

Stakeholder Engagement Activities of UKPRP Funded Projects



**UKPRP CoP Network
Development Theme**
Led by Jack G. Martin,
Emma Stewart,
Heather Lodge & Alice
MacLachlan

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Executive Summary

Stakeholder Mapping

- Can involve initial pre-funding recruitment.
- Mapping gaps and recruiting stakeholders is an ongoing process.

Policy Mapping

- Involves extensive scanning of the policy field.
- Enables streamlined discussions with stakeholders.
- But it can be time-consuming and resource intensive.

Initial contact

- Often in the form of 'snowballing' – start broad.
- Can be frustrating, but important to persevere and identify gaps.

Researchers supporting co-production

- Focuses on forming and maintaining close relationships with stakeholders.
- Important that this individual knows the organisation really well – ideally not an academic

Social media

- Twitter can be useful to engage with new stakeholders, however the audience and reach can be misleading.
- An up-to-date website can be useful to advertise events and act as a focal point for interested parties to go to

Value

- Important to offer the stakeholders something, so they remain engaged.
- This is often in the form of events and the opportunity to meet others in the same field.

Interactions with specific stakeholders

- Conflicts of interest is something that needs to be considered with all stakeholders, and particularly those that are involved in co-production.

Maintaining contact

- Relationships change over the course of the project, some are more involved at different times.
- This is where the Researcher supporting co-production roles are extremely valuable, to maintain the relationships even through periods where some stakeholders may not be particularly engaged.

Stakeholder pressures

- Stakeholders also have pressures of their own, this often does not allow them to engage as much as they would maybe like
- Being aware of stakeholders' other priorities and agendas, as well as possible changes in their department or the wider political landscape
- Try to remove the barriers that might prevent your stakeholders' participation, e.g. the time that events are held

Events

- Webinars - A method of initiating contact and encouraging trying to keep longer engagement with the stakeholders.
- Sandpit - Useful tool to bring together stakeholders and researchers to establish the status quo with regards to policy priorities and direction of projects.
- Round-table - To bring policymakers and researchers together over a whole day to showcase research through different presentations.

- Data Dive - An event to discuss and collate about datasets brings people working on similar topics together and allows them to discuss issues or gaps etc.

Audiences

- Care should be taken to invite the right kind of stakeholders to the right kind of event.
- Having an activity during an event can help discover key issues as well as find common ground.

Online Engagement

Table 1: Summary evaluation of online engagement with stakeholders	
Advantages	Disadvantages
Allows more stakeholders to attend, including internationally	Difficulty building new relationships
Higher level of attendance at webinar events	Progressing specific problems
Events are low-cost	Lack of 'catch-up' conversations – focus on tasks
More inclusive	Challenges in building trust
More frequent engagement can strengthen relationships	Attendees may be less prepared for meetings

Hybrid Meetings

- These are difficult to do well, and an efficient facilitator is crucial to the success of hybrid meetings.

Recommendations

- Stakeholder engagement entails several different strategies and approaches. Researchers need to be adaptable and be aware that there is not one correct way of engaging stakeholders.
- Researchers should be aware that different stakeholders engage and interact in diverse ways.
- Sufficient resources for stakeholder engagement should be factored into research grant proposals.
- Time and effort are required to establish and maintain working relationships, which should be factored into research projects.
- Stakeholder engagement is a continuous and dynamic process. Researchers should be prepared to engage with stakeholders throughout the duration of a project.

Background

What is the UKPRP?

The UK Prevention Research Partnership (UKPRP) is a multi-funder initiative that supports novel research into the primary prevention of non-communicable disease (NCD) to improve population health and reduce health inequalities. Our Community of Practice is made up of members from UKPRP funded Networks and Consortia.

What is the Community of Practice?

The UK Prevention Research Partnership (UKPRP) Community of Practice (CoP) is a forum to share ideas, opportunities, and challenges across the UKPRP Networks and Consortia. By exploring our experiences, we can learn from one another, and together, to improve our ways of working to support non-communicable disease prevention. The CoP provides a place to share our learning across key topics of mutual interest. Communities of practice are iterative and respond to the needs of the group, therefore new topics of interest have emerged as we have progressed, particularly when the new funded Consortia joined. Over time, we will continue to build a body of publicly available knowledge, methods, and tools to share learning with each other and the wider prevention research community. The website for this is <https://ukprp.org/community-of-practice/>.

A UKPRP Network is a new interdisciplinary community of researchers and users formed around a broad NCD primary prevention research challenge and support networking activity. Networks support interactions between diverse disciplines and users to exchange expertise, scientific insights and capability as the network generates a shared vision around its chosen NCD prevention challenge. A key focus of a Network is to develop future capacity in the UK to address NCD prevention challenges. The funded Networks are:

GENIUS's aim is to build a community working towards a more health-promoting food and nutrition system in UK schools. The ultimate vision of the GENIUS network is to harness the expertise and experience of a wide range of stakeholders to drive excellence in all parts of the UK school food system to benefit the health of all pupils.

PETRA's vision is to bring together experts in economics, environment (climate change, sustainable development, planetary health), law, public health, and public policy to look at how trade and investment agreements affect the health and wellbeing of the population in the UK.

PHASE's aim is to bring together public health and simulation experts to deliver translational research that uses agent-based models to address the complex challenges faced by decision makers in the prevention of non-communicable diseases.

MatCHNet's aim is to develop a multidisciplinary, community of public health researchers, methodologists, policy makers and service providers. This community will come together to prioritise and evaluate upstream policy interventions that potentially affect child and maternal health outcomes, using administrative data across the 4 nations.

A UKPRP Consortium is a novel combination of partners, including, where appropriate, industry (such as commercial/business partners), representing a range of academic disciplines and undertaking interdisciplinary research addressing a specific challenge in the primary prevention of NCDs. UKPRP Consortia develop research strategies with users, for example policy makers, practitioners, civil society groups, health providers, the public, who may be part of the consortium, for the generation and implementation of new knowledge. The thinking behind consortia is that drawing together teams of experts from different disciplines and sectors, and including users, should enable researchers to capitalise on a range of expertise to develop novel research into high-quality interventions that can deliver change at a population level. The funded Consortia are:

ActEarly's aim is to focus on upstream early life interventions to improve the health and opportunities for children living in two contrasting areas with high levels of child poverty: Bradford, Yorkshire and Tower Hamlets, London.

GroundsWell's aim is to create a virtuous cycle of research, data, policy, implementation, and active citizenship. By working together, we will all better understand and evidence the role of urban green and blue space within wider social, economic, environmental, cultural and health systems. We will identify and implement actions to maximise health benefits from urban green and blue space. Our democratisation of the research and decision-making process will be based on principles of co-design, co-implementation, co-evaluation, and co-translation.

Kailo's aim is to: Work closely with local partners and build strong relationships that reinforce local efforts to address the wider determinants of mental health issues amongst young people; Help build a shared and systemic view of the wider determinants of young people's mental health, which surface new perspectives, challenges and opportunities; Support work that puts young people at the centre of the process to understand their experience, design new strategies and inform decisions; Collaborate to push forward and validate sustainable systemic approaches, which can continue to play a role in driving transformative change for young people.

SIPHER's aim is to shift from health policy to healthy public policy. This means all policy sectors working together to tackle health inequalities and improve the health of the public. The conditions in which we are born, grow, live, work and age are key drivers of health and health inequalities. Preventing ill health related to these "social determinants of health" requires well-coordinated policies across many sectors, such as the economy, welfare, housing, education, and employment. SIPHER will deliver novel evidence of the costs and benefits of the complex, interlinked and long-term consequences of policy decisions. This will help our policy partner organisations identify opportunities for the strategic alignment of policies across relevant sectors and give the confidence to change the way major investment decisions are made.

SPECTRUM's aim is to focus on the commercial determinants of health and health inequalities. SPECTRUM will generate new evidence to inform the prevention of NCDs caused by unhealthy commodities, including tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink. Our research aims to transform policy and practice to encourage and enable healthy environments and behaviours.

TRUUD's aim is to work with decision makers and communities to prioritise health in urban decision-making processes. We are particularly focused on how non-communicable diseases (NCDs) can be prevented by changing the way that urban development decisions are made. We are focusing on major new infrastructure and transport systems in our case study areas of Bristol and Greater Manchester. We are working with senior decision-makers, related stakeholders (including community partners), and advisors at national, regional and city level. With them, we will identify where the most influence on decision-makers lies (e.g., land disposal, procurement, regulation, economics), then develop and test ways to prioritise health.

Vision's aim is to improve the measurement of violence to support the investigation of causal pathways, to develop a theory of change, and to evaluate interventions, in order to reduce the violence that harms health. Gender and other inequalities are mainstreamed throughout the analysis. The Consortium draws on multiple disciplines across the social and health sciences, including sociology, criminology, health, and economics. We will work with data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, Third Sector specialist services, police, health services and much more. We will integrate and analyse data to build a theory of change and evaluate interventions.

Importance of Stakeholder Engagement

Research can provide the knowledge to enable change, and for UKPRP funded group's activities and research to be able to make a change in the field of public health and NCD prevention, it is essential to not only effectively communicate with and disseminate to a range of stakeholders and decision makers in policy and practice, but also co-produce with them where appropriate (see figure 1). Therefore, effective, and efficient interactions as well as building strong relationships with stakeholders are crucial elements to enabling UKPRP and the funded groups to make the desired impact. Literature around this subject, such as [Boaz et al. \(2018\)](#), has identified a knowledge gap relating to assessing the impact of stakeholder engagement on research use. The cohort involved in this report are of particular relevance as they are part of diverse research teams that

focus on upstream determinants and central to their project design is co-production of research with the public, policy makers, professionals and those likely to implement the intervention.

Methods

Interviews took place between April and November 2022 with members from all 11 of the UKPRP funded Consortia and Networks. These were conducted by the CoP Research Fellow who works across all the funded groups and is primarily responsible for progressing outputs. The purpose of these interviews was to gather in-depth knowledge of the stakeholder engagement activities carried out by the funded groups. The participants described their stakeholder engagement activities, the benefits and downsides to these, and shared learning about conducting these activities for multi-institutional research groups, which are all synthesised in this report. Participants were approached for interview as their role within their funded group related to governance, stakeholder engagement or impact. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom and were recorded using Zoom’s record feature. Interview recordings were professionally transcribed, anonymised and imported into NVivo 12 for analysis. Analysis was thematic and used both deductive and inductive approaches.

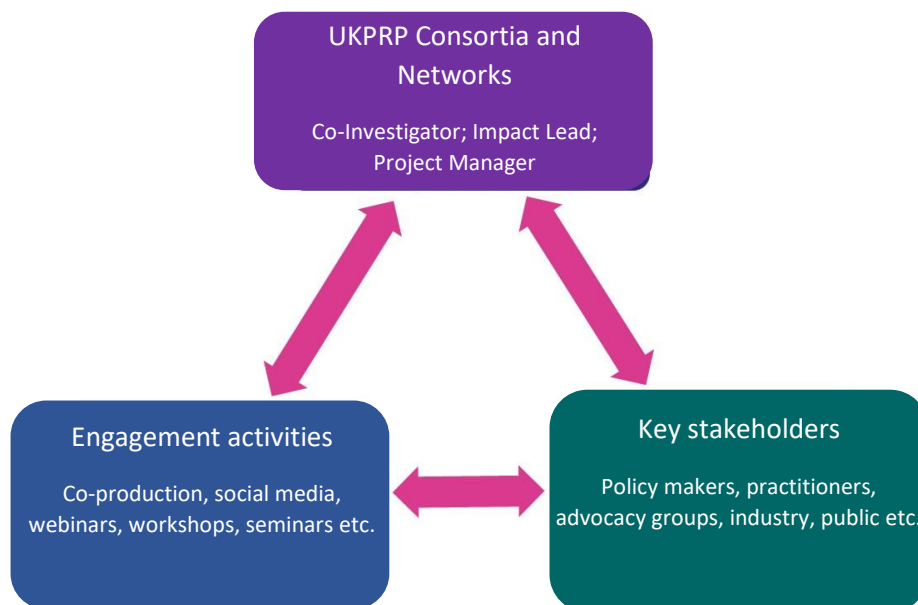


Figure 1: The key elements to stakeholder relationships

Pre stakeholder engagement activities

Stakeholder Mapping

Across all the funded groups, none described performing any formal mapping or analysis of stakeholders at the start of the funding period. Instead, many Networks and Consortia were aware of the different stakeholders they would like to be engaging with and brought individuals onto their project at the set-up stage who already had strong links with those stakeholders.

“So, we sort of almost in the construction of the application had the people on board to then pull in those stakeholder connections and we did have letters of support, you know, and buy in, you know, not formally in terms of costs etc but from stakeholders in, probably particularly [Location] and [Location]. So, we did sort of try and have that embedded from the start [...] the range of people we had in the network already we actually had good connections with the active players” – Network Principal Investigator

“Some of that was through personal contacts, so when we set [the Network] up we thought very carefully about who to ask as PIs and Co-Is because we wanted that breadth of discipline. And each of those experts in their own right has come with their own set of, their own network of contacts” - Network Coordinator

This can be seen as a very efficient method, as links and relationships are already established with key individuals from the start, and communication with them can progress right away. However, this does rely on:

1. experts knowing the subject area, and already being aware of who the key individuals and stakeholders are, and
2. convincing these key individuals to come onboard with your project.

The Principal Investigators of the UKPRP funded groups are all very established academics, with a vast array of experiences, contacts, and established relationships in their field. For less experienced researchers, who perhaps are less aware of the stakeholder landscape, performing a stakeholder analysis and mapping who the influential stakeholders are may be the best place to start.

Recruiting stakeholders can also be regarded as an ongoing process. For example, one Network explained that they conducted a stakeholder mapping exercise after several months to determine any gaps. This identified key groups including academics, UK/international connections, public health agencies, government, third sector organisations, and service providers. Existing contacts and gaps in membership, including geographical coverage, were then identified as the basis for further targeted recruitment. This exercise was also helpful in setting up a stakeholder consultation group to ensure the key groups were invited as well as representation from across the UK nations.

One Consortia also discussed how they brought in one of their stakeholders as a co-director 2 years into their project, and have seen huge benefits from doing so:

“We made a change at the end of year 2 and brought like one of our policy partners like as a co-director which has worked really well because that means that we’ve basically got the academic and the policy or end user perspective represented at the top of the Consortium in terms of the strategic decision making, so that’s been really helpful in terms of us being plugged into the realities of what these organisations are dealing with but also again able to sort of respond to opportunities as well so that’s been helpful.” – Consortia member

Policy Mapping

One Network carried out policy mapping before engaging with stakeholder groups. This was mainly due to the constraints of conducting this task at the start of the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020. This was described as ‘desk-based policy scanning of the policy landscape’ in their subject area. The Principal Investigator describes the benefits of this:

“So we thought it would be a good idea to kind of map out what the policies were (...) we know within our kind of Management Group to prioritise and filter those and then be a bit more strategic and go onto the stakeholders with a shortened list of priorities. (...) I think we were then able to target people a bit better (...) by having a smaller list of policies, get people who were actually interested in them to come and talk to us.” – Network Principal Investigator

Another benefit identified was that when discussing the list of identified policies, stakeholders could help to gather more information and discuss the feasibility of having an impact in that area:

“I think in terms of our meetings that we had with our stakeholders they were picking up on the ones that we had already talked about, and we had identified in our group. (...) it was useful to get information, they might say well yeah that policy is important, but you can’t evaluate it for this reason, or that reason, or its already been evaluated, or give us input in that sense.” – Network Coordinator

“I think it did really help us focus into what was available and what could be done (...) the sort of stakeholder group are able to say we don’t need any more research on that, or there is already research evidence there.” – Network Principal Investigator

However, this process did come with a warning. It proved to be quite challenging and time consuming:

“The actual mapping of the policies is a very labour-intensive process. So I don’t know if people would...you need to factor that in if you wanted to do that, it’s not just a simple exercise to do it, it took a long time to do. We tried to take quite a systematic approach to it so its...yeah, it’s not just like a small add on that you could do if you wanted to do it properly.” – Network Coordinator

Interactions with stakeholders

Initial contact

Although funded groups may have been already aware of the key stakeholders in their field, they did not necessarily have established relationships with all of them. One group talked about ‘snowballing’ to begin that interaction. This is where stakeholders talk to each other, and individuals pass on information about the project. One Network PI said: *“we’ve constantly said to people who else do you know who might be interested in this area?”* Another Network similarly described what they did:

“So I think sometimes it is about if people know people and they know a name, even if it’s not even like a very strong contact but if they just know someone and they know that name and so if the email comes into their inbox they’re not just going to automatically ignore it (...) I suspect that overtime that’s what’s helped us to maybe make more contacts because when you start initially nobody really knows who you are.” – Network Coordinator

Unsurprisingly, email was the most common method of contacting people and one Network Coordinator said it can be frustrating, but you just have to persevere sometimes:

“You have to be persistent [laughter], don’t give up and I guess start broadly so start as broad as you can in terms of putting out to all the potential people that you can contact. If you can get someone...you might not know someone initially but if you can get someone who’s interested, they’re interested in what you’re doing then you can use them to get other people as well. So once you’ve got broadly...you’ve got people who respond to you then you can identify your gaps in your stakeholders and the people you want to engage with (...) I think people were interested in it and if it wasn’t right at the time for them they might say well this is really interesting but actually it’s my colleagues that you need to...so some of them were like...again it wasn’t easy to get those ones but so then you’re sort of cold emailing colleagues of people that you don’t really know if that makes sense.”

Researchers supporting co-production

Some of the Consortia have members of their team permanently based in stakeholder organisations. These kinds of roles have a range of titles such as Researchers in Residence, Embedded Researchers or Knowledge Brokers. This is likely a result of Consortia being a lot more resourced and can afford to appoint roles specifically designed to form and maintain close relationships with stakeholders.

A Consortia member in one of these roles describes their purpose:

“To kind of try and bridge the bit between research, look for opportunities as policy is being developed (...) my role is about presenting evidence and letting the political masters decide on what the policy will be. So, I basically just kind of look for different opportunities about what’s going on.” – Consortia member supporting co-production

While a member of a different Consortia described their version of this kind of role as:

“They attend meetings, they feed in, so they are engaging in action research, so they’re kind of consistently dripping this in. So even their presence there says health is important and we think it’s important but also the conversations that they have and how they work with them, they’re kind of drip feeding in this idea of health and trying to bring health more centrally as well.” – Consortium Management Team member

Here, a Consortium manager describes how important it is that someone in this kind of role knows the organisation they are in really well, and how it would not be as effective if it were an academic that was placed into the organisation:

“on each of them it was someone that was already there, I think that’s probably been beneficial because I think someone coming into a project like [our Consortium], or like any of the consortium it’s pretty complicated and there are so many different people so having to sort of learn the approach, learn the structure of the team, whilst also trying to like then get into a new organisation when effectively your job is to sort of have the 2 of those things closely linked together, I think probably would be too big a task I think for a lot of people. So yeah, the people being in the organisations already I think that’s been a benefit.” – Consortia manager

Here is a member of a Consortium describing the first task they had, which was to establish connections with the stakeholders they thought should be aware of the work their Consortium is doing:

“that’s been kind of the number one priority for the first year in post is just establishing connections with the people that we think need to know about [The Consortium]. So for me, that was just about setting up introductory meetings with key stakeholders in [location]. So there was a bit about identifying so who is it that we need to be talking to. So when it came to sort of civil servants and people who are directly responsible for writing policy or developing policy, that was just getting in touch with them and asking for an opportunity to have a kind of introductory meeting that usually involved a presentation of all of the [...] work packages and I kind of summarised that and took them through this is what it is, this is what we’re doing, these are the key areas, this is who I am, if there is any of this stuff that is of interest to you please get in touch with me and then that led to more kind of tailored meetings or presentations with specific research teams within [The Consortium]. So if there was a policy team at [the government] who were particularly interested in data that one of the teams had I was setting those up but we also produced a kind of introductory letter and briefing for [members of the government], so just...that is literally just about raising their awareness of [The Consortium]” – Consortia member supporting co-production

Social media

Social media was also mentioned as a method of initiating connections with key stakeholders. One PI describes how they used Twitter to do this:

“We identified, you know, the sort of I suppose key players online that we wanted to pick up or connect with, so I suppose it’s just to start by liking things that they did or if we had personal connections sort of making contact and saying this is us, this is who we are, this is what we’ll be doing. So, you know, a variety of ways just to try and get that presence”. – Network Principal Investigator

Social media was also mentioned as a good way of advertising events or content as too was creating a website:

“We did use the [project] website really for flagging a lot of different things and actually I think in that respect that was quite good and the social media, so for things that were going on actually stakeholders then maybe emailed it to us and we put it on the website so there was a lot of that, you know, that did go on in terms of that. flagging events, you know, things that, or, yes, like online conferences, online events where academics and non-academics could join.” – Network Principal Investigator

However, some interviewees questioned Twitter’s usefulness, potential audience, and reach:

“I’ve become increasingly aware that some people are, but an awful lot of people aren’t, so you think you are reaching the world, on some level, but actually you are not. And I do think you know I’d include myself in this but I know others as well, there has been something about the last two or three years a lot of people have withdrawn themselves from Twitter, people who were, because I think Twitter is obviously good, but I think you are, you are only ever going to reach you know a minority, it seems like you reach a load of people but it’s not” – Network Principal Investigator

Value

It was mentioned that no matter your method of contacting key stakeholder groups or specific individuals, it's important to offer them something so stakeholders remain engaged with your project and feel like they are getting something out of their engagement. Network members describe how they struggled to do this at first:

NC: *"I think initially it's difficult because what do you offer people, you say oh we've got this Network, we want to get people involved but they're like well what do you want and what's involved. At the early stages you're just like well we want to take your details and we want to add you to our list and we're going to be doing stuff but not yet."*

PI: *"We're offering them the opportunity to get involved in shaping potential research projects so it's quite a sort of strange thing you're offering you know because a lot of people if you're going to a Public Health Agency or going somewhere in government it might be like we want to do this research, we've got some funding, or we're looking for funding to do this research, are you interested in it, we're not even at that stage yet, we're at the stage of trying to build these relationships, so (...) we weren't really offering them anything."*

The passing of time, however, and the growth in the Network means that stakeholders can be invited to events, offered the opportunity to meet new people in the field and make new connections, as illustrated here:

NC: *"It's not easy. It takes time and...but I guess it becomes easier over time. So it's easier now and I guess now that we've got activities, now that we've got our webinar, if you're doing presentations, we've got our Pump Priming then people do start to come to you rather than you trying to go to them."*

PI: *"Eventually people were helpful in saying yeah there are other people that are interested in this and here are some people you need to talk to but then now having the webinars and having events and having things that we can direct people to, the website is now quite sort of dynamic, there's more things on that as well for people to do."*

Interactions with specific stakeholders

Several funded groups discussed how the relationships they have with different stakeholders is very different. For example, one group mentioned how they have really struggled to interact with national government and found the whole process very frustrating.

"The area that is so frustrating is to try and penetrate into government, it's nigh on impossible (...) I mean it's going to take inside knowledge, inside contacts really. I mean some of our webinars were attended by the House of Commons [subject] Chair, but I've not been able to establish a contact with him to take dialogue further" – Network Principal Investigator

Aside from being persistent, this PI did offer a possible solution to if government officials are continuously not interacting:

"The only other way of doing it is to get a public outcry and that's really why we went down the mass obs and the youth parliament ideas is to generate pressure from the other end. And once you're generating a public conversation then your policy makers tend to start making, oh ok have we got to do something about this, then it least gets their attention. It's slow way of doing it but..."

The term 'mass obsv' refers to [The Mass Observation Archive](#) based at the University of Sussex. The project was launched in 1981, with the aim of reviving the early Mass Observation organisation idea of a national writing panel. Since it began, many of the participants have been corresponding over several years, making the project rich in qualitative longitudinal material.

"So it's a bit like a, you know, a Ipsos MORI type poll where you can, you go to the general public and there's a mass observation archive has got, across the UK they've got about 5,000 that consistently

reply year on year to a series of questions but you can purchase the questions so I've been buying questions from them for, I don't know, 15 years now, on dementia, old age and care, financial abuse and scams, various, different topics that I'm interested in. So we paid for a series of questions asking the public about [subject] and we've had about 130 responses from the public which came in two weeks ago and we're working with a colleague at Sussex who's a linguist to do two different types of analysis, linguistic analysis and also using NVIVO as a qualitative tool. (...) It's brilliant data from the general public and so it gives us another insight into, you know, what does the public think about this issue, do they know anything about it at all. (...) I think, to be honest I don't broadcast the mass obs too much, you know, I keep it secret and use it myself. One of the reasons for that is once you, it costs you £4,000 to buy the questions, but you get in excess of 100 replies every time for 4K and why on earth people don't use it for PhDs is beyond me." – Network Principal Investigator

When discussing interactions with specific stakeholders, a very important point was raised in relation to commercial interactions. The vast majority of funded groups chose not to partner or co-produce with commercial organisations, and it is something that the UKPRP CoP has its own Development Group on. One PI said:

"So I think whoever you are dealing with you need to be aware that they might have some personal or other interests like a commercial interest and the more you can be transparent about that and be aware of that, that's important. So we are aware of that, you know guidance we've written for conflict of interest we talked about the importance of letting stakeholders in with being aware of conflicts of interest, at least declaring them, so I think we were going with, they could only really work with us if they think we could help them in time to generate some income or profit, and we were aware of that."

Maintaining contact

The funded groups made it clear that it is difficult to maintain relationships with stakeholders over a long period of time as there are a lot of factors influencing the relationship, see figure 2. The 'natural fluidity of projects' means that the focus may change slightly and *"sometimes you're engaging quite a lot with them and then other times you're not"* – Network Coordinator

This can be particularly more difficult for Networks, or research projects in the very early stages of their creation because, as mentioned previously, there is little to offer or keep stakeholders engaged. However, it is a factor throughout a project's lifespan and just because you may not feel like you have particularly strong ties with a certain stakeholder, doesn't mean you should value them any less. These relationships change over the course of the project, and as this Network PI explains, it's the quality of the interaction, not quantity:

"but actually it might be that they become a Co-Investigator in the project so they might not have had lots and lots of involvement (...) but that piece of input, [we] could have gone actually they were really helpful, they had different other people that they knew about and they were really really up on that specific part. So I think they would be a really good person to have as a Co-Investigator in the project, so all of a sudden they've gone from almost like a chance encounter, not quite a chance encounter, a weak tie, to right in, to right in the middle of what's going to be going forward, an output, one of the outcomes" – Network Principal Investigator

Another Network PI however discussed how they go about creating strong relationships and what has worked for them in the past:

"I know where I've had success, is where you can have just a long-term relationship, so you build up those personal relationships and trusted relationships so that when they do have you know when a decision maker does have an issue that they can put some time and effort into. And they know that maybe simply talking to them what might help them and they can pick up the phone kind of thing. So I think the, the real, the number one thing I'd say is about getting better collaboration between academia and those kind of decision makers. Just investing the time to build up those long-term trusted relationships. So you then become you know, through those relationships through that formal

network, it becomes part of their world if you like. So part of their world within their company or organisation or whatever, but if they know you and if they're aware of you then" – Network Principal Investigator

Consortia aimed to mitigate this issue with the aforementioned 'Researcher supporting co-production' roles. This allows them to have more established and better maintained links with their stakeholders but consistently keeping them up to date with the research that is going on within the Consortia:

"So in particular what's been really helpful over the last few months is that [name], the [Consortium] Comms person has been kind of sending over the monthly published reports from [The Consortium]. I think we've been doing that for 4 or 5 months or something now. I kind of get that into [topics] and send that out to the relevant people and equally if somebody in [The Consortium] particularly wants to present on something then I can kind of facilitate that and I also keep an ear out might be the best description for what conversations are taking place and what people might be interested in and then sort of tap that into the work of [The Consortium]." – Consortia member supporting co-production

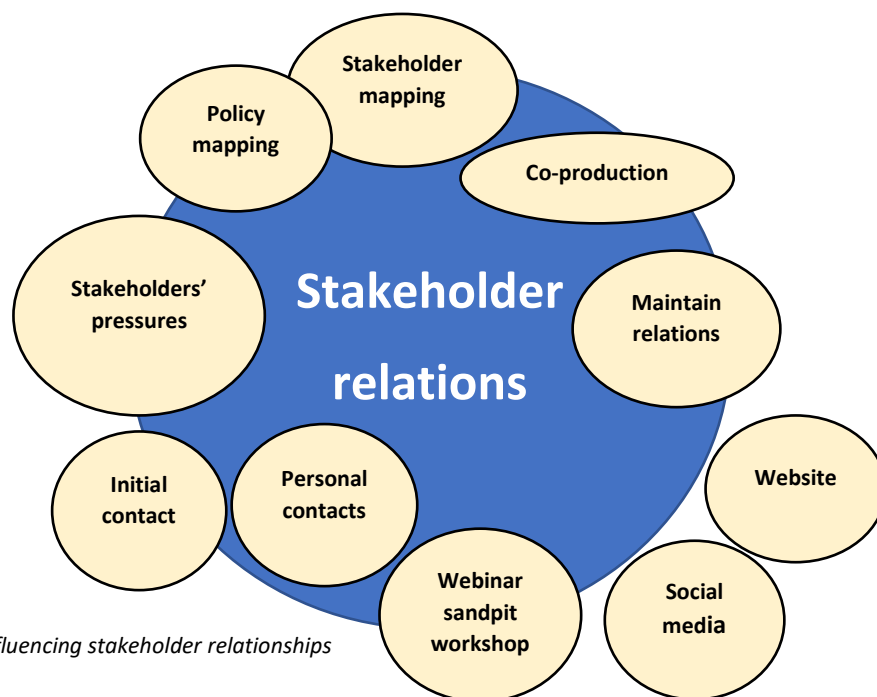


Figure 2: Factors influencing stakeholder relationships

Stakeholder pressures

All groups thought it was important to mention that stakeholders also have pressures of their own. This often does not allow them to engage as much as they would maybe like to:

"I guess it's just...it's the type of people that you're trying to engage and they're just so busy and how do you cut through and get their attention because they're just so busy." – Network Coordinator

"we've had a lot of kind of interest, but then and this applies across all interactions you have with groups is that they, even if they can kind of see the value of it, to staff and the tradeoffs they have to make, and often the trade-off they have to make is really determined by their time resources" – Network Principal Investigator

Another Network PI stated that: *being aware of stakeholders' different priorities and agendas and that's not just for [your project], you know, that's across the board in terms of [your subject]. It's just being aware of that, that that's really important I think when, yes, you're working across sectors and across stakeholders.*

Sometimes the reason for stakeholders withdrawing isn't always time pressure, sometimes it's because things have changed in either their department or the wider political landscape:

“Thinking about the stakeholders and the wider kind of political context and what’s acceptable for stakeholders and the activities that they can be engaged in because our experience was that people wanted to take a step back because they had been told that they weren’t to engage in particular activities for whatever reasons and I don’t think that’s specific to [us]. I know that speaking to other people in consortium they’ve had similar experiences as well, so these stakeholders don’t exist in a vacuum. There’s that wider context and that influences whether or not they want to be involved in projects.” – Network Coordinator

Therefore, it is important to allow stakeholders to engage with you and your project, and to make this process as easy as possible. One PI discussed the steps they took to make sure there were as few barriers as possible:

“I mean I think awareness of the context and setting of individual groups of stakeholders, you know, and we’ve mentioned it a few times there around, you know, timing for holding events, you know, timing of getting people to attend face to face, timing, you know, (...) so I suppose it’s just awareness of their challenges, barriers to participation. I think you’d rarely find somebody who wasn’t willing to be involved in the sort of activities that we’ve been doing but it’s just trying to remove the barriers that might prevent their participation.”

– Network Principal Investigator

Events

There are many different events researchers can host to engage with their stakeholders. Each event has a slightly different aim or reason. This section will identify the events that were mentioned by the interviewees and try to provide the reason behind why you would host such an event.

Webinar

Duration: 30 minutes or 1 hour

Platform: Online

Reason: A method of initiating contact and encouraging engagement with stakeholders, where there is a 10–15-minute presentation followed by a 10–15-minute discussion based on what your project could offer. This can demonstrate to policymakers how they might benefit from partnering the project. This can be done for different groups of stakeholders in turn.

Quotes: *“I think the webinars have been really important, I guess in terms of the visibility of the Network as well and looking at the people that have attended it’s not like the same people attending all of the webinars, it’s been quite diverse, and it’s been people that are not on our Network list. So that’s been really...probably for the...in terms of the return of time, or investment, or whatever I think that’s been a really good...there is obviously time involved in that but it’s not a huge amount of time involved but you’re getting good publicity for the Network and awareness.” - Network coordinator*

“the webinars were so well received that I think once we then followed up with invitations for the sandpit people were prepared to think ‘oh yes we’ve attended some of their stuff and it was really good, we can have an input into that’”
- Network coordinator

Sandpit

Duration: 1- or 2-days

Platform: in person

Reason: Useful tool to bring stakeholders and researchers that do not know each other – this event can facilitate discussions to strengthen relations and also establish the status quo with regards to policy priorities and direction of projects.

Quote: *“We planned that as a kind of 2 day...I was calling it a Sandpit and my idea was that people would come, they would know each other a bit but they wouldn't necessarily know each other and then they would chat about the different priority, policy priority areas, the different datasets that could be possibly used and then they would meet in small groups maybe some people had done some thinking beforehand, they would meet in small groups and come up with proposals and then over the 2 days then maybe the first day would be about presenting and discussing and chatting with each other and then the next day would be in the morning maybe like present their proposal, present their ideas, so there would maybe be 4 or 5 presenting and then because everybody was in the room we'd have a few like stakeholders saying whether they thought this was a good idea and they would get involved in it as well and then we would then decide sort of that morning and afternoon which projects we would take forward and then people would obviously have those relationships as well “*

– Network Principal Investigator

Round table

Duration: 1-day

Platform: in person

Reason: To bring policymakers and researchers together over a whole day to showcase research through different presentations. Discussion covers research and policy perspectives, which allows the audience to learn about each other's current and future plans.

Quote: *“It was almost like a networking event. We had a whole draft programme; we had a facilitator, you know, we'd gather together, we'd talk about the purpose of the network dah dah dah, but then we would split off and people would, I think, in advance, say where they felt their areas of interest were around [the subject]. (...) those were going to be working groups who would tackle particular issues and, you know, obviously from a scientific, academic approach, but also between, working between stakeholders and the idea was to have sort of, I suppose, position paper kind of things developing out of that and that would be us sort of understanding the current state of [the subject] as preparation then to move on.”*

– Network Principal Investigator

Data Dive

Duration: 1- or 2-days

Platform: in person

Reason: An event to discuss and collate knowledge about datasets. Whilst this could be achieved by email, this approach brings people working on similar topics together and allows them to discuss issues or gaps etc. This facilitates networking and peer learning and also allows for easy follow-up afterwards as the people who identify the gaps are more willing to help.

Quote: *"We brought together our Management Group (...) and we also brought in other people who were thought were experts on data, in the area [subject] and so this was a kind of scoping exercise just basically almost like to try and get all the expertise that's in the room and to try and put that down in some way and sort of get all the kind of knowledge and expertise that people have in the area of data because people in the different nations all have that expertise so to try and bring that together and document that as a starting point for a kind of wide...a larger kind of data mapping exercise, so rather than just go to all these people individually, bring them together and say...also to try and I guess facilitate and encourage learning between the members of the Network as well so someone who might not know about the Scottish datasets then they could... break the group up into smaller groups to discuss the data and we had a template to be filled out, so documenting the data sources and then looking at the sort of data variables and the outcomes that are available in these data sources." - Network coordinator*

Workshop

Duration: 1 or 2 hours

Platform: Online & in person

Reason: Gathered a wide group of Stakeholders and held conference style presentations followed by break-out groups to facilitate discussion and draw-out stakeholder input, which is easier in smaller groups.

Quote: *"You know the size of the group was carefully discussed and generated and so that was, and then the use of breakout rooms and so you ended up with maybe, I don't know, five in a breakout room, given a period of time to discuss (...) And then we were bringing those jam boards with our virtual post it notes back in and, you know, condensing those and discussing those. So, you know, I think we have had examples of activity (...) where we have managed to get that sort of discussion and stakeholder input going but I don't think it's without challenge and I'm not sure if we've fully replicated what could have been done face to face." – Network Principal Investigator*

A member from a different Network also identified that activities within workshops are key to stimulating discussions between individuals who otherwise might have thought they didn't have much in common:

"I think people really appreciate when you are in a room with different people, usually those ones when we are mixing young people with academics and practitioners, so quite different voices in the room there. But having like a focused task for everyone to kind of work on and kind of share their views and their experiences was a good way to get people talking who may not otherwise realize that they have that much in common if that makes sense? That kind of workshop activity that gives you a bit of a focus to start a conversation around." - Network coordinator

Audiences

Selecting the audience for events was a subject that came up a lot during the interviews. One Network Coordinator compared the audiences for workshops and webinars. They thought that for a workshop, the type of stakeholders attending should be thought through and carefully selected. Whereas for webinars, the audience could be a wider range of stakeholders. However, it may be difficult to identify a specific topic that suits all stakeholders, so sometimes it is better to split them up, and run multiple webinars, with a more select and focused audience:

"I think because it's online and you are not particularly looking to your audience to engage with one another because they are webinars they are not workshops. I don't think it particularly matters what your mix of stakeholders is because they are probably not going to engage with each other that much. And just in terms of finding a topic that is of interest like it's quite different pitching something at modelers than it is at non-modelers [...] So yeah, just in terms of actually being able to reach at least one of those audiences with an appropriate topic it felt easier to split it up." - Network coordinator

This is an approach that another Networks also took:

"the idea was to have a series of workshops about different things and we would hope that most people would engage with all the workshops but now because of people's time and the focus and the different things we're doing in [the Network] we're kind of planning different Stakeholder Groups, so try and keep the ones that are interested so in the policy ones, and it's not that the policy people wouldn't be interested in the data or the methods because I think they would be and there might be crossover but actually convene a data group and a methods workshop." - Network coordinator

A Principal Investigator of one Network mentioned that sometimes they feel the presence of certain stakeholders, might influence other stakeholders, and their answers or willingness to join in the conversation. However, they added that it is often important to get these groups conversing if progress is to be made:

"I mean it's always hard that isn't it as to whether you capture everything that caterers think, you know, whether there's any influence because there's somebody from policy, you know, there, whether that impacts on what they say but I think that's an issue, whether you're doing it online, face to face, whatever. But I think in terms of progressing and the whole role of [our Network] and trying to get stakeholders to engage and interact together and for everybody's voice to be heard I think you have to try and have all groups together because otherwise you're never going to, you know, we aren't going to progress if we keep isolation, you know, if we keep these groups in isolation and they don't mix and interact and I think we need that across the board." - Network Principal Investigator

A Network coordinator expressed a feeling that when there are a mix of stakeholders at one of these events, it's important to have an activity of some sort. This enables individuals to discuss the topic and possibly realise they had more in common than they thought:

"Having like a focused task for everyone to kind of work on and kind of share their views and their experiences was a good way to get people talking who may not otherwise realize that they have that much in common if that makes sense? That kind of workshop activity that gives you a bit of a focus to start a conversation around." - Network coordinator

Members of this Network also identified that they didn't need to host their own events, and instead contributed to other events that were going to have very similar stakeholders to them:

"We also contributed to quite a few other conferences and things, rather than hosting our own events (...) we kind of tagged onto conferences where stakeholders were who we were looking to engage with were already going to be attending rather than organising our own events because we kind of thought are people going to travel or come online to join our events when they see somethings going on already, so yeah, we done a couple of symposia and workshops." - Network Principal Investigator

Another cost-cutting activity that one Network took advantage of was becoming part of a Special Interest group within government, as this meant they were able to meet and present at the annual meeting, which reached directly to their target stakeholders at no cost to themselves.

"becoming a special interest group gave you a slot for a symposium at the annual meeting and I think just always felt that was it, that was the opportunity for us, you know, I mean networks aren't, you know, we were not well funded in terms of, you know, perhaps running our own conference or, you know, so you had to look for I suppose cost effective ways of, and you know, there were a number of network members would have been going to the event anyway so it gave you that opportunity to gather." - Network Principal Investigator

Online Engagement

As the projects funded by the UKPRP all began shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, we thought it appropriate to discuss the move to online/at-home working in relation to stakeholder engagement.

Finding it difficult to create those personal relationships was mentioned numerous times, and one Network Coordinator explained how they found this particularly difficult when the stakeholders are from totally different subject areas:

"Building relationships is more difficult virtually I think and that's what I think being in the room might have forged those relationships in a different way and a bit quicker perhaps, particularly when you're dealing with disciplines that don't talk to each other and I think we, I think we have sort of struggled with that a little bit, where you suddenly realise that [X] and [Y] don't have much common ground and it would have been much easier to perhaps sort out some of those tensions round a table rather than through Teams meetings where you've not quite got the body language or where you can't stop and have a cup of coffee or, and I think that's perhaps, I don't know if it set us back but it was certainly a challenge." - Network coordinator

A member of a Consortium also mentioned the difficulty in creating relationships online especially when discussing future research and where to go next:

"I think face to face in my opinion you've got more chance of actually developing a relationship with somebody. If you're able to listen to their presentation and then have a coffee with them and talk to them about it and talk to the about your specific interest in their research then...certainly the ones that I'm working on that I hope will be face to face is about trying to not just present existing research to people but it's about trying to develop a kind of dialogue so that future research is influenced by the potential research users as well. I think that's probably where the virtual environment isn't that helpful at the moment because a lot of that stuff comes about through more informal conversation I think or more kind of developmental conversation, whereas with the virtual stuff just by its nature it needs to be a wee bit more structured. So yeah...I would hope that the face-to-face contact generates more influence on the direction of the research and where it's going." – Consortia member supporting co-production

Another issue identified with online stakeholder engagement was that it's difficult to actually progress specific problems, it's okay if you want to discuss or share things, but that next step is what this Network Principal Investigator found difficult:

"I think online, you know, can be hard because you can have a series of interesting speakers, you know, I would say we've done that really well. There's always been lots of chat, questions that you put into chat, a bit of discussion, you know, maybe some 'oh can you send me that paper' or 'can you send me that link' or whatever, you know, I think that's done well. How you actually then transfer that into real discussion, debate, moving a particular issue forward I still think is challenging." - Network Principal Investigator

The same PI also stated that there are no unplanned discussions when meeting online, and that the smaller 'catch-up' conversations that lead to talking about the subject in more depth are missed:

"Plenty of time in between the actual planned sessions for people to migrate and maybe [Person X] meeting up with [Person Y], I mean I know those connections exist, to say 'how are you getting on', 'I haven't seen you in while', you know, and talking about the issues that they have so that they can sort of migrate into what's more comfortable outside of sessions and that is lost online."

Similarly, a member of a consortia mentioned how formal conversations are online, and feel like calls are only scheduled when there is a specific reason, whereas before you could easily meet and chat through a range of things less formally:

"It feels like you have to have a very specific reason for a call or a meeting in a way you wouldn't have done that before, you might have said oh well I'll come to you, and we'll just have a chat about it, and it doesn't feel to work that way on Zoom." – Consortium Manager

A member of a different Consortium also identified benefits to meeting with stakeholders in person, as there are conversations that happen off the record as there is more trust built up

"I think that is one thing we have missed with the pandemic. A lot of this dynamism in our relationship with policy-makers is dependent on them not having to put things in writing. Even being on Zoom and online, it just feels a little bit less secure, whereas if you're sitting in a room with them, they can tell you anything and they know you're not recording them. They can be completely candid and there is no record of what they've said. They can deny it if they need it. Not that they would, but it's just – that definitely has made it harder" – Consortium Management Team member

Another issue identified with online events was that the attendees possibly arrive less prepared than if that event was in person. A Network Coordinator explains that a stakeholder mentioned they would prepare more during their travel to the event, whereas for an online event, they wouldn't:

"One of the stakeholders, she said that getting on that train, she might have spent that hour or 2 hours thinking about that and thinking about what she's going to talk about when she came to the meeting and she might have more to give but just zooming into a call, she'd just come out of another meeting, you know the kind of head space to think about what your contribution is going to be and what you want to talk about in that meeting, then that's kind of missing from that online forum." - Network Coordinator

However, there were many benefits identified with hosting online stakeholder engagement events. The most common benefit identified was that it allowed more people to attend, as well as allowing for an international audience:

"The online conferences we've done have probably reached people we wouldn't even have thought of inviting, so a bit more of an international audience which has been quite good." - Network Coordinator

"I don't think we'd have had 55 people in a physical sandpit for two days. Not at the level we were asking for, you know, seriously high-level people in their own organisations, I don't think we'd have had 55 in those events (...) And I don't think we'd have got the international people either. (...) I think that's sort of been the big benefit, in that we were able to use colleagues who have got serious

expertise from Australia, from the Caribbean, from Norway, I don't think we'd have got them in the room physically otherwise.” - Network Principal Investigator

It was also said that higher attendances for online events may be in part due to individuals attending even if they were only semi-interested. As this Network Coordinator describes, some stakeholders can attend and observe the event while doing other things or have it on in the background, whereas if it were in-person, they most likely wouldn't have attended:

“For example the webinar series we are going to do, it will all be online again because it just, it reached a wider audience and I think you are more likely to get people who will go in, even if they are only vaguely interested and even if they have it on in the background and pick up a few bits about [subject] whereas they probably wouldn't turn up and attend an event about it. So, I think it does give you a bit of an opportunity when working online to reach those audiences, you want to reach those audiences that are kind of semi interested in what you are doing. So yeah, I think that is a good opportunity.” - Network Coordinator

Online events were also identified as being more inclusive as well as having better reach. As there are no costs associated with joining an event online, it allows for more early career researchers (ECRs) or non-academics to attend:

“So I think some of the benefits of that is that actually you can capture, so I just think about some of the events that we did have actually because you didn't have to travel and because you didn't have to pay all of these, you know, some of those things, I think actually there were benefits. We did get perhaps ECRs engaged and wider representation from non-academics because they didn't have to pay, you know, there's no budgets really for a lot of, you know, junior academics or non, you know, non-academics actually to attend some of these events. So, I think that I do think there was a bonus with that, I do think perhaps we got, you know, perhaps wider representation.” - Network Coordinator

Online events were also seen as potentially being beneficial for maintaining relationships with stakeholders. This is because if events were in person, there would likely only be one a year, whereas online events can happen more frequently and so provide more opportunities to strengthen relationships:

“It might be quite far for people, so I guess one of the advantages of the online stakeholder meetings is that we did get people from all of the 4 nations that we might not have got these people all in a room on the same day at the same time and it allowed us to meet them multiple times on multiple occasions as well. So we probably wouldn't have done that if it had been just the one big policy roundtable so I guess in terms of like (...) about forging relationships then if we're seeing people 2 or 3 times then hopefully we've got maybe a better...a slightly stronger relationship I don't know with these people than we might have if we'd just seen them once and never again.” - Network Coordinator

Definitely in terms of frequency of contact yes. And it's probably short sharp bursts because I mean most of our sessions would have been an hour and a half to two hours because you would be wary of people's time commitments. But then they've happened more frequently whereas, yes you're right, you'd have been, sort of if you'd been contributing to a face to face it would be once or twice a year, you know, a day, a day and a half. So that is, I think that probably is better. In terms of them participating online I do think (...) there's been way more opportunities for engagement online in terms of that short, people contact you, you can attend so much more, I think there's huge benefits for that. - Network Principal Investigator

Hybrid Meetings

As we move out of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a lot of uncertainty around if people are willing to travel to attend meetings in person again. This PI describes how difficult it is to gauge if individuals are willing to attend meetings in person, or if that element would deter some:

“I think it's...it's tricky because some people are willing to travel and want to travel and think yeah that would be quite nice to sit in a room, other people are like well actually that's a bit of a hassle for

me, it's an overnight stay, or it's a whole day for 2 hours, do I want to do that? So then it's then thinking through the hybrid situation, so again that's something I think we haven't quite got to thinking through yet (...) in my head I was just thinking that we would probably just carry on with the virtual but maybe put feelers out to see whether the people would want an in person meeting but it's hard to I think just make that big leap to say everything is going to be in person now because you don't want to lose people who are going to just go actually I'm not travelling ever again." - Network Principal Investigator

Hybrid meetings were mentioned as a possible solution to this, but it soon became apparent this is difficult to do well. A PI described some of the complexities involved in running a successful hybrid event:

"It's having the discussion going on in the room but those online not just being passive observers, being active participants in the discussion. (...) I don't think we've got it resolved yet in any way, but I do think maintaining somehow that online option and therefore running hybrid is going to have to happen because otherwise you will lose that, what we've already talked about, that, you know, ability to get, it's not more people, it's the key people no matter what their circumstances to contribute." - Network Principal Investigator

One of the main issues identified was obtaining an efficient facilitator, and how the meeting is structured to engage both the online and in-person attendees. As described here:

"I guess you just feel a bit isolated, and no one knows you're there or not. So having your face shown and somebody maybe in the room interacting with you and asking you for questions and really stopping and saying: 'oh and our online audience, do you have any questions?' you know that kind of thing (...) you know having a really good facilitator that was sort of in the online world drawing you in, maybe that would work" – Consortium Management Team member

It was said that two facilitators may have to be brought in to enable these hybrid events to run smoothly, as this PI describes how a hybrid event they attended was structured:

"It was in person but there were people who had called in but they actually ran the participatory stuff separately. So we all sort of gathered together in a room online but then there was a separate facilitator for the online people to the facilitator in the room who was going back to the post- it-notes and I think that was an effort to make sure that those online were contributing (...) But what you don't get then is a particular person online interacting with a particular person in the room so you're definitely still losing something but I did think that was, you know, a potentially useful way of trying to do it. But you then need two facilitators, you know, what if the discussion goes off in two completely different directions and actually bringing those back together becomes very difficult (...) people aren't sort of reimbursed for travel expenses and all of that so should we be thinking about how and where do we get good facilitators that can manage, you know, an online presence and an in person presence and have that skill set to do that and not be sort of expecting, you know, academics to try and manage and lead that." - Network Principal Investigator

Another possible solution offered was to only include a hybrid element once it has been established that an important attendee or key stakeholder was not able to attend in person:

"The only thing I'd add is I think...it worked better when there's a minimal amount of people who are online in the hybrid setting. I think the one way to do that is to set it up as a face-to-face event but then if there are key stakeholders who say that they can't make it then offer to attend online, I've seen that done before as well. So, then it just minimises, it's not overwhelming, you don't know who's talking and people can't just check out and go and do something else. I think that makes it easier to run that way too." – Consortia Impact Officer

Conclusion

The aim of this report was to synthesise the knowledge of stakeholder engagement activities carried out by UKPRP funded groups. Along with a range of other topics, this experienced cohort identified that carrying out a policy mapping exercise enables more streamlined discussions with stakeholders, relationships with each stakeholder change over the course of the project, some are more involved at different times, and it's important to offer the stakeholders something so that they remain engaged. Events are a great way of engaging stakeholders, but care should be taken to invite the right kind of stakeholders to the right kind of event. It was also identified that researchers must be aware of stakeholders' other priorities and agendas, as well as possible changes in their department or the wider political landscape. Hybrid meetings were also discussed, and it was apparent that these are difficult to do well, and an efficient facilitator is crucial to the success of this type of meeting.

Recommendations

- Stakeholder engagement entails several different strategies and approaches. Researchers need to be adaptable and be aware that there is not one correct way of engaging stakeholders.
- Researchers should be aware that different stakeholders engage and interact in diverse ways.
- Sufficient resources for stakeholder engagement should be factored into research grant proposals.
- Time and effort are required to establish and maintain working relationships, which should be factored into research projects.
- Stakeholder engagement is a continuous and dynamic process. Researchers should be prepared to engage with stakeholders throughout the duration of a project.

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