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# **11. Designing and Delivering Targeted Policy Engagement Events**

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## **11.1. Introduction**

Targeted policy engagement events are opportunities for researchers and policy actors to come together in both in-person and virtual spaces to influence the design, implementation, and evaluation of policy. Engagement events are held at all stages of research and policy development and implementation to explore these common interests in practice. Common event types include day long conferences, short seminars or discussions, or discussion/seminar 'series' which build on one another with a group of the same participants in each discussion. Events can include many types of actors involved in influencing policy: public officials, civil servants at various levels of government, public servants in a delivery function (e.g. policy officers, healthcare practitioners), voluntary sector staff and advocates, those in the private sector, and researchers within independent research organisations and academia. Events can be designed and led by an academic and/or an academic knowledge broker or can be designed by a policy actor who invites researchers and stakeholders into policymaking spaces.

The study of policy engagement events engages with research focussing on the interaction between evidence and policy. Recent work from Oliver et al (2020) builds upon Best and Holmes (2010) to understand and categorise engagement events within three different perspectives. *Linear* approaches focus primarily on evidence dissemination and are illustrated by events like seminars that announce new research findings. *Relational* approaches focus on 'how knowledge is shared among diverse stakeholders...and how to create partnerships underpinned by common interest' (Oliver et al 2020), and often take the form of discussion-focussed events with stakeholders. Finally, *systems* approaches focus on 'infrastructure and systems that need to be in place to support research use in government' (Oliver et al 2020). Choosing between these approaches is dependent upon the type of engagement you wish to foster. Initial work from Oliver et al (2020) found that most events sit within the first two categories.

Individual researchers benefit from participating in policy engagement events by sharing their research directly with influential policy actors, fostering relationships and making connections with actors inside policymaking spaces for future collaborations. Additionally, these engagements allow researchers to learn more about the type and form of evidence that policy actors are interested in and the research questions being asked inside policy spaces they can contribute to. Policy partners/collaborators benefit by being able to quickly

tap into new and emerging evidence on their areas of interest, hear from a diverse range of stakeholders to inform policy development or implementation decisions, and make connections with knowledge producers and experts to help answer questions and fill research gaps.

This chapter will detail some of the common features of targeted policy engagement events from the perspective of an academic knowledge broker in a university and will detail two engagement events – one in person and one virtual – to draw out useful tips for implementing them.

## **11.2. Designing an Engagement Event**

Targeted policy engagement events often occur when a policy issue requires new evidence and insights to be considered and/or a variety of research and policy stakeholders should be brought together in discussion to influence policy design, implementation, or evaluation. There are many situations wherein a policy engagement event would be a useful way to bring experts from academia and policy spaces together, and the reasons for designing one may come from either partner. The impetus for engagement can often inform whether an engagement should be ‘linear’ in its approach, or whether the event tends towards a more ‘relational’ or dialogue-focussed event.

### **11.2.1. Identifying opportunities for engagement**

One of the key horizon-scanning activities for a knowledge broker is identifying the opportunities that are ripe for engagement. These can include:

- Periods of national crisis in a policy area, which requires the marshalling of new evidence and ideas to solve problems (e.g. social recovery from Covid-19)
- Changes of government/elections which may necessitate different approaches to address policy problems
- A new policy agenda or strategy from the current government (e.g. Programme for Government, Autumn/Spring Budgets)
- Large changes in certain policy areas (e.g. devolution of social security, changes to international development budgets)
- Requests from government departments for new research based on documents like the UK’s ‘Areas of Research Interest’
- New studies or pieces of evidence that have changed the policy debate on an issue

Once an opportunity is identified by an academic, knowledge broker or policy partner, an important task is understanding what research evidence and expertise is needed to improve understanding of the policy problem. For knowledge brokers in academic institutions this means first connecting with the network of academic experts both inside and outside your institution to understand how their knowledge and evidence can be utilised. Academic

experts can serve active roles as presenters, panellists, discussants or facilitators on the day or simply attend.

One of the important ways that academic experts aid in the design and delivery of policy engagement events is by serving as the gatekeeper to the field. They help a knowledge broker identify the aims and outcomes for the event, what issues require discussion, and importantly, have a keen sense of who needs to be around the table to meet the event's objectives. For most targeted engagement events, identifying an academic lead (or team of academics) to work with you is a vital part of the design process. An academic lead is important to establish early on because knowledge brokers will likely not be able to identify every actor working in a policy area. These academic leads help brokers make a 'way in' to a policy and knowledge network and will work closely with them to ensure the event is timely, appropriate and useful for all those in attendance.

### **Top Tip**

**Approach and meet with an academic lead early on in the event planning to help determine the core aims of the event and identify others in their knowledge network inside and outside academia to be involved.**

#### **11.2.2. Getting buy-in**

Targeted policy engagement events work well when they are designed to meet the needs of both parties at a point in time and can include discussions of issues that are 'hot' as well as issues that are perennial, 'wicked' problems. They enable new knowledge and connections to be brought to policy actors quickly and personally. The motivations for policy actors to be involved in a policy engagement event often centre around the desire for more and new evidence and different approaches to be brought to an existing debate. Academics are important actors to provide this type of knowledge as they not only produce cutting edge research but are important advisors, partners and critical friends for policymakers (Haynes et al 2011 and see chapter 10 in this book). Having an academic lead may also improve buy-in from policy partners to participate in this event. An academic who has done policy-relevant work in the past may well be known to the policy partner you wish to engage with, and the strength of these existing relationships will help to buttress the reputation of the event.

Academic participants often find value in policy engagement events which enable their work or expertise to inform policy action but also find value in opportunities for policy actors to inform their research activities. Academics should try and participate in or design engagement events not just at the end of a research process as a 'dissemination' event but at various stages of research to help form new questions for inquiry, identify potential partners for co-produced research, identify policy implications for their research, and create a network of stakeholders. Participating in targeted policy engagement events is a useful way to make connections for future work, which can be done most notably in dialogue-focussed 'relational' types of engagement.

### 11.3. Implementing targeted policy engagement events

This section will detail the key considerations in organising and delivering targeted policy engagement events using two case examples, one delivered in person and one online.

#### 11.3.1. In person: DWP Areas of Research Interest Workshop Day – October 2019

In October 2019, knowledge brokers from the University of Glasgow and University of Edinburgh worked in collaboration with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Evidence and Insight Unit to deliver a one-day workshop event focussed on the DWP's Areas of Research Interest (ARI)<sup>1</sup>. There were roughly 60 participants that included academics from universities across Scotland and civil servants from the DWP and the Scottish Government. The aim of this event was to bring together new evidence and build relationships in Scotland to address the ARIs.

**Establishing partnerships for event delivery:** The two teams of knowledge brokers from Glasgow and Edinburgh agreed that the universities would formally partner to hold this event early in the planning process. One of the reasons for this formal partnership was the status of the policy partner (a UK government unit with little prior engagement in Scotland), which necessitated that more resources were brought to bear to ensure the event was delivered to a high standard. In a project of this scale it was valuable that the formal knowledge exchange (KE) partners had an open discussion to discuss how to use their resources most effectively; a discussion that is also useful to have with any formal policy partner (like the DWP). One of the universities had more KE staff and would have greater access to facilities to hold the event and organise arrangements on the day, while the other university team had more extensive knowledge and connections to the Scottish academics for participation and subject matter expertise. These resource specialties would inform who would lead on operations and who would lead on participant recruitment and agenda content.

**Lead time:** Day-long policy engagement events that seek to bring together many civil servants and academics must be planned very far in advance. For this event the first discussions between university partners began eight months before the event was held. In that discussion it was agreed to send a proposal to the DWP contact requesting a follow up meeting to discuss the event scope and a timeline for all subsequent planning stages.

#### Top tip

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<sup>1</sup> 'Areas of Research Interest give details about the main research questions facing UK government departments' and aim to improve how government departments: 'align scientific and research evidence from academia with policy development and decision-making, engage with researchers..[and] access stronger policy evidence bases' (Government Office of Science 2017).

**If you want to have a high level of participation from civil servants – particularly for an in-person workshop or conference where travel would be required – more than 6 months of planning is recommended.**

**Building the community:** All events require an important discussion about the network of participants and presenters to be involved, and a formal project partnership enables the creation of a larger network of academics and policy experts. In most research fields knowledge brokers will likely be able to quickly identify the ‘key players’ that are likely candidates to present their work, but a wider network can help to broaden out invitations for participants. It is important to be clear on who is the most appropriate policy community to engage with, which is dependent on the policy issue being discussed. Is the policy focussed at a national, regional, or local level? Do you want academia, public, private, and/or voluntary sectors involved? In this case, UK and Scottish civil servants were the most appropriate given the high-level discussions of DWP policy.

**Event Design:** If you are organising the event with a policy partner from the outset (as here), the initial conversation will discuss the best way to organise the day and you will need to keep in regular contact as the agenda develops and speakers confirm. For a day-long workshop in person the day will likely include presentations from the key policy partner, other government units if applicable and academics, along with times for smaller group discussions (here, one in the morning and one in the afternoon). You will therefore need to collaborate with project partners to recruit appropriate presenters and discussion facilitators.

If working with civil servants from different nations, councils or government units be aware of the sensitivities they will bring to the event when organising the day. If you give space for one unit to present their work at the beginning of the event (such as the DWP), it is likely that the other government will want to speak as well.

### **Top Tip**

**If there is a document that is guiding the day’s events (such as the DWP Areas of Research Interest), try to have presentations that speak to most, if not all, of the subsections included in the document. These specific subtopics can also be used to organise the small group discussion periods.**

**Event inclusion:** In-person events need to take into account accessibility issues for those with physical disabilities and for those with other inclusion needs (e.g. for those hard of hearing). In your initial communication to participants be sure to include information on disabled access to all facilities and request for participants to get in touch with you if they have additional inclusion needs at the earliest possible convenience.

### **11.3.2. Online: More Different Futures Network, May – July 2020**

Online events can also be single policy engagement events but are more readily adaptable to a series of events and conversations. The *More Different Futures Network* was one such project, a series of online seminars and discussions with housing policy and delivery experts in three countries; the UK, Canada and Australia. By the end of the 10 discussions over 150 participants were included in this international network. The aim of the discussion series was to bring together evidence, policy and practice insights and innovations early in the Covid-19 crisis to influence policy decisions in the short, medium, and long term.

**Establishing partnerships for delivery:** This event was organised and implemented within one KE unit and did not include a formal partnership with another KE broker or with a policy partner. However, it was appropriate to create informal partnerships with other academic colleagues to help design the engagement, especially as the project involved international partners. In this case the academic lead in the UK approached colleagues in Canada and Australia to serve as informal academic leads for their countries to ensure the content was context-specific and the appropriate international experts were included. Events that aim to reach a wide range of actors (especially international participants) should consider informal partnerships for each country or 'sector' partner (e.g. civil servants, third sector, etc) to help deliver the engagement.

**Lead time:** Organising online events of this type – short seminars or series of discussions – tend to require less lead time than in person events of the same type, as there are no travel arrangements to make and no facilities to book. A good rule of thumb is to allow at least two months of lead time from project inception to delivery. For an event series the announcement of the full series of dates and times should be released at least one month before the first discussion and any materials for participants to read or view in advance of the sessions should be available a week before the session.

**Building the community:** Ensuring the right people are in the room is critical even if that room is in a virtual space. In a discussion series there will likely be different networks of participants you would like to invite for certain sessions alongside a core group invited to all sessions. In this case, as the discussion series progressed the team added new participants who were experts in homelessness, housebuilding and more as the discussion series focussed on their area of expertise.

#### **Top tip**

**Online events will likely also need different staff in the project delivery team, including an online platform administrator and backup hosts and event chairs in case event leads have technical issues.**

**Event Design:** Much of the core agenda elements are similar for online events, with time for presentations and discussions with large and small groups. Planning online policy

engagement events must additionally consider the delivery format, and consider issues such as screen fatigue, encouraging active participation, and organising successful small group discussions.

While presentations using slides are a standard feature of online events, for events that are relational in nature (discussion focused) you can consider removing presentations from the agenda. Presenters can instead record videos for participants to view before the session or create a briefing paper so that the session is focussed on discussion from the start. This was done with every session in the More Different Futures Network. The sessions began with a panel of respondents who discussed key reflections from the videos, chaired by the event's academic lead, which enabled the conversation to begin in earnest. This allowed other participants to get comfortable entering their own comments in the platform's chat function or raising their virtual hands. A skilled chair should listen to the panellists while also keeping a note of issues and questions that come up on the chat platform for larger discussion.

Small group discussions are vital in online events as elsewhere. For discussion-focused policy engagement events it is often useful to assign participants to rooms to ensure that stakeholders with similar areas of expertise from different sectors are in a group together to collaborate. Online breakout groups also require a skilled facilitator with discussion questions set in advance to ensure the group discussion does not lag.

#### **Top tip**

**To avoid screen fatigue try to limit a single online event to less than two and a half hours; you can also build in 5 minute 'breaks' if necessary.**

**Event inclusion:** Please include in every invitation for participants to get in touch with you if they have additional inclusion needs at the earliest possible convenience. For larger seminars consider hiring a sign language interpreter, who will be permanently on a split screen alongside presenters. If attendees require captioning it is the responsibility of the organiser to ensure events are captioned. Many online platforms have a live captioning feature, third party captioning services can be integrated, or you can hire a transcriber to caption the event manually to display on screen.

#### **Top tip**

**There are some online platforms that government departments do not allow on their networks. If most key policy participants can only use one type of online platform, consider hosting your event using that platform rather than using workarounds for individual participants.**

### **11.4. Outcomes and Looking Ahead**

Targeted policy engagement events are one way for policy actors and researchers to engage outside of their offices to receive, consider and discuss new evidence to make decisions and



build relationships around areas of common interest. Three functions of events – engaging with evidence, collaborating in discussion, and building relationships – are all mechanisms by which policy, practice and evaluation can be influenced and new research can emerge.

It is challenging if not impossible to specifically trace a ‘policy impact’ back to one single policy event or a discussion series. This is because policy is often made, revised, and implemented incrementally based on small decisions using evidence, expertise, emotions and beliefs (Cairney et al 2016). Policy engagement events that focus on supporting these three functions among diverse stakeholders can catalyse dialogue and relationships for many years, often with outcomes that the event organiser will never be aware of. However, knowledge brokers or academic leads should try and keep in touch with participants if possible, noting down any new collaborations or outputs that come from it.

Common challenges to delivering high quality and impactful targeted policy engagement events can arise related to academic participation and policy actor participation. For some engagement events academics may simply not see the value in engaging. This may be due to the event not being entirely related to their current academic work, they are overstretched with other commitments (including teaching) or they do not feel like their involvement will make a difference. To address these concerns it may be useful to have a very clear sense of what policy actors will be in the room, the discussion aims, and how their expertise will bring a new viewpoint to the current debate before approaching them. (If you clearly make your case and they do not engage, no need to take it personally!)

Some policy engagement events can also suffer from not being inclusive of all the voices in the policy debate. To help address this knowledge brokers should be aware of and consider constraints on all participants’ time. For example, policymakers in government will likely be very busy in the run-up to budget announcements or large annual reports but may be more available in the period before an election where Parliament is suspended. Voluntary sector participants who have an operational role may find it difficult to attend day-long events due to demands on their time and also may not have the resources to travel long distances to events. Academic participants are more likely to be available in periods without teaching commitments. You can consider shorter but more frequent engagements (such as discussion series) for groups with schedule demands to accommodate these needs.

In the two cases detailed above, there were some common features that made success possible. First, knowledge brokers formed partnerships (either formal or informal) early in the planning process with academics or policy partners that knew the policy field in detail. These content experts were vital in determining the most appropriate combination of event elements (e.g. presentations vs discussions), the network of stakeholders, and the overall aim of the engagement. Second, the events were tightly organised around a framework document or topic so that new ideas or ‘solutions’ could emerge from discussion. Try to design policy engagement events that go beyond ‘linear’ dissemination with discussion that considers gaps in knowledge or new ideas to solve current (and future) problems. Finally, each of these events had a strong ‘backstage’ team to make this happen. It is useful (if

possible) to have a knowledge broker as the event designer who is the academic liaison and network manager, a communications lead who will be responsible for creating or editing any content for the web, and a staff member to run operations on the day (whether in person or virtual) to ensure all technology, facilities and participants are included in the event.

It is likely that policy engagement units inside higher education will be considering ways to make their engagement more 'hybrid' in the future. This will include hosting some engagements in person, some fully online, or considering ways to have in-person events meaningfully include participants who are unable to be in the room. Knowledge exchange professionals as well as research and teaching staff are also improving the creative tools that can bring people together to work collaboratively in online spaces, and useful learning between these staff members at universities can improve both practices. Openness, innovation and dialogue will be vital as the university/policy engagement field develops further, and targeted events will likely continue to be an important way for policy actors to collaborate with new and established knowledge producers and brokers to improve their work.

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