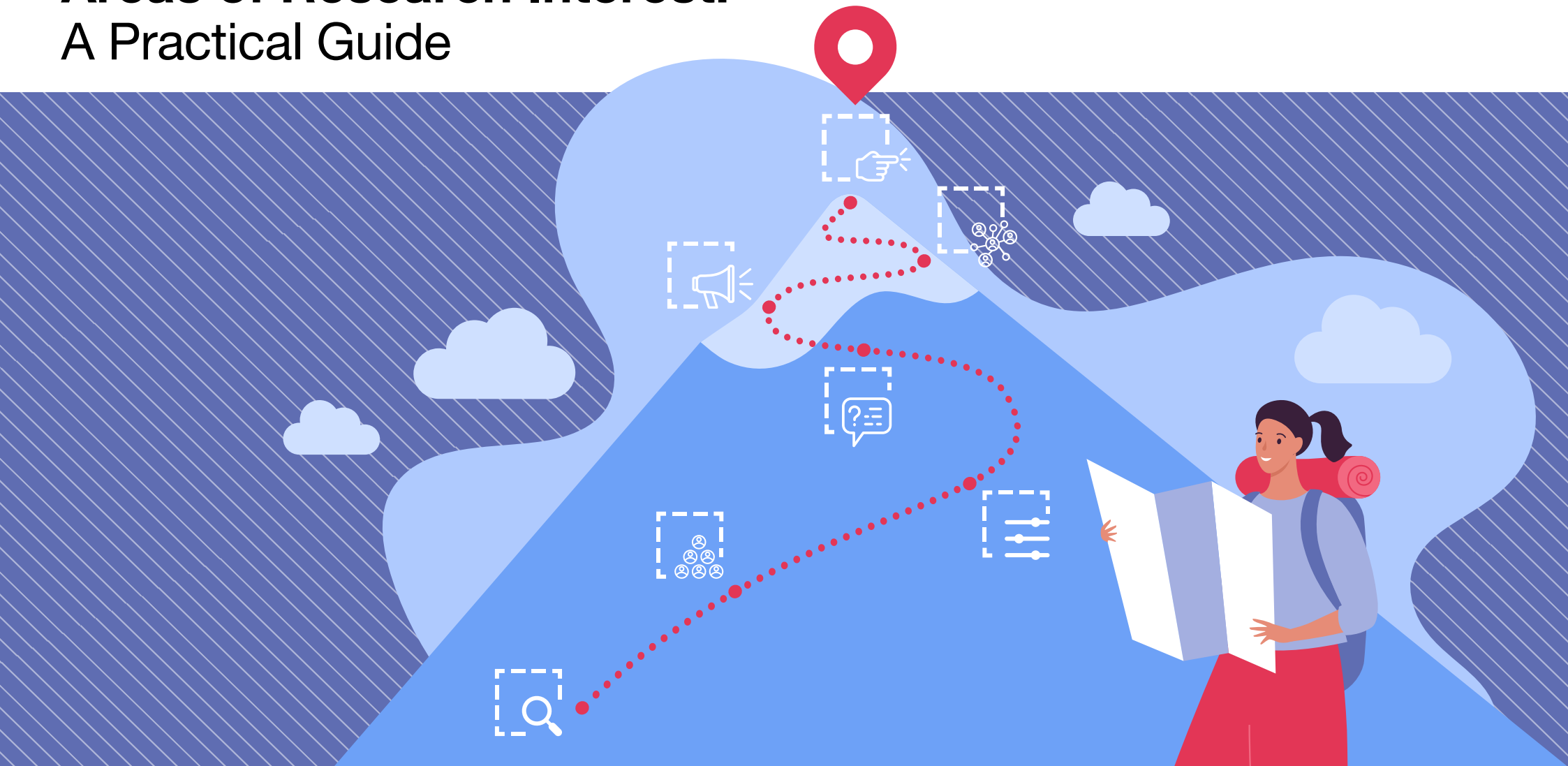


Areas of Research Interest: A Practical Guide



December 2024

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Areas of Research Interest: a Practical Guide

Areas of Research Interest: a practical guide was written by Max French and Melissa Hawkins (both from the Public Policy and Management Research Group, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University.). It was designed by Roots and Wings (www.rootsandwings.design). We are grateful to Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) for funding and supporting this project.

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- Kathryn Oliver
(London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, ESRC-GOS ARI Fellow, CAPE evaluation Team)
- Annette Boaz
(Kings College London, ESRC-GOS ARI Fellow, CAPE evaluation team)

“This guide offers a useful, accessible and actionable guide to developing Areas of Research Interest, which I am really delighted to see published. It brings together practical experience and learning from the work of CAPE and others on how ARIs can be deployed as an effective structure for academic-policy engagement. This is particularly useful in the context of continued changes to the public policy landscape and to the academic-policy ecosystem.”

Sarah Chaytor
Director of Strategy & Policy at University College London & Co-Chair,
Universities Policy Engagement Network

“The value of Areas of Research Interest (ARI) to policy makers is increasingly recognised, but they are not only relevant to national government. This is a fantastic guide for local and regional policymakers and practitioners to use when developing ARIs. The ‘ARI Canvas’ tool is practical, flexible and provides a brilliant resource to support the development of diverse ARIs as well as wider dialogues around research priorities and knowledge needs. ”

Matt Baillie Smith
Professor and Dean of Research Culture, Northumbria University

“The North East Combined Authority has a bold and forward-thinking policy agenda and we recognise the fundamental role that research and evidence play in delivering these ambitions. Developing an ARI approach has provided a framework to shape future relationships and maximise the way in which the Combined Authority engages with the research community.”

Rob Hamilton
Head of Innovation and Strategy, North East Combined Authority

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CAPE is a knowledge exchange and research project funded by Research England that explores how to support effective and sustained engagement between academics and policy professionals across the higher education sector. CAPE's resources have been co-developed across the CAPE consortium and using practice-based experience.

Our toolkits, guides and reports are designed so that they can be adaptable and operable for diverse contexts and tailored needs across universities and policy organisational systems. Our CAPE resources are intended as a starting point that we hope will help both to navigate CAPE some common challenges in academic policy engagement and to inspire new and deeper ways of engaging.

www.cape.ac.uk

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Introduction

Research should be at the heart of Government with an effective dialogue and understanding between researchers, politicians and the public, so that policies and strategies are in place to bring about research that benefits society

Nurse Review of UK Research Councils 2015, p9.

In 2015 the Department for Business, Education and Skills asked Sir Paul Nurse to review the operation of UK Research Councils and explore how they could support research in the most effective ways. The review recommended to “maintain ‘statements of need’, in terms of the most important research questions confronting [UK Government] Departments”. That recommendation was received enthusiastically: every UK government department has since published an ‘[Area of Research Interest](#)’ (ARI) in response.

ARIs are tools which help policymakers [understand their research priorities](#), address knowledge needs, and communicate more effectively with academics and the broader [research community](#). But central government is now far from the only institution with these needs. ARIs have since been developed independently by local governments, combined authorities, UK and devolved legislatures and UK public bodies.

Based on the experience of central government departments, the Government Office for Science produced helpful [guidance](#) to support the ARI process. This guide takes stock of the broader set of experiences which have emerged since, focusing in particular on models adopted in localities and regions.

This guide is informed by our direct experience as [CAPE Fellows](#) developing an ARI with the North of Tyne Combined Authority, and draws on detailed case studies of the ARIs in development by [Newcastle](#) and [Leeds City Councils](#). We are indebted to the collective insight of our ARI Expert Group, who drew on many other ARI experiences to provide thoughtful and extensive input to this guide.

This guide is for policy professionals and practitioners developing or considering an ARI approach. It offers pragmatic support, practical examples and flexible guidance to help navigate the critical decisions involved in creating an ARI.

This guide will help readers to:

- Navigate the key stages involved with an ARI
- Learn from leading examples
- Use their ARI productively.

What is an Area of Research Interest?

Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) are public expressions of research priorities and evidence needs. ARIs help governments and public bodies identify their research and engagement priorities and bring evidence gaps into sharper relief. ARIs can hardwire research and evidence into policy development and decision making, build consensus around knowledge needs, and help organisations work more strategically based on cutting-edge evidence.

ARIs are also powerful [communication tools](#). ARIs help external parties understand policy needs and can serve as a front door for academic-policy engagement. They are used by many organisations to stimulate conversations and partnership working and ensure policy needs are upheld as core priorities. Our case studies demonstrate how ARIs can also help organisations develop productive relationships with relevant experts and better integrate with their broader knowledge ecosystems.

ARIs were first proposed in a major review of UK Research Councils and then institutionalised within central government departments. Since then, ARIs have proved a flexible and dynamic model of research-policy engagement with far broader applicability.

A wide range of institutions have developed ARIs over the past ten years – a non-exhaustive list includes:

[2015 - Nurse review of UK Research Councils](#)

[2017 - UK Government departments](#)

[2017 - Food Standards Agency](#)

[2020 - UK Parliament COVID-19 ARIs](#)

[2021 - UK Parliamentary Committees](#)

[2022 - Senedd Cymru](#)

[2022 - Crown Prosecution Service](#)

[2022 - Leeds City Council](#)

[2023 - Newcastle City Council](#)

[2023 - North of Tyne Combined Authority](#)

[2024 - Office of the Police Chief Scientific Adviser](#)

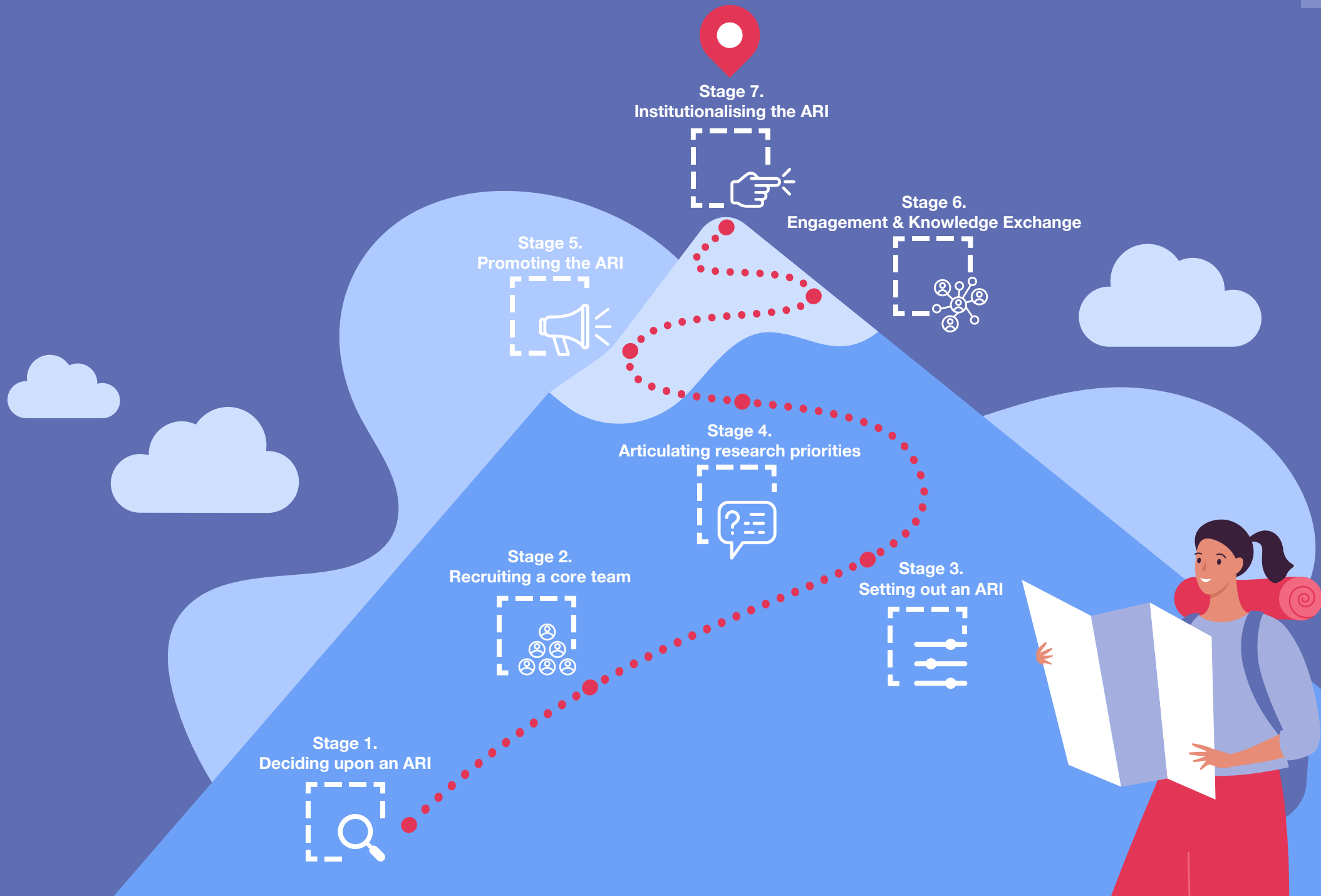
[2024 - Office for Statistics Regulation](#)

How to use this guide

This guide simplifies the ARI process, helping developers navigate the 7 key steps involved with taking an ARI from ambition to action. It complements existing government [guidance](#), drawing on a broader set of contexts and experiences from devolved nations, localities and regions.

Page 5 presents detailed and practical guidance to help practitioners move through each of the 7 steps, drawing on grounded experiences of other ARIs, particularly our three case studies.

However, ARIs are a flexible model and a prescriptive step-by-step guide would be inappropriate. Page 6 introduces the ‘Area of Research Interest Canvas’: a planning and self-reflection tool to help readers plan and manage their own distinctive ARI journeys. **We encourage readers to adapt rather than adopt this guide, moving between their own Canvas and the step-by-step guidance to develop an approach tailored to their own context and needs.**



Area of Research Interest Canvas



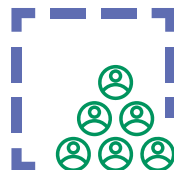
Stage 1. Deciding upon an ARI

How much do you know about ARIs and what experiences would be helpful to learn about?

What are your knowledge needs (see Table 1, Page 10) and is an ARI the most suitable response?

What are your time and resource constraints?

What would you, your team, your organisation hope to achieve from an ARI?



Stage 2. Recruiting a Core Team

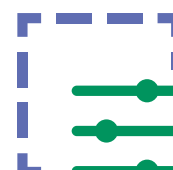
Who will take forward and 'own' the ARI?

Are senior leaders bought-in?
How will senior support be maintained?

What skills and resources are required within the core team? Who possesses these?

Should academics and/or external actors be involved?

How will the core team engage with the rest of the organisation?



Stage 3. Setting out an ARI

What is the purpose of your ARI?

How ambitious can the ARI be, given organisational and resource constraints?

Will the ARI be focussed on a theme, or spread over a section of the organisation?

What types of evidence do you need now?
What about 5-10 years from now?

Where do you require evidence from (local, regional, national, international?)



Stage 4. Articulating Research Priorities

How do research priorities relate to your organisation's strategic goals, policies or plans?

What methods will you use to ascertain research priorities (e.g. interviews, conversations, group discussions, consensus building processes)?

How might other less represented stakeholders be involved in identifying knowledge needs (e.g. marginalised communities, external stakeholders, the public)?

How will you communicate your research priorities: as research areas, topics, questions, or something else?



Stage 5. Promoting the ARI

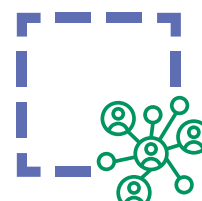
Who is your target audience, and what are their motivations for engaging with your ARI?

What bodies/organisations or other connections can help advertise your ARI?

Who should be responsible for marketing the ARI in your organisation?

What will your web and social media presence look like?

How can your audience interact with your ARI, and what are the timelines for this?



Stage 6. Engagement & Knowledge Exchange

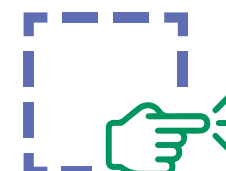
What would meaningful engagement look like to your target audience?

How will you know if your ARI is reaching the right people, generating the right responses, and impacting on your organisation? How can you monitor this?

How will evidence be gathered, stored & communicated?

How can you develop stronger relationships with knowledge providers and ARI contributors?

What needs to be done to ensure your organisation listens to ARI contributors?



Stage 7. Institutionalising the ARI

How will the core team - and senior leaders - champion the ARI within your organisation?

What opportunities are there to hard-wire the ARI into the core routines, plans and strategies of the organisation?

How will you ensure that the ARI remains relevant and useful over time?

How will you report on the ARI's use and continue to engage with contributors?

Are there opportunities to spread or scale ARIs in your organisation or region?

ARI Canvas: cut out and keep version



Area of Interest Canvas

Instructions

1. Read the guidance on the seven ARI steps to get a feel for the options available
2. With your team, work through the guiding questions to consider what an ARI in your situation should look like
3. Revisit the guidance and sketch out your own ARI plan
4. Revisit this plan and revise your approach as you see fit.

If you use this, please let us know us how you get on!

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Stage 1.

Deciding upon an ARI

Stage 2.

Recruiting a Core Team

Stage 3.

Setting out an ARI

Stage 4.

Articulating Research Priorities

Stage 5.

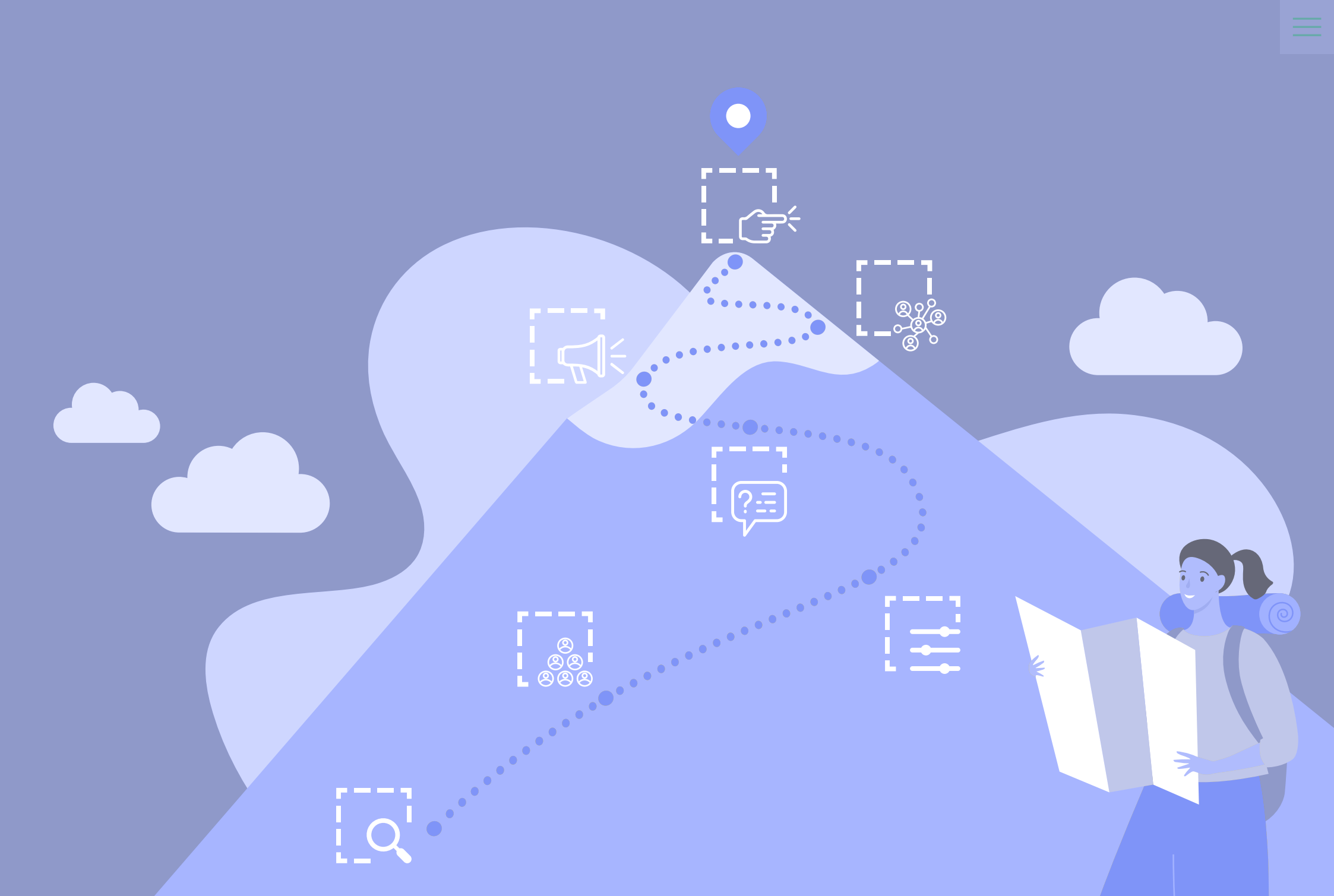
Promoting the ARI

Stage 6.

Engagement & Knowledge Exchange

Stage 7.

Institutionalising the ARI



Developing an ARI: three case studies

In this guide, we draw significantly upon three case studies of ARIs developed in the North of Tyne Combined Authority, Newcastle City Council and Leeds City Council. We introduce each briefly - more detail on how we collected and analysed data can be found on page 23.

North of Tyne Combined Authority

The North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) was a partnership of three North East councils, with a directly elected metro mayor. The NTCA operated until May 2024 when a new devolution deal took force, and its functions transitioned to the larger North East Combined Authority.

The authors of this report undertook a CAPE-funded Policy Fellowship with the NTCA to trial methods for [academic-policy engagement](#). An ARI approach was selected, and following internal discussion, this was linked to the thematic priority of 'Community Engagement and Connected Communities'

CAPE Fellows worked in close collaboration with five NTCA staff, taking an action research approach. The core team co-developed a list of research questions, published an online survey, analysed the data together, and convened subsequent knowledge exchange activities, including a workshop and one-to-one conversations with contributors. ARI themes are currently informing new strategic developments within the new Combined Authority.

Newcastle City Council

Newcastle City Council's ARI was developed by the Newcastle Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC), one of the 30 [NIHR](#) funded HDRCs to boost research capacity and capability in local government. The HDRC undertook a 'Deep Dive' within the council's Children and Families Directorate, seeking to systematically assess policy challenges and research needs.

The HDRC team undertook 27 interviews with service leads, and from these identified a long list of research priorities across the Directorate. The team worked collaboratively to prioritise these and elaborate them into a set of research questions, which were published in an internal council report. Research questions have been used to shape research activities within the Directorate, and with research partners, with the aim to iterate and spread across other directorates over time. The Children and Families ARI process prioritised research questions with the greatest potential to influence long-term health outcomes and reduce inequalities, which is a core aim of HDRCs.

Leeds City Council

Leeds City Council has partnered with the University of Leeds to co-design and trial [areas of research interest](#) as a response to a [Review of Collaboration](#) which recommended a more strategic approach to knowledge exchange,

Leeds' ARIs have undergone a number of iterations. The first in 2022 were linked to the council's knowledge needs around the topics of culture, digital, food, and inclusive growth, with the second ARIs updated in 2023 to include the topic of place. To make a clearer connection between council knowledge needs and university research, the University of Leeds' policy engagement team [Policy Leeds](#) was able to directly link ARIs to [Research England Policy Support funding](#). This resulted in the funding of ten projects 2022/2023 and five projects in 2023/2024, all with direct links to council ARIs and resulting in a [diverse](#) range of activities and outputs.

Policy Leeds are continuing to work in with Leeds City Council to determine how to best sustain and innovate their use of ARIs. These include plans for connecting with other local authorities and the voluntary and community social enterprise sector to explore potential future collaborations.



Stage 1. Deciding upon an ARI

ARIs are a powerful mechanism for academic-policy engagement and knowledge exchange. But they are not appropriate in every context, nor are they necessarily the most effective way to address evidence needs. The first step is to determine whether an ARI is indeed the right approach.

ARIs are time-consuming and intensive projects. Where research priorities are narrow and evidence gaps already well-understood, there are likely more [straightforward means for addressing knowledge needs](#). In cases where research problems are already well-studied, commissioning a literature review may provide an easier route. Literature reviews can be undertaken in-house by suitably experienced and resourced teams, or through a range of external providers who specialise in delivering [rapid systematic evidence reviews](#). However, it can remain a challenge to translate literature review evidence into actionable guidance within the specific context and challenges faced by an institution. There is also little value conducting a literature review when a substantial evidence base is lacking in the first place.

Consultations – which could involve online surveys, interviews or workshops among many other methods – provide a means to rapidly assess evidence and opinion on a specific topic, and can address specific organisational problems. Straightforward and inexpensive to undertake, consultations may suffice in place of an ARI where an agreed research priority would benefit from opinion in addition to academic evidence.

Many knowledge needs call for more in-depth, long-term and dynamic processes of knowledge gathering. An alternative would be to establish a special body – a working group, roundtable, commission or inquiry for example – to undertake a more focussed evidence gathering approach. One example, the [Roundtable on Wellbeing in the North of Tyne](#), grouped together sector leaders to set long-term wellbeing goals for the region. This involved a range of evidence gathering processes including a consultation and literature review. This approach might be appropriate where high-level policy priorities demand a new and path-breaking research agenda and a degree of autonomy from the organisation. However, such an approach is resource intensive, long-term and does not necessarily mesh well with routine organisational business.

ARIs have been chosen because research priorities are unclear, priority areas are new or emerging, or subject areas have a contested evidence base. ARIs can encompass a whole organisation's research agenda, or one part of the organisation, for example one department within a council. In these cases, ARIs are often used as an agenda setting mechanism, helping to better identify and promote the core knowledge needs confronting the organisation.

ARIs can also be used in a more targeted way. The NTCA's ARI in community power and Senedd Cymru's parliamentary committee ARIs are thematic ARIs, exploring distinct subject areas in detail. Thematic ARIs are likely to be novel or speculative, with the ARI working as a 'can opener' for a specific course of inquiry.

Compared with other potential methods for addressing knowledge needs, ARIs can be considered an 'upstream' intervention, used to focus research and achieve clarity and consensus on knowledge needs. ARIs can precede and accommodate other interventions like commissioning primary research, initiating 'mobility' programmes like fellowships and research placements, conducting literature reviews or developing consultations. ARIs also permit a longer-term and more relational engagement with relevant knowledge producers and brokers, facilitating ongoing collaboration. By integrating with the organisation, ARIs might stand a better chance of becoming integrated into organisational routines than a separate commission or inquiry structure.

By focussing attention on research and knowledge needs, ARIs may seem an onerous and drawn-out process compared with methods which seek to fill evidence gaps directly. Indeed, many have taken years to be developed, published and utilised. However, ARIs are a far more mature method now, with an active and supportive community which can offer advice and guidance – a good port of call is UPEN's [ARI subcommittee](#). The [ARI database](#) lists ARI topics already explored by others and can also be a useful reference point.



Stage 1.
Deciding upon an ARI

Table 1. Appropriate methods for different knowledge needs

Is an ARI the best approach for your knowledge needs? Use this table to check if an alternative might work better.

KNOWLEDGE NEED	ARI	LITERATURE REVIEW	CONSULTATION	COMMISSION/ INQUIRY	POLICY FELLOWSHIP	CONTRACT RESEARCH
Clarity on research priorities	Y	N	Perhaps	Perhaps	Perhaps	N
Take stock of existing evidence base	N	Y	N	Y	Perhaps	N
Deep dive into pressing policy problem	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Rapid assessment of external opinions	N	N	Y	N	N	N
Better understanding of new or emerging issues	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Better relationships with researchers/institutions	Y	N	Perhaps	Y	Perhaps	N
Better capability for research and evidence use	Y	N	N	N	Y	N



Stage 2. Recruiting a Core Team

ARIs require deep subject knowledge, keen analytical skills and senior organisational commitment. We recommend forming a ‘core team’ to take operational responsibility for the ARI, whose members commit to regular meetings and intensive hands-on working.

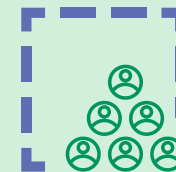
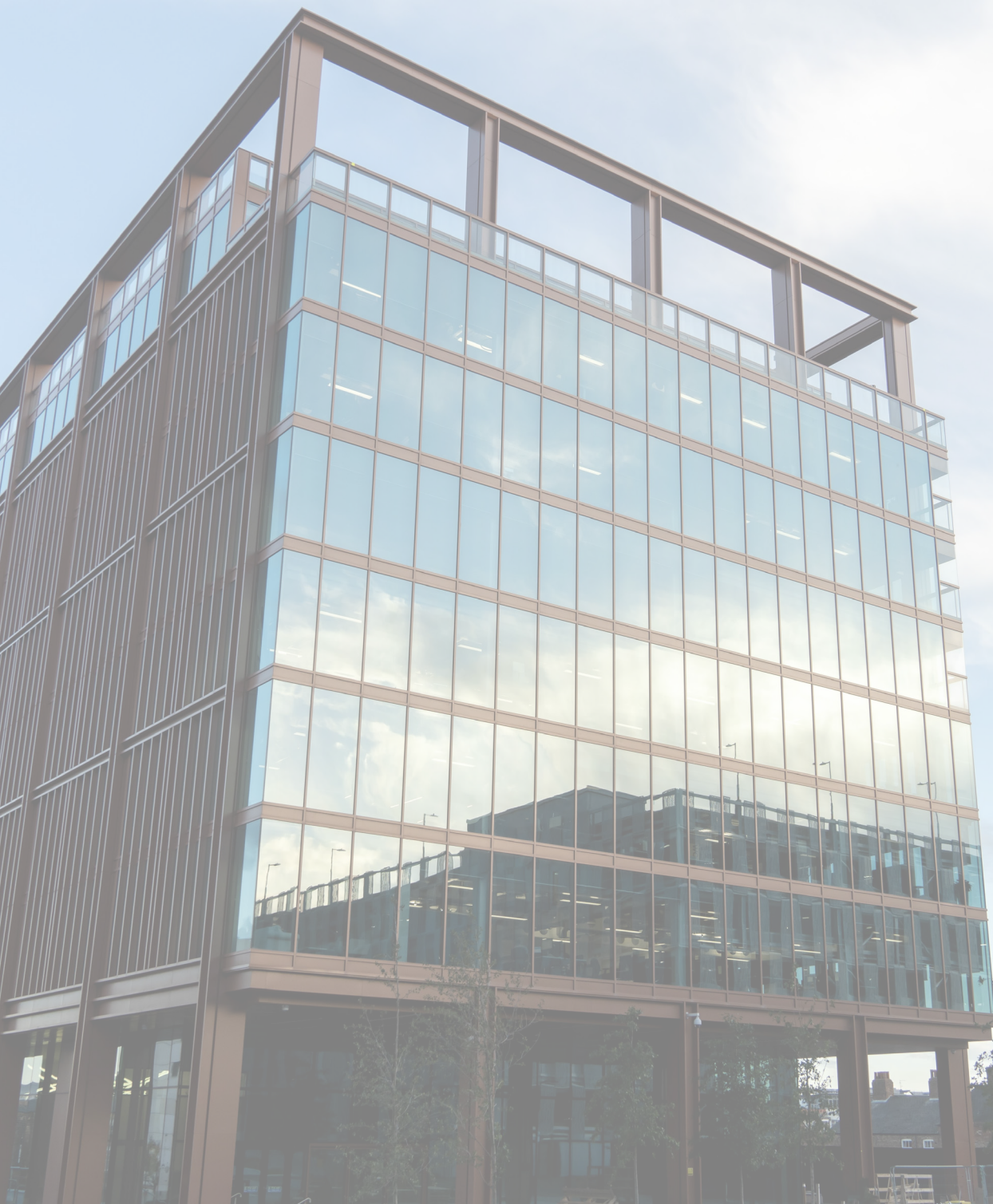
ARIs need clear institutional ownership throughout all stages to ensure engagement and effective use of the evidence base. For this reason, ARIs have relied on active and visible support from senior management teams and officials with organisational responsibility for research. A first step should be to attain appropriate organisational buy-in. In the first instance, this should involve seeking recognition for the ARI in relevant strategic documentation, approval by governance boards, and senior support and resourcing for the core team.

A common practice has been to pair academic researchers with policy teams in the core team. This helps to broker in specialised knowledge and research expertise, and in our cases supported a strong relational approach between research and policy institutions. In several cases (North of Tyne, UK parliament, Senedd Cymru, UK Government), this has involved a specific research-to-policy fellowship model – see CAPE guidance [here](#). While uncommon, it is certainly possible for academics to propose an ARI, using an engagement model like a fellowship or [learning partnership](#).

An academic partnership might bring rigour and independence to the process and lend legitimacy and credibility to the resulting evidence base. However academic and policy working cultures can be very different, and attention should be paid to finding the right ‘fit’ – academics must be capable of working across boundaries and geared toward valuing policy goals alongside academic outputs. Academic fellowships are no shortcut, taking a minimum of six months in practice, and often far longer. It also risks the organisation ‘handing over’ responsibility to the academic researchers, leading to decreased organisational motivation and engagement. We consider it vital that the organisation – at a minimum – actively participates within the core team to ensure organisational ownership throughout and, crucially, after the research contract ends.

An alternative is to carry out the ARI in-house, resourcing a core team to lead on its development directly. With this report, other guidance such as the [UK Government ARI guide](#), and resources such as the [ARI database](#), ARIs led by core teams embedded entirely within policy organisations are certainly a feasible option. Recruiting staff experienced with bridging academic and policy cultures was reiterated by interviewees across our three cases as critically important. While uncommon in practice, consideration should be given to enlisting team members from external organisations – the business community, voluntary and community sector, or other stakeholders – to give core teams diversity and external influence.

Core teams have often drawn from knowledge mobilisation bodies and/or those with a remit for developing research capacity. For instance, Newcastle City Council developed its ARI through the local Health Determinants Research Collaboration, an NIHR-funded project which has a specific responsibility for building research capacity in local government. Universities are often connected to local or regional knowledge brokers, e.g. [Policy Leeds](#) or [Insights North East](#), which can help start conversations and arrange collaborative research activities. Even if not part of ARI core teams, these bodies may play important informal and advisory roles, bringing cultural sensitivity, networks and connections and informal advice to the process without the commitment of a formal research contract. National knowledge brokers like [UPEN](#), [CAPE](#) or [SPRE](#) in Scotland have emerged to help connect research and policy, and provide good places to start.



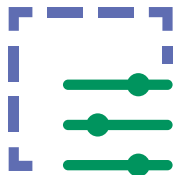
Stage 2.
Recruiting a Core Team

Case study:

Building a core team within the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA)

The NTCA, through CAPE, embarked on a policy fellowship with the original intention to develop stronger academic-policy relationships. A core team of seven were assembled, comprising two policy fellows from Northumbria University, and from the NTCA: a data and insights lead, thematic team leads, and policy development officers. Each member brought specialised knowledge and distinct skill sets, and the level of involvement ensured the ARI's continued integration at the NTCA.

A partnership approach was adopted between the two parties, and engagement was based on a series of co-design workshops, which helped navigate through each stage of the ARI. This ensured both policy and academic staff were mutually engaged in setting priorities, developing research questions, publicising the ARI and analysing in detail the responses to an online call for evidence. While this was an intensive process, this gave team members a sense of ownership of the ARI and strengthened commitment to embed the ARI, and to sustain the approach following the NTCA's transition to the North East Combined Authority. Informal relational elements – such as team lunches, coffees and catch ups – were critical to building these relationships, and prioritised to ensure strong relationships were maintained.



Stage 3. Setting out the ARI

ARIs can serve different functions, engage diverse audiences and come in sizes great and small. The next step is to consider the intended function and necessary scope of the ARI.

First, it is critical to consider the purpose of the ARI, as this varies widely in practice. Organisational ARIs articulate existing research priorities within the organisation – though these are likely to be poorly understood. The first port of call is often corporate, business or other strategic plans where organisational priorities are explicitly stated. But many ARIs have required in-depth research with staff necessary to uncover knowledge needs. Staff teams with responsibility for these objectives could then be engaged in setting research questions. The UK Government Department ARIs operate like this, with long lists of questions spanning existing departmental priorities.

Others use ARIs to explore new or emerging thematic areas. The North of Tyne chose a thematic ARI - Community Power and Connected Communities – to take tentative steps into different ways of working. This allowed a more targeted and subject-specific ARI, with questions clustered around specific aspirations of this theme. Since this is non-routine work, organisations might better address thematic ARIs through a matrix-style structure with cross-functional ARI core teams.

Next, what is the likely size and scope of the ARI? ARIs can be very broad, spanning the research priorities of large central government departments or whole public bodies. Other ARIs, for instance those undertaken by [Welsh parliamentary committees](#), focus on specific areas in detail. Discussions of scope bring into focus potential cost barriers to embarking on an ARI, which have been particularly evident in a local government context. Setting the scope and focus of the ARI involves finding the right balance of breadth and depth of inquiry for the purpose – and resources – at hand.

Setting ARIs across a whole organisation, or a large UK Government department - is resource intensive, requiring significant debate amongst large tranches of the organisation. A popular alternative is to begin with one subsidiary unit to trial the process before spreading and scaling. Newcastle City Council, for example, began with its Children and Families Directorate, which provided a supportive environment to test its utility in other departments. We recommend developers consider carefully how ARIs should be staged and progressed.

Next, what types of evidence are sought? Many ARIs implicitly target *scientific evidence*. This adopts a hierarchy of evidence, with studies evaluated through positivist assertions of reliability and validity. Narrative evidence involves the contextualisation of research to particular questions – for example through a literature review or a narrative submission to a call for evidence. Finally, *experiential evidence* involves direct lived experience or engagement within a phenomena of research interest, for example homelessness or transitions of care.

It is vital that ARI developers value the types of evidence which provide most insight into ARI subjects and questions. Scientific evidence may be most appropriate for answering quantifiable research questions, though may be less helpful in human and relational service areas where evidence bases are more contested and diverse. Experiential evidence would be relegated to the bottom rung of an evidence hierarchy, but may be the most appropriate to a given research question or priority area.

Related to this point, the target audience needs to be given careful thought. If academics are targeted, which types of academics, which disciplines, and which research institutions? Some ARIs are diversifying their intended contributors: professionals working in peer organisations (e.g. other councils), local councillors, communities and citizens are potential stakeholder groups. But these participants have very different needs, motivations and preferences for engagement. Developing a clear [stakeholder plan](#) would be therefore useful when considering whom to involve and how.

It is also important to consider risks in framing and publishing ARIs. The process of identifying and publicising needs for research and evidence can be a challenging and exposing enterprise. It might be considered risky in some organisations to “own up” to knowledge gaps or signal a lack of expertise. Setting an ARI creates an expectation of follow through. Contributors will rightly expect organisations to respond to inquiries, and to utilise the ideas, insight and evidence they offer. Organisations developing ARIs should therefore be prepared to act on them.



Stage 3.
Setting out an ARI

Table 2. ARI parameters - five examples

Here are some examples in practice - what is your ARI's purpose, scope and reach?

ARI	PURPOSE	SCOPE	REACH
UK government departments	Align academic research and policy development	Broad departmental priorities	National (UK wide)
The Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology	Improve use of evidence in government scrutiny	Specific themes set by parliament	National (UK wide)
Senedd Cymru	Improve use of evidence in government scrutiny	Specific themes set by parliament	National (Wales)
Leeds City Council	Explore thematic areas of interest aligned to council strategic ambition	Themes set by the council	Locality
Newcastle City Council	Improve research capability in local government	Pressing challenges faced by council service leads	Locality
North of Tyne Combined Authority	Explore new/emerging thematic area	Specific new/emerging area of work	Regional



Stage 4. Articulating Research Priorities

ARIs help identify organisational knowledge needs then express these publicly as research priorities. Research priorities will become the focal point of the ARI, and it is critical this stage be given adequate time and attention.

To attract the engagement and senior-level support needed, ARI developers have turned to strategic documents to set ARI agendas – for instance corporate or business plans – which often state organisational objectives. While useful starting points, strategic objectives do not necessarily require research. Research priorities should relate instead to areas of knowledge need – where the absence of achievable knowledge impedes these strategic priorities.

ARIs have used various approaches to better identify knowledge needs. Newcastle HDRC undertook a ‘deep dive’ approach with council staff, using naturalistic interviews with council operational leads to identify practical challenges and pressing concerns ‘on the ground’. Others, for instance the Senedd’s ARIs, are often more future-oriented, scoping and theoretical. ARIs are often developed in a closed shop, their scope limited to current organisational knowledge. But developers should adopt a more collaborative process, co-developing or at least sense-checking knowledge needs through engagement with relevant external stakeholders and communities.

Once knowledge needs are identified, a next considerable challenge is to articulate these as actionable research priorities. Research priorities are the front door of the ARI: how these are framed and what they include communicates who is invited in, and by implication, who is less welcome.

ARIs have developed and presented research priorities very differently. Many have stated research priorities into subject or thematic areas, perhaps listing potential research topics alongside – see [UK Government departments](#). In others, for instance [Leeds](#), ARI are communicated as thematic areas of possible research. Its broad and high-level articulation of priorities helps the council revise the ARI annually to keep in tune with changing council research demands.

Others have found it necessary to move further, developing specific ‘research questions’ which target particular knowledge needs. Research questions are specific, actionable and ask contributors to tailor their responses to a more focussed line of inquiry. However, developing effective research questions is a time-consuming process, and may be best suited where ARIs require specific answers and a focussed evidence base.

Research questions were developed within the NTCA’s thematic ARI through a series of co-design workshops amongst the core team in which ideas for research questions were pitched, discussed and refined. It took three workshops and two months to hone 12 specific questions from an initial broader set of themes. Newcastle City Council took forward an in-depth directorate-wide inquiry and prioritisation exercise spanning six months, described in more detail at the end of this section.

We note a general lack of significant external public and stakeholder engagement in creating or revising research priorities and themes among ARIs currently. Developers could extend their view beyond the organisation, targeting groups normally excluded from decision making or agenda setting processes. Piloting research priorities and questions with excluded or marginalised groups would provide a different perspective, and help ensure questions are engaging and motivating. A scoping literature review might also add focus and precision to the questions being asked. Research priorities rarely emerge in isolation – we also recommend consulting the [ARI database](#) which lists questions and evidence to help refine research questions.



Case Study:

Newcastle Health Determinants Research Collaborative's Deep Dive

Newcastle's HDRC team developed research questions through a “deep dive” into the knowledge needs and research requests of the council's Children and Families Directorate. 27 conversational interviews were undertaken with service leads within the directorate, focussing on the practical challenges facing their teams. Interviewees were then invited to discuss their knowledge gaps and research in relation to these challenges.

The HDRC, working collaboratively as a team and inviting further feedback from council staff, translated knowledge needs into research questions through a prioritisation exercise based on: the potential to positively impact health and wellbeing; potential to reduce health inequalities; scale of impact; potential return on investment; and where there was a unique role for the HDRC in addition to existing analytic capacity in the Council. All research questions were published as an annex to the HDRC's major report for the Children and Families directorate.

Clear research questions helped the council be far more proactive about addressing research priorities. Clusters of research needs identified fuelled discussions about how to bridge evidence gaps and questions were used to shape funding applications and research projects the Directorate engaged with.



Stage 5. Promoting the ARI

Having prepared its focus and content, the next step is to publish the ARI and promote it to the right audiences.

Websites function as the first port of call for engaging others on the ARI and should warrant special attention. As Leeds' ARI [website](#) demonstrates, the ARI can become a central portal for local research and policy engagement matters, in effect framing the broader policy engagement space.

We recommend creating a public-facing web presence to host the ARI on an ongoing basis. An easy option is to adapt an existing institutional website: [Senedd Cymru](#) for instance links its ARIs to associated parliamentary committees and an online contact form. But hosting on institutional websites is not without its own challenges. When the North of Tyne Combined Authority transitioned to the North East Combined Authority in early 2024, its ARI webpage was rendered inaccessible. Hosting the ARI on an external website, or indeed on a variety of websites, will provide stability over the long term.

ARIs invariably target academics, but most also involve many other stakeholders, including policy institutes, elected officials or particular communities (of geography, interest or identity), and the broader public. Maintaining an active stakeholder engagement plan can ensure ARIs are tailored to their intended audience and attract desired contributors.

Core teams should call in help to promote the ARI. Knowledge brokers like UPEN and CAPE, alongside regional actors such as [Insights North East](#), have been pivotal in promoting ARIs to relevant networks and attracting motivated academic audiences. Research councils are also [increasingly connected](#) to ARIs and have broad academic reach.

Most UK universities now have a central research and information services department which can also help ARIs reach a broad section of academics who, even in relation to a specific research question, are often distributed across different schools, faculties and departments. It has also been helpful to enlist institutional PR, social media and marketing teams from universities, councils, and other relevant bodies to help reach the right email lists and contacts and ensure the ARI finds the right audiences. This is particularly the case in regional and locality-based ARIs where place-based knowledge exchange and relationship building is more critical.

Running introductory launch events/webinars has proved a popular method to raise awareness and garner interest in contributing to the ARI. Public events can help promote the ARI and field any questions. In-person events can convene relevant local actors, and build personal relationships, and may be significant where research questions have a local or regional character. Online events can reach further afield and are inexpensive to organise. UPEN have hosted several well-attended [online](#) and [in person](#) events on ARIs very recently. ARIs should also be actively publicised following launch to maintain interest and communication: Policy Leeds for instance has used a combination of social media, annual events, and blogs which has grown the Leeds ARI profile over the years.



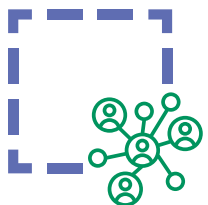
Stage 5.
Promoting the ARI

Case Study:

North of Tyne Combined Authority ARI publication strategy

A key intention of the NTCA core team was to encourage a wider audience to respond than just academic researchers. This in part was due to the thematic focus of the ARI on ‘connected communities and community engagement’ – where the evidence base and likely partners would not all be found within a university’s campus. A co-design workshop with the core team was structured around creating a stakeholder plan to target this audience and engage local knowledge networks. From this, we engaged key stakeholders, including CAPE and Insights North East as local knowledge brokers, and relevant university contacts across the region.

The ARI was published on the NTCA website and promoted through social media accounts of key partners. UPEN and CAPE also publicised the ARI, helping to reach universities and academic-policy networks at a national level to complement our regional engagement. The core team made use of existing connections to the voluntary community social enterprise sector and local authorities, as well as academic networks, to further publicise the ARI. The initial call for evidence received 31 detailed responses directly addressing the ARI’s research questions, the majority from local actors.



Stage 6. Engagement and Knowledge Exchange

ARIs help institutions address their knowledge needs more pro-actively and systematically. Most will want to use their ARI to actively engage with relevant external stakeholders through engagement and knowledge exchange.

Most ARIs have a single point of contact for external engagement on their ARI. This has involved setting up an email inbox for fielding research requests, proposals and contributions to the ARI. We also recommend appointing one or more staff members to manage external engagement and ensure this connects to ongoing efforts to integrate the ARI within the host organisation.

A common, and straightforward, addition is using an online survey form as a request form or call for evidence, advertised prominently on the ARI website. [Senedd Cymru](#) for example uses an online Microsoft Forms link to enable contributors to register interest in being kept informed, add existing and planned research in the topic area, and suggest questions for the Committees to ask of the Welsh Government.

An online form can solicit both research evidence (via hyperlinks or file upload) and narrative responses from contributors by directly posing research questions as survey items. In the NTCA's case, its 12 research questions structured an online 'call for evidence' survey. Responses were indexed in a central evidence database for straightforward analysis on a question-by-question basis. When designing calls for evidence, it has proved useful to offer the option to upload documents or other attachments as evidence, separate from the commentary submitted, and to attach handling requests or restrictions on further sharing. This enables documentation to be assembled alongside narratives in a single evidence database.

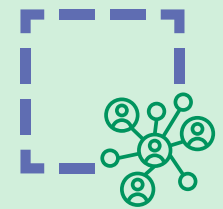
Using an online form has the additional benefit of collating a distribution list to arrange subsequent contact and knowledge exchange. Contributors should of course be informed of how data will be stored, processed and used in line with relevant data protection legislation, any relevant organisational policies and handling requests from contributors. Microsoft Forms, Qualtrics, JISC Online surveys amongst many others provide suitable platforms.

Online surveys, however, have a number of deficiencies as a knowledge exchange tool. They do not permit significant nuance or the evolution of views through two-way dialogue. Applied alone, online surveys will fail to overcome longstanding barriers separating communities subject to marginalisation from contributing sufficiently. For these reasons, we recommend considering more ambitious engagement strategies which involve stakeholders in more relational and dialogical knowledge exchange.

The NTCA for instance used an online survey as a first step. One-to-one conversations were subsequently arranged between contributors and ARI core team members to further explore submissions they found particularly resonant. Contributors were invited back to a workshop to discuss themes arising across all responses in greater depth. These activities developed not only staff knowledge about their topic, but their relationships with individuals and organisations with expertise in the subject area.

It would also be beneficial to commission outreach activities to promote the ARI and attract potential contributors, particularly where evidence is sought from citizens and communities. Community-level workshops have been considered in some cases. Here, staff could support engagement led by other groups better embedded in local contexts. Commissioning community-based research projects could also provide novel insight into ARI research questions. Ambitious ARIs can look to deliberative democracy methods like citizen juries or citizen assemblies.

More relational approaches require additional investment, time and attention. They also introduce complexity to the analysis since very different types of evidence (scientific, experiential, or narrative evidence) require integration and balancing. For this reason, the ARI core team requires keen analytical capacity even after ARI publication. The NTCA found it valuable to retain a documented evidence base, which could be expanded or revisited in the future.



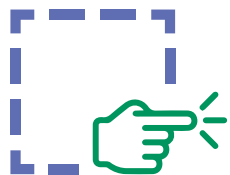
Stage 6.
Engagement
& Knowledge Exchange

Case study:

Leeds use of an ARI to build conversations and relationships

Leeds' ARI developed as a response to a review of collaboration between Leeds City Council and the University of Leeds. ARIs have been [developed](#) and [iterated](#) over the past two years which identify current council priority areas that align with strategic ambitions. Leeds has applied an innovative approach to using their ARI to shape calls for the Research England [Policy Support Fund](#), which is open to researchers at the University of Leeds to bid for on an annual basis.

The intention has been to utilise the ARI in conjunction with funding to initiate conversations, develop connections, and build relationships between researchers and council staff. Over the last two years, funding has supported [15 projects](#) that have strengthened the connection between the university and the council, as well as creating a wide range of outputs.



Stage 7. Institutionalising the ARI

Evidence suggests an ARI will struggle to influence practice without a strategy for its use and integration. This final step therefore seeks to establish the conditions for the ARI's implementation and further development.

ARIs can be used in many ways. Most commonly, they help organisations direct their research activity – for example setting research agendas, directing research spending, and ensuring that internal and commissioned research addresses the specific research priorities identified. ARIs can also help organisations become more evidence-driven by using the ARI and its evidence base to inform strategic and financial decision-making processes.

Organisations can also use ARIs as their front door for academic engagement and knowledge exchange more broadly. Incoming research queries and proposals can be directed toward the ARI to ensure organisational priorities are upheld. ARIs can help organisations be more assertive about their research needs, serving as a framing device or reference point for when establishing research projects, collaborations and partnerships. The [Ministry of Justice](#) has established an Academic Network with over 350 experts which it can draw on in tackling its knowledge needs.

Shifting political ground may make implementation difficult, particularly if strategic priorities change drastically. Integrating the ARI into core organisational policies and strategies – for instance corporate, business or strategic plans - can keep the ARI on the strategic agenda and hard-wire it into routine operations. Seeking formal endorsement from high-level governing boards can also provide protection. For instance, the NTCA's ARI faced an uncertain future when the organisation became the larger North East Combined Authority. Core team members subsequently developed a proposal to the new North East Combined Authority's Cabinet to take forward the ARI's subject area as a going concern. With formal approval, the ARI will now inform an “inclusive engagement” strategy within the new regional authority.

Finally, ARIs also need continual revision and adaptation to meet emerging research priorities and engage new contributors. ARIs need to be formally revised regularly to keep up with a dynamic political context and knowledge environment and ensure their ongoing relevance. Core teams must plan how the ARI will be updated and scheduled around existing corporate and strategic functions. Leeds City Council's ARI is revisited annually, for instance, to keep in step with council priorities.

For all these reasons, we consider it essential that organisations resource an ongoing role for the core team, empowering the individuals involved to act as advocates and champions for the ARI's implementation. Consideration should be given to establishing a broader grouping of staff – a cross-functional team or [community of practice](#) model for instance – which could spread ownership across the organisation and help layer the ARI through a broader spectrum of core practices. In Leeds for example, a secondment of one core team member into the council following ARI development provided a key point of contact to support its mainstreaming within the council.



Stage 7.
Institutionalising the ARI

Case Study:

Refreshing the Leeds ARI

Leeds has ensured that their ARIs remain relevant through a series of iterations. For example, feedback from the first Policy Support Fund projects identified that subsequent calls needed to include an element of co-creation for more authentic engagement with the council's identified priority areas. Investment has also been made in futureproofing the ARIs to ensure their sustainability. A research manager from the University of Leeds has been seconded to Leeds City Council and has been working closely with council staff to build their capacity to take ownership of development of the ARIs in the future. An annual cycle is now established comprising of the evaluation, iteration and publication of refreshed ARIs.

The teams involved are now working to broaden the ARI's engagement further. For example, the council is exploring methods to collaborate with the VCSE sector to feed these voices into ARI development. Furthermore, the council is seeking connections with other local and combined authorities that are also adopting ARIs, both for learning purposes and to minimise duplication of effort.

How we developed this guide

We drew from several sources in developing this guide. First, our own experience as CAPE Fellows supporting the development of an ARI with the North of Tyne Combined Authority, which following an extended devolution deal has now become the North East Combined Authority. Second, we undertook interviews with stakeholders within ARI core teams in the Leeds and Newcastle City Council ARIs. Third, we liaised with other CAPE Fellows who had direct experience of developing ARIs with other institutions. We are grateful for the support and expertise provided by our ARI expert group. We also refined the steps and guidance through co-design workshops staged at the 2024 UK Knowledge Mobilisation Forum in Dundee, and the 2024 Complexity and Outcomes Conference at Northumbria University.

1.	CAPE-funded Policy Fellowship with the North of Tyne Combined Authority <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews with around 20 Combined Authority staff• Five workshops with the ARI core team• Workshop and additional interviews with ARI respondents
2.	Case studies of Newcastle and Leeds City Councils <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews with ARI core teams• Review of public and internal documentation
3.	Background review of other ARIs <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conversations with key stakeholders• Review of public documentation
4.	Consultation <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Co-design workshops in Dundee and Newcastle• Guidance and feedback on drafts from ARI experts

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