Unlocking the Potential of Civic Collaboration
Summary

Introduction

The University of Leeds and Leeds City Council have a proud history of fruitful partnership working in diverse fields of common interest. The imperative for joint working between academics and local authority policy-makers and practitioners is now more pressing than ever as the city faces unprecedented challenges along with new opportunities arising from regional devolution.

A *Review* of research-policy collaboration between the University of Leeds and Leeds City Council was undertaken to gauge the extent of existing projects, better understand the factors that facilitate and inhibit collaborations and identify mechanisms to improve research-policy engagement. The *Review* used mixed methods to gain both an overview of activities and experiences and detailed insights into ways in which effective collaboration might be fostered in future. It revealed significant activity, extensive positive impacts and a strong appetite for further collaboration on the part of both organisations. There was a common view that potential benefits are not being fully realised and that initiatives have tended to be fragmented. The *Review* findings have informed twelve *Recommendations* for enhancing and accelerating collaboration.

Recommendations

1. **A joint research-policy collaboration strategy** should be developed setting out shared priorities and serving to optimise the benefits of existing partnerships, roles and resources.

2. **Named research collaboration 'Champions'** should be identified and act as contact points to facilitate collaboration and signpost potential collaborators.

3. **Identify knowledge needs and co-design research priorities** to determine areas of focus for future research collaboration activities between the two organisations.

4. **Organisational infrastructure to support research-policy collaborations** should be advanced to enhance inter-institutional co-ordination, infrastructure and communications; enabling researchers and council officers to identify shared interests and maximise networking opportunities.

5. **Data analytic capacity should be optimised** through establishing bi-lateral data sharing arrangements, with potential to advance a vision for 'Connected Leeds', where data is shared between public and academic partners.

6. **Foster inter-organisational relations among staff** to enhance mutual trust and understanding by: recognising effort required for effective engagement; organising joint events; and encouraging shared roles, secondments, placements and co-location.

7. **Seedcorn funding should be available to kick-start collaborative projects** through a rolling programme which draws upon existing and any dedicated new resources and capitalises on the value of 'in-kind' contributions.

8. **Fully embed the value of engagement and impact among academic staff** with the University continuing to work to reflect the time required for collaboration in workload models.

9. **A Civic Collaboration Hub** should be considered, which builds upon ongoing work to draw together public engagement and policy initiatives across the University and brings researchers and council officers together with other public and third sector bodies to co-design research.

10. **Extend 'living lab' approaches on the University campus** to further its potential as a 'living lab' for research activities.

11. **Expand 'living lab' opportunities in the city** with the Council committing to providing 'living lab' opportunities for research-driven innovation.

12. **Build research into Council procurement** through the inclusion of standard clauses on potential collaborative research activities in its contracts with third parties.

Findings

Existing collaboration

The mapping exercise identified **118** collaborative research projects that were either ongoing or completed since January 2015. Of these, **45** projects are currently in operation. Projects vary in scale and type, cover a diverse range of social, economic and scientific issues and span all University faculties and Council directorates. They have an associated value of more than **£38m** in external funding. Wide-ranging impacts of research collaboration were apparent in contributing to climate change mitigation, flood alleviation, developing a low carbon economy, child poverty policies, services for vulnerable adults, public health improvements and cultural industries in the city, among many other examples.

Relationships between Faculties and Directorates
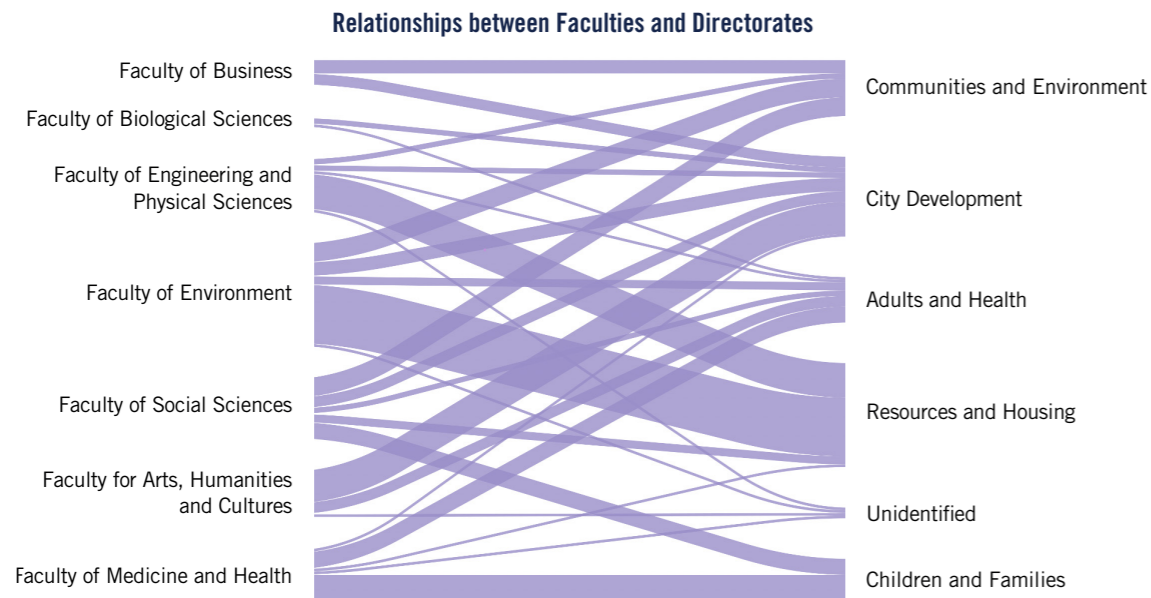
Benefits of collaboration

Researchers and council officers were highly enthusiastic about the value of collaborative working. When asked to select up to three benefits from a list of options, survey respondents most frequently chose 'looking at things in a different way' (62%) and 'co-producing better solutions' (46%). Researchers viewed working with the council as a direct pathway to impact, which is increasingly crucial to Research Excellence Framework requirements. Council officers commented that budget reductions have reduced analytical capacity, making them more dependent on academic evidence to inform policy and practice.

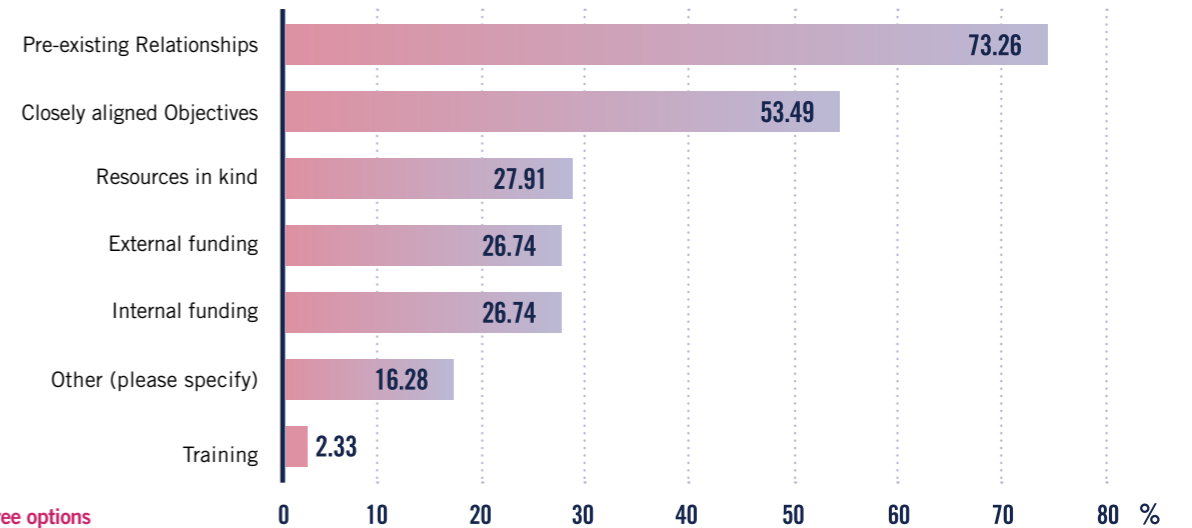**Main benefits of collaboration identified by all survey respondents (n=147)**
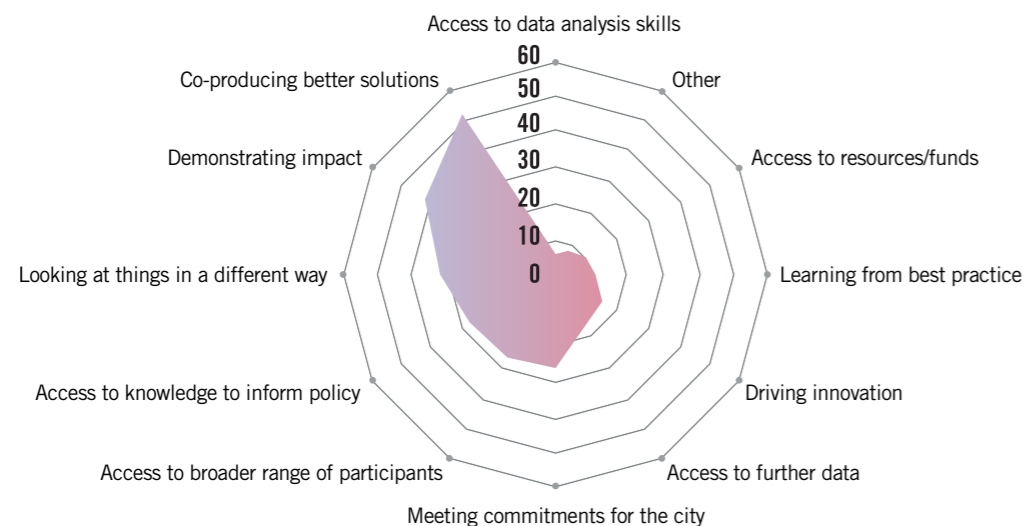
Identified in top three options

Enablers

Survey respondents cited 'pre-existing relationships' (73%) and 'closely aligned objectives' (53%) as key facilitators. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of relationships in initiating and sustaining engagement. The significance of trust and goodwill in delivering successful projects was evident. Staff in both organisations believed that shared commitment and additional effort are required to overcome obstacles when working collaboratively.

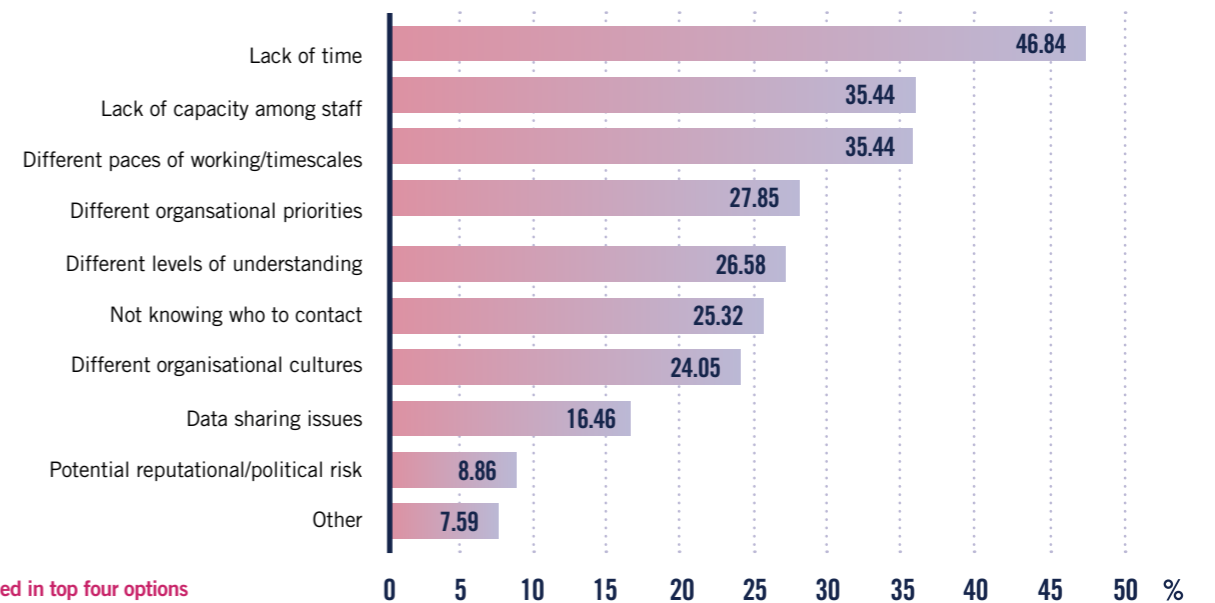**Key enablers of collaboration identified by all survey respondents (n=147)**

	%
Pre-existing Relationships	73.26
Closely aligned Objectives	53.49
Resources in kind	27.91
External funding	26.74
Internal funding	26.74
Other (please specify)	16.28
Training	2.33

Identified in top three options

Barriers

Staff from both organisations believe engagement currently tends to be ad hoc, poorly coordinated and without the support of a coherent inter-organisational strategy. Lack of time was cited as principal practical barrier to collaboration (47%) among those with experience of collaboration. Excessive bureaucracy and lack of resources were also major barriers. Difficulties in navigating in two large, complex institutions was a significant inhibitor – with 'not knowing who to contact' discouraging 75% of survey respondents without prior experience who wished to collaborate from doing so. Interviewees viewed differences in organisational priorities, cultures and timescales as impediments to collaboration. While the Council holds a wealth of data and the University has world-class analytical expertise, they highlighted data sharing as considerable barrier.

Main barriers encountered among respondents who have worked collaboratively (n=88)

	%
Lack of time	46.84
Lack of capacity among staff	35.44
Different paces of working/timescales	35.44
Different organsational priorities	27.85
Different levels of understanding	26.58
Not knowing who to contact	25.32
Different organisational cultures	24.05
Data sharing issues	16.46
Potential reputational/political risk	8.86
Other	7.59

Identified in top four options

Aims and Methods

The *Review* was undertaken to understand the nature and extent of existing bi-lateral collaborations, identify barriers to collaboration, consider ways in which collaboration might be enhanced, and make recommendations for improvements that will accelerate research-policy engagement and foster effective joint working.

The *Review* was conducted between February and June 2020. Data collection comprised: a mapping exercise of existing collaborative research projects (since 2015); an on-line survey completed by 147 University and Council staff; and interviews with 33 academics, research support officers and council officials.

'The very fact that we have on our doorstep the second largest local authority in the country is an interesting test bed to explore.'

Senior academic at University of Leeds

'We get access to cutting edge intellectual capacity to share best practice and the University gets access to frontline, real life, socio-economic challenges… we've got data, we've got operations, activity that is ripe for research.'

Manager at Leeds City Council

Conclusions

The *Review* found considerable appetite and enthusiasm across both organisations for greater inter-organisational research collaboration and for concerted efforts to construct robust and effective mechanisms to enhance research-policy partnerships. On the basis of the *Review* findings, a full Report was prepared including twelve recommendations to accelerate research-policy collaboration and enhance civic partnerships.

Research team

The Report authors are Dr Nicola Carroll, who was employed as a Postdoctoral Researcher by LSSI to work on the *Review*, and Professor Adam Crawford, Director of LSSI. They were closely supported by a dedicated team including: Simon Foy and Tom Knowland from Leeds City Council and Camilla McCartney, LSSI Engagement Officer.

Taking forward the recommendations

The Report highlights the principles that should inform the development of a detailed Action Plan to ensure implementation against a timetable of priorities and responsibilities. The Report and draft Action Plan were submitted to a Reference Group for consultation and feedback.

The Reference Group has agreed to take forward the *Review* Recommendations on a phased basis. While the *Review* focused on bi-lateral collaborations between academics at the University of Leeds and officers of Leeds City Council, it is recognised that these are often embedded in wider multi-lateral networks and cross-sectoral partnerships. The *Review*, therefore, represents an important additional, new step in unlocking potential for wider civic research collaboration in the Leeds city/region.

'The Recommendations provide an excellent basis from which both the University and Council can move forward to shape our future collaborative relations for mutual benefit. We are now looking closely at how we can actively implement them.'

Professor Nick Plant, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research & Innovation, University of Leeds and Tom Riordan, Chief Executive, Leeds City Council

Acknowledgements

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The *Review* and *Action Plan* have benefited significantly from the input, advice and support of a large number of professionals from both organisations who have assisted with the *Review*. In particular, the *Review* has been overseen by a Reference Group of senior representatives from both organisations.

Full report available

The full Report - *Unlocking the Potential of Civic Collaboration: A review of research-policy engagement between the University of Leeds and Leeds City Council*, can be downloaded at: https://lssi.leeds.ac.uk/partnerships/review-of-collaborative-working/

Further infromation

For further information visit the LSSI website at: www.lssi.leeds.ac.uk/

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