Academic-Policy Engagement:
How-To Guides

Engaging with policymakers

How-To Guide

Queen Mary Policy Hub

Engaging with Policymakers

This guide provides practical guidance and insights into how policy advisory boards and roundtable events can increase research impact, while helping you navigate managing ethical issues in group settings.

Chapter 1. Policy Roundtables

What is a policy roundtable

A roundtable is a form of academic discussion where participants from similar fields come together to discuss and debate a specific topic.

Each person is given equal right to participate, as illustrated by the idea of a circular layout referred to in the term 'round' table. Roundtables typically involve 8-15 people and last from two to three hours. Often the discussion is centred around a specific topic, outlined in a briefing paper. Roundtables take time and effort to organise so before committing to hosting an event, consider whether you have the time and resources to organise the roundtable successfully.

Why host a roundtable?

- Allows more people to participate than in a panel discussion
- More engaging than a lecture-style event
- An opportunity to bring together leading voices in the field across different sectors (academia, policy, and industry) to discuss current policy topics
- Useful for mapping out the policy topic, research needs, state of play and policy recommendations

Organising: Pre-roundtable

1. Identify your aims, objectives and timelines

Clarify what your aims and objectives for hosting the roundtable. It can be helpful to schedule a roundtable strategically around a larger event or debate, so look to see if there are any key dates.

Week 1 - Determine roundtable focus and secure a Chair
Weeks 2-3 - Draft briefing paper, agenda and participant list with Chair
Week 4 - Invite participants (give them 1.5 weeks to respond)
Week 5 - Follow-up with non-responders and invite alternates
Week 6 - Complete programme booklet and circulate to participants
Week 7 - Host roundtable

2. Recruit a Chair

Having a Chair will help you to frame the briefing paper, set the agenda, guide the discussion and determine your participant list. During the actual roundtable, the Chair can manage the flow of the discussion, while you can manage the logistics. The Chair should be knowledgeable, experienced and well-versed in the topic. They need to be able to act as a strong moderator to lead the discussion and tease out themes and patterns in the discussion; involve less confident participants (and restrain 'over-zealous' participants) and keep the discussion moving.

3. Briefing paper, agenda and participant list

Briefing paper

Work with the Chair to draft a briefing paper (which sets the context for the discussion). Briefing papers are 1-2 page documents with sections outlining the overview of the roundtable (background information, purpose, topic), policy challenges (what policies are relevant to this area, what's the state of play), and discussion questions.

Agenda

The agenda gives participants a clear idea of timings and what will be discussed. If you are hosting the roundtable in person or hybrid, you might want to consider including 30 minutes at the start of the event to facilitate networking amongst participants attending in person.

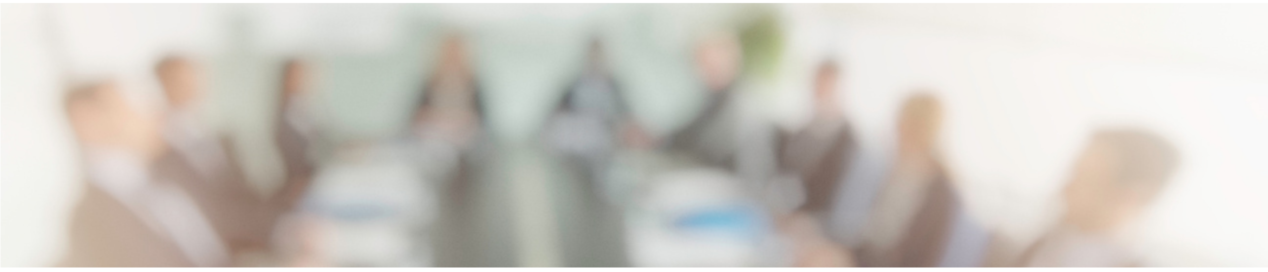
Participant list

The ideal number of participants for a two to three hour roundtable is around 10-12 people. To account for the number of people who will decline or fail to reply to your invitation, identify around 24 people to invite for your 'first string' and another 10 for your 'second string.' The topic you select will dictate the types of sectors you want represented (e.g., academia, policy, industry, clinicians, law enforcement, etc.), but whatever your chosen sectors, you should ensure equal representation from each. The Chair will be particularly helpful in helping to identifying people to invite. When compiling your list, reach out to your networks to see who people suggest and do some desk-based research on potential participants (e.g., using Google and Twitter).

4. Set up the meeting

Decide whether you want to host the roundtable online, in-person or hybrid. Once you decide which meeting method you want to use, you will then need to either prepare the online meeting and familiarise yourself with online platforms, or book the physical meeting space and accompanying audio/visual requirements and catering, ensuring accessibility, etc.

Format	Pros	Cons
Online	• A good option if your participants are geographically disparate and you do not have the budget to pay for everyone to attend in person • Accessible (i.e., for those who cannot travel or live too far away, enables people to turn on closed captioning) • Can be done for free	• Difficult to facilitate engagement and discussion between participants • Potential for technology to go wrong
In person	• Easiest way to facilitate engagement and discussion between participants • Provides participants the opportunity to network with each other	• Expensive – room hiring costs, participant travel costs, drinks and food • Not as accessible for those who cannot travel, have caring responsibilities, require closed captioning etc. • Hard to bring people together if they are not all geographically co-located
Hybrid	• Provides flexibility for those who cannot travel or attend in person • Gives people an option to attend online in case of illness or last-minute changes to schedules	• Difficult to have engagement between the online and in-person groups • Potential for audio-visual technology to go wrong and disadvantage those attending online



5. Send participant invitations

We recommend emailing people individually, and not in a group email, as this is more personal and increases the likelihood that people will respond. Your invitations should include the following elements:

Subject: The subject of the email should use the format 'Invitation to Queen Mary University London's [name of roundtable] on behalf of [name of Chair].
Body of email: Create an email template that you can copy and paste into the body of each email. Take care to proofread each email to ensure the details are accurate.
Invitation letter including briefing paper and draft agenda saved as a PDF

If people reply and cannot attend, ask whether a colleague can attend in their place. If they can attend, forward them a diary invitation and ask them to send you a one paragraph bio for inclusion in the programme booklet. For the people who have not responded within 1.5 weeks of the initial invitation, send a follow up email. If your numbers are low, you can also start sending invitations to your 'second string' participants.

6. Compile programme booklet

Your programme booklet should include all the documents that participants will need prior to the event. We suggest including the following details: joining instructions or meeting location, agenda, briefing paper, and participant bios. One week before the roundtable, email all participants with the final programme booklet, making sure to BCC participants for GDPR purposes. You should include yourself in the 'To' field and CC the Chair.

7. Hosting the roundtable

The day before the roundtable, send everyone a reminder email with the login details (for online or hybrid events) or room instructions (for in-person events). It is highly likely that at least 1-2 people are going to be unable to attend on the day of the event, this is normal, do not panic. If you are hosting the roundtable in person or hybrid, you might want to consider including 30 minutes at the start of the event to facilitate networking amongst participants attending in person.

Ahead of the event, catch up with the Chair to ensure you are both on the same page and understand the objectives and format for the roundtable.

Organising: Post-roundtable

1. Transcribing the discussion

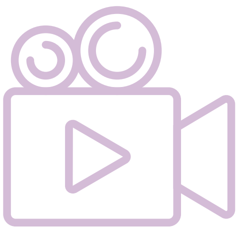
For note taking purposes and to have a record to refer back to, it is recommended that you transcribe the discussion. If it is hybrid or online you can use a platform like otter.ai, or Teams or Zoom's in-built recording software. If the event is in-person, consider organising a note-taker. Check with participants before recording to ensure they consent.

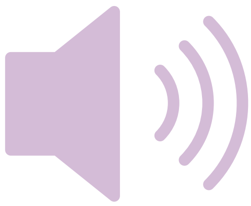
2. Follow-up

Send an email to all the participants thanking them for taking part, telling them they can get in touch with you if they want to be introduced via email to any of the other participants, and telling them the timeframe to expect the outputs and whether they will be asked to review any documents.

3. Outputs

Outputs should be co-produced with the Chair and roundtable participants. If you create a policy brief or summary document of the discussion, send drafts to the Chair and participants for their review and sign off. Consider working with participants to develop outputs, such as blogs, videos, podcasts, infographics, etc. For information on how to approach producing these resources, refer to the guides and resources on how to produce a Policy Brief and Blogs.





Further Reading

Eventbrite top tips for hosting a roundtable discussion

1. Define your goals – what problem are you addressing? What will you do with the information from the discussion?
2. Plan your room – whether virtual, in-person or hybrid
3. Carefully craft the invitation list and choose a strong chair
4. Prepare a brief for the chair and other facilitators
5. Set an agenda
6. Record and share results

Chapter 2. Policy Advisory Boards

Policy Advisory Boards

A policy advisory board (PAB) is a group convened to support the governance of an organisation, department, or project. It is composed of individuals who bring unique knowledge and/or possess skills that complement those of the internal team.

Advisory boards do not have formal authority to govern, that is, they cannot issue directives which must be followed. Rather, advisory groups serve to make recommendations and/or provide key information and materials to the internal team. Boards may also be referred to as an advisory group, advisory panel, reference group, advisory committee, or advisory consultation committee. Advisory groups can be standing (ongoing) or ad-hoc (one-time) in nature.

Organisation and structure

Internal Coordination

The coordination and management of a PAB should be led by the internal team, either through a formal steering committee or through a nominated manager or managers.

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference document should specify the PAB’s purpose, duration, frequency and timing of meetings, guidelines for membership, expected engagement, and structures for interaction with the internal team.

Meetings

Ensure meetings (1-2/year) have a clear purpose with an agenda focused on the key decisions that need to be made (avoid using meetings solely as a forum for updates). Meetings that generate outputs or follow-ups will help participants to feel like they are contributing.

Why form a PAB?

When to form a PAB	When not to form a PAB
• To provide strategic direction and guidance on the work programme • To provide independent, external, and policy-orientated advice • To broker new partnerships and identify potential funders • To raise the status, prestige, and visibility of the project/department/team • To act as a sounding board to ensure work is both academically sound and relevant to the real world • When a programme or project is too large or complex to be handled by the internal team, or when it involves major current issues or challenges. • When there is sufficient time and resource to properly coordinate a PAB	• It seems like 'a good thing to do' and would look great in the eyes of your funders and commissioners • Staff do not have the time or capacity to coordinate the PAB • Staff do not have time to change direction or do things differently as a result of any potential recommendations from the PAB • You have not identified a clear purpose for the PAB

Members

While the purpose of your PAB will determine the types of people you invite to be members, the ideal size is usually around 5-10 individuals. Depending on the objectives of the PAB, you may wish to seek participation from: academics, practitioners, people with lived experience, senior officials, and policy professionals (e.g., civil servants, politicians, people working in charities, think tanks).

Ensure that there are benefits for people to join and that the relationship is not purely transactional. For example, participating in the PAB might provide non-academic members with the opportunity to liaise with academics and access resources like academic journals, while participation more generally provides networking opportunities with other professionals in the field.

Think about ways to make meetings exciting and worth attending for members – for example you could bring in interesting speakers or hold a dinner event.

The Chair

The role of the Chair is to drive the organisation and development of the group, work with internal coordinators to set the agenda and minutes after meetings, and act as the point of contact between the advisory group and the internal coordinators. It is best to have an independent Chair (i.e., someone external to the internal management team). If your PAB has a policy focus, consider having a non-academic Chair.

Recruiting members

There are several approaches you can take to recruitment. The internal team can identify a handful of people to initially approach and then ask these people to leverage their networks to invite additional members. Or the internal team can send out invitations themselves. Generally, it is standard practice to accept expressions of interest in the form of a short statement.

Membership diversity

Having a PAB formed entirely of senior academics can sometime mean that participants do not have the time to read background material or engage with the work beyond an annual meeting. If you intend for your PAB to involve closer engagement and consultation with members (e.g., sending ad hoc documents for review or comment, organising events, providing advice, etc.) you might want to consider involving early career researchers as they are often at the heart of research and development and equally might also be keen to be involved.

Recruit members with an eye to diversity (i.e., go beyond the ‘usual suspects’), but try to avoid tokenism (i.e., only making a symbolic effort to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality) as much as possible. **It is crucial to acknowledge that people from under-represented groups are often disproportionately asked to participate on boards and panels compared to white counterparts, which means they have less time to put towards their own research and projects**. You could consider remunerating participants from poorly-resourced organisations or marginalised communities for their time.

Further Reading

Participatory Research Oxford: Section 1 - Developing an advisory group

Slade et al. (2010). The contribution of advisory committees and public involvement to large studies: Case study. *BMC Health Services Research*.

Examples of Advisory Boards at Queen Mary

qLegal - Advisory Board
Queen Mary Academy - External Advisory Board
Queen Mary Global Policy Institute - Advisory Board
School of Business and Management - Advisory Board

Chapter 3. Managing Ethical Issues in Group Settings

Managing Ethical Issues in Group Settings

When organising group activities like workshops, roundtables and focus groups, it is possible that ethical issues may arise where some invitees have conflicts or disagreements with others.

Although many public policy events and activities are exempt from the need to formally obtain research ethics approval, it is good practice to consider:

Participant Comfort and Safety

Reflect on whether your topic is likely to be contentious or create instances where some participants might feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

Getting Ethics Advice

Seek advice from your institution’s ethics team on possible ethical concerns and how best to address them and to ensure your planned activity does not require ethics approval.

Who not to invite

In the context of public policy activities, invitees should be selected based on their professional credentials and expertise. When considering who to invite to an event, ask yourself: Does this person's presence contribute to academic discourse?

Participants should not be invited if there are very specific concerns around security or safety (e.g., there is evidence of their engagement in unlawful hate speech) and, equally, someone should not be un-invited unless you have specific and credible concerns around security or safety. To find out which organisations are linked to unlawful hate speech you can review the government's list of proscribed organisations.

Freedom of speech and events policy

Once invited, unless there are safety and security risks, participants should not be un-invited from events and fora as this would likely be a violation of their freedom of speech. This case study on the Reindorf Review on 'no platforming' summarises the controversy surrounding the University of Essex where two speakers were uninvited to speak at events. On separate occasions in 2019 and 2020, two professors were uninvited from speaking at events due to preconceptions about their views on trans rights and gender identity. The report found that the University was in breach of its statutory duty to take reasonably practicable steps to ensure that freedom of speech within the law was secured for visiting speakers.

Most organisations will have their own freedom of speech and events policies. For example, Queen Mary's Freedom of Speech Policy and Policy and Code of Practice on the Conduct of Events outline the university's position on freedom of speech in the context of its values and duty in law, as well as expectations of event organisers pertaining to the conduct of events.

Before planning any event, you should familiarise yourself with your institution's policies and procedures.

Managing conflicts

Where participants have conflicting views, they may wish to avoid interacting with each other in group settings. While participants should not be un-invited from an event based on their views, we can make adjustments and put steps in place to help make group discussions amicable and safe for everyone.

Sharing participant lists prior to sessions

Letting everyone see who will be in attendance gives participants the choice not to attend if they do not wish to be in a session with a particular individual. For data protection reasons, these details can only be shared with the consent of all participants, so if you are considering this approach, you should first consult with your university data protection team.

Clearly stating the terms of the session

Clearly stating the terms of the session Informing all participants that invitations were extended based solely on their professional credentials and expertise, and emphasising that you do not intend to elicit personal views, can help clarify the basis on which invitations are made. Conducting sessions under 'Chatham House Rules' can also help to ensure participants feel comfortable participating in an event. Under the Chatham House Rule, after an event, participants are 'free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

Code of conduct

Where contentious issues are likely to be discussed, it may be helpful to circulate a brief code of conduct document reminding participants that professional interaction is expected. Ideally, you would co-create the code of conduct with the invited participants prior to the event. Alternatively, you could share a 'values list' with participants prior to the event (this is similar to a code of conduct, but simpler).

The Chair

If your event will be moderated by a Chair, ensure the person in this role is a confident and strong speaker who can intervene if discussions become heated (e.g., if one participant deliberately addresses another despite measures to keep them separate, or shares controversial personal views where they are not relevant to the event/elicited by the Chair).

Making adjustments

Sometimes, a participant may ask not to interact with another. Although it is impossible to guarantee this, given that the event is in a group setting, there are some adjustments that can be made.

- Participants can be placed in separate breakout sessions (online or in-person)
- The event Chair can be informed and asked not to actively call on these participants to respond to one other, and can also avoid inviting them to speak immediately after one another

You should make the limitations of these adjustments clear to participants and note that some interaction may still happen. Where there are equalities considerations (e.g., if those from marginalised groups feel they must pull out because they feel unsafe), organisers should consider whether there are measures they could take to ensure they still have the opportunity to participate such as providing a video recording or written submission.

Sources of support

Where you identify possible ethical issues, it is always a good idea to seek broader advice. This could include speaking to your institution's:

- Research ethics team
- Data protection team
- Events/compliance teams
- Other researchers who have organised similar activities in the past

Further Reading

Centre for Public Engagement - Principles of Equitable Partnership in Public Engagement

Chatham House Rule

Reindorf Review on 'no platforming'

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

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