

# TRANSLATION FOR POLICY

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**Translation across Borders**

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## Summary

This report summarises the learning from a project funded by the AHRC which worked at the interface between central government policy and academic research. The project's primary purpose was to enhance the policy impact of the Connected Communities (CC) programme, both directly and by exploring ways to overcome barriers to impact. It started from the assumption that collectively the CC projects have generated much policy-relevant knowledge, including from projects which did not have an explicit focus on or interest in policy.

Translation for Policy (*TfP*) successfully:

- ❖ brought together Connected Communities research and researchers with relevant research and policy teams within the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The total value of the projects involved in face-to-face meetings with civil servants was £5.2 million – this contact would not otherwise have taken place. Some of these contacts led on to further engagement, including for instance participation in Louise Casey's 2016 *Review of Opportunity and Isolation*
- ❖ tested a variety of ways of facilitating connections which generate practical lessons for future engagement
- ❖ generated significant learning related to the workings of the policy and academic environments as these affect academics' and civil servants' willingness and ability to engage with each other
- ❖ demonstrated the value of co-producing research in creating impact
- ❖ prompted development of an intellectual agenda contrasting the nature and use of knowledge in academic and policy domains, and in particular the nature of the questions which drive knowledge generation.

The key findings are that:

- 1) a very considerable amount of policy-relevant knowledge has been created within the Connected Communities Programme, but relatively little of this has been communicated to central government, and in many cases its relevance is not recognised by academics
- 2) it is possible, and comparatively inexpensive, to share this knowledge. This is most effectively done through face-to-face meetings. Organising these – or other forms of transfer such as summary reports - requires dedicated resources and determination.
- 3) many of the barriers can be overcome – or at least worked around - by skilled intermediaries; mechanisms should be found, probably by the Research Councils, to fund such posts.
- 4) some of the barriers can be reduced by mutual learning about the 'others' domain – again through face to face meetings, but also better provision of information, opportunities for workplace visits and shadowing, seminar series and so on.

These findings reinforce those of other recent AHRC and ESRC projects about the importance of creating and enabling networks between academics and non-academic communities in order to increase the effectiveness of research. The Research Councils potentially have a major role to play in this, which would require a refocusing of their attention away from discrete projects towards supporting partnerships.

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# Translation for Policy

## Introduction: the project

*Translation for Policy (TfP)* took place in the second half of 2015, building on the knowledge and connections developed during a preceding project, *Translation across Borders (TaB)*\*. That project brought together a civil servant and academic researchers, most of whom had previously been involved in the commissioning and delivery of a series of AHRC-funded policy briefs. *TaB* explored the borders between the academic and policy domains by investigating the production and unpredictable use of the briefs as processes of *translation*. It was partly interview-based, and also included ethnographic work by a Research Associate within DCLG and a number of workshops to probe researchers' and participants' assumptions about roles and communication. It aimed to be symmetrical between the two domains, focusing more-or-less equal attention on the people, processes and structures within each, and involving a civil servant in interviewing academics and vice versa. The workshops were also used to test and develop 'tools', co-designed with an artistic team, to catalyse reflection and communication.

*Translation for Policy* was an extension of *TaB*, which involved the Principal Investigator and RA (0.4 FTE) working closely with a policy analyst within DCLG on a series of bridge-building (or 'match-making') activities over a seven month period. The analyst involved was initially a member of the Connected Communities (CC) advisory board, whom the academics knew from the policy brief commissioning and *TaB*. Following staff changes within DCLG her role was taken by the analyst most closely involved in *TaB* as co-researcher, with whom the academics had a longer-standing relationship predating *TaB*. The latter stages of the project, including the face-to-face meetings, were jointly planned and facilitated by the Principal Investigator, Research Associate and DCLG lead.

The intention was to connect researchers from the Connected Communities programme with civil servants across a range of government departments, to promote and explore the policy-relevance of a range of programme outputs, and to test and further develop the learning from *TaB*. *Translation for Policy* also shared *TaB*'s aims of gaining new practical and intellectual insights into how research is 'translated' between academic and policy domains, the barriers to translation which exist, and how these might be overcome. It was thus explicitly experimental and learning-oriented, as well as practically focused on facilitating connections.

Both projects took place in a context of other research on research impact. This report can usefully be read in conjunction with the AHRC's *Creating Living Knowledge* report<sup>1</sup> on the Connected Communities programme and *Knowledge that Matters*<sup>2</sup> from the ESRC's and N8 group of universities' work on co-production and impact, as well as other outputs from *TaB*. Many of the conclusions and recommendations from all this work are similar, and stress the importance of developing and supporting relationships as a prerequisite for academic research impact. The Translation projects' specific contribution to collective understanding comes from their focus on engagement with a policy community, and the investigation of

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\* See Box at the end of this report.

how research already undertaken – whether co-produced or not - can be linked to policy through collaborative action. (Both the AHRC and ESRC/N8 projects focused principally on the relationship between co-production and impact.) The detailed testing within *TfP* of how such co-produced links can be built also increases practical knowledge of how impact can be enhanced.

## **What did we do?**

The process of making useful connections was surprisingly unpredictable, difficult to coordinate, labour intensive and time-consuming - all of which are indicative of the systemic issues which mitigate against effective take-up of academic research. We provide detail of process here both for ‘methodological’ reasons (to support our findings), and to illustrate the kinds of tasks which institutionalisation of bridge-building processes would have to achieve.

The first steps were to informally ‘mine’ a wide network of academics, in particular researchers involved in the AHRC Connected Communities ‘Legacy’ projects, and civil servants for their connections and contacts across government. With a growing network of connections in mind, the full list of over 300 CC projects was analysed by Keri Facer (AHRC Leadership Fellow for ‘Connecting research with communities’), the DCLG lead officers, and the *TfP* project team. A set of projects likely to be of policy interest were identified\*.

The twenty-five Principal Investigators of this initial set were contacted by email by the RA, asking if they would be interested in exploring connections between their research and central government policy-making. Telephone conversations with those that were potentially interested were used to explore the potential for connections. Issues such as policy relevance of prior work (importantly including topics which the academics might not have identified themselves) and the extent of their previous connections with policy makers were explored and (crucially) personal connections between the *TfP* team and potential recruits were established. Interested researchers were asked to provide a one or two page summary of their research interests and what they considered to be the relevance to policy-making processes. Some were unable or unwilling to do this, and rather were invited to send (or simply sent) project outputs to the *TfP* team.

As a result, contact was made with analysts and/or policy leads within Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and (subsequently) Public Health England. Initially the project’s intention was to broker face-to-face meetings, but this seemed neither feasible nor appropriate in all cases: as an alternative, academics were invited to send reports for which the project team attempted to find a policy audience. As meetings were confirmed, there were numerous emails and telephone conversations between the RA and CC academics, and internal conversations between the DCLG lead and potential meeting participants, to establish who would be involved, what was expected, and mundane aspects

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\* The scale and diversity of these projects, as well as the organising structure of the programme, are graphically portrayed in the Connected Communities overview diagram produced by Bryony Enright (available at: <https://connected-communities.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Connected-CommunitiesCalls-Overview.png>).

such as fixing dates and times mutually feasible for the largest number of the most relevant people.

During this process, the contacts with departments outside DCLG failed to gain momentum. For instance, a meeting took place between the DCLG lead and his DWP counterpart, but subsequent attempts to communicate led nowhere. Similarly conversations with DCMS failed to establish common ground, despite what appeared initially to be the clear relevance of some CC research to that Department’s strategic priorities.

Details of the four meetings which finally took place (between October and December 2015) are summarised in Box 1. The fact that the first of these took place two days before the original project end date, and the others *after* this, is testimony to the delays which inevitably occurred. In particular, the end of November saw the first Comprehensive Spending Review of the government elected in May 2015, and the general civil service view was that it would make more sense to have policy-relevant meetings after the Review.

**Box 1: The four *Translation for Policy* face-to-face meetings (October – December 2015)**

Topic	Civil servants	Academics	TfP team
First World War commemorations	1	3	3
Community integration	4 (+1 via speaker phone)	2	3
Community engagement	5	2	2
Muslim communities and cohesion	4	3 + 1 community leader	3

Underpinning these activities lay a great deal of knowledge that was developed within *TaB*, in particular the appreciation of the need to experiment and practically test different approaches. A weakness of much of the literature on academic research use is that it is interview based, and therefore reports as much on what people believe or wish to present as on what they do in practice<sup>3</sup>. We attempted in both *TaB* and *Translation for Policy* to go beyond this and examine practices. In adopting elements of an action research approach, the project team were attentive to the assumptions being made within all communications and attempts to organise meetings. In a project like this, everything is data.

Four specific ‘experiments’ evolved during the project, to some extent arising as we made a virtue of necessity when some planned activities failed to develop as intended, and we had to deviate from initially planned activities. Through these we were able to compare contrasting approaches to the same issue.

(A) Having asked academics to summarise their work and its relevance to policy, several slow responses drew attention to the difficulty of the task. To test these potential learning points, the project team then individually and separately summarised reports and other written materials from these projects, and sent them to relevant analysts for

feedback and discussion. Without precise knowledge of the policy work underway, this proved to be very difficult. Failure to find an acceptable format which summarised the text in meaningful ways for analysts fed into a related discussion and repeated attempts to pin down a form of questions or set of knowledge requirements from the civil service which would be a useful guide for academics. The difficulty in achieving this further emphasised the need for face-to-face meetings and open discussion as effective ways of discovering and developing policy relevance.

- (B) We started with a plan for contact (1: identify academic research programmes of interest for policy teams, 2: send standardised emails to Principal Investigators, 3: follow up telephone call etc. leading to meeting.) However, this ‘ideal’ dissolved, and in the process of ‘match making’ we tested and compared different methods of building connections – via email using civil service or academic intermediaries, planned and unplanned telephone conversations to establish connection and/or clarify boundaries, face-to-face meetings, written papers, summaries of projects, group discussions and informal pre-meetings to prepare participants in both research and policy fields. Identification of participants in DCLG was based on the government researcher in *TfP*’s own judgement of which individuals in policy teams would be most closely interested in new perspectives and external evidence. This depended both on the nature of the Connected Communities research and the stage at which the policy was in its development. We also briefly tested assertions from policy colleagues that more academics should ‘just pick up the phone’ - a seemingly elegant solution, but one that most academics reported as difficult and we wanted to know more about (see Box 2 for an account of this test.)

**Box 2: “Just pick up the phone?”**

Analysts within DCLG had shown an interest in understanding Muslim women’s employment patterns, and through *TfP*’s academic networks a relevant research paper was found and passed on. In return, attempts were made to locate the most appropriate ‘audience’ within government for research findings on significant inequalities in infant mortality rates within the British Muslim community - the academic researcher was finding it difficult to identify a relevant policy team, despite the apparent policy-relevance of the research. No directory or listing exists, so making direct contact on the issue was impossible. Public Health England (a plausibly relevant body) were contacted by *TfP*’s researcher, and conversations with the general inquiries line and press office eventually led to a civil servant’s name being passed on: this took persistence over several weeks. At the same time a similar request was pursued through a DCLG analyst’s informal network across government, to see if that would yield results. After a couple of weeks, another name was passed on. The two civil servants who had been sponsors of the original research on infant mortality had been identified, even though it had been a couple of years and they had moved positions and departments. It may be reasonable to conclude that difficulties in finding the right people in government for academic researchers to contact are not confined to Connected Communities or arts and humanities research.

- (C) The four face-to-face meetings were also varied (in part deliberately) in terms of size, physical format, degree of pre-preparation, and topic (breadth, degree of political sensitivity, existence of a clear policy team focus within DCLG.) What appears to be a 'standard format' in many academic-policy encounters, in which the academics present their research one after another, without knowing what their policy audience is working on, came to feel inappropriate. Our aim was to find policy relevance, and thus after a successful first test all the meetings followed the same format: very brief introductions by all those present; brief presentations by policy team members on what they were working on and what knowledge they might be interested in; academic responses; and then open discussion for the bulk of the meeting.
- (D) Finally, we were interested in whether difficulties of connecting research and policy were a product of civil servants' perceptions of arts and humanities research, and in particular, whether it is discounted as being less useful than social science. Though beyond the scope of the project – and an obvious topic for further research - attempts were made to connect some social science research findings related to health to relevant policy makers. (The vignette in Box 2 is relevant to these attempts, which suggest it is not an issue confined to arts and humanities research.)

## What impact did we have?

The main impacts – the most observable and probably the most significant – were achieved through the meetings. Overall the project introduced ten Connected Communities researchers from (approximately) fourteen projects\* to potential civil service research 'users', creating personal and potentially sustainable connections between policy and £5.2 million of AHRC and ESRC investment. Box 1 summarises the theme and scale of each meeting.

The overwhelming response from all those involved was positive: that it was time and effort usefully spent. The meetings' 'impact' can be seen at three timescales, starting with the most likely and predictable.

- i. Within meeting: Learning took place within the meetings through the discussions. Knowledge and viewpoints about the substantive topics were exchanged, and (importantly for further contact) participants learned more about the other 'domain'.
- ii. Immediately following: Within a few days of each meeting several academic participants sent research outputs of various kinds to the civil servants, made contact with other academic colleagues to enrol them in further connection-making, and put reminders in diaries to follow up with ideas, papers or conferences in the near future to retain connections. All the academics provided feedback to the *TfP* research team on what worked and what could be improved in subsequent brokering of research/policy links, feeding evidence into this report and later project design work.

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\* This figure is only approximate because several of the researchers have been involved in a number of Connected Communities and other relevant projects over many years. While they were identified for *TfP* on the basis of one or two projects of apparent policy relevance, in the meetings they (unsurprisingly) communicated knowledge based in a much greater range of research experience.

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- iii. Longer term: Over the weeks following the meetings further academic inputs into policy making took place, none of which would have happened without the project. These included invitations from DCLG to: sit on a project advisory board, participate in an evidence gathering ‘roundtable’ for Louise Casey’s *Review of Opportunity and Isolation*, and participate in further workshops at DCLG. Civil servants from DCLG were also invited to the launch of a book by one of the participating academics at the House of Lords.

More generally, it is absolutely clear that academics who either felt they should already have the connections in government, but did not, or those that had never thought about making the connections before being asked by the research team, now have ‘names and faces’ to connect with. Similarly, civil servant colleagues have a longer list of engaged scholars and an enhanced sense of the value of CC (and more generally arts and humanities) research.

This bodes well for longer-term impact, though obviously what this will be is not clear at this point (Spring 2016). Inevitably some of the pressures which obstruct contact – and made our bridge-building activities necessary - will reassert themselves. However, and more positively, the extensive literature (which goes at least as far back as Weiss’s work in the 1970s<sup>4</sup>) on the indirect impacts of introducing new ideas into policy making processes, combined with the number of new avenues for contact made by the project, suggests that there will be further, unpredictable effects.

The project also had ‘academic impact’ in that it generated a great deal of learning and insight, some of which will be reported elsewhere in journal articles and conference presentations, and used to inform future engagement activities and funding proposals. It is also contributing to research and wider debate within universities about how to achieve and teach ‘impact’ and ‘co-production’, contributing an unusually practice-based, empirically-grounded understanding of the issues.

## What did we learn?

In this section we summarise the main learning points, organised by stage in the process: of initiating contact between academic research and potential civil service users; meetings between researchers and civil servants; and sustaining contact after the meetings. All of these should be taken as explanatory and additional to the four key findings:

- 1) A very considerable amount of policy relevant knowledge has been created within the Programme, but relatively little of this has been communicated with central government, and in many cases its relevance is not recognised by academics
- 2) It is possible, and comparatively inexpensive, to share this knowledge. This is most effectively done through face-to-face meetings. Organising these – or other forms of transfer such as summary reports - is not straightforward.
- 3) Many of the barriers can be overcome – or at least worked around - by skilled intermediaries; mechanisms should be found, probably by the Research Councils, to fund such posts.
- 4) Some of the barriers can be reduced by mutual learning about the ‘others’ domain – again through face to face meetings, but also better provision of information, opportunities for workplace visits and shadowing, seminar series and so on.

## Getting people together

### The supply side: academics and academic research

- ❖ There is a substantial ‘pool’ of academics and research projects creating policy relevant knowledge who are not currently connected to central government policy makers. It may be useful to consider academics as positioned in a field defined by level of interest in policy and current policy engagement. Some scholars are already well connected with government, while others actively resist such engagement – such as one who responded to a presentation of findings from *TaB* by characterising the project team as ‘like Stasi informants’<sup>5</sup>. However, we also found a number of mid-way positions, including academics who were:
    - unaware of the potential for policy relevance in their work
    - aware but who haven’t engaged for various reasons
    - previously engaged but have lost their contacts.
  - ❖ Most of these ‘in the middle’ appeared enthusiastic about becoming more policy engaged, and it is here that efforts could be targeted to maximise return on investment.
    - The impact agenda was repeatedly cited as a major incentive for academics to become more engaged
    - Some had simply never thought about policy relevance until it was pointed out to them; others didn’t see their work as policy focused, but alongside their principal ‘findings’ have developed knowledge which could be policy relevant. (Speculatively, this may be particularly the case for arts and humanities researchers compared with many social scientists, and for Connected Communities with its focus at ‘community level’.)
  - ❖ However, turning this enthusiasm into actual engagement, *despite having dedicated staff time to facilitate this*, was much harder than expected. Of the twenty-five academics contacted, ten actually met with civil servants, and research led by a further twelve Principal Investigators had been communicated to (apparently) relevant analyst or policy teams, with responses ranging from nothing to connections and conversations made without further input from our project.
  - ❖ Factors responsible for this were both internal to the academic domain and related to the interface with the policy domain:
    - Pressures on time created by priorities more highly incentivised within the universities (administration, research, writing) mean that if it isn’t *easy* for academics to engage, they will tend not to.
    - Unfortunately it was rarely found to be easy: researchers did not know who to contact in central government, and found it difficult to identify relevant users. The government websites were cited as particularly unhelpful in this regard, and contrasted unfavourably with the perceived openness of academics’ web pages, which typically provide research interests, access to findings and contact details. Even with connections in government departments, it can take several weeks before the ‘right person’ can be identified. Many who were identified, never returned calls or replied to emails; those that did reply took up to 13 weeks to do so.
    - Some academics, while sympathetic to being policy relevant, were unsure whether perceived short-term policy timescales were compatible with longer academic research timescales.
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### **The demand side: civil servants as consumers of research**

In general there is a greater willingness amongst academics to connect to policy than there are opportunities to do so effectively.

- ❖ Most civil servants did not respond to offers to connect made by the *TfP* team. Those that did were introduced to the idea by a government analyst who was close to the project's aims and objectives, suggesting that relationships and proximity *within the civil service* are crucial to achieving greater connection between academic and policy fields. The clearest evidence of this was the falling away of civil servants from outside DCLG after initial contact was made, despite what appeared to the project team to be the high policy relevance of some of the Connected Communities research.
- ❖ Civil servants have a range of other possible sources of research-based knowledge (in particular the think tanks) whose outputs are easier to access than much academic knowledge, as they
  - provide knowledge packaged as ideas and evidence in ways which are primarily focused on research implications and policy relevance
  - provide knowledge written in ways and presented in formats which are often aimed at ministers, and political parties, and are also highly accessible to civil servants
  - are mainly based in London – some academics located outside the capital felt excluded from policy circles.
- ❖ Yet government analysts value the (perceived) *quality* of academic research – there is a potential 'market' if academic research can be made more easily accessible.

As with academics, there are parallel factors which mitigate against the effort required to access academic research.

- ❖ Lack of time, exacerbated by resource constraints evident particularly since 2010 which require a focus on immediate priorities.
- ❖ *Too much* unstructured information on academic research provided by academic websites: civil servants have no quick way to find out 'who is researching what' amongst the two hundred thousand academics in the UK<sup>6</sup>. This neatly mirrors the academics' complaint about civil service opacity.
- ❖ Frequent movement between posts within the civil service can mitigate against building knowledge and relationships with the academic world. Two year tenure (or even less) in posts is common.
- ❖ Reluctance to engage stemming from stereotypes and actual experience of academic research as being of limited direct relevance.

### **'Fit': matching relevant research with a policy audience**

The lack of signposting and *useful* information about 'who does what?' which makes engagement difficult for both academics and civil servants is only one aspect of a set of issues around finding a 'fit' between research and a policy audience. Rational, linear models of research use assume a simplicity and clarity about 'who works on what?' which was not evident in practice, creating a set of problems in matching researchers with policy audiences.

#### ❖ *Defining a topic.*

An issue studied by academics and of apparent policy relevance may

- not currently have any civil servants working on it
- be divided between different policy teams – sometimes in different departments – with no clear overall 'ownership' and so no one point of contact for organising

- research input. ‘Communities policy’ is a good example, divided between DCLG and the Cabinet Office and overlapping with the Home Office’s concerns with ‘cohesion’.
- not be a recognised policy issue, or at least under the name/description given by academics. Or (conversely) similar language may be used by academics and civil servants, but carrying significantly different meanings – this is hard to detect without engagement. ‘Resilience’ is a good example of both issues – see Box 3.

**Box 3: Meanings of ‘resilience’**

Within DCLG ‘resilience’ is associated with state and community responses to emergencies (flood, terrorist attack etc.). In contrast, to many academics it is more about how communities respond to a range of stresses. Resilience in this sense is similar to – but not identical with – current government concerns with ‘community cohesion’, though these are also linked to issues around extremism which generally would *not* be thought of as resilience issues by academics! Responsibility for the government’s communities agenda is shared between DCLG, the Home Office and the Cabinet Office. Conversely, academics would associate resilience with ideas around community development, and so with service provision, neighbourhood and regeneration policies, which are considered separately in policy discourse.

Corresponding mismatches with academia probably exist from the civil service perspective, though these did not surface in the research (probably because the project's purpose was to connect existing academic research with policy – we were only looking in that direction.)

❖ *Defining research(able) questions*

The kinds of questions very reasonably asked by civil servants – which arise from their policy knowledge needs – are often not recognised by academics as questions which can be addressed by academic research. The problems may be fundamental (e.g. if they ask for ‘the best way to...’) or practical (e.g. because they would require huge resources and time to answer properly.) Conversely the kinds of questions asked by academics may not appear to be of policy relevance – being typically less practically focused than civil servants require. (So, for example, many academic research summaries justify projects and findings as being intrinsically interesting in their own right, rather than giving guidance for what to do.)

We found it extremely difficult to transcend this problem when attempting to get civil servants to give us some guidance as to what we should look for within Connected Communities. A chicken-and-egg situation arose: we felt we needed to define the areas of interest for civil servants in order to take to academics - the civil servants needed to know what the academics were working on before formulating their questions and articulating their knowledge demands. This was only really resolved through the face-to-face meetings, when questions and knowledge were explored in dialogue: it was an intractable problem in the production of policy-relevant written summaries of academic research.

❖ *Defining policy relevance*

Civil servants found it easy to describe what was problematic about many academic reports, but harder to prescribe a useful format, even after several experiments. The final prescription was that a report should say succinctly:

*What the government are doing right  
What needs to be different  
Who needs to do what.*

There *may* be a deeper issue here: most academics are simply not equipped to tell civil servants what the policy relevance of their research is, because they do not (and cannot) know what the current policy issues are, nor can they understand the implications of their findings within the policy making process. Civil servants' requests for written academic outputs which tell them what the research means for policy may be essentially misguided and bound to be frustrated.

**Risk and trust**

There seemed to be a significant element of risk involved in policy-research interactions, principally for the civil servants. Alongside the 'practical' risk (i.e. the opportunity costs of time taken up which could be better used) there was a deeper aspect of revealing both the complexity and detail of policy making and the existence of areas of ignorance. There was also perhaps a worry that bringing *new* academics into a dialogue ran the risk of them being unhelpful and potentially poorly behaved by civil service norms, and so causing reputational 'damage' to the civil servant responsible (see Box 4).

**Box 4: Risk aversion**

Through the project a meeting was organised between analysts from different government departments and members of the *TfP* team, in order to explore the potential for connections not only between academic research and policy, but also between policy teams who might have mutual interests in particular topics. The first question posed by one government analyst (new to building connections with academics) to another analyst who was accustomed to having connections, was "how do you know you can trust these people?" Clearly the answer, which was based on the idea that trust had been developed over a significant period of time, was unsatisfactory: the risk of an unknown agent entering 'their' politically-sensitive policy field and mis-reporting their activities was simply too great to risk, and the hoped-for connections did not develop.

Allowing unknown and potentially critical academics into a potentially sensitive work area in pursuit of unknown benefits is perhaps correctly done with caution, if at all. Yet the risk has to be taken if academics are to better understand what knowledge is needed and how it might be useful. For academics the risks are lower: there are opportunity costs in time and perhaps also in writing for lower-status (i.e. more applied academic or practice) journals, in the hope of unpredictable and maybe unknowable 'impact', but the privacy and reputational issues are negligible in most cases.

In practice these risks – and perceptions of them – were reduced through the existing trusting relationships between academics and civil servants within the *TfP* team, and between them and colleagues in their respective organisations. In particular, the relationships built up through the *TfP* and earlier projects enabled the government researcher to be able to trust the brokering process and know that it was not going to compromise civil servants’ commitment to impartiality and ability to support the policy direction that the government has determined.

This strongly reinforces the findings of the AHRC and ESRC/N8 research that relationships and trust are crucial, and require development over time. Our findings, and those of the preceding *Translation across Borders* project, also chime with Pain’s suggestion that ‘agreed common purpose’<sup>7</sup> is also essential: we would go further and suggest this purpose needs to have a moral and collective aspect, best captured by a civil servant in the term ‘a shared endeavour’.

### **Overall: a calculated approach**

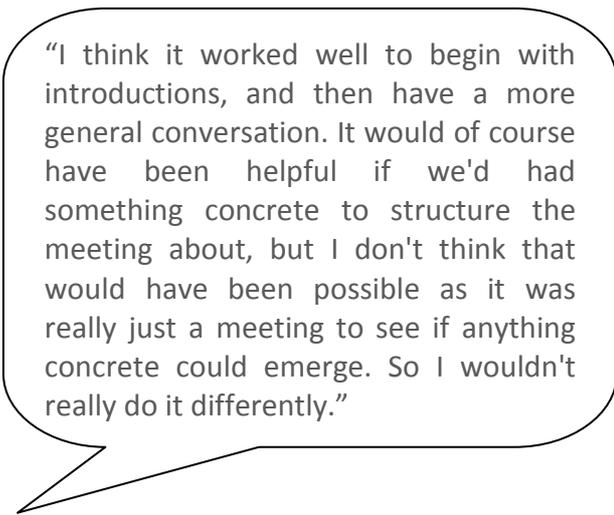
Academics and civil servants make – at least implicitly – a calculation of the costs of engagement in terms of time and effort and potential risk vs. the potential gains in terms of impact and gaining policy-relevant knowledge. In many cases the factors described here mean that clearly present costs outweigh uncertain benefits. The project demonstrated that intermediaries have a key role in reducing both costs and perceived risks, and increasing likely benefits, in particular through their role in setting up face to face meetings.

### **Face-to-face meetings**

The way the meetings were organised and unfolded appeared extremely important to establishing the open and trusting engagement which led to effective communication. We attempt here to roughly group the various aspects of these complex processes in a way which makes them visible and aids their reproduction in further work.

A very limited ‘agenda’ worked well. Chaired by one of the project team (usually the Principal Investigator), the successful structure was:

- 1) introduction to the project and the meeting (Chair)
- 2) round table of introductions – simply name and affiliation and a very brief description of role
- 3) civil servants explain in turn more fully what they work on
- 4) general discussion – the bulk of the meeting, which tended to focus on the insights available from research, possible case studies and evidence developed by the academics and drew on far more than the specific CC projects identified within *TfP*
- 5) Next steps – what people will take from the meeting and do as a result.



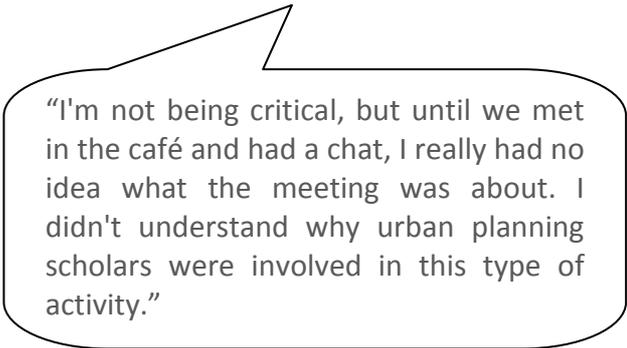
“I think it worked well to begin with introductions, and then have a more general conversation. It would of course have been helpful if we'd had something concrete to structure the meeting about, but I don't think that would have been possible as it was really just a meeting to see if anything concrete could emerge. So I wouldn't really do it differently.”

## Establishing expectations

Establishing what was expected by all concerned was a crucial element in the project's success, as the intention was to 'do something different' from familiar ways of communicating academic knowledge. Some of this was done through the emails and phone calls before the meetings, and was difficult – enough information had to be offered to make participation appear interesting and worthwhile, in a situation where the intermediaries (the *TfP* team) could not yet know who all the participants would be and so exactly who the policy audience would be.

Pre-meetings with the academic participants immediately before the sessions consequently turned out to be extremely valuable. These were mainly first meetings between academics and the project team, and were held off-site whenever possible. They were opportunities to brief academics about what to expect, explain the history of the project, and plan for the meeting. They also started the process of breaking down stereotypes, of both civil servants and planning academics. (Both the academic researchers in the project were based in the University of Sheffield Department of Urban Studies & Planning. Given that name, our engagement in making arts and humanities research useful to government puzzled some participants.) We included some explicit discussion of 'how to act' in some cases, and something on the people they were to meet, where this was known. It was also important to establish that the meetings' format was informal and about conversation and listening. Humour and rapport (and coffee) mattered.

The importance of this became clear at the one meeting without a significant pre-meeting (apart from introductions in the lobby of the DCLG building). Academics and intermediaries were less at ease with each other, and more time was taken within the meeting for people to 'work each other out' and establish trust.



"I'm not being critical, but until we met in the café and had a chat, I really had no idea what the meeting was about. I didn't understand why urban planning scholars were involved in this type of activity."

## How the meetings were organised

As noted above, it was inordinately hard to organise meeting dates and participants, even when much enthusiasm was professed. On the day the people who turned up were not necessarily those who were expected, either academics or civil servants, and the time available changed. This reinforces the importance of emphasising provisionality and a shared endeavour to all concerned (and selecting people happy with this), so that meetings can be productive even if not exactly what was anticipated.

An important aspect of the meetings was that both academics and civil servants had interests broader than the specific meeting focus. This led to serendipitous gains, and also overcame the risks inherent in unpredictable attendance – there was always a useful conversation to be had. What was being organised was a meeting between potentially useful researchers and people who could make use of their ideas – not simply a meeting to exchange knowledge about Topic X.

A specific 'Topic X' had to be the core, however, or a meeting would not take place. Narrowly defined topics were easier to 'sell' and made for more efficient meetings, as

research relevance was obvious and shared interests could be rapidly established. Conversely, the broader topics gave more scope for unexpected and richer sharing of ideas, but involved lengthier exploratory phases in the meetings.

Establishing openness, and in particular mutual understanding over roles and the difficulties of the task at hand, was important. This was achieved in part through the pre-meetings, the Chair's opening remarks, and the project team's continual reflection on the unfolding process and actions to steer this. Importantly, though, success was ultimately dependant on the behaviour of all, throughout. All participants adopted an open approach fairly quickly, despite the risks involved (see above). There is a clear appetite for informal, private and exploratory conversations in contrast to more familiar formal, public and declarative meetings. Assurances of confidentiality clearly helped, though participants were (surprisingly) willing to be digitally recorded for the purposes of the project.

The numbers of people involved mattered - both absolute numbers and also how they related to the space (see below). In general the smaller meetings worked better, unsurprisingly given the emphasis on unconstrained conversation. The balance in numbers between academics and civil servants did not seem to be very important.

### **The nature of the meeting space**

All the meetings took place within DCLG's offices in Westminster. This seemed inevitable, in order to get significant civil service attendance – reflecting the asymmetry between academics' and civil servants' interest noted above, as well as academics' relative freedom to determine their own work priorities and practices. The settings were a rather varied set of rooms, limited by what was available at the time.

Room size and layout matters, and was hard to get right, given the unpredictability in terms of attendance. Small rooms, with few or no empty chairs, encouraged communication; large rooms and the possibility of self-segregation by academics and civil servants around a large central table were less successful. (This was only marginal: it slowed down the establishment of rapport, rather than precluded it. However, in short meetings any loss of time is significant.)

Virtual attendance – through speaker phone (or Skype etc.) – proved to be a bad idea, as it broke up conversation flows and (more importantly) the development of rapport.

### **What happened in the meetings**

The goal of the meetings was to have genuine conversations in which positions could be explained, knowledge needs and resources could be established, and relationships built.

Consequently, some care went into the selection of participants: there was tacit screening to ensure as far as possible that those involved would 'behave' and be willing to have a conversation rather than take an opportunity to 'make a pitch' for their own projects, 'grandstand' or launch political attacks. (These unhelpful behaviours had been observed previously by team members, and accounted for some civil servants' apprehensions about the process.)

A key principle adopted was that the civil servants would speak first and explain their role and interest in the policy topic of the meeting. There is a tendency at research/policy meetings for academics to present their knowledge and then respond to questions. Our

experience (indicated above) with the problems matching knowledge to needs suggested that having civil servants explain their current policy issues and areas in which research might help would be more productive in eliciting *useful* knowledge and ideas from the academics. This was very strongly borne out in practice.

### **Overall**

The key to the meetings' success was the rapid establishment of good relationships and trust within the room. The meetings were characterised (to varying degrees) by a sense of informality and rapport (often evidenced in part by humour), and of a shared endeavour to improve policy. Given the risks and practical difficulties described above, we emphasise that this apparent ease was achieved through a great deal of preparatory work: by conveying a sense of positive relationships already existing between the research team and civil servant colleagues; by making it as clear as possible to participants what to expect and what was expected of them; and also preparing them for the impossibility of predetermining either participants or outcomes.

### **At and after the end of the meetings**

The longer term impacts we know of to date are discussed above. Here we note that:

- ❖ Ending meetings with a 'next steps' discussion appeared vital for any possibility of practical outcomes – without this it would have been easy for people to have viewed meetings as exchanges of ideas valuable in themselves, but with no subsequent engagement.
- ❖ Prompting by the *TfP* team after the meeting, through emails and phone conversations, seemed useful in making further engagement take place.
- ❖ Perhaps inevitably, even the most enthusiastic conversations sometimes led to the appearance of no further action, perhaps due to all the pressures which made the meetings hard to arrange.

## **Ways forward**

The project revealed a complex mix of factors which create very real obstacles to efficient and effective translation of academic research into knowledge usable by civil service policy makers. These include *resources* of time and sometimes money; lack of *knowledge* about relevant people, research and policy issues; difficulties of finding a '*fit*' between the focus and approach of research and of policy making; and the ever-present *pressures* created by other, often higher-priority work objectives.

Some of these are structural and have been identified and discussed in more depth elsewhere, particularly in the context of co-production and impact<sup>\*</sup>. These are inherent in the academic and civil service contexts, hard to change and unlikely to go away. Others are deep-seated yet the project has shown that they can be addressed. The common threads are lack of knowledge and of relationships, and the 'costs' and risks inherent in trying to build both of these. We suggest that these costs and risks can be substantially lowered, at little additional cost relative to the value of the investment in the research, through:

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\* See, for example, Pain et al. (2015) and outputs from *TaB* (in Box below.)

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- 1) Intermediaries who take on a 'matchmaking', brokering role
- 2) Providing a range of opportunities for academics and civil servants to learn about each other's worlds.

Neither of these is original, of course: what the project did is explore the issues in a way which has tested the intermediary role, and identified a range of different aspects of knowledge/ignorance which could be tackled. The common element here, which spans this project and others, is the significance of developing and sustaining networks and links between academic and other communities, including policy analysts and policy makers.

### **1) Intermediaries**

Intermediaries have three key roles: to organise connections (which takes a great deal of time and effort); to identify, filter and translate research outputs into policy-relevant language and format; and – most importantly - to build trust and broker relationships in a way which reduces risks and the need for caution, and so enables more imaginative engagement.

They consequently need to know enough about both academic and civil service domains to be able to initiate connections and identify possible policy relevance in academic research, but personal qualities are equally important. The role is akin to community development (though at times the most appropriate metaphor seemed to be 'matchmaking'!) and requires skills in networking, listening, identifying common ground, facilitating interactions and engendering confidence to try something new and act differently.

Some experience already exists in this field such as the Department for International Development's internal evidence brokers, and a range of initiatives supported by the Research Councils, such as (at local government level) the ESRC Local Government Knowledge Navigators. The most 'neutral' institutional home for intermediaries might be within the Research Councils, provided they also spent time in government departments. Since trust is vitally important, as well as the ability to look across the breadth of research expertise available in any field, individual universities would probably not be appropriate bases. Central government departments might be a possible base, but a civil servant might find it harder to gain trust of academics who are not already very policy-oriented. However, it would be worth exploring if the government social researchers could perform this role – given their intimate knowledge of the policy environment - perhaps in partnership with externally-based 'brokers'.

### **2) Creating opportunities to learn**

These fall on a spectrum from information provision through to much more interactive methods, and include:

- ❖ Better information from central government about current policy interests and how responsibility is divided across teams – including contact details (at least for teams, ideally for named individuals)
- ❖ Collated information at university and RCUK Programme level on policy relevant research projects, again with contact details
- ❖ Opportunities to learn about 'the other world' through placements, internships and work shadowing
- ❖ Opportunities for dialogue about research and policy through seminars, workshops etc.

- ❖ Co-production of research projects, with civil servants actively involved in shaping research questions and the research process itself (i.e. a move away from a commissioning model).

## **What should we do differently?**

Change is possible, but also difficult to achieve: individuals, no matter how enthusiastic to make new research/policy connections, are seriously constrained by the current realities of academic and civil service institutional structures and priorities, austerity, and the fragmentation and increasing marketisation of both academia and governance. Here we make some suggestions for actions which could be taken, now, by different groups. In many ways these echo and reaffirm the findings reported by Facer and Enright, Campbell and Vanderhoven, and Pain *et al.*

### **The Research Councils**

The Research Councils should recognise that having policy impact is enabled and enhanced by small, face-to-face interaction and meetings; that these are often difficult and time-consuming to develop and arrange; and would be greatly facilitated by a cadre of intermediaries working beyond individual project level.

This would require flexibility in project funding, particularly in funding engagement and intermediaries, and in allowing engagement and ‘impact’ activities to spill over the end date of a project. To some extent such flexibility already exists *if it is asked for*: what is less clear is that academics know and appreciate that they can request additional (no-cost) time for engagement activities. This could usefully be made more explicit and routine.

Assessment of proposals should be mindful that realistic, effective ‘pathways to impact’ should incorporate the kinds of activities *TfP* piloted, and also that these may be relatively difficult to predict at the outset of a project. Criteria for judgement should therefore be as much around applicants showing capability and intelligence about the process of developing links, and demonstrating capacity to do so, as about details of events to be organised. It also needs to be recognised that ‘policy impact’ may take place through engagement with organisations in other than the obvious ‘policy makers’ in central government, for example in the third sector, local public services or local government.

At a broader level, the significance of network building and development of trusting relationships suggests that the Councils’ focus could usefully move away from funding discrete projects and insisting on predefined ‘pathways to impact’ towards supporting partnerships through which research and impact would emerge.

### **Academics**

Academics should appreciate the genuine desire for more knowledge and better-informed policy making in the civil service, and acknowledge that the ways that knowledge is needed and used are different from academia, yet valid. Robust research and precisely written reports may not be enough; if/when this is the case, they should arrange for coffee and invite civil servants to an informal meeting.

Although we did not come up with a perfect reporting format, we echo the finding of much other research that academics should learn how to frame the ‘implications’ of their work: providing short, accessible reports which succinctly state what was learned, what

methodology was used, what should be done differently as a result of the findings and who needs to change their practices. (This may not always be possible!) Such summaries should be easy to access and widely publicised.

### **Civil servants**

Civil servants should learn – and perhaps need training in – how to frame questions in ways which academics will easily recognise and can act on.

They should also be prepared to, and be supported to, take more time to engage with researchers. When community-based research is of policy interest this engagement would ideally take place in the research setting. This sort of practice would help build the necessary understanding of how similar words are used in very different ways and what this implies on the ground.

### **Both academics and civil servants**

Academics and civil servants should take every opportunity to engage with each other – at seminars, workshops etc. – to make contacts and get a better knowledge and ‘feel’ for the different worlds.

Such engagement also requires – and should also reinforce in a cyclical process – both groups learning better how to talk to each other. This is partly about learning rather different languages, but also about developing wider understanding and ‘communicative competence’ alongside a value- and empathy-based sense of a shared endeavour of improving policy.

### **Universities and Civil Service as organisations**

Both academics and civil servants need to be supported with time, funding and skill development to do effective research/policy engagement. Investment in this boundary work is both an effective use of funds and vital if existing relationships are to change significantly.

Both should also make information more easily accessible which would enable appropriate contacts to be made easily: for the universities this means collating and simplifying information about academics and research findings; the civil service needs to make organisational structures and policy interests more visible and accessible.

### **What more do we need to know?**

Both *TfP* and *TaB* were constrained in scope and scale: we worked mainly with Connected Communities research and with teams within DCLG. The following speculations would all be worth further investigation.

It is possible that:

- communication between researchers and civil servants in other disciplines may have different dynamics and in some cases be easier. The issue of turning knowledge into policy must always arise, though, and may simply occur at different points in the process – maybe within the civil service rather than at the interface with the academy.
- attitudes and practices of engagement differ between government departments, influenced by policy field, orientation toward commissioning external research and evaluation, longstanding policy networks, and simply by institutional culture.

- attitudes and practices of engagement differ between academics – anecdotally it would seem that many natural scientists and engineers, for example, find policy engagement relatively easy. This may be a misapprehension: further investigation might show that, as with arts and humanities and social science, a few are well-connected and find communication easy, but many are not.

An expansion of the qualitative and action research approach to research use to other disciplines, policy fields, government departments and national administrations would therefore be timely and fruitful.

### **The *Translation across Borders* project**

A summary description of *TaB* can be found at: <https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project/translation-across-borders-exploring-the-use-relevance-and-impact-of-academic-research-in-the-policy-process/>.

The principal written outputs from these projects were:

- ❖ Connelly, S., G. Dabinett, S. Muirhead, K. Pahl and D. Vanderhoven (2013) *Making Meaning Differently: Community governance in the context of decentralisation*, Sheffield: University of Sheffield
- ❖ Durose, C., C. Mangan, C. Needham, J. Rees and M. Hilton (2013) *Transforming Local Public Services through Co-production*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham
- ❖ Richardson, L. and C. Durose (2013) *Who is accountable in localism? Findings from theory and practice*, Manchester/Birmingham: Universities of Manchester and Birmingham.

*TaB* generated academic outputs alongside the tools.

- ❖ Connelly, S., D. Vanderhoven, C. Durose, L. Richardson, P. Matthews and R. Rutherford (2015) 'Translation across borders: Exploring the use, relevance and impact of academic research in the policy process' in D. O'Brien and P. Matthews (eds.) *After Urban Regeneration: Communities, policy and place*, Bristol, UK: Policy Press, pp. 181-198;
- ❖ Connelly, S., D. Vanderhoven, C. Durose, L. Richardson, P. Matthews and R. Rutherford (forthcoming 2017) 'The Legacies of Connecting with the Policy Community' in K. Facer and K. Pahl (eds.) *Researching in Public: Contested Origins, Live Debates & Emerging Legacies for Collaborative Research*, Bristol, UK: Policy Press
- ❖ Vanderhoven, D (2016) 'Encountering the Subjective in Participation' in Y. Beebeejaun (ed.) *The Participatory City*, Berlin: JOVIS.

Peer-reviewed journal articles are in press.

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5. And see Pain, R. (2006) 'Social geography: seven deadly myths in policy research' in **Progress in Human Geography** 30(2): 250-259.
6. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for 2014/2015, from [www.hesa.ac.uk/stats-staff](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats-staff).
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