

Bennett Institute
Policy Resources

Engaging with UK Government

A Guide for Academics

In partnership with the
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Introduction

There are many different routes and pathways for academics to engage with and potentially influence Government policy. This guide sets out a number of ways you can practically engage with the UK Government. Which route you take will depend on what your motives are for wanting to engage and what impacts, if any, you are hoping to achieve. This guide has been supported by the EPSRC so is aimed at researchers with expertise in engineering and science although the advice is equally applicable to any academic who may want to become more policy aware.

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Engaging with Government officials routes in

Engaging with Government officials, including civil servants, offers the opportunity to get involved at the early stages of policy development before a policy even goes through the parliamentary process. However, unlike giving evidence to a Select Committee or approaching an MP, the routes to engage and influence can be nebulous. Finding out who you need to approach and how to contact them can be tricky. You can start by identifying exactly which Minister, which Government Department(s), and also which administrations, have responsibility for your area of expertise. Many policy issues will cut across several Government Departments. Responsibility for how Government officials engage with evidence and expertise can also vary between and even within Departments but there are a number of senior roles and networks/teams within and across all Government Departments that it's useful to be aware of. Knowing who is involved in the policy process and why can be the first step to having an influence on policy and practice¹. It can also be a good idea to keep an eye out in the media for relevant political debates or policy announcements to see which Ministers or Government Departments are mentioned. This can help you keep abreast of emerging political discourse and also be a good introduction to learn how emerging policies take shape.

Government Ministers

Getting the direct attention of a Government Minister is difficult – they receive a huge volume of correspondence every week and are unlikely to act on evidence that doesn't align with their Department's strategic objectives no matter how compelling your research might be. If you haven't already made an impression on their Special Advisor,

(see below), then any correspondence you may send will likely receive a standard formal response written by a junior civil servant and the issue is unlikely to be taken any further. Instead try to build a relationship with more junior officials within the relevant Department who work on the particular area your research could influence.

Special Advisors

Special advisors, often known as SpAds, are temporary civil servants employed by the Government to help Ministers on political matters when it would be inappropriate for permanent civil servants to become involved. SpAds are subject to the Civil Service Code, but are exempt from the general requirement that civil servants should behave with political impartiality and objectivity. They are therefore likely to be more political and can be very influential. You can find out who a Minister's special advisor is [here](#). The number of SpAds employed by Government fluctuates but annual lists are published by the Cabinet Office. They are normally employed for the duration of an administration unless there is a reshuffle. For a different perspective on the role of SpAds you might want to read [this](#).

Permanent Secretaries

Permanent Secretaries are normally the Minister's principal policy adviser and should '[be prepared to challenge policies which do not have a sound base in evidence or practice](#)'. A Permanent Secretary is the most senior civil servant in a Department. Each one supports the Government Minister at the head of the Department, who is accountable to Parliament for the Department's actions and performance. Like the Minister's Special Adviser you're probably unlikely to ever meet a Permanent Secretary but you could identify civil servants who are probably five

¹ Evans MC, Cvitanovic C (2018) *An Introduction to achieving policy impact for early career researchers*. Palgrave

Communications 4:88. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0144-2>

or six grades down from the top of a Department who are likely to provide the first bit of advice on a relevant policy and be easier to approach. Influence them and you never know you might influence all the way to the top. Find out more [here](#).

Chief Scientific Advisers (CSAs)

CSAs provide advice and challenge to Ministers and policy officials and have responsibility for strategic connections with academia. They provide scientific advice to their Department which can help to inform the development of policy. Departmental CSAs work together under the leadership of the Government Chief Scientific Adviser. They do this primarily through the CSA network. Find out more about the role of CSAs [here](#).

Departmental Heads of the Policy Profession (HoPPs)

HoPPs are accountable for raising the standard of policy making and driving improvement activity within Departments. Policy professionals work at the heart of the Civil Service to design, develop and propose appropriate courses of action to help meet key Government priorities and Ministerial objectives. Contact the policy profession for details of Departmental HoPPs: policy.profession@policyprofession.gov.uk

Chief Analysts

Chief Analysts oversee the groups of analysts, (often consisting of a combination of social researchers, economists, statisticians, operational researchers, scientists and engineers), in their Departments. They oversee how analysts are used as a resource in policy discussions and how to improve analysts' capability. Contact the Analysis Function in Government to find out details of Departmental Chief Analysts: Analysis.Function@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Government Science and Engineering profession

The Government Chief Scientific Advisers operate within a network of science and engineering professionals in Government. The Government Science and Engineering, (GES), profession is part of the analysis function within Government. A large number of the GES are based in public sector research establishments (PSREs), research institutes and laboratories attached to Research Councils or in Government Departments.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. Having identified who and why you want to engage with a particular individual you can then think about ways to begin actively contributing towards policy discussions. This can be done in a variety of different ways and via different mediums either informally or formally. Informal ways can include sending an official a summary of your research with an offer to meet up or you could ask if there are any opportunities to deliver or contribute to any forthcoming seminars. A more formal means of contributing to a policy debate may be to make a written submission either to a Government consultation, feeding in your expertise via a Government Department call for evidence or responding to a Department's Areas of Research Interest document (more on this below). However you choose to engage though, be as specific as possible and avoid information overload.
2. You can keep track of relevant policy announcements, press releases and Ministerial speeches by checking the websites of Departments of interest and signing up to email alerts or Twitter feeds. Keeping yourself up to date with the political debate in your area of interest means you'll be able to make best use of any 'windows of opportunity'

– timing is sometimes everything. You can find links to all Government Departments [here](#).

3. It could be useful to establish contacts with [Government Science and Engineering officials](#), (GES), working in relevant areas to yourself. You can also keep up to date with other potential opportunities to engage by checking out the GES [blog](#).

Engaging with the Government Office for Science (GO-Science)

GO-Science is a focal point for science and engineering across Government and provides scientific advice and evidence to policy teams and ministers. GO-Science is not a Ministerial Department but is headed by the Government Chief Scientific Adviser. It does not develop policy but synthesizes research and evidence and supports the work of each Department's Chief Scientific Adviser. GO-Science's remit is to ensure that Government policies and decisions are informed by the best scientific evidence and strategic long-term thinking. GO-Science is also responsible for:

- providing scientific advice in emergencies via the [Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies \(SAGE\)](#);
- helping the independent [Council for Science and Technology](#) provide high level advice to the Prime Minister on science and technology issues across government;
- supporting strategic long term thinking in government through 'Futures', (structured approaches to explore possible and preferable futures), and 'Foresight', (the process of conducting 'Futures' work), to help policy makers develop more resilient policies and;
- developing the [Government Science and Engineering profession](#).

➤ *Get involved:*

1. You can also keep up to date with GO-Science's Futures, Foresight and Horizon scanning work, (the process of looking for early warning signs of change in the policy and strategy environment), by checking out their [blog](#) and find out if there are opportunities for engagement.

Engaging with Government Department's Areas of Research Interest documents

Recently the government accepted the Nurse review of UK Research Councils² recommendation to provide a more sophisticated dialogue with external academia. In response [Areas of Research Interest](#), (ARI), documents have been produced to provide details about the main research questions facing Government Departments. ARIs are also intended to help academics working in policy-related areas to anticipate future Government priorities. In short they provide an opportunity to engage and collaborate with relevant Government Departments.

The ARI documents currently published vary in scope, and cover different time frames, but provide numerous opportunities to engage and inform with both high level strategic research questions, which Departments need to help develop and deliver policies in the long term, and more immediate pressing policy challenges that Departments face. All have in common evidence priorities that align with Departments Single Development Plans which set out Department's objectives and how they will be delivered. There are many cross-cutting interests within the ARI documents including behavioral science, data and digital, health, international best practice, people and population, new technologies and smart cities, security and

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nurse-review-of-research-councils-recommendations>

the environment. The role that science and engineering and cutting-edge analytical approaches could play in helping Government Departments enhance their evidence base cuts across all Departments' research interests.

➤ Get involved:

1. There is a wealth of opportunity to potentially maximise the policy impact of your work, to engage and influence and add to different Department's evidence bases. Research questions posed in ARIs could be answered in a variety of ways – including primary qualitative and quantitative research, secondary data analysis, rapid evidence review or robust synthesis of existing evidence.
2. To find out more about each Government Department's research needs you can search through all ARIs [here](#). If you are already engaged in research or are about to embark on a new project that aligns with a Department on a particular research question, then use the contact details in relevant Departments ARIs to get in touch. And don't assume that ARI documents are an exhaustive or definitive list of all Departments' research needs. They are intended to open conversation – so ask questions, engage in dialogue and find out how best to respond.
3. Note ARIs are not potential invitations to tender, and it is unlikely that Government Departments will fund speculative research projects, but the majority of Departments separately commission research projects and evaluations directly with projects for tender advertised on the Government's [contracts finder](#).

Engaging with Government committees and academic panels

Government Departments have different ways in which officials' access and use academic evidence and expertise in forming policy. The use of advisory committees, be these ad hoc or more formal forums of academics and other experts, that provide advice to officials and ministers is one way that some Departments currently engage with academia. Some Departments have more than twenty committees and draw on them extensively in making policy; others have very few. Committees tend to be concentrated in science and economic policy areas. The Institute for Government³ suggests that Committees that have set membership are more likely to have a greater influence on Government Departmental policy making - these include the below:

Advisory non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs)

NDPBs are committees that are sponsored by a Department and provide it with expert advice although they carry out their work at arm's-length from Ministers. Most scientific advisory committees and councils – of which there are over seventy – are advisory NDPBs. Science Advisory Committees, (SACom), advise on specific topics for example the [Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs](#). SAComs are present in most Departments and provide a technical advisory purpose and tend to work relatively independently of each other. Science Advisory Councils, (SAC), give more broad and strategic advice across a range of issues, such as Defra's [Science Advisory Council](#).

³ Sasse T and Haddon C (2018) *How Government can Work with Academia*, Institute for Government

Expert advisory committees

These are permanent committees that often perform a similar role to advisory NDPBs but do not have a legal existence such as the [Air Quality Group](#), which provides independent scientific advice on air quality to Defra or the Ministry of Defence, (MOD), [Defence Science Expert Committee](#) which provides science and technology advice across MOD.

Cross-cutting committees

These are committees that work across Government Departments – for example the [Cross-Government Trial Advice Panel](#). Or cross-cutting committees that provide advice across departmental areas such as the [Council for Science and Technology](#) which advises the Prime Minister on science and technology policy issues across government. The council is supported by a secretariat in the Government Office for Science.

➤ Get involved:

1. You can sign up to email alerts and twitter feeds to committees of interest and find out about any opportunities to get involved. Apart from the links mentioned above you'll find links to all NDPB committee and councils [here](#).
2. You could consider applying to become a member of a relevant committee. Opportunities are advertised on individual [Government Departments](#) as they become available.
3. Some Government Department's run analytical associate pools or *ad hoc* academic call-off contracts which are groups of independent academics and researchers that can be commissioned at short notice to provide services such as small-scale data analysis or rapid literature reviews. Find out about the [Department for Education's analytical associate pool](#) . You could contact relevant Departments of interest, via [analyst contact details](#) within the ARI

documents, to find out if other Government Departments have similar initiatives.

Engage with a What Works Centre

The What Works initiative was launched by the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury in 2013 to promote the better use of evidence in public policy. The What Works Team, based in the Cabinet Office, has responsibility for coordinating the What Works Network – a group of Government based research centres tasked with ensuring Government spending decisions are informed by the best available evidence on what works. The Network currently consists of nine What Work Centres that have championed new ways of increasing the supply of evidence in areas such as policing, education, local economic growth and health. A What Works Centre for Children's Social Care is currently under development. The Centres were envisaged as doing 'NICE for social policy' – applying the methods of evidence-based medicine that NICE used, (evidence synthesis, experimental trials), to areas such as educational attainment, early intervention and crime.

Each Centre operates in its own distinct way but all are committed to translating evidence into actionable guidance to inform policy maker's decision making – be that Ministers, policy officials or frontline workers. The Centres are staffed by people from a range of backgrounds including academics, practitioners and Government officials. The Centres systemically assess and synthesise the evidence base in their field of expertise.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. In areas where the evidence base is weak the What Works Network has taken action by either bringing these gaps to the attention of research funding bodies or by directly commissioning and

supporting research. You can find notifications on research gaps, calls for evidence or for research proposals by looking at individual What Works Centres and signing up to alerts and twitter feeds. Find out more about the Centres [here](#) or follow the What Works Team on Twitter [@whatworksuk](#) or contact them at whatworks@cabinetoffice.gov.uk.

Respond to a Government consultation

One simple way to engage with Government is by giving your views on new or changing Government policies by responding to Government consultations. The Government routinely runs consultations on new policy proposals and on Green and White Papers. Green Papers are the first iteration of a policy document that will be developed into legislation whereas White Papers are a more final version that will closely inform the development of a relevant Bill. Government Departments take responses from consultations into consideration before making decisions.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. You can search for current [‘open’ consultations](#) and filter by topic.

www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk

Department of Politics and International Studies
Alison Richard Building
7 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DT

office@bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk



@BennettInst

