

Academic-Policy Engagement:
How-To Guides

Routes for academic-policy engagement

How-To Guide

Routes for academic-policy engagement

This guide introduces readers to foundational knowledge in academic-policy engagement. The content is designed to help students, early-career researchers, academics, researchers and staff gain an overview of the public policy ecosystem in the United Kingdom. The chapters highlight methods and routes for engaging policymakers at national and local levels of government, as well as in the third sector, and strategies and resources to assist you to incorporate academic-policy engagement into your work.

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Chapter 1: Principles of Academic-Policy Engagement

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The public policy ecosystem

The White Paper: Modernising Government (1999) defines public policy as ‘the process by which governments translate their political vision into programmes and actions to deliver ‘outcomes’, desired changes in the real world.’

In turn, the Oxford Policy Engagement Network describes academic-policy engagement as ‘the ways that researchers and policymakers connect and explore common interests at various stages in their respective research and policymaking processes.’

The term 'policymaker' usually makes people think of the ‘obvious,’ visible decision-makers – Government Ministers, Parliamentarians and the civil servants and parliamentary employees who support them. However, there are many ‘non-obvious’ groups that also help to inform and shape policy, including think tanks, private sector lobbyists, charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and even academics!



Policy can be made at local, national, and international levels of government. Check out the other guides under the 'Routes to Engagement' section

The policymaking process

The reality of the policymaking 'cycle' is that external factors such as political pressures, Cabinet, staff turnover, legacy policies and the media often mean that the process of developing a policy can be messy.



General Opinion

Research can help set policy agendas by identifying emerging threats and opportunities that the government or other policy professionals might need to respond to.



Public Debate

Research can help policy professionals to frame the problem by diagnosing what is known about the issue, as well as its causes, effects and scale.



Formulate Policy

Researchers can help to develop solutions to the issues identified. Policymakers might work with researchers to create proposals based on what has been tried before (or elsewhere) and whether it worked.



Final Decision

Determining value for money can help assess the costs and benefits and using evidence to inform models and assumptions that make up final legislation and funding decisions.



Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

Researchers can suggest appropriate and effective methods for delivering interventions and assess whether the policy goals have been met. Evaluation is crucial for future funding and legislation decisions.

Why engage with public policy

Professional Benefit

- Promote the value and practical applications of your research
- Strengthen the case for research funding
- Showcase yourself, and your institution
- Understand how to make your research more impactful
- Raise the profile of your research
- Broaden your dissemination
- Build your network

Societal Benefit

- Shape further research needs and priorities
- Transfer your knowledge to the wider community
- Create societal impact for the greater good
- Shape and change policy

Navigating and influencing the policymaking process

Successful academic-policy engagement often stems from strong relationships between researchers and policymakers.

The earlier you start your policy engagement, the more opportunity there is for your research to have impact. In earlier stages, methods you would use to develop a project, such as focus groups, advisory groups, co-design processes, network-building, collaboration, consultation and co-production can inform how your research takes shape. Once your research is in later stages, you can use traditional research dissemination routes such as the media, websites, social media, publications, exhibitions, presentations, and outreach to share your findings with policy audiences.

Political challenges to influencing policy

Academics should understand what kind of norms, values and cultures exist within institutions when they are trying to engage with them. One challenge exists when trying to find common ground between stakeholders who have different incentives. Institutional norms proliferate the culture within institutions, which form the basis for how different types of evidence is understood and used to drive practice, policy and decision-making. Other challenges are the policy networks and reliance on the ‘usual suspects.’ We need to think about how we move past established relationships and form new policy networks to gain new insights and visions and increase diversity within participation and core beliefs. There is always a tendency for well-established ideas to serve as the core belief of policymakers, which in turn influence discussions on policy issues. Lastly, different forms of evidence can inform the way that we respond to events.



The task for academics is not simply to summarise concisely what you think is the best evidence, but to frame its implications to make it policy relevant and demanded.

Approaches to influencing policy

Linear



Linear approaches focus on disseminating research to policymakers through routes such as blogs, social media, etc. This is the simplest way to translate research findings for policy audiences.

Relational



Building relationships (e.g. through meetings, institutional visits, seminars) is crucial for facilitating policymakers’ access to research and ensuring that your research is policy relevant.

Systems



By better understanding the individuals and the incentives across universities and different levels of government, we can maximise opportunities for engagement.

Facilitators to influencing policy

Dr Katherine Oliver (2014) has described elements that facilitate policy influence for academics.

1. Conducting high quality research
2. Making evidence relevant and credible
3. Understanding different policy processes
4. Being accessible - engaging routinely, flexibly, and humbly
5. Being an honest broker or issue advocate*
6. Building relationships and ground rules - co-producing research and policy recommendations with the decisionmakers
7. Being entrepreneurial - developing media savvy skills so that you can promote your work
8. Continuous reflection - assess whether or not the engagement is working

*Informing (honest broker) versus influencing (issue advocate) policy



Honest Broker (informing)

- Aims to expand (or at least clarify) the scope of choice for decision-making
- Allows for the decision-maker to reduce choices made on personal preferences or values
- Lets the decision-maker face the challenge of reducing the scope of choice
- Often best achieved through a range of views, experiences, and knowledge

Issue Advocate (influencing)

- Seeks to compel a particular policy decision
- Tries to limit the scope of choice for the decision-maker and tells them what they ought to prefer
- At risk of 'Stealth Issue Advocacy,' in which scientists claim authority of science, while working to restrict the scope of choice

Next Steps

6 Top Tips for Getting Started

1. Look for the research needs and priorities
2. You will need to 'put yourself out there,' it is not a passive pursuit
3. Know your aim and objectives – define short-term and long-term objectives
4. Try to understand your audience – who are the key players
5. Define a strategy – how to reach your audiences, timing, external partnerships
6. Evaluate – measure your success and how to improve

Further Reading

Cairney, P. (2019). Chapter 2: What is policy and policymaking. In P. Cairney (Ed.), *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues 2nd edition*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Oliver, K., Innvar, S., Lorenc, T., Woodman, J., & Thomas, J. (2014). A systematic review of barriers to and facilitators of the use of evidence by policymakers. *BMC Health Services Research*, 14, 1-12.

Pielke Jr, R. A. (2007). *The honest broker: Making sense of science in policy and politics*. Cambridge University Press.

The White Paper: Modernising Government (1999)

Chapter 2. National Government

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Policymaking in the UK

Separation of Powers in the UK

At the UK-level, there are three branches that develop public policy



The legislature makes laws by passing legislation. The legislature is represented by the UK Parliament, which is made up of people we have elected (House of Commons) and people who have been appointed (House of Lords). The Government cannot make new laws or raise new taxes without Parliament's agreement.



The Government is the executive function that make decisions about new policies and spending of public funds. The Government is the Prime Minister and his Cabinet, who are supported by the Civil Service. The political party that wins the most seats at a General Election takes charge of the Government for five years.



The judiciary enforce the law.

Structure of the Civil Service

His Majesty's Civil Service is a strictly non-partisan organisation which helps the Government to translate its policies into action and deliver key services to the public. Martin Stanley (former Senior Civil Servant in the Cabinet Office and author of *How to be a Civil Servant*) describes civil servants' three primary duties: 1) to give advice to ministers before they make policy decisions; 2) to help ministers promote and defend their decisions in a professional and objective way; and 3) to implement ministers' decisions.

'Delivery departments' (e.g. the Home Office, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), Department for Work and Pensions) are pyramid-shaped, with more staff at EO and AO grades. Some departments like the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO), Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department for Education (DfE) are diamond-shaped with a significant number of Grade 7 and Higher Executive Officer (HEO) posts.

The structure of the Civil Service is particularly complicated, so the following is a summary of the non-administrative grades who you might engage with on policy matters. The middle grades of the Civil Service (Grades 6 and 7 and Senior and Higher and Executive Officers) are particularly fluid, with people moving jobs (often horizontally to other departments) on average every two to three years.

Senior Civil Servants (SCS)

SCS is the most senior grade made up of each department's senior management team. Permanent Secretaries work closely with the Minister and are responsible for the day-to-day running of the department. Below them are Director Generals (DGs), Directors and Deputy Directors (DD). Directors are responsible for the policy work of their respective teams and report to the DGs.

Grade 6 and 7

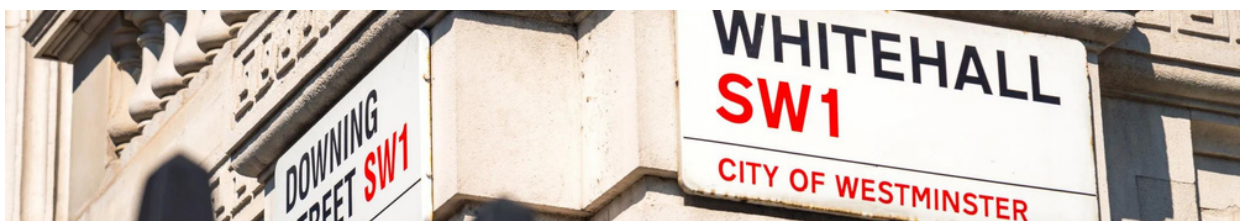
Grades 6 and 7 is made up of experienced officials with significant policy responsibilities. Typical job titles for someone at Grades 6 or 7 include: Assistant Director; Policy Manager; Senior Manager; Deputy Head of Department.

Executive Officer grades

The most junior roles are a series of Executive Officer grades (Senior Executive Officer (SEO), Higher Executive Officer (HEO), Executive Officer (EO) and Administrative Officer (AO)) who are responsible for policymaking and policy implementation. They are often subject experts and lead on highly specialised pieces of work.

Special Advisers (SpAds)

Special Advisers (SpAds) are temporary civil servants who advise UK, Scottish and Welsh government ministers. As political appointees, they differ from impartial civil servants in that their advice can contain political dimensions.



Key policymakers



There are the visible decision-makers – the Prime Minister, Government Ministers, Members of Parliament (MPs), and the civil servants and parliamentary employees who support them. There are also many other groups that help shape policy, including think tanks, private sector lobbyists, campaigners from charities and non-governmental organisations, and even academics!

The devolved administrations of Scotland and Wales

While the UK Government is responsible for aspects of the Constitution, international relations, and national defence, the Scottish and Welsh Governments, as well as the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament), have far-reaching powers over social, economic, and cultural policy. Both the Scottish Parliament and the Senedd are unicameral legislatures and are often referred to by their shorthand – ‘Holyrood’ for the Scottish Parliament or ‘Cardiff Bay’ for the Senedd, just as the UK Parliament is often referred to as ‘Westminster’.

Researchers can engage with all or any of these branches for academic-policy engagement through a variety of policy tools and techniques.

Engaging with the UK Parliament

Select Committees



Select committees are small groups of MPs or members of the House of Lords that are set up to investigate a specific issue in detail or to perform a scrutiny role. When the Commons and Lords Select Committees announce an inquiry, they invite the public – including academics – to submit written evidence. The Committees then invite officials and experts to give oral evidence for questioning and can demand information from the government.



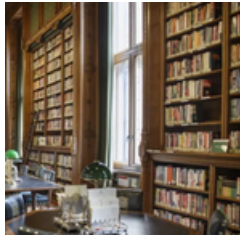
Public Bill Committees

A Public Bill Committee is a committee set up by the House of Commons to examine the details of a particular Bill. After the second reading of a bill, it is often referred to a Public Bill Committee for further scrutiny. They may choose to receive written and oral evidence, including from academics.



Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)

POST produces impartial, non-partisan, and peer-reviewed briefings, designed to make scientific research accessible to the UK Parliament. The briefings come in the form of POSTnotes and POSTbriefs. They cover the areas of biology and health, energy and environment, physical sciences and computing, and social sciences. When researching a [POSTnote](#) staff engage with academic literature and directly with academics.



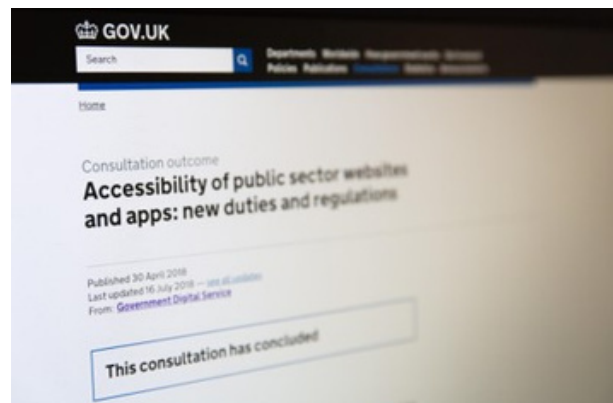
House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries

The Libraries are research and information services based in the UK Parliament. Their impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents. You could contribute to a briefing or peer review.



All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs)

APPGs are less formal than Select Committees and are groupings of MPs that focus on specific topics. They are required to have membership across parties and from both Houses of Parliament. They hold roundtables and invite speakers to provide briefings. These events are open for the public to attend. APPGs carry out their own inquiries for which they sometimes use evidence. However, they do not hold any formal power and Parliament is not obliged to consider their recommendations, as they are with Select Committees.



How to find out what interests Parliament

- Calendar of scheduled business: Online calendar that shows day by day events for the House of Commons, House of Lords and Committees.
- Early Day Motions: These are formal motions submitted for debate in the House of Commons, which allow MPs to draw attention to an event or cause and which other MPs support by signing.
- Petitions: Petitions are a way for people to make sure their concerns are heard by Government and Parliament. Petitions enable members of the public to petition the House of Commons and press for action from the government.
- Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs): A single session every Wednesday when the House of Commons is sitting, during which the prime minister answers questions from MPs.
- Oral Questions: Parliamentary questions that are put to a government minister in person by an MP or member of the House of Lords in the Chamber of each House.
- MPs' interests and Peers' interests: Remember that MPs and Peers work for you! Look at their individual webpages, Twitter and other social media accounts to see which issues they discuss and are active in.
- Hansard: A searchable, verbatim report of what is said in Parliament (for example: debates, speeches, questions and answers).
- King's Speech: The King delivers this speech at the State Opening of Parliament. This speech details the Government's agenda for the coming session, including proposed policies and legislation.

Engaging with the Government

Advisory committees: Many government departments maintain scientific or social science advisory committees, which seek to draw together academic expertise to inform policy development. Details are on individual department websites.

Open Innovation Team and the Policy Profession: The Open Innovation Team works across the civil service to collaborate with academics to generate analysis and ideas for policy. They frequently contact academics for their input into policy problems via interviews, research reviews, workshops and joint seminars. The Open Innovation Team also works with the Policy Profession, which is part of the Cabinet Office, to design, develop and propose appropriate courses of action to help meet key government priorities and ministerial objectives.

Government consultations: The Government routinely runs open consultations on new policy proposals, green papers and white papers. Green papers are the first iteration of a policy document that will be developed into legislation; white papers are a more final version that will closely inform the development of the relevant Bill.

Chief Scientific Advisers (CSAs) and their networks: CSAs are academics who are seconded into government to help connect research and policy and thus understand the importance of evidence for informing policy. Making contact with CSAs at the right time (i.e. when a particular policy issue is being considered and evidence being sought) can be a useful way of feeding into the process. Establishing a relationship can lead to future opportunities for input.

The Government Office for Science (GO-Science): GO-Science works across the whole of Government to provide scientific advice and evidence to policy teams and ministers. It does not develop policy but synthesises research and evidence, and supports the work of the CSAs. The best contacts are the individual area specialists.

Civil Servants: Departments such as the HM Treasury, the Cabinet Office, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero are particularly ‘top-heavy’ with more responsibility for policy formulation, more staff at senior grades, and the lowest-average-age in Whitehall. These departments typically have the most interest and capacity in engaging with academics. Across other departments, you can try engaging with civil servants in Grades 6 and 7 as people in these roles are working close enough to the policy issues while still having the authority to make decisions.

What Works Network: The What Works initiative aims to support the use of evidence in policy and decision-making. The aim is to improve the way government and other public sector organisations create, share and use (or ‘generate, translate and adopt’) high quality evidence in decision-making. Organisations within the network collate evidence, conduct systematic reviews and undertake policy evaluations.

Areas of Research Interest (ARI): ARI give details about the main research questions facing government departments. The ARI outline the department’s research interests and can help the department build a network of academics that can mobilise research activity around them. For example, being the basis for conversations and allowing academics to offer valuable insight when gathering evidence or identifying evidence gaps around a research question.



The nine What Works Centres cover policy areas including health and social care, education, crime, children and families, local economic growth, older people, wellbeing and homelessness. The three Affiliate centres cover youth offending, higher education and financial wellbeing. The 2018 What Works Network: Five Years On report highlights the impact of the What Works initiative in its first five years.

Engaging with the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales

Scottish Parliament Academia Network (SPAN): Established in 2014 by the Parliament's Information Centre (SPICe) to encourage knowledge exchange between the Parliament and academics. [SPAN](#) is free to join, and members receive a monthly newsletter updating them on opportunities as well as parliamentary committee consultations.

Scottish Parliament Academic Fellowship Scheme: The Fellowship programme enables academics to work on projects with the Scottish Parliament. It is only open for a small window each year so keep an eye on their [website for opportunities](#).

The Scottish Policy and Research Exchange (SPRE): Recently relaunched as an independent charity, [SPRE](#) offers training programmes as well as opportunities to shape the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government's policymaking. It communicates with its members through its brokerage network which you can sign up for [here](#).

Senedd Research: In-house [research service](#) for Members of the Senedd and Senedd committees. It often consults researchers from Wales and the rest of the UK to inform the expert advice it gives to Members. You can [sign-up to its mailing list to receive updates](#), including new engagement opportunities such as committee consultations, fellowships, and adviser roles.

The Senedd's Academic Fellowship Scheme: The [Fellowship programme](#) enables academics to work with the Senedd on a specific research project. They issue 'directed calls' (for experts to work on a specific project) and also welcome 'open calls' from academics.

Further Reading

Stanley, M. (2021). *How to be a Civil Servant*. (4th edition). Richborne Publishing.

Sign up for updates and alerts

House of Commons Library

- Subscribe to [email alerts](#) about the Library's work
- Read [insights](#) on current affairs from the Library

House of Lords Library

- Subscribe to [email alerts](#) about the Library's work
- Read [blog posts](#) on topical issues and current affairs from the Library

The House

- A [weekly newsletter](#) published when Parliament is sitting

Select Committees

- See a list of [open calls to submit evidence](#) to Select Committees
- [Find out more about Select Committees](#)
- Subscribe to [email alerts](#) about Select Committee inquiries

Public Bill Committees

- See a list of [open calls to submit evidence to Public Bills Committees](#)
- [Find out more about Public Bills Committees](#)

All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs)

- Get in touch with the [APPGs relevant to your area of expertise](#)
- Find out [more about APPGs](#)

Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)

Find out about [POST's current work programme](#)

- [Contribute to a POSTnote](#) as an expert
- To receive notifications about POST's publications, events and work programme, [join the POST mailing list](#)

Chapter 3. Local Government and the Third Sector

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Local government in the UK

Local government is devolved across the UK, which means that the structure of local government varies depending on the region.

County councils cover the entire county area and provide most services while the district councils cover a smaller area and provide more local services. However, London, other metropolitan areas and some parts of shire England operate under a single-tier council structure. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have unitary authorities that operate a single-tier local government system.

Areas of Responsibility

County councils	District, borough & city councils	Unitary authorities; London & metropolitan boroughs	Parish, community councils
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education Transport Planning Fire and public safety Social care Libraries Waste management Trading standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rubbish collection Recycling Council Tax collections Housing Planning applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All the services listed in Columns 1 and 2 London and metropolitan areas: Fire, police and public transport provided through joint authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allotments Public clocks Bus shelters Community centres Play areas and play equipment Grants to help local Organisations Consultation on neighbourhood planning



Local government policymakers

Here are the main decision-makers at the local government level:

- **Councillors:** elected on 4-year terms, decide the overall direction and implementation of policy
- **Full Council:** all elected councillors, makes decisions and debates policy based on Committee reports
- **Committees:** small groups of councillors who monitor and review the council's activities
- **Cabinet:** formed by the political party that has the most elected representatives, can make decisions on some policy areas (e.g. environment, housing) without approval of full council
- **Leader or Elected Mayor:** political leader of the council
- **Officers:** permanent staff, perform the duties and work of the council

Membership bodies

There are two main membership bodies that represent local councils. The Local Government Association (LGA) is a voluntary lobbying organisation that promotes better local government across all the councils in England and Wales. London Councils is the local equivalent of the LGA for Greater London. It represents London's borough councils and the City of London and advocates for their needs and priorities at the regional, national, and international levels.

Local government in London

London has 32 boroughs that are divided into wards and each ward is represented by three elected councillors.

There are two models of council structure: 1) a ceremonial leader elected by full council and cabinet; or 2) directly-elected mayor and cabinet. Most boroughs use the first model, but residents in Hackney, Lewisham, Tower Hamlets, Newham and Croydon vote directly for their mayors who subsequently have more power than the ceremonial mayors. The Greater London Authority (GLA), comprises the Mayor and London Assembly. The mayor is directly-elected by Londoners and sets the overall vision for London. The Assembly consists of 25 elected members and their role is to scrutinise the mayor's budget and plans.



Source: London Government Directory

Engaging with local government

Unlike with Parliament and national government, there are no defined routes for engagement with local government. Most councils will have a Strategy team who work across different policy areas and will have a Corporate Plan or Strategy outlining their objectives and priorities. Check strategy documents to see if your research aligns with any of the council's priority areas. The Strategy team should be your first point of contact (check if your institution already has connections with the council you are targeting).



Every council must publish details of when key decisions will be taken, papers of meetings and minutes of meetings showing the decisions that were made. You can view council meeting agendas, minutes and reports on your council's website and the public can attend most council meetings.

The third sector in the UK

In contrast to the public sector (e.g. public goods and governmental services) and the private sector (e.g. economic system run by individuals and companies), the third sector includes non-governmental and non-profit organisations that conduct social activity across the voluntary, independent and civic sectors. Charities, cooperatives, social enterprises, voluntary and community groups, faith and equalities groups, housing associations, etc. are some of the organisations that form the sector. These organisations are value driven and principally re-invest surpluses or raise funds to further social, environmental or cultural objectives.



Source: Luca Franceschi, Dianova

Benefits of working with the third sector

The Third Sector can play a vital role in developing high-quality services [and has] particular strengths, such as reaching the most disaffected people, finding innovative solutions and offering a personal touch.

– Phil Sector, former Minister for the Third Sector

Benefits of working with the third sector include: gaining local insights, better community engagement, more trusted service provision, responsiveness to emerging needs and local ownership of initiatives.

Engaging with the third sector

Charities

- Charities are interested in academic evidence to feed into their work or for specific projects.
- The best contact will usually be the policy officers, research officers or policy advisers working in your area of interest.

Research Funders

- Major research funders in the UK may issue calls for proposals around policy areas.
- UKRI hosts annual Policy Internships for doctoral students and Policy Fellowships for researchers to work with a UK or devolved government or What Works Centre. The NIHR also intermittently releases Policy Research funding.

Think Tanks

- Think tanks are research institutes that seek to play a key role in making and influencing global, regional and national policy. Think tanks sometimes seek academic input into projects and often have advisory boards which includes academics.
- The best contact will usually be research fellows or policy advisers working in relevant areas. Examples of policy-related think tanks include: Policy Exchange, Institute for Public Policy Research and the Centre for London.
- Be mindful that think tanks often have political connections and affiliations.

Learned Societies and Professional Bodies

- Learned societies promote an academic discipline, profession, or a group of related disciplines such as the arts and sciences (e.g. The Royal Society, The British Academy).
- A professional body promotes and furthers a career and the people who practice in it (e.g. Institution of Engineering and Technology, British Medical Association). Many learned societies and professional bodies also conduct policy work.

Further Reading

Learn more about local government:

- Gov.uk: [Local government structure and elections](#)
- Gov.uk: [Understand how your council works](#)
- Institute for Government: [Local government explainer](#)
- Local Government Association: [What is a local government?](#)

Learn more about third sector bodies:

- [Think Tanks](#)
- [Approved learned societies and professional organisations](#)
- [UK research funders](#)
 - [UKRI Policy Internships](#)
 - [UKRI Policy Fellowships](#)
 - [NIHR Policy Research](#)
- [Working with the Third Sector](#)

Find out more

The Queen Mary Policy Hub publishes a regular bulletin providing news of upcoming training and policy events, resources, and funding opportunities.

Sign up at qmul.ac.uk/mei/policy-hub/.

We are happy to support other policy focused activities - please get in touch.

Acknowledgements

This guide was prepared by Audrey Tan and Thomas Chidwick.

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