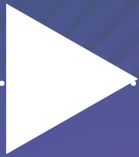# Common stages in the ARI process

Transforming Evidence
for policy and practice

Common stages in the ARI process

In the UK, ARIs are produced by a range of public sector organisations. Government departments are obliged to produce ARIs on a regular basis, whereas other public sector organisations do so on a voluntary basis.

For UK government departments, devolved administrations, executive agencies and arm's length bodies, there is existing guidance on Writing and using Areas of Research Interest produced by the Government Office for Science. For all public sector organisations, there are common stages to the ARI process:

1. Identifying a lead sponsor

It is helpful to have a named individual or team responsible for delivering the ARIs with a mandate to work across the organisation. This helps the ARIs achieve the ownership and support of the whole organisation who will see their priorities reflected within the document. In government departments, this is usually the Chief Scientist who has oversight of departmental research-policy engagement activities including research commissioning, science advisory structures, knowledge mobilisation activities, and dialogue with funders. In non-government organisations this can be a senior analyst or an executive with lead responsibility for science and analysis.
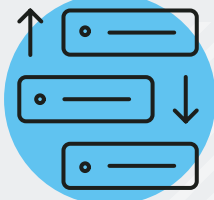
2. Soliciting and prioritising knowledge needs from policy and practice teams

ARIs should reflect as comprehensively as possible the policy and knowledge priorities of all policy teams/directorates. If possible, these should be produced with colleagues in the evidence/analysis function. Some organisations survey all teams to elicit an initial long list, then prioritise these with senior leaders.

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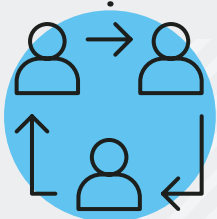
3. Engaging with key stakeholders

Helps alert funders and research communities about upcoming policy priorities and helps the policy teams to assess the existing evidence base. This information can inform the post-publication ARI engagement strategy. Ideally, the final ARI document can (a) identify ARIs where there is already a mature evidence base, and / or (b) propose concrete actions for each ARI or set of ARIs. For example, where there is a mature evidence base and / or relevant evidence syntheses, a knowledge exchange event may be more useful than commissioning new research. Engagement often takes place through existing networks such as Science Advisory Committees (SACs).

4. Publishing and disseminating the ARI:

Where possible, it is helpful to have the final ARI document signed off or otherwise endorsed by senior leadership prior to publication to signal the credibility of the identified knowledge needs. Although all ARI documents are different, it is often helpful to include:

- The aim and purpose of the ARI document

- How the ARIs were developed and by whom, with a timetable for refreshing the ARIs

- A point of contact, and ideally an email address

- Any next steps which the organisation is planning to take around specific ARIs (e.g. commissioning of knowledge exchange events or research

- How external stakeholders could respond to or use specific ARIs (e.g. indicating where policy briefs, evidence syntheses, or focused discussion would be welcome)

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UK government ARIs can be found in the [ARI database](). Publishing the ARIs on this database helps raise awareness among stakeholders, as well as identifying potentially relevant research projects and opportunities for collaboration. It can also be helpful to engage with knowledge brokers such as the University Policy Engagement Network (an umbrella organisation for university policy centres), and the National Academies to disseminate new ARIs.

5. Using the ARIs to engage with stakeholders:

It is helpful for policy and practice organisations to have a clearly articulated external engagement strategy complementing their existing science advisory structures. Policy and practice organisations get the most from the ARI process where external stakeholders are given useful steers about what the most constructive responses would be. Most ARIs can potentially be addressed using existing research and expertise. This means that evidence synthesis and knowledge mobilisation (through e.g. roundtables, seminars, or other expert consultation) are likely to be effective mechanisms to address several ARIs. Organisations could consider expanding the range of research-policy engagement mechanisms ordinarily used; for example, working with secondees, contributing to academic syllabuses, working with the What Works Network to commission evidence syntheses, knowledge mobilisation events, dialogue with funders about existing grant portfolios and upcoming strategic investment; training and capacity-building activities; involving stakeholders such as local government or voluntary sector. These may be better-value engagement mechanisms than fellowships or commissioned research, which are both more expensive and time-consuming.

6. Refreshing ARIs:

Most policy and practice organisations aim to refresh their ARIs every 1-3 years, to ensure the priorities remain up-to-date and politically relevant. When seeking to refresh ARIs, it is helpful to revisit policy priorities and assess the changing evidence base.

7. Assessing impact of ARIs:

Policy and practice organisations need to be able to show that it is worth the investment of time and resource in working so intensely, with externals and with funders. Examples of clear benefits would be helpful, particularly on whether and how it has changed research funding practices. Policy and practice organisations wanting to assess impact may find it helpful to be as clear as possible about their goals, their 'asks' (e.g. synthesis, knowledge mobilisation, focused discussion, state-of-field discussion) and 'offers' (e.g. hosting roundtable, research funding) to inform evaluation plans. It might also be useful to work with stakeholders such as funders, who could notify policy or practice organisations when ARIs are cited in grant applications, or used in strategic planning; researchers, who may cite ARIs in research publications; or external stakeholders (UPEN, universities, National Academies) to pass on queries about ARI usage.

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