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UKRI Policy Fellowship Impact Event Report
May 2025

FELLOWSHIP IN A NUTSHELL

Dr Jo Daniels, University of Bath

Dr Keri Wong, University College London

With contributions from UKRI Policy Fellows Dr Katharine Steentjes, Dr Stefan Siegert, Dr Roxana Ciurean, Prof Carolyn Hayles, Dr Susie Hulley, Dr Jack Blumenau, Prof Rosie Meek, Dr James Worrall, Prof Katharine Boyd, Dr Yadira Bajón Fernández, Dr Hannah King and guest speakers Tatiana Souteiro Dias and Prof James Copestake

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On 13 May 2025 the 2023 cohort of UKRI Policy Fellows - researchers and academics from diverse fields embedded inside government departments and devolved administrations—gathered at the British Academy in London for reflections and mutual sharing of experiences as their 18-month fellowships come to an end. The event focused on the impact and influence of their fellowships created a safe, reflective space for fellows to take stock of what the scheme is achieving.

The day blended three strands: celebration of practical wins, candour about stubborn barriers, and capability building for the next phase. Morning sessions surfaced lived experience—from a "blue-sky" expectation versus reality mapping to rapid three-minute pitches from the thirteen fellows that showcased impacts ranging from carbon sequestration modelling at DEFRA to trauma informed yoga in women's prisons.

After lunch the focus shifted to evidence. University College London's Tatiana Souteiro Dias (Research Development Officer, at the IOE UCL's Faculty of Education and Society) demystified forthcoming REF 2029 rules, while Prof James Copestake unpacked "attribution versus contribution" and challenged attendees to craft proportionate causal claims to evidence their impact in their policy fellowship. Breakout tasks converted theory into action: stress testing fellows' impact stories, drafting cohort wide recommendations, and peer reviewing theories of change.

Graphic scribes from We Are Cognitive captured key ideas in real time, producing visuals that complement this report. By close of play participants had outlined a roadmap that includes a follow-up reunion, a collaborative learning brief for ESRC and departmental Chief Scientific Advisers and other relevant groups within government organisations and What Works Centers, and a shared online workspace to sustain peer support.

This Executive Summary distils key insights from conversations of the day so that fellows, departments, the public, UKRI and the wider policy research community can quickly grasp what was learned—and, crucially, what needs to happen next.

Welcome and Morning Coffee

A relaxed coffee reception where Dr Jo Daniels and Dr Keri Wong greeted participants, encouraged informal introductions and outlined housekeeping points. They set a friendly, collegial tone for the day and encouraged attendees to mingle across disciplines.

"Grab a coffee, find a seat, and say hello to someone you haven't met yet." - Dr Jo Daniels

Keri outlined the day's goals: reflection, networking and next-step planning. During this time, Jo introduced the live scribing team from We Are Cognitive and sought consent to record table discussions.
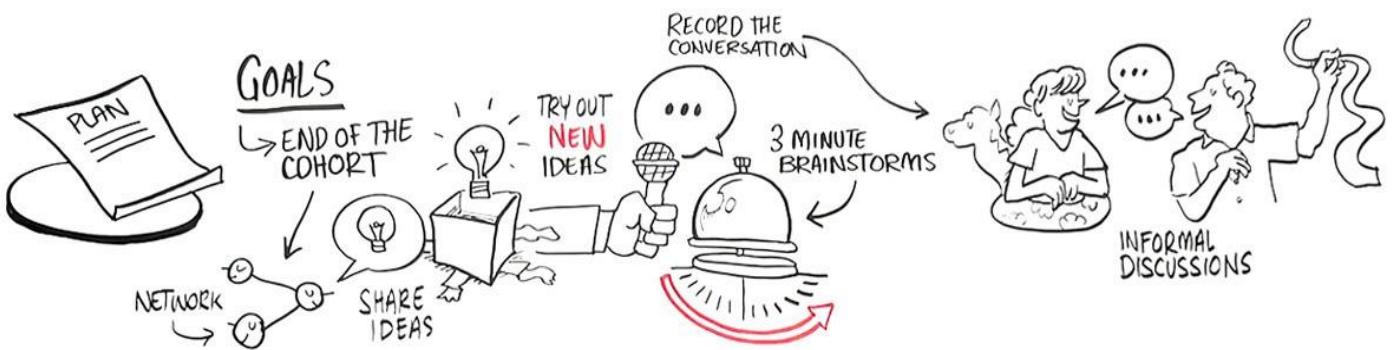
Goals:

- To have the time and space to reflect on our fellowship

- To share experiences and network with our cohort

- To learn from others and plan for dissemination / impact activities

Knowledge:

- To share and collate our fellowship experiences thus far and consider next steps

- To share good practices on who might benefit from our experiences

- To co-create and collaborate on potential new projects

Outcomes:
- Leave with some ideas on who might benefit from your experience and how you might go about sharing those experiences
- Leave with some skills to measure your fellowship impact
- Leave knowing you've contributed to at least one output summarised by We Are Cognitive

"We really want a chance to network, share ideas, and also think about next steps."
- Dr Keri Wong

Themed discussions: blue-sky solution-focused group activity

Dr Keri Wong

This session is about blue-sky thinking: brainstorming freely, generating new ideas without constraints or commitments. It's a space to think creatively—no liabilities, no strings attached.

Keri reflected on the reality of her fellowship experience using the metaphor of Van Gogh—someone who found beauty in things that were fading or coming to an end. She noted that while expectations often look beautiful and idealised, reality tends to be messier. Most of us probably found ourselves somewhere between those two poles.

"Each of us has experienced individual challenges—with a big 'C' sometimes—but this is a good time to think about what next."
— Dr Keri Wong

The group was invited to reflect on two key questions:

1 What were my expectations when I started my fellowship?

2 What has the reality of the fellowship been?

In discussion, many fellows noted that reality often leaned much further from their original expectations:

- Most didn't follow the plan they had submitted at the start.

- Only one person reported sticking closely to what they'd originally proposed with their host.

- Roles often shifted—from presenting at conferences, for example, to supporting internal relationship-building or strategy work.

The main insight: what you think you're coming in to do is often not what the fellowship turns out to be. This is not necessarily failure, it's a source of learning.

"Maybe some of these processes, if we document them, the next person won't have to go through the same bureaucracy." - participant

The Big Picture
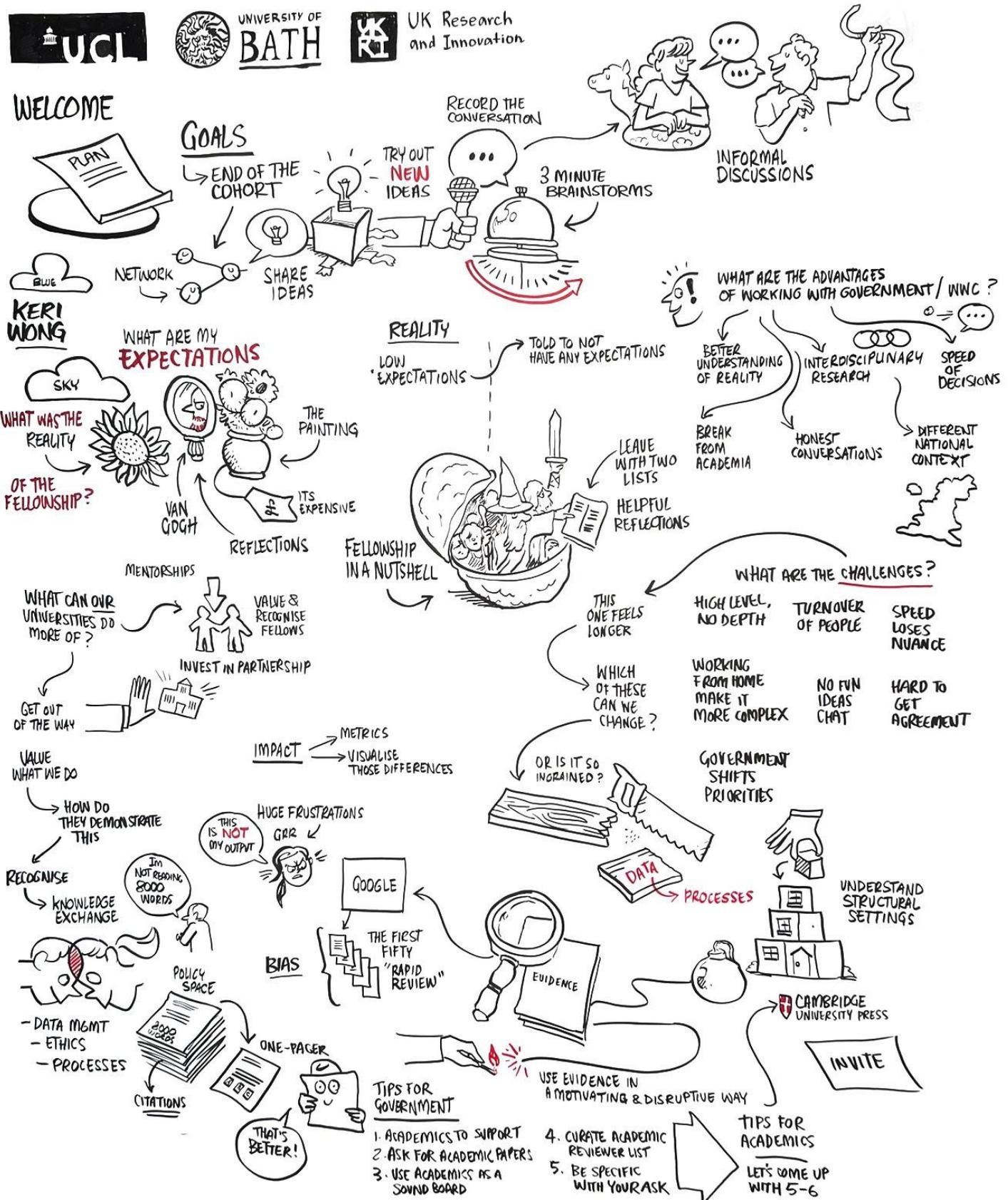
Three-minute pitches "My fellowship in a nutshell"

Dr Katharine Steentjes – Based in Northern Ireland (DAERA)


- Focus

Behaviour change and public attitudes to climate action
in Northern Ireland—informing DAERA's engagement strategy.

- Biggest Win

Established need for larger public engagement program, across
NI government departments

- Key Challenge

Initial plan to run Northern Ireland's first farmer climate
attitudes had to be changed due poor initial press coverage
Internal restructuring slowed down progress

Dr Stefan Siegert, – University of Exeter, Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs
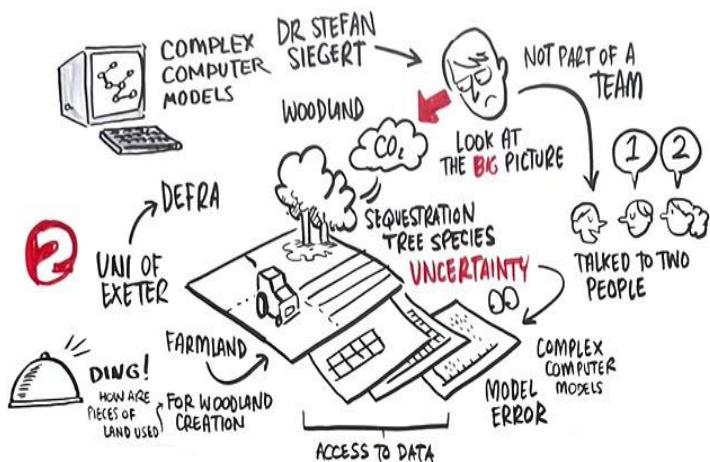
- Focus

Quantification across linked land use and
climate models for woodland creation policy.

- Biggest Win

Exposed hidden parameter risk in the tree
species model—shifting DEFRA thinking from
optimisation to resilience.

- Key Challenge

Complex model handoffs and developer scepticism
slowed data access.

Dr Roxana Ciurean – British Geological Survey, Scottish Government

- Focus

Geohazard Scientist critically appraising
the extent to which civil contingencies risk
assessment information is used in developing policy
and driving civil contingencies activities in the
Scottish Government.

- Biggest Win

Mapped how risk information is used and
recommended ways to improve the process by
collecting evidence directly from policymakers;
helped shape other strategic activities.

- Key Challenge

The inception phase took longer than expected, which required extending the fellowship to
ensure delivery of the planned outputs.

Professor Carolyn Hayles – Cadw (Welsh Government)
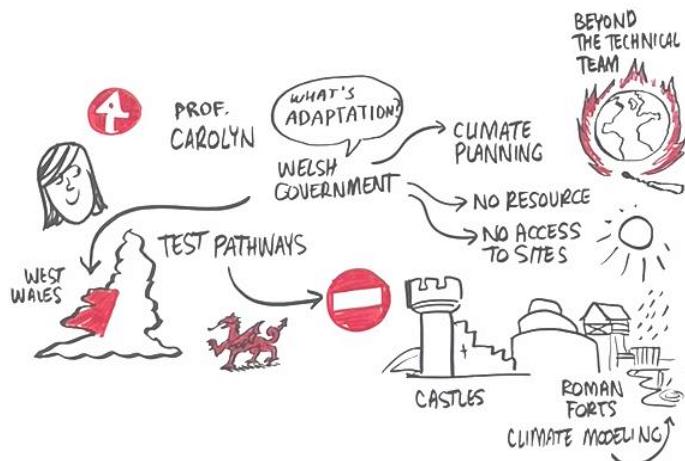
- **Focus**
Embedding climate adaptation pathway planning for heritage assets—castles, forts, monuments.
- **Biggest Win**
Tailored risk assessment framework now informing Cadw's national strategy.
- **Key Challenge**
Host initially unclear on adaptation; no site access or resources until relationships built.

Dr Jo Daniels – Department for Health and Social Care
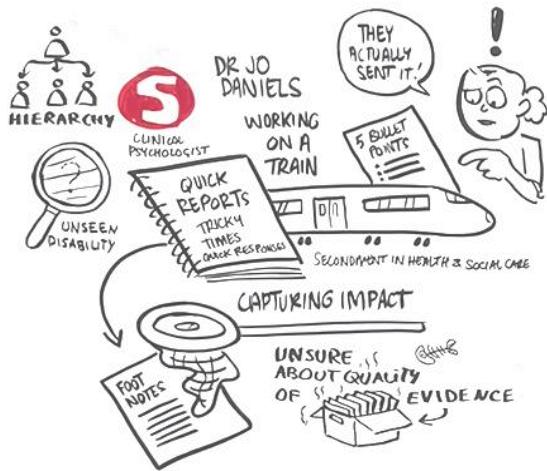
- **Focus**
Developing the research and evidence base
For policymaking in health and social care settings, leading a government Area of Research Interest (ARI).
- **Biggest Win**
Commissioning new research and funding call in my field, plus opportunity to brief CSAs, ministers and contribute to important policy documents.
- **Key Challenge**
Could have utilized expertise more, took time for people to understand the scope of the policy fellow role and expertise available. Role was often responsive and at times high pressure.

Dr Susie Hulley – Ministry of Justice

- **Focus**
Life sentences for children & digital technology evaluation in prisons (with Prof Rosie Meek).
- **Biggest Win**
Direct interviews with judges captured rare sentencing insights; aligned findings with forthcoming homicide law review.
- **Key Challenge**
Precarious contracts and MoJ security delays caused sustained stress.

Dr Jack Blumenau- Cabinet Office, Evaluation Task Force

- **Focus**
Advisor on quantitative evaluation quality; dubbed the "polite voice of doom".

UKRI Policy Fellowship
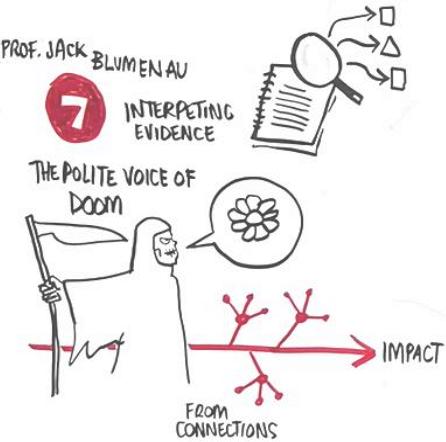
- **Biggest Win**
Secured UKRI metascience grant and extended fellowship parttime; leads multiteam study on analytical variation.
- **Key Challenge**
Twelve plus months from networking to commissioned research.

Professor Rosie Meek – Royal Holloway University of London, Ministry of Justice

- **Focus**
Digital technology rollout evaluation and trauma informed yoga training for prison staff.
- **Biggest Win**
Established evaluation framework across multiple prisons, advancing yoga pilot for women & youth estates.
- **Key Challenge**
Slow approvals and informal research skills training roles.

Dr James Worrall – Foreign Office, University of Leeds

- **Focus**
Middle East crisis analysis and rapid briefings during Red Sea, Iran, Israel and Syrian collapse escalations.
- **Biggest Win**
Four day Syria note reached the Prime Minister, informing cross Whitehall queries.
- **Key Challenge**
Band width limits, role change and health setback complicated early months.
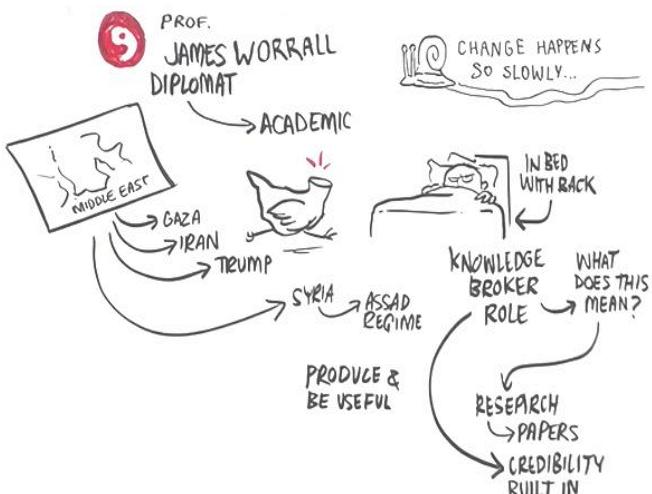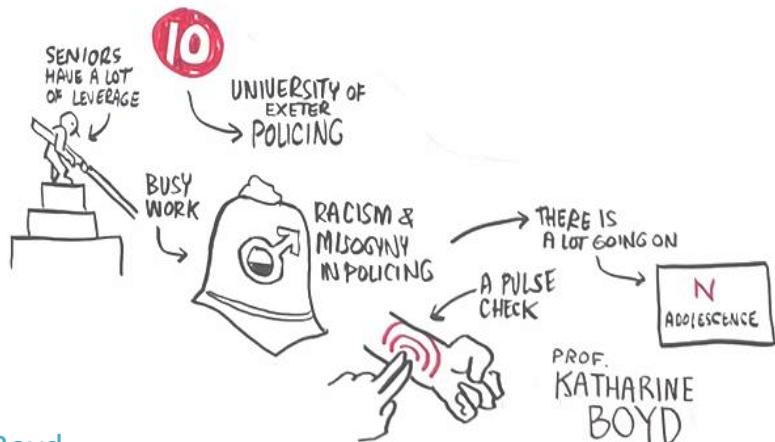
Professor Katharine Boyd
– University of Exeter, College of Policing

- **Focus**
  Behavioural science interventions to address sexism, misogyny & racism in policing culture.
- **Biggest Win**
  Launched six month cluster RCT (three forces) to assess the Pulse Check culture surveys amongst 4 integrated interventions
- **Key Challenge**
  Low baseline survey uptake; heavy admin due to security clearance requirements

Dr Yadira Bajón Fernández –
Cranfield University, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
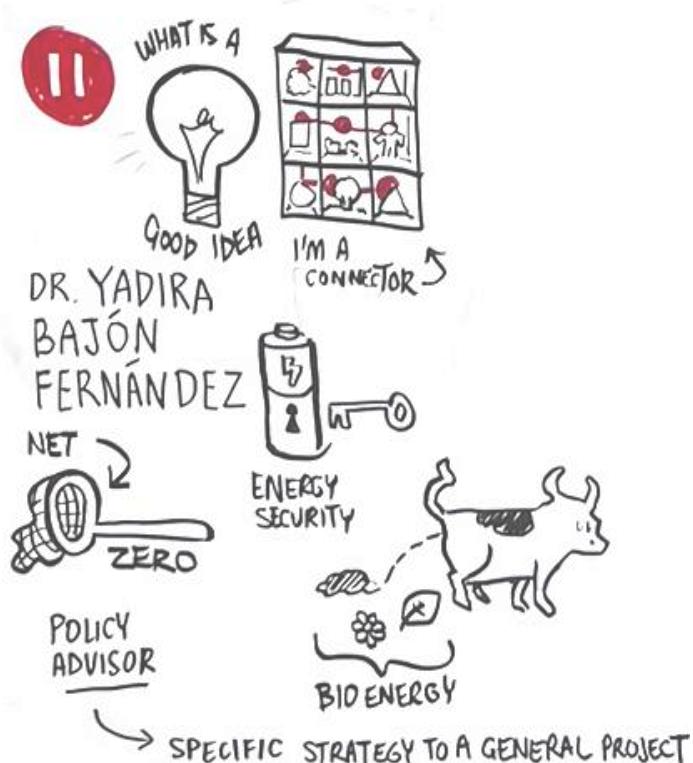
- **Focus**
  Advising on sustainability aspects for the growth of low-carbon intensity biomethane in the UK, and more broadly on sustainable biomass treatment, resource recovery and circular economy strategy.
- **Biggest Win**
  Informed evidence-based policy initiatives like the Green Gas Support Scheme (GGSS) and Future Policy Framework for Biomethane. Initiated and now chair a cross-government group on methane emissions abatement from anaerobic digestion.
- **Key Challenge**
  Delays with security clearance and project start. Limited quality evidence available on some GHG emission sources and abatement strategies.

Dr Hannah King –
Durham University, Youth Futures Foundation

•Focus
Defining and measuring "good jobs" for marginalised
young people and translating evidence for
policymakers and employers.

•Biggest Win
Draft metrics shaping forthcoming youth employment
policy papers; recognised as organisation's evidence translator.

•Key Challenge
Imposter syndrome amid intense peer review culture

Dr Keri Wong – UCL, Home Office

•Focus
Applying data analytics to better understand crime outcomes and cases, upskilling

workforce on evidence scrutiny and quality, as well as evidence access.

•Biggest Win
Gained data access and strategic proposal on next step in assessment. Shared research
on youth hubs, health inequalities, and co-production and delivered training in evidence review,

access, and capture for the Home Office.

•Key Challenge
Lengthy data access bureaucracy and juggling training with personal research &
event co-hosting.
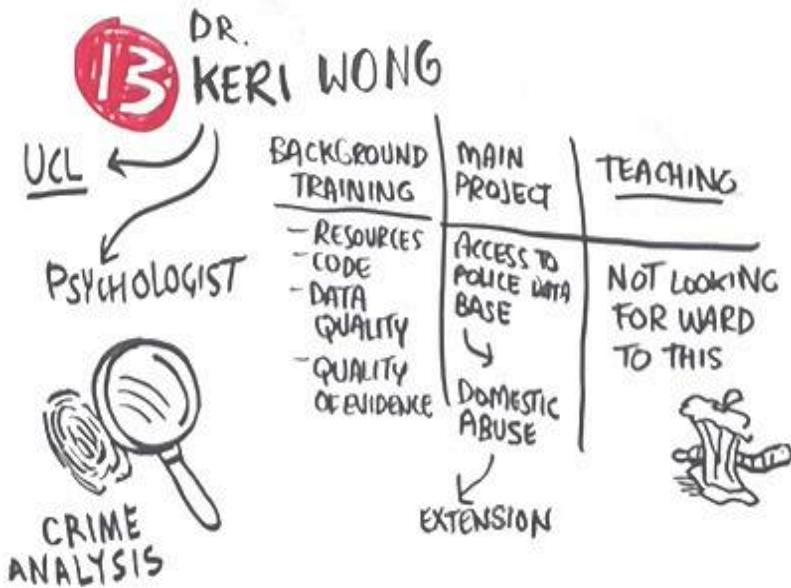
The Big Picture

Assessing the impact of research and policy: attribution claims & games

Prof James Copestake

Drawing on three decades of development economics evaluation, Prof Copestake walked participants through five hard won lessons on making credible causal claims. He contrasted the policy world's appetite for "irritatingly simple answers" with the messy reality of mixed method evidence and urged fellows to own their contribution stories ahead of REF 2029.

"Causal attribution is what I'm obsessed with."— Prof James Copestake

Key Points:

- Know your motivation: are you proving impact, improving practice, or both?

- Horses for courses: start with the problem and its complexity before choosing a favourite method.

- Two-step attribution: link your work to a tangible intermediate driver (e.g., legislation) before before developing a credible claim to having contributed to bringing it about.

- Theory of change discipline: map feedback loops, external shocks and alternative explanations—not just linear input-output chains.

- Qual led mixed methods: most realworld evaluations eyeball monitoring indicators, then test causal stories with qualitative tools like QUIP and causal mapping.

Opportunity:

Fellows can model transparent, proportionate evaluation practices for their host departments.

Challenge:

Policymakers crave unambiguous answers to complex questions or problems, yet credible evidence often requires nuance and uncertainty.

The session ended with some final thoughts from Professor Copestake:

- Don't chase the perfect method—aim for one that's credible, useful, and clear
- Engage with theories of change, even if you don't love them—they open doors to better policy thinking
- Listen carefully to stakeholders and your own instincts

The Big Picture
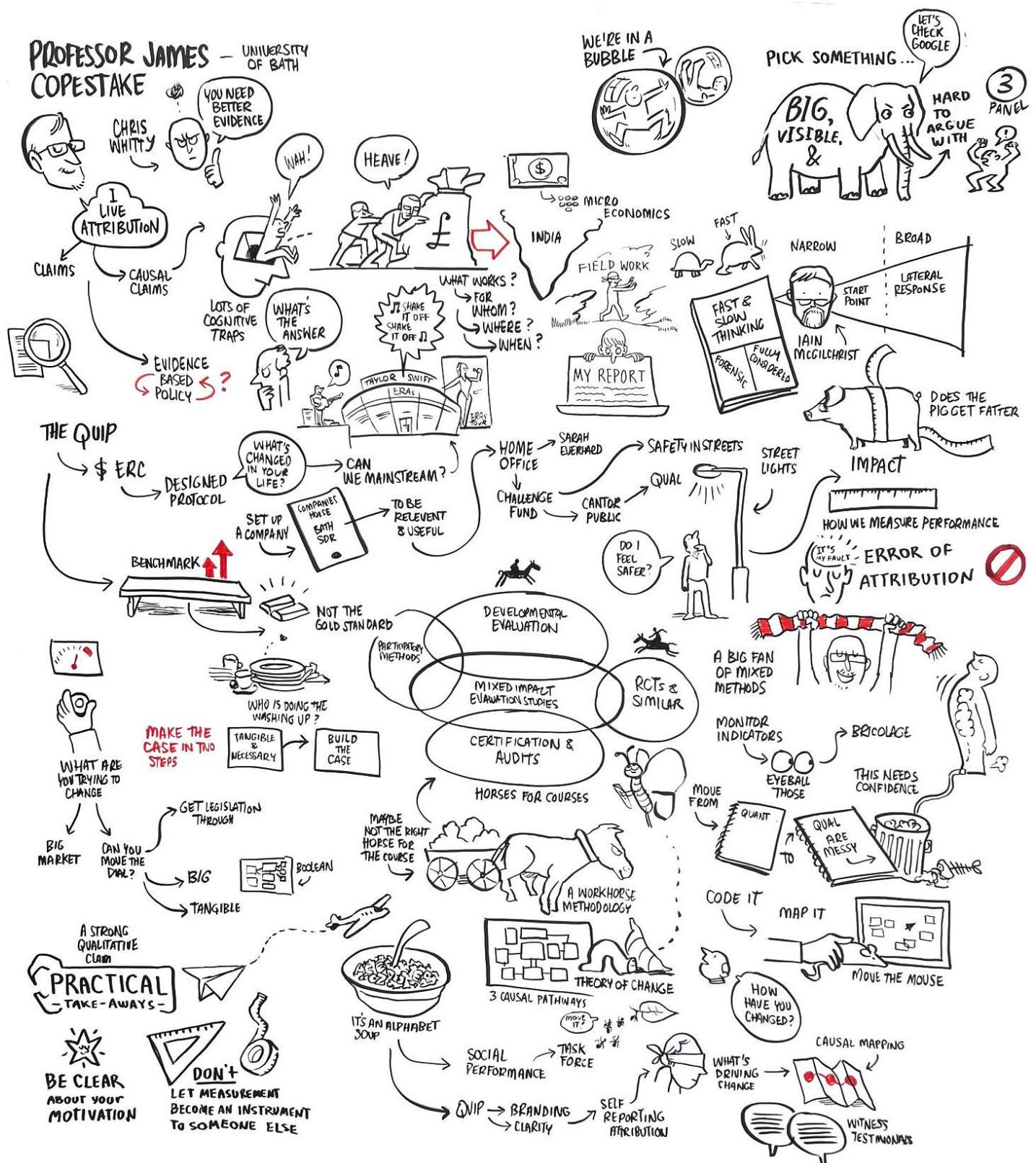
Research Impact and the REF – Engaging Policymakers

Tatiana Souteiro Dias

Tatiana unpacked upcoming changes to the REF 2029 exercise, emphasising the shift from impact case studies to narrating broader research engagement and impact. She outlined common misconceptions, highlighted evidence tracking tools, and shared concrete examples of policy influence.
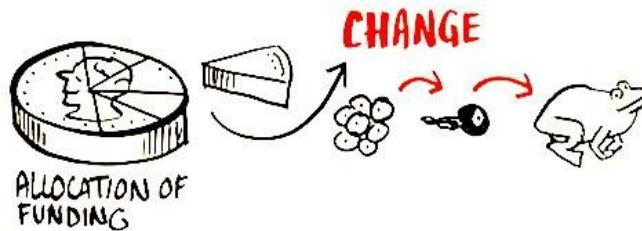
"Start collecting evidence early, and think like an assessor: what would persuade you this work was high-quality research impact?" — Tatiana Souteiro Dias

Key Points:

- Mythbusting: media headlines ≠ impact, talking to policymakers ≠ guaranteed change, impact development should start at the design stage and continue during and after a project.

- Reach = breadth and diversity of beneficiaries;
  Significance = importance of change.

- Case studies on teen mental health evidence and teacher workload reforms illustrated layered influence across departments.

- Recommended tools: Altmetric and Overton for tracking policy citations; maintain living files of emails, testimonials, media coverage, briefings and blogs.

Opportunity:
Fellows' embedded roles give direct access to policymakers—ideal for building relationships and for collecting rigorous evidence.

Challenge:
Data confidentiality can limit public testimonials; requires alternative documentation routes.

Independent Reflective tasks/activities set by Tatiana

Following her presentation, Tatiana asked fellows to spend 15 minutes individually reflecting on their own projects using four guiding questions focused on change, beneficiaries, evidence and next steps.

Key Points:

- Prompted fellows to define the specific changes their research could enable in policy or practice.

  Encouraged listing stakeholder groups who benefit and how.

- Urged mapping a clear "line of sight" from research activity to outcome.

- Stressed the importance of assembling evidence now—emails, briefings, media mentions and policy citations—to avoid scrambling later.

Brainstorm

Prof James Copestake
Prof Copestake introduced the "Most Significant Change" (MSC) storytelling technique, then divided attendees into four groups. Each group selected one fellow's pitch to develop into a robust impact narrative and theory of change diagram.

Key Points:

- Explained MSC: participants craft 500 word impact stories, screen them collaboratively, promote the strongest ones.

- Groups of three brainstormed how to strengthen one chosen pitch using tips learned during the day.

- Focus on clarity of outcome, causal pathway, and evidence needs.

- Planned 20 minute small group work followed by whole room sharing and potential "prize" for the most compelling story.

Opportunity
Peer critique helps fellows sharpen impact logic and documentation plans.

Challenge
Limited time to explore every pitch; emphasis on prioritisation.
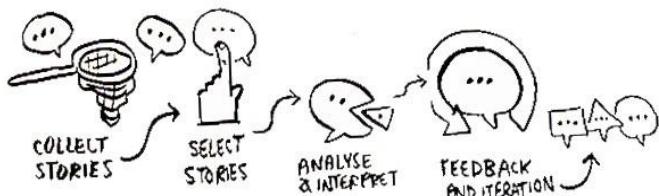
"There is an evaluation technique called the most significant change."— Prof James Copestake

The room reflected on some next steps following the brainstorm session:

• Track alumni from the first cohort—what have they built from their partnerships?
• Could they be invited to future events?
• More embedded knowledge-sharing could be transformative

The Big Picture

REF IMPACT: DEBUNKING MYTHS & MAXIMISING POTENTIAL
TATIANA SOUTEIRO DIAS

HELP RESEARCHERS DEVELOP IMPACT — RESEARCH

LOCH NESS — MYTH BUSTING

REF 2029 — ALLOCATION OF FUNDING — CHANGE

BROADER DEFINITIONS: WIDER OPPORTUNITIES ☆☆☆☆☆

RESEARCH → NOT TEACHING

SHARING FINDINGS = IMPACT

IMPACT

TALKING TO POLICY MAKERS — NO

IMPACT HAPPENS — YEARS AFTER

GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR CASE STUDIES
WHAT? WHO? WHERE? WHY? HOW?
BE JOURNALISTIC

CAN WE MAKE THEM INVISIBLE? — CASE

WHAT COUNTS? — CITATIONS — IN NEW OR REVISED POLICY

USED BY GOVERNMENT

REACH — BREADTH

MENTAL HEALTH — YOUNG PEOPLE
ACROSS UK

CASE STUDIES
USE IN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS
ON MANY LEVELS

IMPROVE WORKING LIFE FOR TEACHERS — WORKLOAD — MEASURES

ALTMETRIC: POLICY MENTIONS MEDIA — OVERTON

HEIGHT + ☆☆☆☆☆
• DIVERSITY OF BENEFICIARIES
• SIGNIFICANCE
• RIGOUR → QUALITY → INTEGRITY

NEXT STEPS:
① READ GUIDANCE → USE TOOLS
② REFLECT YOUR WORK
③ COLLECT EVIDENCE — YOUR STORY

TESTIMONIALS?
VERBAL EVIDENCE
WHAT NEEDS TO GO INSIDE A TESTIMONIAL?

BRAINSTORM JAMES COPESTAKE

COLLECT AND ANALYSE STORIES

FROM THE VANTAGE OF A DONOR

RICK DAVIES

(MSC) MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE

EVALUATE LARGE SERVICE DELIVERY PROGRAMMES

THE PRIZE IS... YOU BUY THE DRINKS

- WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?
- HOW CAN YOU MAKE IT BETTER

ETHIOPIA — BANGLADESH — INDIA

| 1 | 2 |
| 3 | 4 |

DEVELOP FOUR STORIES

COLLECT STORIES — SELECT STORIES — ANALYSE & INTERPRET — FEEDBACK AND ITERATION
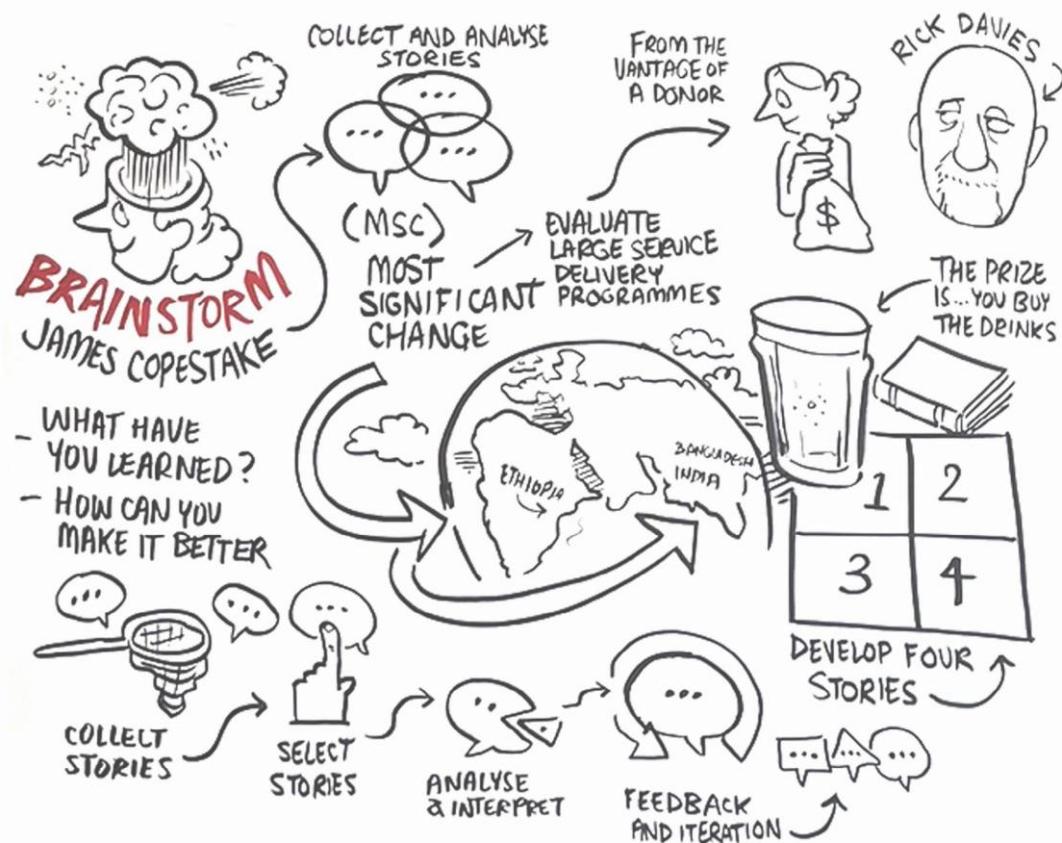
Guided Discussion & Ideas Generation: Next Steps?

UKRI Fellow Discussion

An open floor conversation synthesised lessons from the day and generated concrete ideas for sustaining the cohort's momentum—ranging from collective publications to practical net- working tools. Fellows weighed resource constraints against the ambition to influence future fellowship models.

Key Points:

- Draft a cohort wide learning brief (or impact case study) for ESRC, departmental Chief Scientific Advisers and other funders—framing impact as collective attribution rather than isolated claims.

- Set up a Teams or Slack workspace to replace ad-hoc email chains, share resources (e.g., data quality code, systematic review tips) and coordinate future events.

- Digital literacy & re-entry focus: leverage current ministerial interest in employing people with prison experience; curate evidence on low-risk offenders and resourcing gaps.

- Plan a follow up "story phase" event in December—potentially hosted by a willing government department—to widen the alumni network and workshop joint outputs.

- Challenge funds & evaluation: recognise local authority capacity gaps; fellows could advise on proportionate, learning oriented evaluation models.

- Barriers flagged: travel costs, last minute meeting invites, and patchy host department onboarding—call for dedicated networking budgets and a clearer roadmap for incoming fellows.

Opportunity:

Shape national guidance on policy fellowships and influence future schemes by presenting coordinated evidence and practical recommendations.

Challenge:

Securing funding and institutional backing for cross department collaboration while ensuring fellows retain ownership of their narrative rather than external evaluators.

"Wouldn't it be cool if we had a collective process and did that case study based on our fellowships work?" — Participant

"We could really shape what policy fellowships look like in the future in a really positive way."
— Participant

Interactive Mentimeter polls

Dr Keri Wong

Realtime Mentimeter polls captured participant sentiment on working with government and WhatWorks Centres, surfacing perceived advantages, challenges and priority next steps. The quickfire format provided a cohort "temperature check" that later informed group recommendations.

1 Advantages of working with government / WhatWorks Centres

• Network access & insider perspective – direct links to policymakers, data and decision processes

• Opportunity for tangible impact – research translated swiftly into policy actions

• Learning & skill-building – deeper grasp of policy cycles, evidence translation and political context

• Reputational benefit – fellowship badge carries weight with future funders and employers

• Variety & refresh – a break from academia's rhythms brings new experiences

2 Challenges of working with government / WhatWorks Centres

• Bureaucracy & slow pace – approvals, procurement and meeting cycles delay research

• Data access and security hurdles – clearance processes restrict timely analysis

• Shifting political priorities – projects risk derailment when ministers or agendas change

• Hierarchical cultures & role ambiguity – fellows must navigate status boundaries and unclear expectations

• Resource constraints – limited budgets and staff time stretch capacity

3. Ideas / Next steps for the fellowship community

• Create an online peer workspace (Teams/Slack) to share tools, code and briefings

• Draft a cohort learning brief for ESRC & Chief Scientific Advisers summarising collective impact

• Hold a December reunion to workshop stories and support REFready outputs

• Press for clearer onboarding & networking budgets for future fellows

The Big Picture

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