# Academic-Policy Engagement at the Local Level

The Leeds approach to developing Areas of Research Interest

# Executive summary

This case study gathers insights from the work of Leeds City Council (LCC) and the University of Leeds (UoL) in piloting and refining the use of Areas of Research Interest (ARI) for stimulating academic-policy engagement.

Our ultimate goal for our collaboration was for research to inform more effective policy making at Leeds City Council, improving outcomes for Leeds communities. This goal was underpinned by three long term outcomes we wanted to bring about: (i) positive local impact from high quality and timely research (ii) a culture of collaboration between our institutions and (iii) a maximisation of limited resources which aligned strategic priorities with research expertise. Over the last three years, the University of Leeds has directed just over one third of its Research England Policy Support Fund (PSF) allocation, plus other internal funding (ESRC and UKRI Impact Accelerator Awards, Horizons Institute funding), to projects which support research-policy engagement at Leeds City Council. Of these, many have addressed questions raised in the Areas of Research Interest.

This case study is intended as a reflection on the approach Leeds has taken in strengthening the research-policy collaborations in the city. As one of the first cities to trial Areas of Research Interest at a local authority level, we offer some prompts to consider for other academic institutions and policy organisations who are using or might be interested in using ARIs as a tool.

Below, we provide a summary of key features of the Leeds City Council ARI; an overview of our journey to date; six key takeaways from what we've learned in putting this approach in place; a summary of the benefits that have been derived and how we are evaluating our progress; a reflection on the factors that have enabled our approach; and finally, some questions for the future and some links to other resources which you might find helpful.

**Dr Abi Rowson**
Horizons Institute, University of Leeds
On secondment to Leeds City Council Policy & Intelligence Team
a.rowson@leeds.ac.uk

## The Leeds City Council ARI are designed to:

- Match existing research evidence with knowledge needs in the Council for policy development and decision-making.
- Provide a starting point for conversations about priority policy areas to develop new research and collaborations, or translate current knowledge into improvements in practice.
- Increase the number and diversity of researchers engaging with the Council.

# Introduction

As city anchor institutions, Leeds City Council and the University of Leeds are committed to working in partnership to drive the city's sustainability, prosperity, social inclusivity, health and well-being.

A jointly-authored **Research Collaboration Framework** sets out how the two organisations work together to mobilise the research expertise of the University to address the evidence challenges faced by Leeds City Council.

The two institutions have been building collaborative partnerships for decades, and through different routes, but since a **Collaborative Review** in 2020 there has been a sustained effort to provide strategic research collaboration. A significant output of this collaboration has been the introduction of the Leeds City Council Areas of Research Interest.

Areas of Research Interest, or ARI, are a mechanism for connecting researchers and policy partners. They were proposed by the **Nurse Review in 2015**. Government departments, supported by the Government Office for Science (GO-Science), have regularly published ARI over subsequent years. These national ARI are now collated in an

ARI database that includes ARI from other governmental organisations too. ARI have more recently begun to be developed at local and regional levels. Leeds City Council was one of the first local authorities to trial this approach, starting in 2022. More detail about the evolution of the Leeds City Council ARI can be found in Section B.

The Leeds City Council ARI have evolved to reflect the knowledge needs of the local authority and provide a way of communicating its priorities. In April 2024, we published the most recent iteration of the Leeds ARI. You can read them on Leeds City Council's **Leeds Observatory** website.

Below, we summarise our experience of working on Areas of Research Interest in Leeds and highlight some of the lessons that we have learned over the years. We have received a large amount of interest from colleagues wanting to use this model elsewhere in the country and at different policy levels. We are also working with our friends and colleagues in **Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network** (Y-PERN) about how to transfer and scale up in the Yorkshire and Humber region, and specifically, how a mayoral combined authority could build on the lessons that we have learned. In addition, the **Universities Policy Engagement Network** (UPEN) offers a forum for considering how ARI can work in a devolved UK picture, and how ARI at different levels of government can intersect and support each other.

The level of interest in our work came as a (welcome) surprise and explains why we decided to write up our experience in this case study. Please do get in touch if you want to find out more. Juliet Jopson (Public Policy Engagement Manager, University of Leeds, **s.j.jopson@leeds.ac.uk**) and Dr Abi Rowson are currently members of the UPEN ARI sub-committee and we see this as a crucial forum for sharing practice. Mike Eakins (Head of Policy, Leeds City Council, **michael.eakins@leeds.gov.uk**) leads on the Council's work in this area.

## Overview of this case study

# A. Key features of the Leeds City Council ARI

- The Leeds ARI are **themes, topics and questions** which invite a response from researchers. They are not necessarily framed as research questions: it is for the academic researcher to develop research questions informed by their disciplinary expertise and research methodology, in discussion with Council officers.

- The Leeds ARI are framed by the **demand of the policy partner's knowledge needs**. Some of these knowledge needs might be answered by the University of Leeds, but not all of them will be. They will be relevant to researchers at other universities or organisations.

- The Leeds ARI **are aligned with the corporate strategy** of the local authority, the Best City Ambition. Its thematic pillars are: Health & Wellbeing; Inclusive Growth; Zero Carbon; Team Leeds.

- The **ownership of the ARI belongs to the policy partner**, although they are developed in consultation with academics and knowledge mobilisers from the University.

- **Contact names and email addresses** of relevant policy officers are provided so that it is easy to understand who 'owns' the question.

- The Leeds ARI are **updated annually** to reflect changing priorities, **and published** on the Council's **Leeds Observatory** website, to invite responses from a diversity of researchers and partners.

# B. The Leeds journey

The process of developing ARI has taken a number of years.
We have learned and iterated along the way.

## Collaborative Review of Research

**2020**

Recommended a Steering Group chaired by PVC R&I; a Working Group; development of ARI.

## Four themes chosen from LCC priorities

**SPRING 2022**

Culture; Digital; Food; Inclusive Growth. 'Place' identified as future theme.

## Policy Support Fund call

**AUTUMN 2022**

Ring-fenced funds for LCC ARI. 13 projects funded. Events and evaluation through 22-23.

## Research Collaboration Framework

**2023**

Working Group began drafting the joint document.

## Secondment of UoL 'Knowledge Mobiliser' to LCC

**2023-2024**

To refine and embed ARI. Qual interviews with senior staff across LCC. ARI overhauled.

## Policy Support Fund call

**SUMMER 2024**

Local and regional funds ring-fenced. 5 projects funded. Events and evaluation through 24-25.

**1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12**

## Workshops to co-design priorities

**2021**

Too many ideas identified. Back to drawing board.

## Series of ARI Focus Groups

**SUMMER 2022**

Facilitated discussions on each of the four themes, with academics and Council officers. ARI written up as outputs.

## 'Place' Innovation Forum

**SPRING 2023**

Council officers, researchers, third sector: co-created Place ARI. Further project funding released.

## Policy Support Fund call

**SUMMER 2023**

Ring-fenced funds for LCC ARI. Co-production required. 5 projects funded. Events and evaluation through 23-24.

## Newly refreshed ARI published

**SPRING 2024**

ARI newly aligned with LCC's 'Best City Ambition'. Launch attracted 230 researchers.

## Research Collaboration Framework published

**WINTER 2024**

The framework underlines the shared commitment for LCC and UoL to work together, using the ARI as a key mechanism for enabling research-policy engagement in the future.

You can read more about the start of this journey in the Policy Leeds blog:
**Partnering with Leeds City Council to identify local knowledge needs**.
See **medium.com/policy-leeds.**

# C. Six takeaways from our early work at Leeds

We tested and learned by doing – and made some mistakes along the way.

**1**

At Leeds, our earliest iterations of ARI looked like very long shopping lists, but it turned out that some areas were not actionable.

Funding cuts have affected all local authorities and Leeds City Council was no different. We found that it was no good identifying gaps in knowledge or evidence if there was no way to make progress – no 'landing place' for that work. There must be resource, capacity and capability available at the policy end.

**Consider where policy partners can make progress with evidence and research.**

**2**

Initially Leeds ARI were developed around themes through focus groups with a mix of academics and policy officers.

Convened at pace, these focus groups were somewhat arbitrary and random, at times overrepresenting the University and underplaying the Council's priorities. As a result, the ARI did not speak to the Council's core needs and ambitions. This had a real impact on getting traction and communicating the importance of the work to colleagues at the Council.

**In setting the parameters of ARI, be responsive to both supply and demand, but prioritise demand of the policy partner.**

**3**

Working between institutional timescales was a constant challenge: some early ARI included evidence requests which were short-term and difficult for academic researchers to deliver given the research cycle, academic workloads and funding deadlines.

We also heard from senior Council officers that university research can move too slowly to meet the Council's needs, with one describing the pace as 'glacial'. In response, later ARI were designed to stimulate engagement with perennial, longer-term issues, or spark interest in collaborative research projects which could be co-produced over time.

**Be explicit about the timescales of the Areas of Research Interest. Consult on whether they will work for researchers and policy partners given funding constraints and academic workloads.**

**4**

The earlier review of the institutional collaboration had given a good overview of what happened historically, but once the first set of ARI had been developed, the University used Research England Policy Support Fund to fund Dr Abi Rowson– a knowledge mobiliser, rather than a researcher — to take up a part-time secondment in the LCC Policy & Intelligence team.

The purpose was to further refine and embed the mechanism within the Council and increase buy-in with new directorates. This extra resource was provided by the University, but its aim was to give full ownership of the ARI to the Council.

**Consider how policy partners can take ownership of the ARI, without feeling imposed on by academics. We found that some LCC departments had felt overwhelmed by requests for Letters of Support for grant funding, for example.**

**5**

Some parts of the Council had strong links with universities, others had none at all. Understanding where there was already good engagement and what had been a barrier or been a failure previously, was critical for building the collaboration.

The secondment of a knowledge mobiliser from the University created a greater porosity between the institutions: it was also crucial for championing the work, selling the benefits of engaging with research, and strengthening the culture of collaboration.

**Secondments and policy/ research fellowships can be effective in breaking down institutional culture barriers and easing communication. The ARI are a mechanism and a framework for institutional collaboration, by they are built by personal relationships and human interaction.**
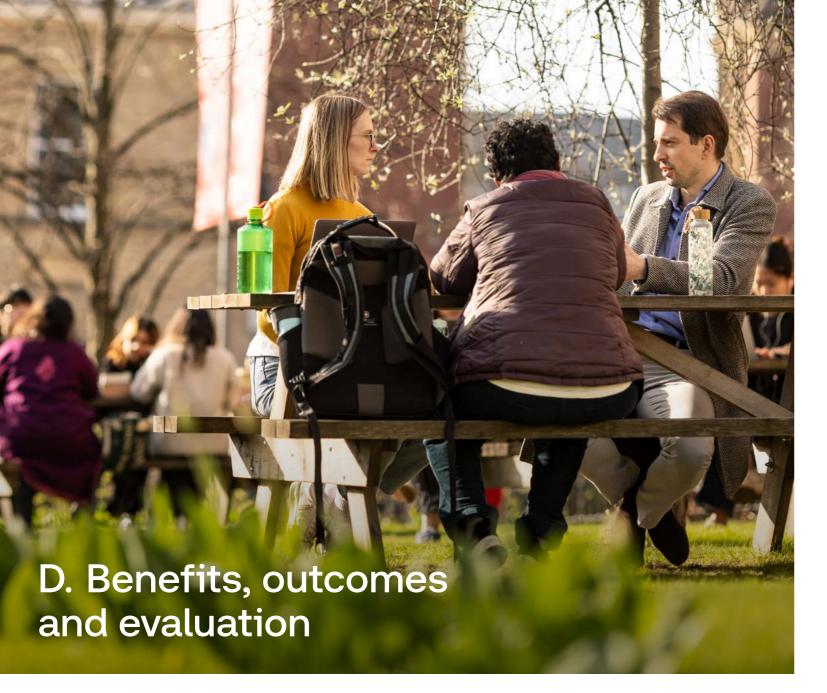
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We conducted focus groups and interviews with senior Council officers about what their directorates could gain by engaging with research, and where their priorities lay.

We used these interviews, together with the corporate documents, to draw up drafts of questions which formed the bases of ARI. These were refined by the teams in the directorates and the Council's Policy & Intelligence team. Following the interviews, a prompt sheet was developed via Microsoft Forms, in order to support policy teams to develop ARI independently in the future. This prompt sheet was based upon guidance published by the **Government Office for Science**.

**Consider ways to build in the sustainability of future iterations of ARI beyond the life of a single project, secondment or fellowship.**

# D. Benefits, outcomes and evaluation

Our ultimate goal for our collaboration was for research to inform more effective policy making at Leeds City Council, improving outcomes for Leeds communities.

This goal was underpinned by an ambition to see three long term outcomes: (1) positive local impact from high quality and timely research (2) a culture of collaboration between our institutions and (3) a maximisation of limited resources by connecting research expertise with strategic priorities.

In 2024 the newly-refreshed ARI were framed as 35 questions designed to engage researchers in dialogue: to use as a starting point for further discussion and collaboration; for shaping research questions; and for building into funding applications. These ARI were framed under the themes of Health & Wellbeing, Inclusive Growth, Zero Carbon and Team Leeds and were published on Leeds City Council's **Leeds Observatory** website.

Our work on evaluating the programme is ongoing and, building on a Theory of Change approach, we have developed a set of indicators against which we can measure the success of our work. In future, we hope to publish an evaluation framework which can be adapted by institutions for their own use.

# Outcomes to date

## 1. Co-produced knowledge is more targeted to local needs

Over the last three years, the University of Leeds has supported collaborations via an internally-managed competitive funding programme which utilized more than one third of its Research England Policy Support Fund allocation. Council colleagues, as well as other external partners, formed the assessment panel, alongside internal peer reviewers. These projects have given rise to a wide range of co-produced, impactful research collaborations benefiting the citizens of Leeds and providing evidence and data to inform policymaking.

Past and present projects can be found on the **Policy Leeds** website. Two events per year bring all projects together along with partners and other stakeholders to communicate aims and outcomes and foster networking. Learnings from these projects are collected and fed back into the funding programme.

## 2. Current research and evidence is more readily available from a variety of institutions

We knew from the start that not all of the ARI could be answered by the University of Leeds; the measures of success for the project were not limited to engagement only with our University, but with others in the city and region. Designing the ARI mechanism to support a wider collaboration meant that evidence is more readily available. The local and regional policy and research eco-system is complex and multi-layered, and evidence and research can be found in many different places. The benefits to the citizens of Leeds of collaboration over competition have been at the heart of this work since its inception.

## 3. Strategic prioritisation of collaborative work

Publishing ARI has enabled a more strategic approach between the Council and the University, directing focus to areas which would benefit from collaborative work and have the biggest impact. Some Council directorates had struggled to cope with the volume of approaches from researchers, who were often requesting Letters of Support for funding applications. Where engagement had been low in the past, this was in part due to a misalignment of shared interests. With the ARI publicly shared via a website and through online information events hosted by the Council, academics understand how their expertise can contribute to the Council's priorities, and time and resource on both sides is balanced.

## 4. ARI are a sustainable and iterative model, embedded in Business as Usual

As well as communicating the Council's knowledge needs and guiding strategic collaborative work around research and evidence, the ARI are used in corporate strategy documents, and as a key part of a developing research strategy. Established as business as usual and assigned ownership within directorates, the ARI are more easily iterated annually.

## 5. Increased diversity of engagement from both academics and local partners

We have increased the number of researchers at the University of Leeds who are interested and engaged with working with local authority colleagues. In 2024, over 200 researchers attended the launch and publication of the new ARI, which included opportunities to ask questions of Chief Officers about their priorities and how the ARI would help deliver these.

An unexpected outcome of this work was that Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations (VCSO) found that the ARI were useful to them too in understanding the knowledge needs of the local authority and seeing where their expertise could add value. Our current work is considering how third sector groups can be better brought into both the development of ARI and how the local authority invites engagement with them. The ARI approach has meant that a wider diversity of expertise is harnessed and co-ordinated and engagement with the Council's knowledge needs is increased. We are working closely with our colleagues in the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP) to ensure that this approach continues.

## 6. More transparency of how to get involved with local research-policy work

Publishing local ARI has increased the visibility of research-policy engagement work for both University and Council colleagues, opening up the institutions to each other, with clear contact points, email addresses and 'front doors'. Transparency around routes to engagement has also gone hand-in-hand with the two institutions producing a **Research Collaboration Framework**, which articulates how the University and Council will work together. You can read a blog about the framework here: **Strategic research partnership between University of Leeds and Leeds City Council set out in new framework**. See **medium.com/policy-leeds.**
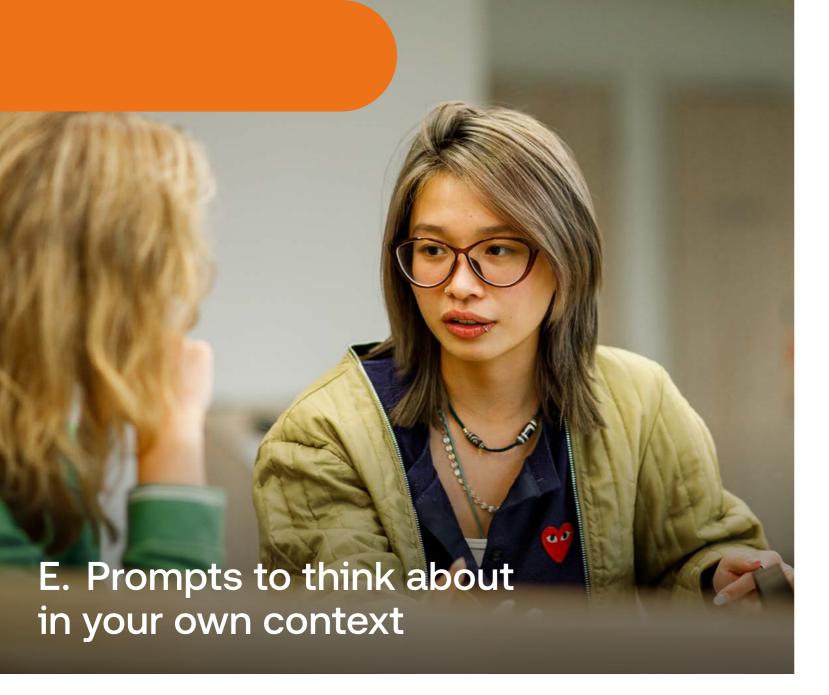
## 7. Transferability and scalability to regional government

Given the context of English devolution, the ARI work within a local authority provides the opportunity to consider how lessons can be learned and transferred to regional governments for engaging with university research. In the case of Leeds, we are already working with our colleagues at Y-PERN, Yorkshire Universities, and the West Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (WYCA) in order to apply learning. We see opportunities to demonstrate how working with HE research might be a better and more cost-effective fit compared with relying on consultancy. At regional level there are shared priorities and overlapping knowledge needs and we are in the process of trialling other mechanisms to bring partners together through, for example, Communities of Practice.

## 8. Funders and research councils are better able to see place-based research needs

Research England Policy Support Fund has been used to pilot collaborative projects which have underpinned the development of strong researcher-policy partnerships. These partnerships are now being used as the foundation for larger and longer-term applications to research councils and other funders. The Policy Support Fund interventions have ensured that these bids have place-based research needs at their heart. Additionally, some local, place-based projects have been scaled up to a national level. Where we have diversified funding streams we have a more sustainable resource to support our work. As members of the Universities Policy Engagement Network we seek to influence funders in supporting this type of place-based activity.

# E. Prompts to think about in your own context

The bi-lateral relationship between the University of Leeds and Leeds City Council is reasonably mature: collaborations have existed for many years.

Recently, the relationship has been strengthened by governance structures which ensure buy-in at senior levels. There is significant trust between partners and a shared commitment to 'Team Leeds' through the agreement of a Research Collaboration Framework. This maturity means that an established Working Group is effective at delivering on a shared agenda of research-policy activity.

Areas of Research Interest are just one mechanism for stimulating academic-policy engagement but they are not a silver bullet: other routes might suit your context better. At Leeds, for example, we are also developing a suite of activities which enable researchers and policymakers at the local and regional levels to work together. These include capacity-building activities such as training for researchers; routes for engaging with the scrutiny function of the Council; joint seminars and roundtables; and Communities of Practice around priority areas.

| To consider | Local authority perspective | University perspective |
| --- | --- | --- |

## Governance and senior sponsorship

**What senior buy-in do you have sponsoring a collaboration or a commitment to research-policy engagement?**

Are there local or regional examples which you could use as exemplars? At Leeds, we have been approached by many other councils and universities to share our work.

The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) website hosts toolkits and resources to support this work. It also produces events, workshops and conferences for sharing new ideas and good practice. See **upen.ac.uk**.

**What senior leader buy-in do you have?**

At Leeds, the PVC R&I has a remit which includes civic engagement and leads an executive steering group which oversees the bilateral collaboration and signs off the action plan of a Working Group.

The University is also part of other key networks in the city, for example, the Leeds Anchors, which represents the city's 14 largest employers in the city; and the Leeds Academic Health Partnership.

## A partnership model Working Group

**How are you going to organise and distribute the work involved?**

The Working Group is the engine room of the collaboration. It has members from the Council and the University. One member of the Working Group is on secondment from the University to the Council to cement the partnership and accelerate the work around Areas of Research Interest. The Working Group is made up of key members of the University, the Council, and local and regional actors.

## Resources and capacity

### What resources do you have available to support engagement with academics?

At Leeds City Council, there is a central Policy & Intelligence team which has strong links with directorates and helps to shape corporate strategies. Like its counterpart at the University, it offers a 'front door' for a large and sometimes difficult-to-access organisation. Cuts to funding may have impacted on these central teams in many local authorities.

At Leeds, the part-time secondment of a knowledge mobiliser from the University created extra capacity and momentum to accelerate ARI work.

### What resources does your university already commit to local, regional and national engagement with policymakers or partners?

We know from the outside, the University of Leeds is a confusing place to navigate. We have a central team, Policy Leeds, which acts as a 'front door' for external policy work. Policy Leeds co-ordinates the governance of the institutional collaboration.

Is there a central team devoted to policy, or are there knowledge exchange or impact officers dispersed across the institution? Maybe you have both central and dispersed teams.

## Incentivising engagement

### How are your priorities communicated to external partners and internal colleagues?

At Leeds, the Council's corporate strategy is contained within a Best City Ambition which articulates key priorities. The Areas of Research Interest are aligned with the Best City Ambition. Not only does this prioritise the right work, it enables Council colleagues to understand and buy into the research-policy engagement work and see its relevance.

### How can you incentivise academics to engage with policy?

Although there might be widely-held enthusiasm for undertaking research-policy work, there is a lack of incentive for university researchers to get involved. Career pathways and progression, and markers of esteem (e.g. academic publications and grants income) do not often include policy impact. This work is difficult without structural and sectoral support.

At Leeds we have used Research England Policy Support Fund to highlight the Leeds City Council ARI and provide funding to projects which aligned with them. In addition, other internally-managed funding was available, for example via UKRI Impact Accelerator Accounts and other interdisciplinary networks.

## Internal Networks

### What structures support this work?

At Leeds City Council, the Policy & Intelligence team co-ordinate opportunities around research and evidence. This includes hosting a monthly Policy Network.

### What structures support this work?

At the University of Leeds, we have a University policy network which meets once a month to share information. Members of this network include professional staff with roles such as Research Managers, Impact Officers, Communications and Engagement Officers, Knowledge Exchange Officers.

Academics grouped by research themes can be found in institutes, centres and networks and many have policy interests.

## Communication

### How is the work shared and engagement promoted?

The Working Group agree a joined-up communications plan to share progress, funding and to showcase opportunities. The University of Leeds has more capacity to lead on this work, so its policy engagement hub, Policy Leeds, co-ordinates the collaboration's communications via social media which is amplified and promoted to audiences by the Council. Bi-annual networking and evaluation events are hosted at the University.

# F. Questions for the future

We have come a long way with this approach at Leeds and have tried to build in opportunities for learning and iteration. But there is still much to consider.

In particular, around:

1. Getting the balance right between the **supply** of research and the **demand** of policy partners in how we shape ARI;

2. How we best **co-produce** ARI with all relevant partners in the city and region;

3. How devolution impacts on the local and regional policy landscape and how we collaborate and share knowledge across **different government levels**;

4. How we **incentivise research** colleagues to engage with policy, to surface **existing** evidence where appropriate, and support them in finding funding;

5. How we **influence at institutional and sectoral level** to include research-policy engagement as a recognised and rewarded career pathway for researchers which can attract appropriate funding;

6. The perennial problem of the **funding crisis** facing local government and the not insignificant resources that this work requires, both in gathering evidence and acting upon it.

# G. Resources you may find helpful

Colleagues at Northumbria University have authored **Areas of Research Interest: A Practical Guide**

We encourage you to read their guide in parallel with this case study: our experience shares similarities with Northumbria but there are differences which you might find instructive too.

The **Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement** (CAPE) project has authored a suite of useful resources and toolkits for navigating the research-policy space using a range of approaches.

These can be found on the **UPEN** website, along with other many insightful blogs and articles, see **https://upen.ac.uk/**.

# Contact information

For further information, please contact the Horizons Institute team at University of Leeds.
**horizons@leeds.ac.uk**
**www.leeds.ac.uk/horizons-institute**

Or see the Policy Leeds website at
**www.leeds.ac.uk/policy-leeds**