

Bennett Institute
Policy Resources

Engaging with local government

A Guide for Academics

In partnership with the
Centre for Science and Policy
and Churchill College



Engineering and
Physical Sciences
Research Council

Introduction

There will be many different routes and pathways for academics to engage with and potentially influence local government policy. This guide sets out a number of ways you can practically engage with local government policy. 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 it 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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What is local government: a brief introduction

The structure of local government varies from area to area. There are 339 local authorities in England which provide a wide range of services to people in their areas¹.

Many parts of England have two tiers of local government. Two-tier areas are where authorities share local government functions. County councils tend to be responsible for services across the whole of a county, like education, transport, planning, fire and public safety, social care, libraries, waste management and trading standards. District councils cover a smaller area than county councils and are usually responsible for services like rubbish collection, recycling, Council Tax collections, housing and planning applications. Some shire district councils and all metropolitan district councils are often referred to as borough or city councils. There are 25 county councils (the upper tier) and 188 district councils (the lower tier) operating under this model.

In some parts of the country, there's just one tier of local government. These 126 single-tier authorities provide all the functions of local government. There are three main types of single-tier authority: Unitary Authorities (57), London Boroughs (33) and Metropolitan Districts (36). The London Boroughs provide nearly all local government services in their area, however, the Greater London Authority (GLA) provides London-wide government including special responsibility for police, fire, strategic planning and transport. For most purposes the GLA is not deemed a local authority though and is not included in the 339 figure above.

In addition there are also approximately 10,000 parish or town councils in England that operate at a level below district and borough councils. They do not generally have statutory functions although they are often

responsible for smaller local services such as allotments, parks and community centres.

Most local authorities in England are run by a leader and cabinet from councillors of the majority party or a coalition of parties in cases of no overall control. Local councillors are elected for four-year terms by the local community and are re-elected under a number of different models. A meeting of all council members, 'the full council', is responsible for decision making in an area, setting the policy framework, agreeing the budget and spending plans. In practice most of a council's work is undertaken by paid council officers. Unlike civil servants, who work for the government, council officers have a duty to support the whole council, not just the cabinet, so they have to remain politically neutral.

Combined authorities and 'devolution deals'

Legislation passed in 2009 introduced an additional type of regional authority, [combined authorities](#), where two or more councils collaborate to take collective decisions across council boundaries and coordinate responsibilities and powers over services including transport, housing and social care. Combined authorities are not local authorities but joint legal bodies through which groups of authorities can work together.

There are currently ten combined authorities in England, not included in the 339 figure above, with eight of these also being mayoral combined authorities. In these authorities, the elected mayor makes decisions about policy and spending in conjunction with council leaders from each constituent council. In non-mayoral combined authorities, key decisions are made by a leadership board made up of constituent council leaders with voting rights comparable to those in mayoral authorities.

¹ To note these figures take account of recent and proposed mergers. See this for latest:

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07104/>

In the majority of cases the combined authorities have agreed 'devolution deals' with central government in which additional powers and budgets have been transferred to the authorities from Westminster. The devolution deals agreed so far have many similarities in terms of devolved powers, including leading on planning and strategy for regional transport, skills training and economic development. The combined authorities are generally concentrated in and around English city regions. The first deal was agreed between Westminster and [Greater Manchester](#) in 2014. Greater Manchester also has the most extensive devolution deals to date and is the only mayoral combined authority to have control over an integrated health and social care budget for the area. As mentioned before, the importance of context and understanding the local government landscape in which you wish to engage cannot be overstated. It is recommended you check out the full details of exactly which powers have been transferred to the combined authorities [here](#) if you want to maximise your policy impact in these areas.

The Greater London Authority is also a devolved body led by a mayor, but is distinct from mayoral combined authorities and has a different set of powers and budgets. Combined Authorities and the London Assembly can scrutinise executive decisions but not legislate in the manner of the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly, who possess both executive and legislative devolution.

Apart from a proposed agreement for a devolution deal between the government and the local authorities of West Yorkshire there have been no new devolution deals over the last couple of years, although certain councils are still involved in ongoing discussions and other deals may be imminent². In addition the Government's announcement of a forthcoming Devolution White Paper in a

recent [Queen's Speech](#) and the Government's continued rhetoric about 'levelling up' is expected to signal a renewed energy in favour of English devolution. There have also been further shifts in English devolution policy and place-based policies with the [Transforming Cities Fund](#), [Stronger Towns Fund](#) and introduction of [local industrial strategies](#) at the level of Mayoral Combined Authorities and [Local Enterprise Partnerships](#).

Local government finance: a brief introduction

Local government finance is very complex but understanding the financial context in which local government operates is key to being able to comprehend the constraints and drivers of policy decisions that local government has to make. English local authorities have four main types of finance: council tax; business rates; central government grants; and local fees and charges. In the main these sources of revenue finance are not ring-fenced so authorities can spend the money as they choose.

Every year levels of central government grant for local authorities in England are decided via the annual [Local Government Finance Settlement](#). The calculations used to create the settlement take into account each council's ability to raise its own revenue, in order to balance funding across authority areas and ensure that they are able to carry out their local services. Local authorities also receive annual allocations of capital funding which must be accounted for separately.

Local authorities are required by law to have a balanced budget – in short planned expenditure has to match income for the year ahead. The responsibility of the budget rests with the Chief Financial Officer, preferably with the full support of their Chief Executive, so that the policy vision and strategy for the

² Check this helpful resource to find out the latest on devolution discussions: [https://www.lqcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-](https://www.lqcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/exclusive-lgcs-latest-devolution-map-reveals-scale-of-ambition-10-03-2020/)

[growth/exclusive-lgcs-latest-devolution-map-reveals-scale-of-ambition-10-03-2020/](https://www.lqcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/exclusive-lgcs-latest-devolution-map-reveals-scale-of-ambition-10-03-2020/)

local area is sustained through a robust financial plan.

There are some areas of spending, known as statutory services, which an authority is required to provide by law. Often these services are 'demand-led' which means that it can be difficult to budget effectively for these services as the demand for them may change. These include statutory services such as adult social care and children's services. Local authorities spend the majority of their resources on education services and adult and children's social care – these three areas together made up well over half of local government spending in 2018/19³.

Local government: the future

The shifting relationship between citizen and the state will no doubt continue to evolve. Against this, or despite this backdrop, central government funding for local councils has significantly decreased, with central government funding cuts of nearly 50% since 2010-11, which has forced many councils to fundamentally reconsider how they deliver their services. The additional impact of COVID-19 has also yet to be fully realised although councils have already lost significant amounts of their commercial income from coronavirus-related shortfalls in Council Tax, business rates and commercial investments. In addition 'in-house' research capacity in local government is highly variable ranging from little capacity for policy analysis to councils using modern data science techniques to deliver more efficient services. For an academic this may open up more opportunities to influence as the chance to innovate or take on board academic expertise is actively sought out by local councillors and officers searching for solutions to complex questions.

³ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8431/>

⁴ Allen, T., Grace, C., Martin, S., (2013) *From Analysis to Action: Connecting Research and Local Government in an Age of Austerity*. Local Government Knowledge Navigator

⁵ <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/economic-lessons-learned-covid-19-pandemic-and-measures>

Why engage with local government?

Although local government is likely to have diverse needs, a recent assessment of local government's needs for research expertise found that '*the need for better and more reliable knowledge and evidence as a basis for well-informed decision-making was a consistent theme*'⁴. The same report found recurring themes in terms of local government's evidence needs including questions around the future role and shape of local government and local public services; research to inform 'place-based' approaches; ways of achieving radical cost savings; evidence on cross-cutting areas such as public health and social care; supporting an ageing population; and supporting local economic growth. In relation to the latter a number of local councils have raised the need for an economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is socially equitable and decarbonises the economy⁵.

Local government policy makers surveyed in a recent report also expressed a need to '*be able to draw on academic expertise and analytical skills to support them at the point of development and/or delivery of major policies, interventions, and evaluations of local government activity*'⁶. In particular your academic rigour could bring fresh thinking and new ideas to help answer the big questions that local councillors or officers will be grappling with and help them see the bigger picture if they are bogged down in the day to day operations.

A recent qualitative study exploring approaches to evidence use in local government also found that one of the drivers for use of research at the local level is in the development of policy formation and statutory requirements for data collection⁷. There is therefore potentially considerable

⁶ op. cit.

⁷ Cheetham, Mandy & Redgate, Sam & Humble, Clare & Van der Graaf, Peter & Adamson, Ashley, (2019). *Local Authority Champions of Research: a mixed methods proof of concept study*. The Lancet. 394. S11. 10.1016/S0140-6736(19)32808-9.

scope for academics to engage with and potentially influence local government policy. In addition it's possible that policy engagement at the local level is more likely to impact directly on policy making and implementation leading to impacts that go beyond 'conceptual' or 'symbolic', to impacts that are 'instrumental' and therefore lead to a direct policy change⁸. This is because the scales are smaller in local government, decision makers are more accessible and policy more targeted. A good example of this is the [Cambridgeshire County Council Policy Challenges programme](#) set up between early career researchers and policy makers. One of the recent policy challenges provided the evidence base for the development of the council's Climate Change and Environment Strategy and Action Plan.

You may also wish to engage with local government policy if you have a particular expertise about a local area. A number of Britain's leading universities have reaffirmed their commitment to their local communities by producing a 'Civic University Agreement' in partnership with local government and other major institutions in their area⁹.

Like central government though, policy making at the local level is also inherently messy and will be developed through a complex interaction of different factors. It is likely to be conducted through a number of channels including overview and scrutiny committees, (see below), council members and the cabinet, and the ideology of the leading party in local government will have significant influence. In addition there are other dominant policy drivers at play - as councillors are democratically elected local representatives they will be expected to balance the needs of their local area, abide by the statutory requirements of services that they deliver and are bound by the need to balance the budget. An appreciation of this complexity and that local policy making will

probably occur at different timescales to yours, can help you be proactive and spot the opportunities to know when to engage.

Engaging with a local councillor or officer

Local councils are made up of councillors who are voted for by the public in local elections normally for a fixed term of four years. They are supported by council staff (officers). Councillors are responsible for making decisions on behalf of the local community about local services like housing, education and social services, and allocating budgets.

Academic research can help councillors or local officers scrutinise government policy and debate pressing issues of the day. Research can also help local councillors or officers and their staff to answer queries from constituents or address issues in their local area. As councillors are elected by their constituents, within their electorate, they should have a vested interest in addressing their constituents concerns. It may be that there is a local councillor who has particular interest(s) that resonates with your area of expertise.

Councillors and local officers know more about the issues facing their communities and are more accustomed to working in partnership with multiple stakeholders. Engaging at the local level may mean tracking or measuring your policy impact is easier as the scales are smaller and policy more targeted. Councillors will also be more attuned to what is 'politically possible' and understand how the council functions as a political body but also the broader local circumstances that affect how decisions impact on the ground. One of the key roles that councillors are expected to fulfil is a policy making and scrutiny role. They do this by contributing actively to the formulation and scrutiny of the council's policies, budgets, strategies and service delivery. Your expertise

⁸ For a good discussion on a framework to classify types of policy impact see: [https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/how-researchprioritization-exercises-affect-conservation-policy\(d45af34a-d312-4b26-9ca3-fba88b35d01d\).html](https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/how-researchprioritization-exercises-affect-conservation-policy(d45af34a-d312-4b26-9ca3-fba88b35d01d).html)

⁹ See: <https://upp-foundation.org/over-50-universities-pledge-commitment-to-local-communities-through-civic-university-agreement/>

could help councillors ensure that their decisions are based on 'what works'.

➤ **Get involved:**

1. You could contact your local councillor online: www.writetothem.com. This can be a good way to raise awareness about your area of expertise that you think should be factored in to a particular policy decision. Have a clear objective in mind when you make your approach – what do you want the outcome to be? Don't be afraid of asking questions and communicate as you would to any intelligent layperson.
2. Every local council is different but having a basic understanding of how the council you wish to engage with works will help you be more strategic with your policy engagement. You can view council meeting agendas, minutes and reports on your [council's website](#) and find out more about the way a council of interest is structured and what area, directorate or department your area of expertise may fall under. It may be worth reading a council's strategic plan to find out what the council's priorities are for the next five years as a way of discovering if your research may align with the council's objectives.
3. It is also worth knowing if your council, (or council of interest), has a legal duty to act on the issue that you wish to influence. There are over 1,000 duties on local government which you'll find listed in the following [spreadsheets](#).
4. An important part of influencing local policy is to utilise the opportunities you have to raise issues with local decision makers. If you are able to attend local strategic meetings they will have representation from a range of local partners who you may be able to work with. For example, this might include sitting on a [Health and Well-being Board](#) or a [Police and Crime Commissioner](#) stakeholder group where these exist.

Governance models and scrutiny

The [Local Government Act 2000](#) set out the governance models that must be operated by local authorities - these can include either a mayor and cabinet executive; a leader and cabinet executive, a committee system or other arrangements approved by the Secretary of State.

The Act also introduced a new political management system for local councils in England and Wales, requiring them to have a separate 'executive' in the form of a leader, or elected mayor, and cabinet. Similar to the relationship between UK Parliament and Government the remainder of the council was required to scrutinise the executive by establishing at least one overview and scrutiny committee.

Overview and Scrutiny is a function whereby non-executive councillors, also referred to as 'backbench councillors', can hold the Executive to account. It also has a role in reviewing the effectiveness of decisions, policies and services which affect the people of an area and help to shape future policy development and decision.

The Localism Act 2011 gave councils the option of converting to a committee system form of governance. Councils that have chosen this option are not required to have a separate overview and scrutiny committee, although they may choose to do so. However, it is still expected that scrutiny will take place within committees to identify where improvements need to be made.

In addition the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 requires combined authorities in England to still establish overview and scrutiny committees.

Whichever governance system a council operates, scrutiny is still an essential part of ensuring that local government remains transparent, accountable and open, which in turn should result in improved public policies and services.

Engaging with overview and scrutiny committees

Overview and scrutiny committees have statutory powers to scrutinise decisions that the executive is planning to take; those it plans to implement and those that have already been implemented.

Recommendations following scrutiny enable improvements to be made to policies and how they are implemented. Committees can also play a valuable role in developing local policy and can be a highly influential function in the local community. Evidence informed scrutiny can generate ideas and ways of doing things and challenge assumptions about existing ways of working. Evidence-led reviews of existing services ensure that local people are receiving the services they require and deserve. Secondly, as a result of those reviews non-executive members can play a significant role in the shaping of future policy that affects their community.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. The Centre for Public Scrutiny have advocated that *'high quality research evidence can and should be used as part of the scrutiny process'*²⁰. It could be argued that against the backdrop of ever shrinking local government resources the need for evidence informed scrutiny has never been more necessary. There are a number of approaches that councils can take to feed in expert academic evidence into the scrutiny process including co-opting onto a committee. Although less common in practice scrutiny committees can also appoint independent 'technical advisers' to help them understand complex issues. Have a look at your or a [council's website](#) of interest to see how they involve external expertise in scrutiny and overview and discover if there are any opportunities to get involved.
2. You can also submit a request for a Scrutiny Review to be undertaken by

your council. The issue(s) you believe should be investigated must affect local residents. You'll find details of how to request a Scrutiny Review on a [council's website](#) of relevance to you.

Engaging with Areas of Research Interest documents

[Areas of Research Interest](#), (ARI), documents give details about the main research questions facing central government departments. They set out the evidence gaps that are a priority for Government and are specifically targeted at academics to help them identify where their research could have direct impact on policy. However, there are many cross-cutting interests within the ARI documents which are likely to align with challenges that local authorities will be grappling with including behavioural science, data and digital, health, international best practice, people and population, new technologies and smart cities, security and the environment.

Given that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, (MHCLG), aims to support effective local government and distributes a significant amount of funding to local authorities, then engaging with their ARI would mean responding to research questions that local government is also likely to be facing. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, (BEIS) also has a remit for regional policy and local growth.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. Read Government departments' ARI's that support local government, in particular [MHCLG](#) and [BEIS](#), and see if their evidence gaps and priorities align with your research expertise. Make contact with senior analysts at BEIS and MHCLG, you'll find contact details at the back of the ARI documents and ask if there are opportunities to work not only

²⁰ Centre for Public Scrutiny (2017) *Using evidence in scrutiny - A practice guide for local government scrutiny*

with central government but also in collaboration with local government. For example analysts from local authorities and central government worked together on the then Neighbourhood [Community Budget](#) evaluation and also brought in expertise from local academics.

Engaging with other organisations

Given the sheer complexity of local government you may find it easier to collaborate with a [knowledge broker](#) or intermediary who could foster a relationship with a relevant local councillor or officer. For example the [Institute of Local Governance Studies](#) is a research and knowledge exchange partnership comprising North East England's five universities, local authorities, police and fire and rescue services and other key public sector agencies. Who you decide to link up with will depend on the scale of policy engagement you are trying to achieve as there are also organizations that support the different tiers of local government, listed below, which you may find helpful to engage with. The organisations listed below can also help you keep abreast of local government discourse and help you find out what topics local government may be interested in that may align with your areas of expertise. Keeping up to date with relevant political discourse can open up potential avenues to engage with policy that you may not have considered. Local contacts and networks will also have a better understanding of the local government landscape and the deeper nuances of the local policy process, including power dynamics, informal rules and norms, which takes time to get to grips with.

➤ *Get involved*

1. [Local Government Association \(LGA\)](#)

The LGA is the national membership body for local authorities and works on behalf of its member councils to support, promote and improve local government. They aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local

solutions to national problems. The LGA regularly briefs parliamentarians of all political affiliations on issues of concern and relevance to local government ahead of debates in Parliament. The most recent of these can be found [here](#). You can keep up to date with the LGAs work by signing up to their [e-bulletins](#) or following them on [Twitter](#).

2. [Knowledge Hub](#)

Knowledge Hub is an online platform that allows individuals interested in public service delivery to exchange ideas and knowledge through forums, blogposts and messages. It is the UK's largest platform for public service collaboration. It was launched in 2010 by the LGA but is now run as an independent company although the LGA remains involved as a subscribing organisation. As its users are from a range of sectors including both local and central government it may be worth your while signing up to see if you can contact and engage with relevant policy makers who may be interested in your area of expertise.

3. [Central Local Information Partnership \(CLIP\)](#)

The Central Local Information Partnership (CLIP) enables central and local government to work together to deliver a minimally burdensome information infrastructure for policy development, implementation, service delivery, monitoring and reporting. Much of their work is undertaken by subject specific sub-groups that deal with data and statistics relating to the following topics: census, environment, finance, fire, housing, labour market, planning, population, public health and transport. An important part of the role of CLIP is to assist the [Single Data List Gateway Group](#) in governing the Single Data List, the list of all the datasets which local government must submit to central government. For further information on CLIP you can contact them [here](#).

4. [Local Area Research and Intelligence Association](#)
The Local Area Research & Intelligence Association (LARIA) is a UK-based membership body largely run by volunteers working in the public sector. They promote continuous improvements in the quality and impact of local research and intelligence by facilitating the sharing of research and intelligence best practice and create networking opportunities. There are a variety of ways to [get involved](#) that you might want to check out.
5. [Local Government Information Unit \(LGIU\)](#)
LGIU is a local authority membership organisation. Its members are councils and other organisations with an interest in local government. LGiU provides a news and briefings service to its extensive network. LGiU's Daily News provides a roundup of what's in the national and regional press. You can sign up to customise a [Daily News](#) service or follow LGiU on [Twitter](#).
6. [New Local Government Network](#)
The New Local Government Network, NLGN, is a group of around 50 organisations from the public and private sector united by a belief in 'innovation and creativity'. NGLN works closely with its network on practical issues of service delivery as well as national policy. Through research, peer-to-peer learning, innovative communications and influencing, they aim to create a local government sector characterised by the pursuit of social impact and social change. You can [sign up](#) to receive email updates about NLGN publications, events and projects.
7. [What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth](#)
Several of the [What Works Centres](#) have developed their own links with local councils and in some cases regional grouping of councils. Although there is not a What Works Centres dedicated solely to local government's needs the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth (WWG), set up in 2013, aims to analyse which policies are most effective in supporting and increasing local economic growth. You can follow WWG on [Twitter](#).
8. [The Local Enterprise Partnership Network](#)
To promote local economic growth the Government established 39 Local Enterprise Partnerships, business led partnerships between the private sector and local authorities. The LEP Network champions the impact and value of LEPs in building local economic growth and prosperity across the country. It acts as the lead commentator and negotiator for LEPs at a national level with government, advisers, businesses, academia, think tanks and other target audiences. It also acts as a central source of information and data on LEPs at a national level.
9. [Different tiers of local government](#)
Local government is supported by a number of representative bodies which work at different levels of local government. As well as the LGA, (listed above), county and unitary authorities are supported by the [County Council Network](#) and metropolitan and district councils are supported by the [District Council Network](#). Parish and town councils are also supported by the [National Association of Local Councils](#).
10. [Professional bodies](#)
If your research expertise relates to a particular type of service that local authorities deliver such as adult social care, children's services, economic growth and housing and transport you may also want to check out the related professional bodies including the [Association of Directors of Adult Social Care](#); the [Association of Directors of Children's Services](#); the [Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport](#); and the

[Chartered Institute of Housing](#) to see if there are opportunities to join up, engage and influence policy at the local level.

Local policy engagement examples

There are many examples of local authorities who have developed close working relationships with the academic sector. Innovative approaches to using evidence have included local research champions and embedded researchers operating in different ways as knowledge mobilisers. Some University departments are also already working on programmes that are directly relevant to local authority policy making enabling the transition to engagement much easier. The following examples may inspire you to engage with local government:

Local Government Knowledge Navigator

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator, LGKN, and follow-up Local Government Research Facilitator was a two stage programme of work that began in 2013 and ran to 2016. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and delivered jointly with the [LGA](#) and [SOLACE](#). It sought to bring about better engagement between local government and academic researchers.

The LGKNs found a variety of examples of local government and research collaboration which may be useful for you to consider in thinking about how you may engage with local government policy. For example Sheffield City Council and CRESR, at Sheffield Hallam University, work on [Strategic Housing Market Assessments](#) was based on a University programme of work that was already directly relevant to local authority decision making. A number of [reports](#) by the LGKN were produced over the period which are worth checking out for inspiration.

Cambridgeshire Policy Challenges Programme

Within Cambridgeshire the Policy Challenges programme is a collaboration between the Cambridge University Science and Policy Exchange (CUSPE) and Cambridgeshire County Council. The programme offers the chance to impact real-world local policy making and develop an understanding of local government while contributing to the community.

The Policy Challenges brings together teams of early-career researchers to work directly with the county council on policy problems affecting Cambridgeshire residents. It is useful to find out how previous challenges have worked.

You can find out [background information](#) on the Policy Challenges, including a link to previous project reports. Lessons learnt from three successful years of the partnership are summarised [here](#). For further queries you can get in touch with the [transformation team](#) or [CUSPE](#).

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