

An Evaluation of the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network



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Evaluation Introduction

During the Spring of 2025 Sealey Associates worked with Stephen Meek Consulting Limited and Transforming Evidence to undertake **an evaluation of Yorkshire Policy Engagement and Research Network** an ambitious programme designed to connect universities with combined/strategic authorities across Yorkshire and Humber. As you will see in this document, the evaluation reveals both significant achievements and ongoing challenges in bridging the gap between academic research and policy implementation.

Who are Sealey Associates?

Sealey Associates is a specialist **research and innovation consultancy** with extensive expertise in designing and delivering high-quality evaluations for the UK research and higher education sector. Led by Dr Bridget Sealey, the team has undertaken major evaluations of UKRI Impact Accelerator Accounts, the large-scale Y-PERN programme, and NORFACE—a multilateral funding scheme supporting cross-country research activity—as well as commissioned studies for national funders including the ESRC and the British Academy. Their wider evaluation portfolio encompasses organisational reviews, impact assessments, and targeted evaluations of funding schemes such as HEIF and the Policy Support Fund. Sealey Associates provides **rigorous, evidence-based analysis** and **practical recommendations** that help universities and funders strengthen research culture, impact, and policy engagement.



Section One: About the project we are evaluating

Yorkshire and the Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN) is a pilot project funded by Research England, led by Professor Andrew Brown and formed by a consortium of organisations. Y-PERN brings together researchers, policy makers and wider society to support inclusive, place-based policy making in the region.

The project consortium includes:



12 Universities



15 Local Authorities



4 Combined Authorities

Y-PERN's Objectives are to:

- Enhance collaboration at a sub-regional level between researchers and policy makers e.g. South Yorkshire.
- Enable connections and collaboration at a Yorkshire & Humber scale.
- Understand what works and develop training and capacity building needs across academia and policy makers in the region.
- Evaluating impact and potential sustainability of the Y-PERN model beyond a pilot phase.

Y-PERN's core team comprises **Work Package Leads** and **Policy Fellows**. The latter are hosted across Yorkshire's universities, spanning a range of academic backgrounds, working directly with policy makers across local and combined authorities.

The initial funding period of the project started at the end of 2022 and concluded in August 2025.



Evaluation Approach and Aims

The aim of the evaluation was to help Y-PERN understand its strategic priorities, outcomes and impacts, advise on how to evidence and monitor progress towards them, and help Y-PERN to articulate its value and learning to its priority audiences, to support Y-PERN's sustainability plans.

The Y-PERN team's approach to its evaluation was to tender for an evaluation organisation that would be able to take a collaborative and critical friend approach to Y-PERN's evaluation, underpinned through a realist and pragmatic methodology.

This was to:

- identify realistic outcomes and prioritise what data was feasible for capture on a complex project operating over a relatively short timescale;
- provide Y-PERN with an accurate picture into what was working and what wasn't working;
- ensure findings and feedback informs and improves Y-PERN's operational delivery – offering real time learning.

To support the above activity, Y-PERN created an evaluation reference group. These were members of the Y-PERN team with an interest or experience in evaluation to a) design the tender b) work with the evaluation organisation to help deliver the work. This included providing feedback on processes and stakeholders, reviewing text and identifying ways forward following initial findings. The evaluation reference group and evaluation organisation Sealey Associates Ltd (SA) were convened by the senior programme manager.

SA were contracted to deliver by the University of Leeds in February 2024. SA worked with Stephen Meek of Stephen Meek Consulting Limited and Prof Kathryn Oliver of Transforming Evidence <https://transforming-evidence.org/> (the latter in an advisory capacity). The evaluation took place between February 2024 and June 2025.

Section Two: Summary of Observations



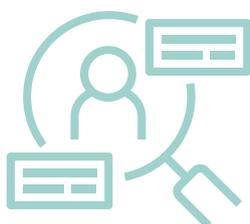
Outcome 1 - Local/ Combined Authorities (LA/CA) understand value of engagement with research



Outcome 2 – Projects and outputs that wouldn't otherwise have happened



Outcome 3 – Evidence of collaborative rather than reactive/transactional engagement



Outcome 4 – LAs and CAs understand value of Policy Fellow role & how to work better with researchers



Outcome 5 – Impact on regional policy development.



Outcome 6 – LA and CA stakeholders see HEIs as an alternative to consultants



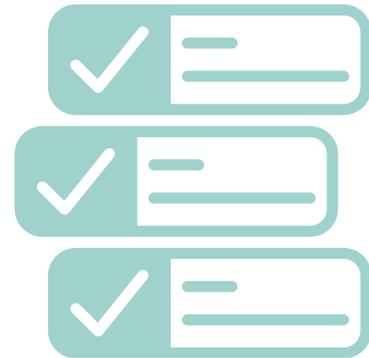
Outcome 7 – Researchers better understand how to work with policy stakeholders

Outcome One - Local/
Combined Authorities (LA/CA)
understand value of
engagement with research



- Local and Combined Authority (LA and CA) stakeholders have shown a **positive understanding of the value of engaging with research**. Outputs generated through Y-PERN have been well received, with stakeholders appreciating the new perspectives and methods brought by the Y-PERN team.
- We have had limited access to senior leaders so are **unable to determine confidently the extent to which the existence and value of Y-PERN has penetrated to more senior levels in organisations**. However, we know there has been political engagement and interest in Y-PERN from the APPG Yorkshire & North Lincolnshire, as well as from Mayor Tracy Brabin of West Yorkshire Combined Authority. In addition, work on devolution was commissioned by the Yorkshire Leaders Board and discussed in their meetings. Council leaders' feedback was embedded into the work and one leader was particularly involved in the development of the report output. These actions indicate a level of awareness and understanding of Y-PERN at senior levels.
- Where we have seen the most explicit recognition of value has been where **Y-PERN have been able to support set piece strategic work driven by operational or other demand, helping shape thinking in ways that wouldn't have been possible in-house or using consultants**, either by input from an individual expert or by brokering multi-disciplinary insight to complex problems.
- We found **several instances where policy stakeholders had contributed to or supported funding bids led by or including Y-PERN researchers**. This included large scale strategic programmes as well as smaller projects that leveraged internally managed seed funding (e.g. via the QR Policy Support Fund).
- Several policy stakeholders speculated that **Y-PERN projects might have been even more valuable had they been co-led by the authorities themselves** as opposed to the universities, to ensure maximum alignment to priorities.

Outcome Two - Projects and outputs that wouldn't otherwise have happened



- While most interviewees felt the projects they were involved in would probably have happened anyway (because of an operational or other imperative), they felt that **Y-PERN's engagement made a decisive difference to the breadth and rigour of insight informing the projects, and to the quality of the outputs.**
- We have found evidence that the use of **embedded fellows, knowledge brokerage skills and networks does appear to have generated distinctive approaches to projects and outputs that would not have otherwise been taken.**
- Y-PERN's advocacy has led to the **development of ARIs** with local and combined authority policy partners. It is unlikely that this would have otherwise happened.
- For HEIs, Y-PERN has the potential to **make considerable contributions to HE-BCIS, KEF and REF submissions**, in terms of income, impact, people, culture and environment.
- Y-PERN facilitated **a positive collaborative relationship between a smaller institution and a larger local institution**, enhancing their policy engagement capacity. However, we also found that **other smaller specialist institutions have struggled to connect and contribute.**

Outcome Three - Evidence of collaborative rather than reactive/transactional engagement



- There is **clear evidence of collaborative engagement**. Embedded, adaptive approaches have proved especially important in the context of asymmetric devolution, the shifting political landscape and changing organisations.
- We found that the most effective model is where the academic is not just providing insight to questions framed by the policymakers, but **helps shape the questions, convening expertise from across disciplines to address multidimensional challenges, and helping frame that insight for the specific local policy context**.
- **Some policy fellows appear to have had a more 'background' role in the relationship with policy stakeholders**, with the academic lead taking the prime engagement/brokerage position.
- Our interviews with policy fellows and partners on the **projects that are having the most impact all stressed that the collaborative/ co-production element was critical**.



Outcome Four - LAs and CAs understand the value of policy fellows and how to work better with researchers



- The **policy fellow role is widely seen as critical to the success of the programme** and works best when tailored to specific contexts and with clear role definition. The policy fellow role appears to be working most effectively in two contexts:
 - The first is where the individual is working in a general bridging, knowledge brokerage role, embedded in an organisation.
 - The second is where a fellow brings deep expertise of both research and policy context on an issue and works across multiple partners on that specific issue.
- **A high premium has been put on knowledge mobiliser skills (and capacity)** because the current political context has required a high degree of adaptability. This is not likely to change in the foreseeable future.
- We found that in the most effective partnerships, the policy fellows and policy partners worked together to establish how to get the best out of the relationships. In future the **insights into effective models that they identified (and we reflect here) should be built into inducting and preparing future policy fellows and academic leads**, especially as to how this role differs from a more usual “research fellow” role.



Outcome Five - Impact on regional policy development

- Evidence of **impact on policy development is still nascent**, which is to be expected for a project that fully started in 2023, and with some fellows only joining in 2024.
- Early work on regional devolution **had a direct impact on policy & helped establish Y-PERN's bona fides with senior policymakers** across the region.
- However, we found evidence of **important potential benefit to the "how" as well as the "what" of regional policy development** from providing access to a deeper, wider range of evidence and insight than would have been the case given limited in house resource for strategic analysis.
- The hardest evidence that **we have found of "relational" policy impacts relates to set piece strategies** for example, childcare, growth, skills, where there was a clear demand, and the work was strategic and synthetic. We also saw one instance where a complex, embedded evaluation produced similar relational impacts that are unlikely to have occurred otherwise.
- We found **evidence of "linear" policy impact** e.g. from evidential or evaluative work carried out by policy fellows. We could not determine from the evidence whether these impacts would have happened without Y-PERN
- Common outcomes experienced by the region's organisations are as follows: **1. Co-developed research priorities:** Authorities and universities collaboratively shaped areas of research interest (ARIs), promoting mutual understanding rather than one-way input. **2. Informed skills and growth strategies:** Evidence-based insights that empowered authorities. **3. Facilitated consensus building:** Serving as an "honest broker," to build common ground on an agreed evidence base. **4. Embedded evaluation approaches:** Long-term research partnerships fostered trust with community stakeholders during complex evaluations generating insights to inform policy decision-making.
- We would anticipate that **secondary benefits for citizens or organisations**, occurring as a result of Y-PERN informed actions taken by policy stakeholders, are most likely to be visible in the medium to long term.

Outcome Six - Local Authority and Combined Authority stakeholders see HE as an alternative to consultants



- There is an **emerging consensus around the type of project which works best within the Y-PERN model**. These tend to be longer term and strategic, where fellows are able to convene a range of insights to help shape and answer policy questions. Shorter term, tactical analysis or “task and finish” commissions fit less well with the Y-PERN model – consultancies (including to a certain extent university-based consultancy functions) are in most circumstances better able to deploy dedicated resource at short notice.
- Reflections from interviewees point to the fact that **even when the engagement is longer term, strategic and relational it still needs to be bound by clear commitments over time and deliverables**, and a recognition that this may evolve over the life of a project. Policymakers also sometimes felt that they couldn’t press HE partners on this as it wasn’t “their” money.
- We also found that **policy decisions taken based on strategic work can be small scale and tactical**, and should be seen as positive evidence of impact rather than a failure to persuade.





Outcome Seven - Researchers better understand how to work with policy stakeholders

- On the whole most **policy fellows reported that they had experienced learning gains in relation to how policy works** and specifically how it works at local and regional level. Learning gains were most significant when the policy fellows had worked collaboratively with the policy stakeholders. Several policy fellows reported that they would have benefited from greater clarity about the objectives and function of their role from the start.
- For policy fellows, some suggested **more could have been done to enhance learning and sharing as a cohort.**
- We saw that **academic leads played diverse roles** that included academic supervision, engaging with policy stakeholders, brokering knowledge and providing a supportive quality assurance role to fellows. **Going forward this role may need further definition.**
- In some institutions the effect and reach of Y-PERN has been relatively localised to the team directly engaged. However, we have also seen that there are instances where **the network has instigated investment in policy engagement support capacity within some HEIs.**
- We found evidence that **Y-PERN gave focus for one smaller institution to a enhance a collaborative relationship with another larger, local HEI** which in turn contributed positively to their policy engagement capacity. Additionally, we note some smaller HEIs were provided with training where requested. However, another interviewee noted that it has **in some cases been more of a struggle for small specialists and non-research intensives to connect and contribute** – it's essentially non-core activity at a difficult time.

Section Three: Methodology

Our Approach

To shape our approach to this evaluation we drew on two recent studies looking at how evaluations of research investments and impact are evaluated.

1. A systematic review conducted by Transforming Evidence Limited (TEL) ([Abudu, Boaz and Oliver, 2022](#)), which looked at the most appropriate frameworks, data and methods used by funders to assess impact methodically.
2. The work by [Petra Mäkelä, Annette Boaz and Kathryn Oliver \(2024\)](#) to formulate an evaluation framework for Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE), which was in-turn an adaptation of the [SPIRIT Action Framework by Sally Redman et al. \(2015\)](#). The SPIRIT framework provided us with a model through which to explore Y-PERN and understand its outcomes.

The evaluation team's proposed methodology and associated documentation was approved by University of Leeds AREA ethics committee.

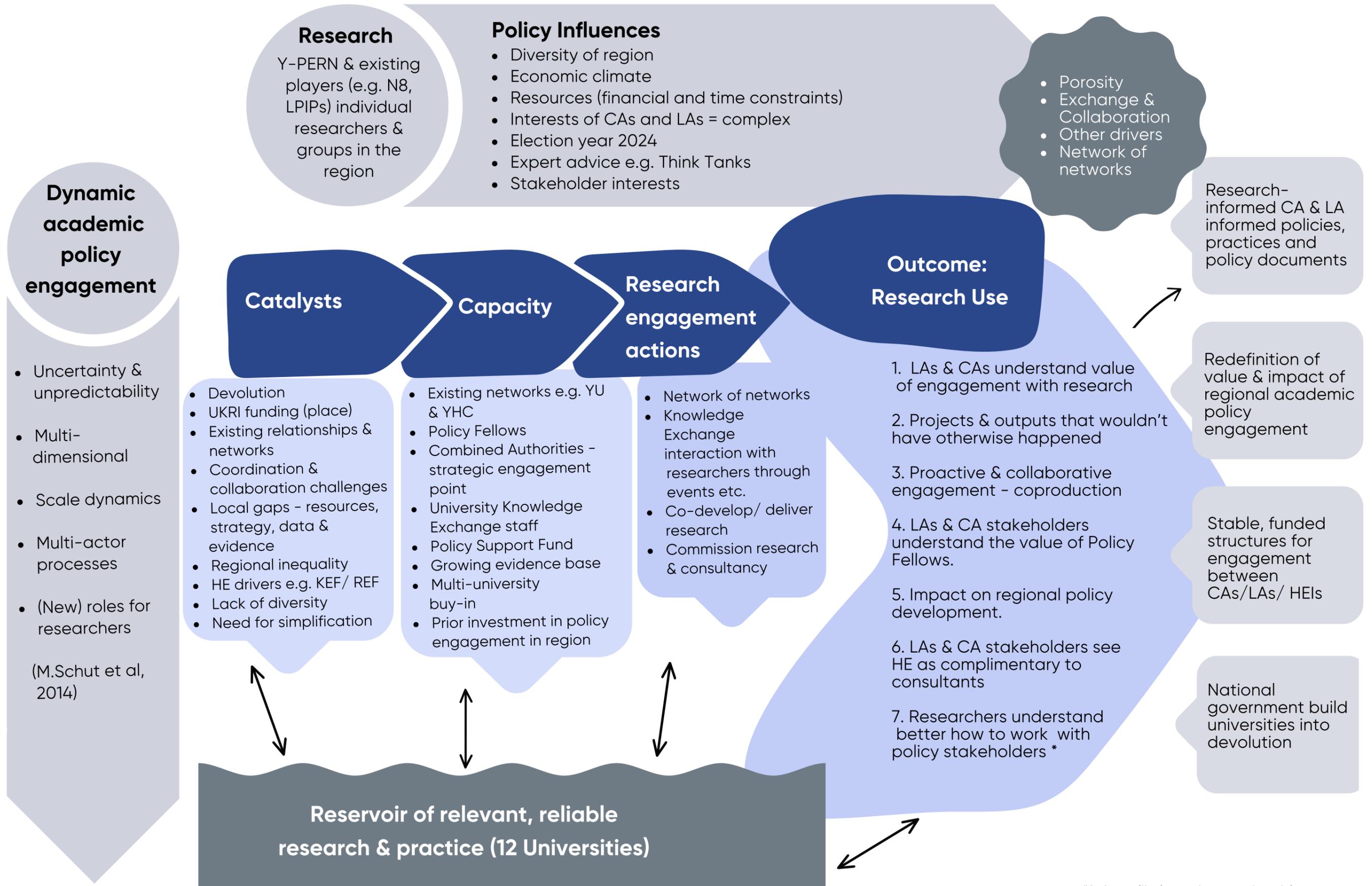
Theory of Change Development

We held two workshops with the steering group and invited stakeholders to shape the theory of change in March 2024. We used the outputs of this workshop and mapped it onto an adapted version of the SPIRIT framework mentioned above (see Fig 1). Using the SPIRIT model as our basis, we developed an evaluation framework with 7 outcomes that shaped our project.

This piece of work enabled us to identify:

- Catalysts, capacities and research engagement actions perceived by the group to be embedded within the Y-PERN delivery process.
- A clear set of outcome indicators to monitor, as well as longer term intended impacts.
- Where and how Y-PERN was influencing policy and the policy making process.

Fig. 1



*1-4 are likely to show noticeable incremental change in the first 6 months, whereas 5-7 are expected subsequently

Catalysts, capacities and research engagement actions

Feedback from the steering group highlighted the ambition of the Y-PERN programme. It is working across a large and complex geography with a diverse set of political settlements, and in a dynamic context (M.Schut et al, 2014). Moreover, following the July 2025 UK General Election the policy and political environment changed significantly, simultaneously generating opportunities but also shifts in focus and priorities. For example, the requirement to produce statutory growth plans as announced in the [English Devolution White Paper](#) led to increased demand for support in this policy area.

As such, whilst some catalysts for Y-PERN's engagement actions remained consistent, others changed and shifted – necessitating increased adaptation. Added to this changing national environment, different Combined Authorities are at different stages of maturity scale and with different devolved powers, again impacting both on catalysts but also capacities and research engagement actions. Overlaid across these contexts have been significant financial pressures on Local Authorities, and increasingly in HE, which has impacted on capacity and commitment in some contexts.

In relation to research engagement actions, it is important to note that individual projects have been delivered at different stages, for different lengths and have utilised different models for engagement. For example, whilst some Fellows were embedded within organisations, communities or authorities, others worked more at arms-length.

Outcomes for Evaluation

Through the process of developing the theory of change we were able to identify and refine the following outcomes:

1. Local authority (LA) and Combined Authority (CA) stakeholders understand value of engagement with research.
2. Projects and outputs that wouldn't otherwise have happened.
3. Evidence of collaborative rather than reactive/transactional engagement.
4. LAs and CAs understand the value of Policy Fellow role and how to work better with researchers.
5. Impact on regional policy development.
6. LA and CA stakeholders see HEIs as an alternative to consultants.
7. Researchers better understand how to work with policy stakeholders.

Data Collection Methods

Q&A

Fifty Three Interviews

53 Interviews with policy fellows, Y-PERN operational group and policy officers by evaluation team. These were 30-minute structured interviews which took place between April 2024 and May 2025 via Teams. (Some interviews were repeated to monitor for changes over time). We had more limited access to smaller HEIs.

Multiple and diverse attempts were made to increase the number of policy stakeholders interviewed. However, the sample remained relatively small in comparison to academic stakeholders.

14 of the 53 interviews were follow ups (between 3-6 month gap) with the Y-PERN core team (academic and knowledge broker professionals). We interviewed 15 policy officials. We decided not to approach this group for repeat interviews, recognising the potential burden this would cause. We had more limited access to smaller HEIs.

The interviews included:

- Policy Fellows
- Evaluation reference group members
- Academic Leads (ALs).
- Policy officials
- Third sector stakeholders (range of roles, organisations and geographies).



Three Workshops

We held **three online workshops**, two in March 2024 and a further one at the start of 2025. The first two workshops used design thinking tools to create a theory of change, adapted from the SPIRIT framework. These workshops brought together the academic steering group, Policy Fellows and Y-PERN stakeholders (university and policy).

In the third workshop we presented our findings to policy fellows and work package leads and sought feedback and discussion which was then fed back into the evaluation findings.



Policy Fellow and WP Lead Diaries

Five diary entries received (contributions from 50% of Policy Fellows, no contributions from WP leads). Training was offered in the use of diaries, as well as a drop-in session. However, we saw limited uptake of this data collection method.

We invited Policy Fellows and WP leads to undertake monthly diaries to capture qualitative insights that can support our understanding of how Y-PERN is delivering against the outcomes identified in the logic model above. We selected the diary method to complement interviews and other forms of data collection as it would allow us to capture immediate reactions and observations, especially in relation to the changing nature of Y-PERN Policy Fellow and WP leads collaborations with stakeholders. Those completing diaries were given a template which will be organised by sub-headings that generate insights in relation to the outcome areas.

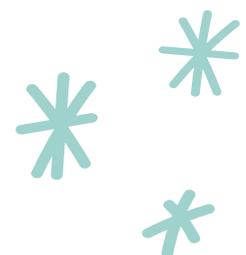


Qualitative and
quantitative
measurement

A simple **online survey** was designed for use with Mentimeter as part of meetings and gatherings with relevant policy stakeholders to measure qualitative and quantitative indicators.

With regards to the online survey, it transpired that there were no suitable opportunities to implement this data collection method. The majority of the Y-PERN team's interactions were at small group level, which would be unsuitable for the use of Mentimeter (due to concerns about confidentiality and anonymity).

As an alternative, we designed a second survey for remote distribution to individuals, which would allow for greater anonymity and accessibility. An updated data management plan was submitted to University of Leeds in December 2024 as part of an ethics application amendment.



Approval was received in early April 2024, and a survey was issued to Y-PERN Academic Leads, evaluation reference group and policy fellows. Unfortunately, no responses were received to the survey.



Desk Review

53 Documents included reports, blogs, meeting minutes. 50% of the documents reviewed are taken from Y-PERN consortium member university websites or associated organisations (e.g. YU, CAPE, UPEN).



Section Four: Delivery Against Outcomes

Introduction – a Network of Networks Approach

Y-PERN is **distinct in its approach within the academic policy engagement landscape** in that it brings together an especially broad range of university and authorities through a 'network of networks' approach across a diverse (economically, socially, geographically) region. Other academic policy engagement programmes have either targeted a more tightly defined geography (for example the NIHR Health Determinants Research Collaborations, Insights Northeast and Y-PERN's predecessor WY-PERN), or have had disciplinary or activity-based focus which might operate regionally or locally as well as nationally but through bespoke engagements (Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement, the International Public Policy Observatory, Economics Observatory). *The **convening power of Yorkshire Universities, in partnership with academic leadership, mobilised and coalesced agreement to work together across the diverse authorities and universities.***

A model of this nature, where diverse organisations are brought together to create **shared value at scale**, is especially important at this critical point where devolution and the prospect of local government reorganisation present institutions and authorities with opportunities to operate with greater strategic autonomy but in the context of considerable resource pressures.

What we have found, as this report goes on to highlight, is that there are **significant benefits from this approach**, namely:

- **Learning** across different authorities around shared policy challenges or opportunities (e.g. local growth plans).

- **Trust**, generated by building on existing partnerships and networks, accelerates engagement and avoids wheel reinvention.
- Demand led provision of **training and capacity building** in evidence use and academic policy engagement at regional and local levels.
- **Convening** Yorkshire & Humber based evidence-based research projects, networks and infrastructures (e.g. HDRCs, the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission) to ensure maximum value and coherence for policy stakeholders.
- Facilitation of **networking** for regional knowledge/policy engagement teams, enabling **knowledge sharing** across varied universities which have different strengths in relation to academic policy engagement.
- Providing a **degree of agility to cope with a complex, changing landscape** (e.g. changes of political structure and leadership). As a network of networks there is some evidence that it can adapt to change more easily than a fixed structure model.

The network of networks approach has delivered value in working across a complex, changing landscape. However, unsurprisingly, **brokering this approach requires considerable central and networked brokerage capacity across partners, perhaps more than was originally anticipated.** This capacity is important to identify and oversee projects, to share information and learning and to maintain institutional buy-in.

Our evaluation has also identified that **foregrounding the “offer”, could further help secure engagement and easy navigation by stakeholders.** This would mean acting as a point to bring together the policy challenges and the research and analytic capacity across the region and offering ways of working that help crack these challenges – whilst at the same time “hiding the wiring” of the networked networks.

Ultimately, the network of networks is important to Y-PERN’s success, **but its offer is what makes the difference to policy partners and academics** not immersed in the “alphabet soup” of programmes and funding streams that underpin it.

Outcome One: Local/ Combined Authorities understand value of engagement with research



We found that Local and Combined Authority (LA and CA) stakeholders have shown a **positive understanding of the value of engaging with research**. This is evident through their constructive engagement with projects and their proactive outreach to Y-PERN. Outputs generated through Y-PERN have been well received, with stakeholders appreciating the new perspectives and methods brought by the Y-PERN team.

We have seen the most explicit recognition of value where Y-PERN has been able to **support set-piece strategic work driven by operational or other demand**, helping to shape thinking in ways that would not have been possible in-house or by using consultants, either as the result of input from an individual expert or brokering multi-disciplinary insight into complex problems. This appears to have been especially useful when individual CAs were in a period of change or were seeking to do something differently.

As research has shown elsewhere (Walker, 2020) to ensure sustainable use of evidence you need champions across a range of functions and seniority levels within a system/organisation – from operational and junior actors to senior managers. There is **clear engagement with Y-PERN across a range of role types and functions** (e.g. analytical, policy).

However, **the extent to which the existence and value of Y-PERN has penetrated to more senior levels in organisations has been relatively difficult to determine**. Interviews with senior leaders in local and regional government have suggested that their engagement with, and understanding of, Y-PERN is often restricted to name recognition and general support unless they have had specific engagement with projects.

Nonetheless, there have been some more substantive examples of senior level engagement. For example:

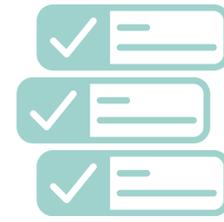
- Work on devolution was commissioned by the Yorkshire Leaders Board and discussed in their meetings. Council leaders' feedback was embedded into the work and one leader was particularly involved in the development of the report output.
- Y-PERN's engagement with the APPG Yorkshire & North Lincolnshire has brought the network to the attention of parliamentarians.
- Mayor Tracy Brabin has publicly recognised the importance of the Early Years Education and Childcare System report by Dr Tom Haines-Doran.

Areas for Consideration

Policymakers reported that they often felt uncertain about the extent to which they could be directive about the projects – while they were the “client”, not the holders of the funding and not part of the central programme leadership. Where Y-PERN worked best was where the activity was co-designed and led. However, **even in the most effective projects there was sometimes confusion about time commitments and deliverables. Several policy stakeholders speculated that Y-PERN might have been even more valuable had it been co-led by the authorities themselves**, rather than by the universities, as this might have ensured maximum alignment to priorities.

While we have had limited engagement with senior officers and no engagement with elected officials, it is likely that senior buy in is important to the sustainability of initiatives like Y-PERN. **It will be important to ensure that the benefits Y-PERN has delivered are clearly communicated to senior officers jointly with policy partners.**





Outcome Two: Projects and Outputs that Would not Otherwise have Happened

While most interviewees felt the projects they were involved in would probably have happened anyway (because of an operational or other imperative), they also felt that **Y-PERN's engagement made a decisive difference to the breadth and rigour of insight informing the projects, and to the quality of the outputs.** We have found evidence that the use of embedded fellows, knowledge brokerage skills and networks does appear to have generated distinctive approaches to projects and outputs that would not have otherwise been taken.

Examples we saw of distinct approaches that were valued by policy stakeholders include:

- Specific **analytical skills** offered by policy fellows that were distinct or additional to the skills found within the policy organisation.
- **Comparative perspectives** from other settings that policy stakeholders might not otherwise have had access to.
- Evidence **mobilisation approaches that had been tried and tested** in other locations. For example, Y-PERN's advocacy has led to the development of ARIs with some local and combined authority policy partners. It is unlikely that this would have otherwise happened.
- **Investment in time through the policy fellowship model as well as participatory methods** have generated trusted networks which will be of future benefit.

Leveraged Funding

We found **several instances where policy stakeholders had contributed to or supported funding bids led by or including Y-PERN researchers.** This included large scale strategic programmes as well as smaller projects that leveraged internally managed seed funding (e.g. via the QR Policy Support Fund). Whilst these funded activities built on longstanding relationships, networks and research within the region and beyond, we understand that Y-PERN was referenced in the bids for funding and thus is contributing to a wider story around evidence generation and use by local authorities within the region. Notable examples, which have collectively leveraged nearly £10million for knowledge mobilisation in Yorkshire and the Humber, include:

- Yorkshire and the Humber Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP) is a UKRI-funded project that builds on the existing multi-sectoral partnership working between academia, local government and community organisations in Yorkshire and the Humber across the 4 Mayoral Combined Authorities: York and North Yorkshire, Hull and East Riding, South, and West Yorkshire.
- Universities Policy Engagement Network Research England Development funding awarded in late 2024, which draws on Y-PERN's experience, particularly in its "places" strand.
- Two NIHR funded Health Determinants Research Collaborations in Wakefield and Bradford (announced end 2023).

Y-PERN's Academic Steering Group's role was to 'facilitate or support funding bids for collaborative research and impact that supports the region'. This role is particularly in evidence in the successful Y-PIP and UPEN awards mentioned above. **These awards aim to significantly enhance collaboration between university academics and policymakers.**

Smaller Institutions

We have had limited access to smaller HEIs through the evaluation; however, we did find evidence that Y-PERN gave focus for one smaller institution to a positive collaborative relationship with another larger, local institution which in turn contributed positively to their policy engagement capacity.

However, another interviewee noted that it has in some cases been more of a struggle for small specialists and non-research intensives to connect and contribute – it's essentially non-core activity at a difficult time.

Areas for Consideration:

Smaller Universities

Investments from Research England into knowledge exchange activities are an important source of capacity building funding for smaller institutions, given that the latter have less access to knowledge exchange funding from Research England due to the funding formula (four institutions within the consortium do not receive HEIF and received the smallest allocation of Policy Support funding available). The evaluation showed that the experiences of smaller institutions within the Y-PERN consortium may have been quite mixed, perhaps in part due to the fact that not all institutions hosted a policy fellow, one of the main sources of resource (due in part to absorbate capacity). **It would therefore be worth undertaking further scoping with these institutions to understand how they can benefit from these investments (learning from those for whom it has worked well as well as less well).**



Areas for Consideration:

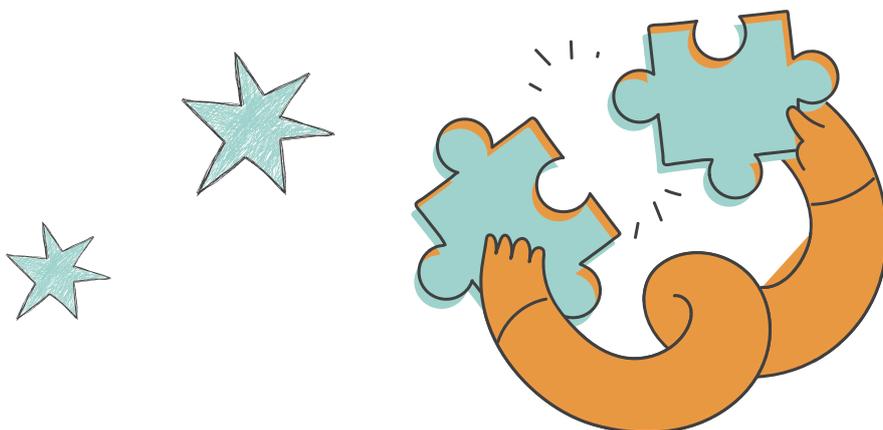
Contribution to Higher Education Provider Data: Business and Community Interaction

One area that is worth considering in relation to Y-PERN's importance for participating universities is the value it may generate/has generated through the Higher Education – Business and Community Interaction (HE-BCI) survey data (collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA]).

The HE-BCI survey measures the volume and direction of interactions between UK Higher Education institutions (HEIs) and businesses, the wider community, and other HEIs. It collects financial and output data related to knowledge exchange activities, including third-stream activities, commercialisation of intellectual property, and other initiatives with direct societal benefits. Whilst policy engagement activities are not explicitly measured via the survey, **several of the outputs relate to or are often driven by policy engagement and many of Y-PERN's activities will be eligible for consideration as data for submission.**

The HE-BCI survey is important not only because it provides an opportunity for institutions to assess the value of their KE activities in comparison with other HEIs, but it is also used to allocate funding for knowledge exchange activities to some institutions, in particular via the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF). For example, the University of Leeds's HEIF allocation in 2023 was £5.6million.

This finding connects with the findings under Outcome Six of the potential for universities to provide a paid for alternative to consultants through the policy fellow model.



Outcome Three: Evidence of collaborative rather than reactive/transactional engagement

The literature in relation to what works for promoting research-policy engagement, highlights the importance of enabling embedded collaborative approaches (Darvish et al, 2022; Oliver, 2020). Within Y-PERN we see clear **evidence of collaborative engagement**. Embedded, adaptive approaches have proved especially important in the context of asymmetric devolution, the shifting political landscape and changing organisations. In our interviews with policy fellows and partners on the **projects that are having the most impact, they all stressed that the collaborative/co-production element was critical**.

We found that the most effective model is where the academic is not just providing insight to questions framed by the policymakers, but **helps shape the questions, convening expertise from across disciplines to address multidimensional challenges, and helping frame that insight for the specific local policy context**.

This co-productive relationship works particularly well in **supporting policymakers frame strategic responses to complex local challenges**, and policy partners felt this was something that HEIs offered that other potential partners – in particular consultants – were less well placed to provide.

As a model, the capacity offered via the policy fellow role allows more scope for this way of working. In several cases, **fellows adapted rapidly to a changing environment and/or embedded themselves within the organisational culture**. In these cases, fellows could build trusting relationships with policy officers, but also with community policy actors for whom investment of time as well as creation of proximity is critical in establishing and maintaining trust and overcoming power differentials (Lansing et al, 2023 and Gafari et al, 2024).

We noted that, inevitably, the **character of academic/policy stakeholder relationships was fluid and changed over time, as priorities shifted** (e.g. due to staff changes/ political contexts). We saw instances where researchers found it challenging as policy activity shifted from developing a strategic, evidence-based overview to identifying tactical options for action which reflected the art of the possible (given resources, politics, other priorities) as well as what the evidence would suggest was necessary or possible. Nonetheless, these policy decisions taken based on strategic work can be small scale and tactical and should be seen as positive evidence of impact rather than a failure to persuade.

Areas for Consideration

Something we did not explicitly ask in interviews, but emerged through analysis, is that **some policy fellows had a more 'background' role in the relationship with policy stakeholders, with the academic lead taking the prime engagement or brokerage position**. The rationale for this seems to have been either that relationships were pre-established between the academic lead and the stakeholders or that the fellow had less experience or a different focus.

Structuring relationships like this is likely to have **benefits in terms of continuity** (i.e. in many case policy fellows are more likely to move on from the project, whereas academic leads are more likely to stay due to their different contract status). This continuity is especially important where relationships with community organisations or actors are part of the engagement process (relationships that can take years of trust building to develop).

However, the **cost of this approach is that fellows who have less direct contact with policy stakeholders** typically have a more restricted understanding of policy need and organisational cultures (factors that we know are very important in academic policy partnerships). In addition, we did see some instances where decision-making may have been slower because of having several individuals or tiers of approval involved.

Research Excellence Framework: People, culture and environment

Y-PERN's activities and outcomes clearly map to the draft assessment framework for the People, Culture and Environment pilot.* The proposed assessment framework has been structured around five factors which enable positive research culture (Strategy, Responsibility, Connectivity, Inclusivity and Development).

Y-PERN is likely to make contributions to the Connectivity factor (see description below), and may also make additional contributions across the other factors:

Connectivity: *Enabling inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches both within and between institutions, fostering co-creation and engagement with research users and society, and recognizing and supporting open research practices. Defined as follows:*

- *Research and research enabling staff and research students share research, knowledge and expertise widely both internally and externally, including through open research practices.*
- *Institution/unit promotes and sustains high-quality collaborative research both internally and externally, promoting mobility across careers and sectors and fostering a diversity of ideas, practices and approaches.*



*At the time of writing, June 2025, Research England had not carried out its review and subsequent amendments to the REF submission components.

Within each of these factors, several indicators have been identified, as well as sources of quantitative and qualitative evidence which can be used by HEIs to illustrate performance against each indicator. HEIs will also be asked to provide narrative elements to support and contextualise their performance against the enablers. **Aspects of Y-PERN's delivery that will be worth considering for inclusion in the submission might include the following examples:**



Leveraged research income and capacity building grants.



Numbers of knowledge sharing activities and individuals reached.



Qualitative evidence about the benefits derived from Y-PERN's collaborative mechanisms (i.e. as outline in this report).



Institutional support that has been provided to instigate and maintain Y-PERN.

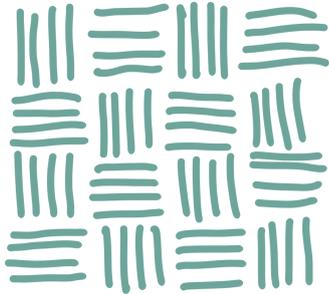
Outcome Four: LAs and CAs understand the value of policy fellows and how to work better with researchers

Polymakers reported that engagement with Y-PERN **enhanced their capacity to engage with the evidence base** in three ways:

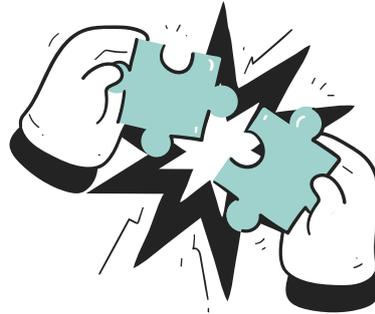
- Individual **policy fellows provide additional, expert resource** at a time when local authority analytical capacity has been reduced, and when combined authorities are in start-up mode.
- Policy fellows **help build capabilities within authorities** in evidence use and analysis.
- Policy fellows and the wider Y-PERN network **significantly reduce the transaction cost of trying to locate expertise** in universities across the region.

As noted in our observations in the relation to outcomes one to three, the **policy fellow role is widely seen by the academic steering group and policy stakeholders as critical to the success of the programme**, and works best when the role is clearly defined, and tailored to specific contexts. **The model allows policymakers and fellows to innovate and develop ways of working that suit particular challenges**, rather than stick to a pre-determined model of collaboration.

Based on our interviews with the fellows themselves, their academic leads and the policy partners these roles appear to be especially effective in two contexts:



An **embedded approach**, with a fellow/team immersed in the policy as well as the research context and is therefore able to act as an intelligent knowledge broker.



A **Policy Fellow working across organisations** on a cross-cutting challenge who is an expert and already had a strong understanding of the policy context.

A high premium has been put on knowledge mobiliser skills because the current political context has required a high degree of adaptability. This is not likely to change in the foreseeable future.

One of the key differences that Y-PERN has brought to academic policy engagement within the Yorkshire and Humber region (as opposed to other existing more localised, sector focused or project-based initiatives), is its **"network of networks" approach**. Evidence gathered illustrates that this approach has brought benefits:

- Policy fellows **are able to draw on pre-existing expertise and relationships**, and policy partners were confident they were connecting with something likely to help rather than simply taking a shot in the dark.
- We noted several cases where **policy fellows shared approaches** developed in one policy setting with another, via other policy fellows.
- We also found that **policy fellows are helping to visualise complex systems** (e.g. identifying interconnections). We saw evidence of multiple instances of this in practice.

- **Capacity building and training activities at regional level, for example through bringing together networks in the region.**
- Some policy partners said Y-PERN had **helped in engagements with central government and in working with other authorities**, being able to make more strongly evidenced arguments and develop better solutions.

Yorkshire Universities (YU) has clearly played a pivotal role in the set up and delivery of Y-PERN, and several policy partners cited the association with YU as a factor in generating confidence in Y-PERN. **YU offers the benefit of having an existing governance structure that all the Y-PERN institutions engage with.** It also offers neutrality, centrality, and deep political understanding that has helped Y-PERN to navigate the complex network of universities and authorities.

Areas for Consideration

Whilst many policy stakeholders had a clear sense of what they wanted to get out of their interaction with the policy fellows, others appeared less clear on how to make the most of the capacity the fellow represented. This included understanding how to approach defining and co-developing a project in a way that could benefit from academic input and collaboration. In future, it may be worthwhile to consider how the development and capacity needs of policy partners are addressed to ensure that asymmetric capacities do not develop that prevent the ability to act.

There are practical risks associated with a networked approach: in a resource-stretched environment, overlapping networks, often involving the same people, are not efficient and are potentially confusing. However, these disadvantages, are minor when compared to the advantages (e.g. sharing with other authorities approaches/data that have been used to helpful effect elsewhere). Moreover, they can potentially be overcome if there were more investment in the coordination function and/or leaning into the networks of knowledge mobilisers supporting policy engagement within institutions (e.g. policy engagement officers). Y-PERN has already begun work to establish the latter approach.

It would be useful to actively share insights from projects more widely across the policy and academic communities. Some policy officers in authorities without a Policy Fellow said that these projects weren't very visible, and that they would have valued learning about them to inform their own practice.

Outcome Five: Impact on Regional Policy Development

We saw a number of common outcomes that have benefited policy stakeholders across different types of organisations with the Yorkshire and Humber region:

- **Contributions to the development of areas of research interest (ARIs)**, helping authorities articulate their research needs and supporting universities to identify opportunities to provide insight. Further these ARIs are being co-developed in a relational way rather than (as with national level ARIs) presented transactionally.
- **Contribution to the development of skills and growth strategies**, drawing on a breadth of evidence and building insight that allows combined authorities to engage as equal partners in debates with national government.
- Operating as an **"honest broker" convenor, helping authorities to build consensus** across groups based on an agreed evidential base.
- **Complex evaluations** that embed a research team over time to create trust with stakeholders such as community actors that generates insights to inform policy decision-making.

In addition to the benefits listed above we noted a series of cross-cutting impacts are listed below:

- **Changes in policy stakeholders' understanding** of policy problems and possible methods to address them, including, changes or adaptations to problem definition processes, and changes or adaptations to strategic approaches.
- **Increased awareness of the value of academic approaches** to a challenge, evidenced by requests for support from other organisations on similar issues.

- **Improved understanding of data**, leading to better decision making,
- **New plans** being developed because of research,
- **Enhanced learning** about interventions, leading to continuation or adoption in other locals
- **Access to different kinds of data and perspectives.**

We would anticipate that secondary benefits for citizens or organisations, occurring as a result of Y-PERN-informed actions taken by policy stakeholders, are most likely to be visible in the medium to long term.

As well as these contributions to the “what” of specific pieces of policy development, we heard that Y-PERN has demonstrated the potential to change the “how” of regional policy development. In the course of supporting specific pieces of policy work it has also created networks and connections that could be drawn on in future – academics and policymakers who are comfortable working with one another and have a shared understanding of the context in which policy decisions are taken. These networks have the potential to make future engagement more efficient.

Areas for Consideration

The evidence suggested that for policymakers to maximise the benefit for policymaking, they should bring academic partners “into the loop” rather than treat them solely as a source of answers to questions. They can help policymakers understand the challenges as well as answer specific questions. They will do this better if they understand the context in which decisions are having to be taken, tailoring insight to reflect local circumstances and bringing in other fields of expertise.

Similarly, the evidence we have suggests that policymakers should share the realities of policy making with academic partners. In particular that policymaking is the art of the possible, and that policy actions might not enact the full implications of research insight but reflect what is possible as a first step in the direction given the circumstances.

There are benefits to using academic partners as brokers to insight across the HE sector in the region rather than just experts in a particular field, or just for a particular project. While our evaluation was not able to test this thesis, it is plausible there will be benefits from maintaining individual and institutional arrangements beyond the lifetime of individual projects.

Creating Areas of Research Interest (particularly through co-production with academic partners) appears to be an effective way for authorities to crystallise research needs and for academics to identify where they can offer helpful insight, and may also be useful for supporting ongoing relationships beyond individual projects.



Outcome Six: LA and CA Stakeholders see HE as an alternative to Consultants

There is an **emerging consensus amongst the Y-PERN team and policy partners around the type of project which works best within the Y-PERN model**. These tend to be longer term and strategic, where fellows are able to convene a range of insights to help shape and answer policy questions and where the need to fit in academic participation alongside teaching and research commitments is less of an obstacle. Shorter term, tactical analysis fits with the model when the fellow is embedded within a policy organisation. In most circumstances, however, consultancies (including university-based consultancy services) are better able to deploy dedicated resource at short notice.

This would suggest that the Y-PERN policy fellow model is a useful “relational” complement to the more “transactional” consultancy-based services that universities offer. Potentially this could be a source of income, with authorities commissioning this kind of strategic insight and support from universities. The Y-PERN team have undertaken analysis that indicates that authorities across Yorkshire and the Humber spend a considerable sum each year on consultancy, especially to address strategic needs where capacity is low*. While this is likely to be unevenly distributed across authorities, and much of it will still be spent on “task and finish” style consultancy, it would suggest there is a local source of income for this kind of activity, which potentially could support the long-term sustainability of the Y-PERN model.

Reflections from interviewees point to the fact that even when the engagement is longer term, strategic and relational, it still **needs to be bound by clear commitments to deliverables, availability of resource, and project closure and handoff**. These may need to be renegotiated during a project to reflect the changing policy environment, but for the relational approach to work policymakers need to know what they can rely on.

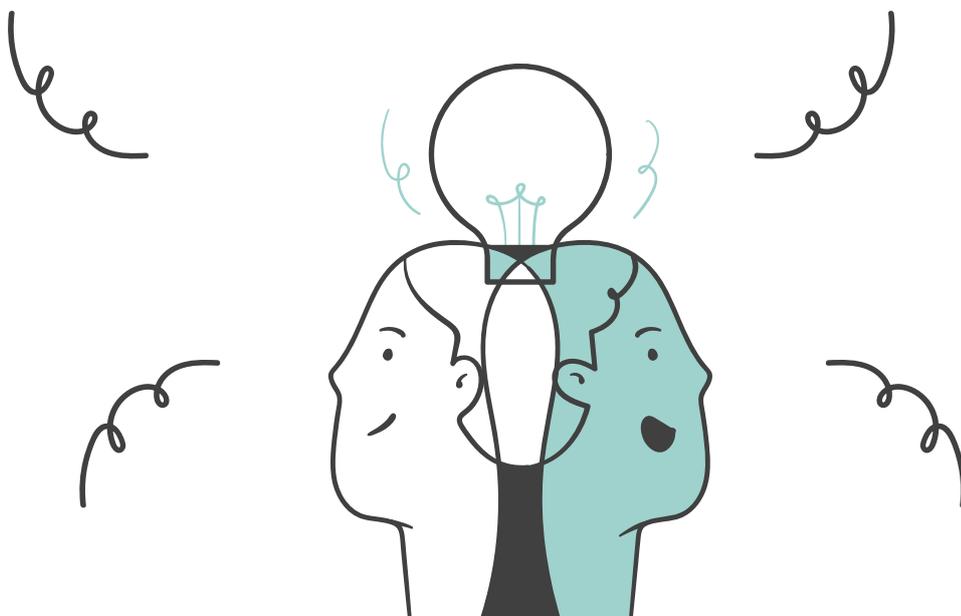
*See discussion of use of consultants [here](#).

Areas for Consideration

Going forward it will be worth reviewing which authorities have research and analysis frameworks (e.g. [Research Services DPS Kirklees Council](#)) and ensuring that one or more Y-PERN institutions are part of these (or that there is an agreement with a consultancy that acts as a 'prime').

Whilst the Y-PERN model has been shown to work especially well for strategic projects, this is not exclusively the case and more tactical projects or requests are also an important part of the partnership mix. Including consultancy as part of Y-PERN's model going forward will help ensure both financial sustainability, as well as ensure that Y-PERN has exposure to tactical needs and to continue to build relationships. The Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University has particular experience working in this way.

It would also be worth exploring with partners the extent to which Y-PERN sustainability and effectiveness could be secured by moving toward a commissioned approach for specific projects financed at least in part by local and combined authorities.



Outcome Seven: Researchers better understand how to work with policy stakeholders

Most policy fellows reported that they had **experienced learning gains in relation to how policy works** and specifically how it works at local and regional level. Learning gains were most significant when the policy fellows had worked collaboratively with the policy stakeholders. Even for those who had limited direct contact with policy stakeholders, their knowledge of local and regional policy had increased. Several policy fellows reported that they would have benefited from greater clarity about the objectives and function of their role from the start. Some policy fellows suggested that more could have been done to enhance learning and sharing as a cohort. This may have resulted not only in additional learning gains, but also sharing of knowledge, methods and data across different authorities.

As noted with the policy fellow role, we also found that the academic lead role differed from case to case. We saw that **academic leads played diverse roles that included academic supervision of policy fellows, engaging with policy stakeholders, brokering knowledge, securing leveraged funding and providing a supportive quality assurance role to fellows.**

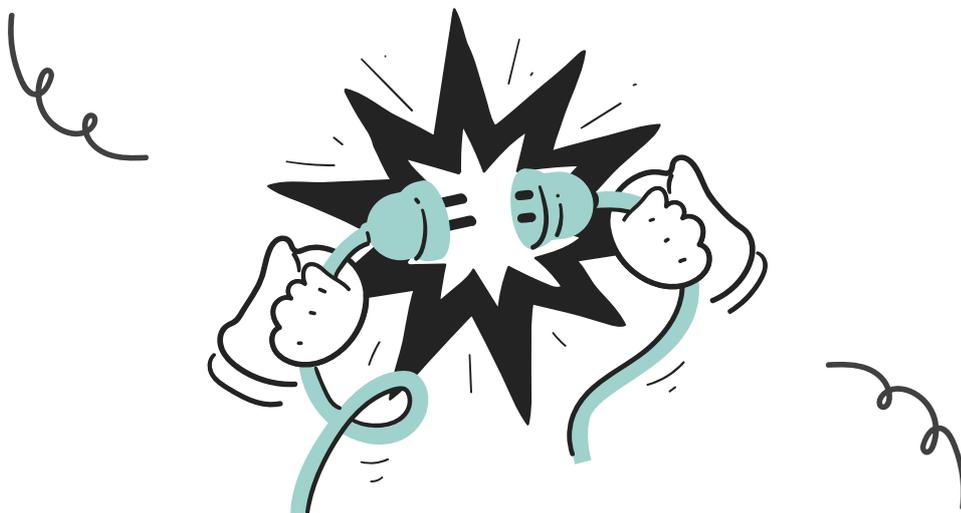
In some institutions the effect and reach of Y-PERN has been relatively localised to the team directly engaged. However, we have also seen that there are instances where the network has instigated investment in policy engagement support capacity within the institutions.

We have had limited engagement from smaller HEIs. However, we did find evidence that Y-PERN gave focus for one smaller institution to a positive collaborative relationship with another larger, local HEI which in turn contributed positively to their policy engagement capacity. However, another interviewee noted that it has in some cases been more of a struggle for small specialists and non-research intensive HEIs to connect and contribute, because policy engagement is essentially non-core activity at a time when HEIs are facing significant financial and other resource pressure.

Areas for consideration

The cohort learning approach can be seen in other fellowship funding mechanisms such as the UKRI Policy Fellowships scheme and the ESRC Postdoctoral Development Programme (the latter is run by Sealey Associates).

Going forward the role of the academic lead may need further definition, especially with respect to the support they provide for the professional development of policy fellows as knowledge brokers. Necessarily, the academic lead role needs to be distinct from that of a standard supervisory relationship and more akin to the management structure of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs; KTP associates have both an academic and a host mentor who each have explicit roles in supporting the development of the associate, as well as the project itself).



Section Five: Recommendations

Co-ownership with Policy Partners

Policymakers reported that they often felt **uncertain about the extent to which they could be directive about the projects** – while they were the “client”, they don’t hold the funding. Where Y-PERN worked best was where the activity was co-designed and led. However, even in the most effective projects there was sometimes confusion about time commitments and deliverables. Some policy stakeholder interviewees indicated that Y-PERN would be even more impactful if their shared ownership encourages great affiliation.



Recommendation:

Options to achieve this:

- There are funding models where local authorities are able to lead funded research collaborations, for example the NIHR Health Determinants Research Collaborations (HDRC). In absence of an HDRC type model, then it is worth considering how policy partners can be actively and visibly included within governance structures as decision makers.
- Within the Y-PERN model, the inclusion of inward bound secondments and exchanges, from LAs and CAs to universities may allow for greater transfer of knowledge between organisations, as well as greater ownership and advocacy. Examples where this model has been used would include CAPE as well as institutionally led scheme such as the long-established Centre for Science and Policy based at the University of Cambridge.

Continuity of Resources

While there is a desire from those engaged in Y-PERN on both the academic and policy sides to continue engagement, the reality is that **local funding to support these activities in a sustainable way is stretched and patchy**. Evidence generated through this evaluation would suggest that some authority consultancy expenditure is likely to better spent with HEIs than with commercial organisations. However, funds in other local government tiers are more constrained, and the priority for spend is often more on immediate operational challenges rather than strategic change, even where in the long run that would be of more value.

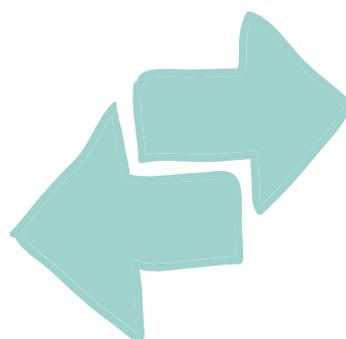
There are undoubted benefits to running these programmes for longer periods. The start-up phase (recruitment, building relationships etc even where, as was the case with Y-PERN, networks already exist) takes time, and the constantly changing political environment means that projects which nominally run for the period of the funded programme face a more complicated reality.



Recommendation:

For funders, consider investing for longer periods of time, especially for programmes such as Y-PERN which are experimental and highly complex. The NIHR approach to five year HDRC investments in capacity is an alternative model. While individual projects might operate on a commissioned basis, the infrastructure to connect between HE and policy carries a cost which is hard to meet pro bono in the current fiscal climate for both universities and local and regional policy makers.

There is also a need to think about transition funding and support. Current approaches fall between the two stools of a traditional time-bounded research programme approach and more long-term infrastructure investment, creating insecurities in relation to project and staff resilience.



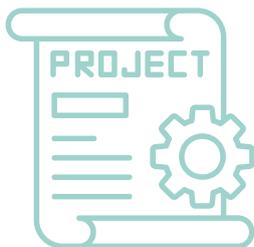
Continuity of Personnel

Policy fellows have had **contracts of varying lengths and most end well before the end of the formal programme.** Where Fellows have been the primary focus of a relationship/ set of relationships with policy stakeholders there is a risk that this collaboration ceases or changes with their departure. The role of academic leads has been important in ensuring continuity in many cases.



Recommendation:

- Establish clear exit strategies and exit interview process for policy fellows.
- Use the academic lead role where policy fellows are employed – setting up as per KTP model where there is a mentor both at HEI and host policy organisation.



Developing a more Coherent Funding Landscape

There is a need to ensure that (a) where programmes serve the same communities they can be managed locally in a way that “hides the wiring”; (b) that programme principals can concentrate on delivery rather than immediately looking for the next pot of money against slightly different criteria; and (c) timing of calls allows for continuity of activity rather than “stop/start”.



Recommendation:

Funders should ensure funding calls and programmes they offer are coherent and complementary – for example encouraging applicants to show how they will align with other related programmes, timing calls so that end and start points align, and to create longer programmes that have time to build infrastructure and secure long-term sustainability during the lifetime of the programme.

Flexible Programme Management

This type of project is highly sensitive to political change and needs to allow for a pragmatic, flexible approach in programme design and delivery.

During the programme Y-PERN saw a change of government, the creation of two new mayoralities, an announcement of major local government reorganisation, and changes of political leadership at local and Combined Authority level. While the local policy challenges remain the same, the relative priority and ideological framing of issues does not.



Recommendation:

Embrace agile programme management methods across governance structures and projects. Agile methods allow for flexibility, adaptation and collaboration with partners and stakeholders.



Network of Networks

The concept 'network of networks' may be useful for understanding the model internally, but it is harder for partners to understand and does not inherently explain the benefits of this approach such as navigation, finding diverse people, and avoiding duplication.



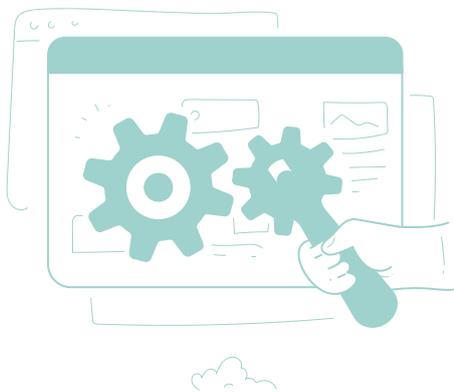
Recommendation:

Instead of emphasising the concept of network of networks to policy partners, focus on clear offers that are generated through this approach – access to expertise across a wide range of universities, a co-productive approach to problem solving – and potentially simplify branding across different but related initiatives to present a more joined up and systematic effect. Developing co-produced ARI frameworks may also support an approach that speaks to policy partner priorities and encourages a more systemic way of working across different HE funding streams.



Policy Fellow Role

The policy fellow role has been **one of the most valued aspects of the Y-PERN programme**, for academic leads, policy partners and the Fellows themselves. That said, many interviewees across these groups identified that the role requires further definition and support.



Recommendation:



Insights into effective models that they identified (and we reflect here) should be built into preparing future policy fellows and academic leads as to how this role differs from a more usual “research fellow” role.

When utilising these forms of role, we recommend ensuring that induction and ongoing support includes a clear definition of responsibilities vis a vis working with policy partners to understand their needs. It may be helpful to include a skills development needs analysis for individuals and then develop cohort support focused on these needs through mechanisms such as formal training and peer to peer mentoring.

Needs that were identified by the fellows themselves or were inferred through our analysis for this cohort were: understanding of policy levers within the local and regional government systems of Yorkshire and the Humber, as well as skills such as agile project management.

Developing a Clear Offer

With support and resource, **Y-PERN has the opportunity to offer a networked approach that has evolved and offers continuity over time**, rather than offering a series of one-off interactions, providing ongoing support beyond transactional contract consultancy. This mixed economy approach adds flexibility and complements specialised consultancy functions such as CRESR.



Recommendation:

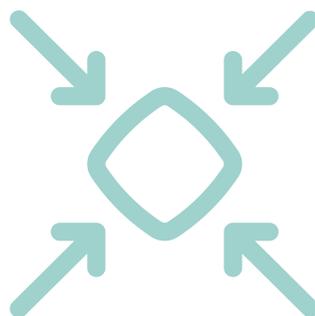
Y-PERN is beginning to identify where it can add distinct value through clear offers. We recommend continuing to develop and iterate these offers in consultation with policy partners.

For example, these may include:

- Supporting development of areas of research interest.
- Strategic advice as well as data support for skills and growth strategies.
- Supporting consensus building across groups.
- Delivering complex evaluations that embed a research team over time.
- Exploring with policy partners the scope for partnerships to be commissioned and funded by them to complement funding from HE.

Central Brokerage Function

Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the importance and value of Y-PERN's core knowledge brokerage/ management function **as well as Yorkshire Universities**, which both played a critical role making interconnections across authorities, universities and projects.



Recommendations:

Consider three possible options all of which have advantages and disadvantages and would need to be scoped with the relevant stakeholders:

- More simple alignment to individual Combined Authorities, at the potential expense of valuable engagement with local authorities.
- Continue as is but invest more in the central coordination team which could lean more heavily into local KE mobilisation professionals in individual universities to create a larger network of brokerage roles within the universities to help manage the complexity.
- Lean more into Yorkshire Universities with its existing governance structure that maps to the geographies, universities and authorities of the region

Ultimately, investment in central brokerage capacity through either of these three models will be essential to ensure that:

- relationships are managed;
- expertise from across the region is mobilised
- that policy partners are able to derive maximum value.

The practical upshot of the importance of 1, 2 and 3 together is that the central hub, leaning into YU, needs clear and permanent connections to the universities via academic leads, who supervise the policy fellows.

What do these Recommendations mean for Sustainability?

Y-PERN is an experimental programme, designed to test models for managing academic-policy engagement across a diverse region. A key challenge for the programme, beyond identifying replicable insights for the region and beyond, is to secure sustainability. If the engagements facilitated by Y-PERN are (as they appear to have been) providing real added value for policy makers in the region then they should be sustained and sustainable.

Our observations and recommendations all point to ways that Y-PERN's model could be made sustainable across the region, which we summarise here:

- Capitalising on Y-PERN's **comparative advantage over other consultancy models** in helping strategic policy definition and development. As pointed out above Y-PERN has conducted analysis that indicates there may be untapped opportunities to contribute to authorities through commissioned consultancy. This analysis would appear to indicate that there is sufficient resource even in the current fiscal environment to support this kind of activity.
- **Greater policy partner ownership of projects.** As discussed, policy partners don't always see themselves as clear leaders of projects. With greater clarity about their role in project definition, and greater precision on outcomes and commitments partners may be more confident about investing their own resources in projects.
- **Continuing joint applications to leverage funding to support collaborations.** Joint applications demonstrate a clear commitment from both parties to use evidence to make a difference, which should give funders confidence.

- **“Hiding the wiring”**. Y-PERN was conceived as a network of networks to help navigate and join up the range of related policy facing initiatives across the region. It has succeeded in this to an extent, but policy partners emphasised that more could be done to present the various opportunities supported by different funding streams to universities as something joined up. This both makes engagement simpler and should encourage HEIs to think about the various programmes as a systemic whole rather than a series of discrete, time-limited projects.
- **Continued investment in a core knowledge brokerage function** would be one way to hide the wiring and ensure that connection points are identified and maintained, and knowledge is shared systematically across the region.
- **Maintaining the networks built through Y-PERN**. Many of the projects have built networks and understanding that have the potential to continue to be useful beyond the point of project closure. Keeping networks ‘warm’ will speed up engagement to deal with future challenges – people will already know one another, how best to work together etc., and feel part of a shared community.
- Given that funding for these projects is likely to be intermittent (one off injections of cash via IAAs, for example), then **building a pipeline of potential projects which can be commenced if and when cash to support them arrives** would be a way of securing a degree of sustainability in the current funding environment, and would ensure funds were allocated to worthwhile projects quickly, maximising the likelihood of impact.
- There is also a role for funders in securing sustainability. **Ensuring projects last long enough to embed, giving flexibility to allow projects are joined up and have continuity beyond project end** (perhaps using QR PSF), and timing calls to allow coherent bids to be developed.



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