI Policy Fellowships). New activities should also be routinely evaluated to assess costs and benefits to the organisation. The ARIs should be used to guide research and engagement activities, and addressing the ARIs could be an evaluation success criterion for these activities.

Working with ARIs: Funders

Research funders can use the ARIs to inform their strategic planning and/or as ideas to shape upcoming funding opportunities. They can also use the ARIs to plan knowledge exchange and to promote existing evidence and investments to relevant departments.

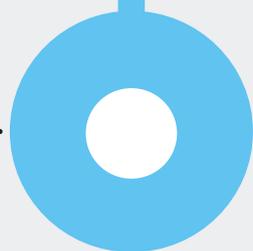
Funders can use ARIs directly to inform strategic funding calls. For example, analysis of the ARIs can be used to identify overlaps between ARIs and funding portfolios (see, e.g. Oliver et al (2025)). This helps funders to understand more about the supply and demand for policy-relevant research and identifies topics where the input of the ARIs in shaping programmes would be most impactful. These kinds of insights can help new funding initiatives complement rather than disrupt ongoing activities. ARIs also help indicate where multiple potential audiences exist for a funding programme, e.g. where multiple government departments indicate interest in an area enabling broader engagement between research councils and policy and practice stakeholders.

Policy and practice organisations would find it useful if funders could make more use of their existing grant portfolios, including completed research. There is potentially a significant overlap between ARIs and the UKRI grant portfolio, but limited resource for knowledge mobilisation or synthesis of this knowledge. At present, it is not clear whether these opportunities are being taken up, or who has responsibility for making sure the value of these research investments is maximised. It would also be useful for policy and practice organisations to seek input from portfolio managers when refreshing their ARIs, so that ARIs reflected the current state of the evidence base.

One way this could happen would be for funding to be made available for ARI-focused engagement, such as roundtables, evidence synthesis, or fellowships. Funders play an important role in supporting and providing resource for engagement activities. One way these funds could be more targeted (and evaluated) is for them to focus on ARIs or themes across ARIs. Resourced evaluation of engagement activities around ARIs to build the evidence base about effective engagement would also help policy and practice organisations understand more about which engagement approaches are most likely to be helpful to their specific needs.

Funders can incentivise behaviours both helpful and unhelpful for the overall science and policy system. How can funders incentivise policy teams to collaborate with the science system and with researchers? What kinds of behaviours amongst researchers and analyst would we like to see?

Finally, funders can identify and monitor use of ARIs within their own processes and by researchers. It would be useful to capture learning about how ARIs are having an impact so policy and practice organisations can adapt their approaches to their ARIs.



Working with ARIs: The role of intermediaries and knowledge brokers

In this space there is an obvious role for intermediary organisations, and for knowledge-brokering individuals within funders and universities to make the most of opportunities presented by the ARIs.

Intermediaries (such as the National Academies, selected What Works Centres such as the Wales Centre for Public Policy) often do have both skilled and resourced individuals who work across academic-policy boundaries. Where there is significant staff turnover in government (as civil servants move roles) Intermediaries can become the repository for organisational memory and could advise departments on their own policy and research engagement history. These intermediaries hold a really important place to convene cross-field and interdisciplinary discussions, and can potentially help deliver major missions and challenges. Intermediaries are really valued, able to access experts, bring in diverse voices and knowledge types.

As such, intermediaries are well placed to create opportunities to frame problems together, and to work together across government on shared areas of interest. This kind of cross-cutting work is difficult for policy organisations to manage internally, so this contribution would be very valuable.

Intermediaries also often produce useful syntheses, and/or run exchange schemes. Ensuring that these focus on ARIs, or themes across ARIs would help policy and practice audiences benefit from these activities.

Working with ARIs: Universities and researchers

Universities and researchers are keen to demonstrate impact on policy and practice. Many universities now have policy units or roles which operate to raise awareness of ARIs and related opportunities. However, these are often very resource dependent. Some universities lack structures to help them understand policy need, so despite the existence of the ARIs, they struggle to address policy agendas. In addition, career structures and incentives do not encourage long-term collaborative work addressing policy and practice priorities, instead – for academics - focusing on grant income and research outputs. There is an open question about how universities can be better incentivised to support existing science systems within the public sector, and to produce and share policy-relevant knowledge more freely.

Universities can use the ARIs to identify methodological skills and topics which are likely to be policy relevant, or will be required to address policy and practice needs. These can inform their training and educational offers.

Researchers can use ARIs to learn about departmental evidence needs, and how to engage with government on priority topics. Researchers can use ARIs to work out how to do policy-relevant research, engage departmental officials in discussion about projects or knowledge exchange events.

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Conclusion

The ARIs offer opportunities to create better links between policy and practice organisations, funders, and academics. These links can support more effective use of public research funding and shape research and engagement activities towards national and local priorities.

Transforming Evidence is an multidisciplinary, cross-sectoral, international community

We aim to connect individuals and organisations who generate, share and use evidence. Our community members include academics, policymakers, practitioners and funders, as well as journalists, think tanks and intermediaries.

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