





# MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH POLICYMAKERS

Head of Public Policy Southampton (PPS), Gareth Giles, or Giles as he is known, describes what he and his team do as “public policy knowledge brokerage.”

“Our role is to support researchers to engage with policymakers, and policymakers to engage with researchers. We’re aiming to enable policymakers to have the very best evidence at their fingertips when making decisions which impact all of us.”

Southampton has been pioneering in its “patient investment in policy engagement”, said Giles. PPS, the University’s policy engagement unit, was established in 2012 after Professor of Public Policy Gerry Stoker recognised the increasing weight research funders were placing on policy impact as part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014. The University is now recognised as a leading institution in this maturing aspect of the Impact Agenda.

More widely UK universities’ engagement with policy is inconsistent. A 2017 Government report by Dr Caroline Kenny, *The Role of Research in the UK Parliament*, described it as ‘limited and poor quality’. Parliamentarians and Westminster staff reported that using academic research evidence could be challenging due to ‘lack of accessibility, poor presentation and communication, and limited relevance.’

Poor policy engagement by academics was problematic because evidence submissions to Parliamentary Select Committees and



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government were dominated by well-resourced trade associations, charities, and NGOs, who have a vested interest in specific outcomes. In contrast, the report argued, academics could provide ‘a balanced and nuanced commentary on the evidence relating to legislation’, helping decision-makers understand the various positions.

PPS’s aim, explained Giles, is to “boost the capabilities and confidence of researchers to engage with decision-makers and ensure that local and national government can easily access in a timely manner the world-leading research conducted here at the University.”

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# Making connections with policymakers

Their activities are delivered through a three-pillar approach, based on “co-production” with researchers and policymakers.

## **Pillar one: evidence supply**

Through grey literature review and stakeholder analysis, PPS develops bespoke policy engagement strategies for researchers. These provide analysis of the policy landscape and identify key stakeholders in government and Parliament. Those individuals are then invited to a policy workshop, giving the research team a chance to share research findings and co-produce policy recommendations with the policy audience. For civil servants, emerging evidence can provide a useful insight and encourage them to advocate for that research within the decision-making process.

Effective communications, including PPS's Evidence to Policy blog, Policy|Spotlight videos, and audio podcast series Policy|Pod, play a vital role in making the evidence easily discoverable for policymakers. (These can be found on the ‘Support for Policymakers’ page on Public Policy Southampton's website, link below). Through search engine optimisation and active social media accounts PPS ensures the visibility of Southampton research in organic searches.

## **Pillar two: evidence demand**

Giles refers to this as the “known unknowns” – the things that Government is aware that it needs to know more about.

Government asks for evidence through publishing Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) and consultations known as Green or White Papers. Both ARIs and White Papers (which set out the Government's plans and ask for responses from stakeholders) offer potential openings for policy engagement from researchers. PPS helps identify relevant consultations, working with academics to refine their responses or develop accessible documentation to show how their research can help understand a problem. The team also supports researchers making written submissions to Select Committee Inquiries or Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology ‘POST Notes’, or attending Parliament to give oral evidence.

PPS sifts consultations and inquiries from the UK Government, the Senedd and the Scottish Parliament, as well as Hampshire County Council and Southampton City Council, to understand the questions being asked. As well as horizon-scanning, this enables the team to match the questions with expertise at the University. This is aided by the recent appointment of specialist policy officers in the faculties of Environmental and Life Sciences,

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Arts and Humanities, and Medicine, as well as the Web Science Institute, Sustainability and Resilience Institute, Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities and Southampton Marine and Maritime Institute.

Secondments provide a less formal, more in-depth route to policy engagement.

“We have good relationships with many civil servants, which allows us to identify areas that they need to know more about. We can help shape their policy question into research questions which can be addressed through secondments,” explained Giles.

Secondments give PhD students and researchers the chance to experience a politically led organisation, use their practical research skills, and build their networks. Civil servants can bring state-of-the-art research skills into their decision-making at no extra financial cost. For PPS, secondments are an opportunity to build credibility and goodwill with the civil servant, often leading to future opportunities for Southampton academics.

## **Pillar three: capacity raising**

This includes policy engagement training, knowledge exchange activities, and placement opportunities.

The Public Policy Southampton Membership scheme, open to all University researchers, offers its 500+ members regular targeted updates on evidence-to-policy opportunities, policy impact activities and access to contacts in national and local government.

Open to doctoral students or Postdoctoral Fellows, PPS's Policy|Associates scheme is a

paid opportunity to support a variety of UKRI-funded projects with stakeholder analysis and policy synthesis, with full training given. Policy|Associates is nationally recognised as an innovative example of creating opportunities which address skills gaps from PGRs and capacity gaps for government.

As vice-chair of the University Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) – a 120-member sector body of which Southampton was founding chair – Giles is also helping to address sector-wide competencies, professional accreditation, and the development of career pathways. Recognising the greater emphasis on policy impact in the REF 2029, many universities are examining their capabilities. Through the UPEN Mentorship programme Giles offers other institutions advice from Southampton's experience on establishing and developing their public policy units.

## **Critical friend**

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Successful policy engagement is subject to many variables outside the University's control and sometimes comes many years after the original research concluded. PPS can help equip researchers with the necessary qualities for the journey, explained Giles:

“Creativity in generating engagement opportunities; tenacity when their policy engagement plan gets knocked off course by a change in the political winds; and the ability to think beyond today or the current award.”

For civil servants and local government officers, PPS offers them access to trusted specialists.

Giles concluded, “Southampton's long-term investment in public policy knowledge brokerage means that we have a depth of contacts and credibility, combined with the reputation as a full-spectrum Russell Group university, to be able to offer the dispassionate, non-political analysis of a critical friend, to say ‘here's what the evidence says are the potential consequences of the policy decision being considered’.”

 **Read more about Public Policy Southampton:**  
[www.southampton.ac.uk/publicpolicy](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/publicpolicy)