



OPEN
OXFORD POLICY
ENGAGEMENT NETWORK



Oxford Policy Engagement Network (OPEN) Peer Mentoring Scheme 2026

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1. Summary

The University of Oxford's Policy Engagement Team, and the UK Civil Service Policy Profession Unit invite Expressions of Interest (EoIs) from eligible researchers and policy professionals to join the 2026 cohort of the Oxford Policy Engagement Network (OPEN) Peer Mentoring Scheme.

In this cohort, the scheme matches 30 researchers from the University of Oxford, and 30 policy professionals at a similar career stage for six months, enabling them:

- To deepen their understanding of how research can inform policymaking and develop the relevant skills to catalyse that process;
- To broaden and deepen their academic and policy networks; and
- To strengthen leadership for academic-policy engagement.

2. Why join the scheme

Many researchers and policy professionals share an interest in better use of evidence in public policy, but when it comes to engaging with each other, they can feel like members of two communities divided by a common language. This unique, boundary-spanning scheme tackles this head-on, revealing to researchers and policy professionals the benefits of mentoring each other.

Since 2021, around 200 researchers from all four academic divisions at Oxford and policy professionals from over 15 UK government departments, plus the Scottish Government, Government of Jersey, NICE, Oxfordshire County Council and the NHS, have taken advantage of the scheme.

'The scheme has been absolutely brilliant, and I've thoroughly enjoyed connecting with the wider cohort so far. My 1:1 meetings with my peer mentor have been especially meaningful, stimulating and unexpectedly reciprocal. I was able to support him more than I had anticipated, which made the experience even more rewarding' (Maria Calazza, Postdoctoral research scientist, Department of Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics, 2025 intake)

Taking turns as mentor and mentee, participants provide each other with a sounding board, act as confidant(e), motivator, and a source of challenge and feedback, and clarify the culture, politics, and values of their respective environments.

Alongside these 1:1 conversations, participants also have opportunities to broaden their networks more widely through the full-day, in-person cohort-building event in January; two online meetings, where participants can select the groups most relevant to their policy and research interests, allowing them to connect with others in the cohort working in similar areas; and a final in-person networking event in Oxford in Summer 2026.

“I have found it a really positive way to broaden my perspective and think beyond my day-to-day policy concerns. It has made me consider how I could link more two of my key interests - the civil service and academia.” (Policy professional, 2023 intake)

3. Objectives

The scheme aims to enable participants to achieve one or more of the following objectives:

- To deepen their understanding of how research can inform policy;
- To develop awareness of their relevant strengths, potential, and opportunities for professional development and leadership in academic-policy engagement;
- To plan how to acquire more of the knowledge and skills required to achieve their potential, and begin to do so;
- To broaden and deepen their research and policy networks;
- To develop their understanding of mentoring, and some of the skills required to do it well; and
- To enhance their motivation to engage with the other sector and build their confidence to do so.

4. How the Scheme works

Matching

Two Mentoring Coordinators manage the scheme as follows:

- Once accepted onto the programme, the Mentoring Coordinators will create a profile card of all eligible peer mentors based on the information they shared when expressing interest, which will then be shared with other participants in the cohort.
- Participants will be invited to review the profile cards of potential peer mentors and indicate up to three they feel could be a good match.
- Matches are not based on having the same policy or research area, but rather on career stage and professional development objectives. Being paired with someone from a different field is entirely expected, and often especially valuable, as it offers fresh perspectives and broader insights.
- The Mentoring Coordinators will propose peer mentor pairs, taking participants' preferences into consideration. While an effort will be made to accommodate these preferences, there is no guarantee that all preferences can be met.
- Each proposed pair will first meet for a short, 15-minute “chemistry” meeting to explore whether the partnership feels mutually agreeable. Within 24 hours, both participants confirm with the Mentoring Coordinators whether they wish to proceed.
- If the match is not a good fit, the coordinators may suggest an alternative peer mentor. Where this is not possible, or the alternative also proves unsuitable, the participant will be offered a place in the next cohort instead.

‘The relationship with my peer mentor has been fantastic. It’s been working so well for us both that we’ve agreed to continue meeting over the next academic year as well, and to read things and offer feedback for one another.’ (Naomi Waltham-Smith, Professor of Music, 2023 intake)

Participation

Participants will:

- Attend a full-day, in-person event in Oxford on 15th January 2026 to meet the cohort, share engagement-related challenges, and exchange insights of common interest;
- Meet with their peer mentor at least once a month (online or in person) until the scheme ends;
- Take part in two thematic online meetings, joining groups aligned with their policy and research interests, to contribute to discussions, exchange experiences, and build connections with others in the cohort;
- Join the final in-person networking event in Oxford in Summer 2026; and
- Stay in touch with the Mentoring Coordinators at any time to discuss questions or concerns.

5. Assessment of Eols

Eols should demonstrate an interest in, and some understanding of, either public policy in at least one area (for researchers) or academic research (for policy professionals), however, no formal experience in the other domain is necessary. They should also demonstrate how the applicant’s objectives align with the scheme’s objectives.

6. Eligibility

Researchers

Eols are welcome from research staff with a contract of employment with the University of Oxford that will be in place for the duration of the scheme. Retired and Emeritus Fellows, as well as Masters and DPhil students, are not eligible to apply.

Policy professionals

Eols are welcome from policy professionals across the UK Civil Service at Senior Executive Officer (SEO) level or above, as well as from policy professionals employed by other policy organisations (e.g. the UK Parliament, devolved assemblies, local authorities, statutory bodies, or civil society organisations).

7. Application process

All applicants should express interest by 12:00 BST on 24 October 2025 using this form, taking careful note of the requirement to attend the cohort-building event (See Key Dates below.)

8. Evaluation

All participants will be invited to an evaluation and networking event in the Summer 2026 in Oxford. Participants will also be asked to complete a mid-point survey and a final evaluation questionnaire about the scheme.

'I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it as everyone I encountered through the experience was lovely' (Policy Professional, 2025 intake)

9. Key dates

Action	Date
Call opens	22 September 2025
Application deadline	24 October 2025
Applicants notified of acceptance or non- acceptance to the scheme	28 October 2025
Deadline for participants to indicate their preferred choices for peer mentor	10 November 2025
Participants seek chemistry meeting with their proposed peer mentor	17 November – 1 December 2025
Full-day, in-person cohort-building event in Oxford	15 January 2026
Cohort Ends	30 June 2026
Networking event in Oxford	TBC (Summer 2026)

10. Contact

If you have any questions about the scheme, or would like to discuss an EoI, please contact José Rojas (jose.rojasalvarado@socsci.ox.ac.uk) OPEN Learning & Development Manager.