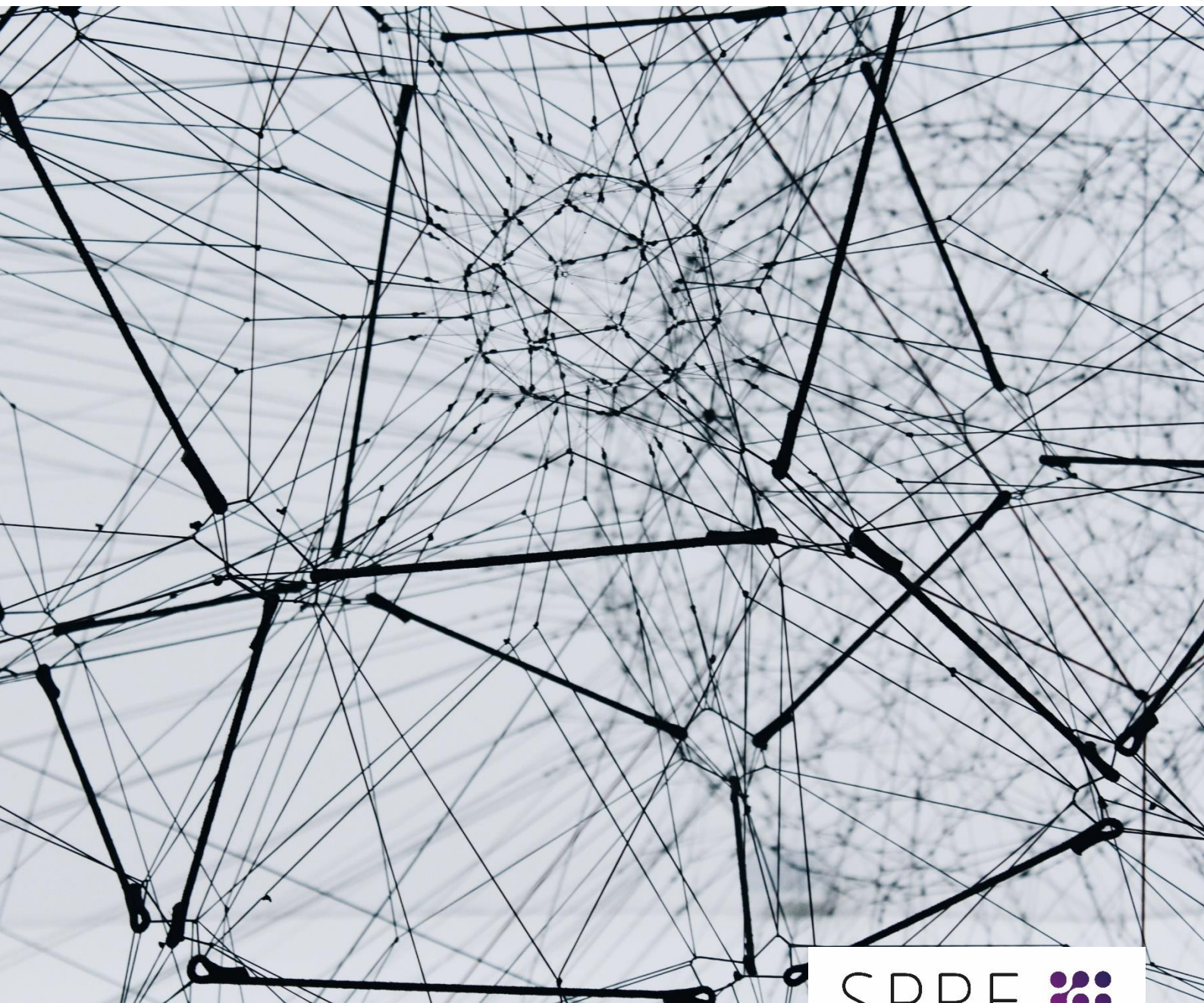


Joining the Dots

SPRE Annual Report

December 2021



SPRE 

SCOTTISH POLICY & RESEARCH EXCHANGE

Welcome

At the beginning of 2019, the Scottish Policy & Research Exchange was launched as a pilot. We set out on a three-year journey to explore whether there was an appetite in Scotland for an organisation devoted to academic policy engagement and, if so, how might it work and what would it do.

Those three years will be up at the start of January 2022. It has been quite a ride. We have trained thousands of academics in how to work with policy professionals, facilitated hundreds of interactions between scholars and officials, and built online tools that have become part of the landscape of Scottish higher education.

During that time, our understanding of what makes for effective engagement has evolved, as it has for colleagues working across the UK and beyond. We have aimed to draw on the very best of current research in this area to inform our practice and over the summer of 2021 had the opportunity to meet with our main stakeholders to discuss what should come next.

Based on the insights offered by our partners, and those of scholars and practitioners working in the field of policy engagement, we are now in a position to move SPRE on to the next stage in its journey – including changing our structure, deepening our networks and relationships with academics, brokers and officials in Scotland, and putting the latest thinking on 'what works' into practice.

We are immensely grateful to the Academy of Social Sciences which, as one of SPRE's founding partners, took on legal liability for the project in 2019 and has provided oversight and support services during the last three years. In early 2022 that relationship will change when SPRE is established as an independent body, constituted as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO).

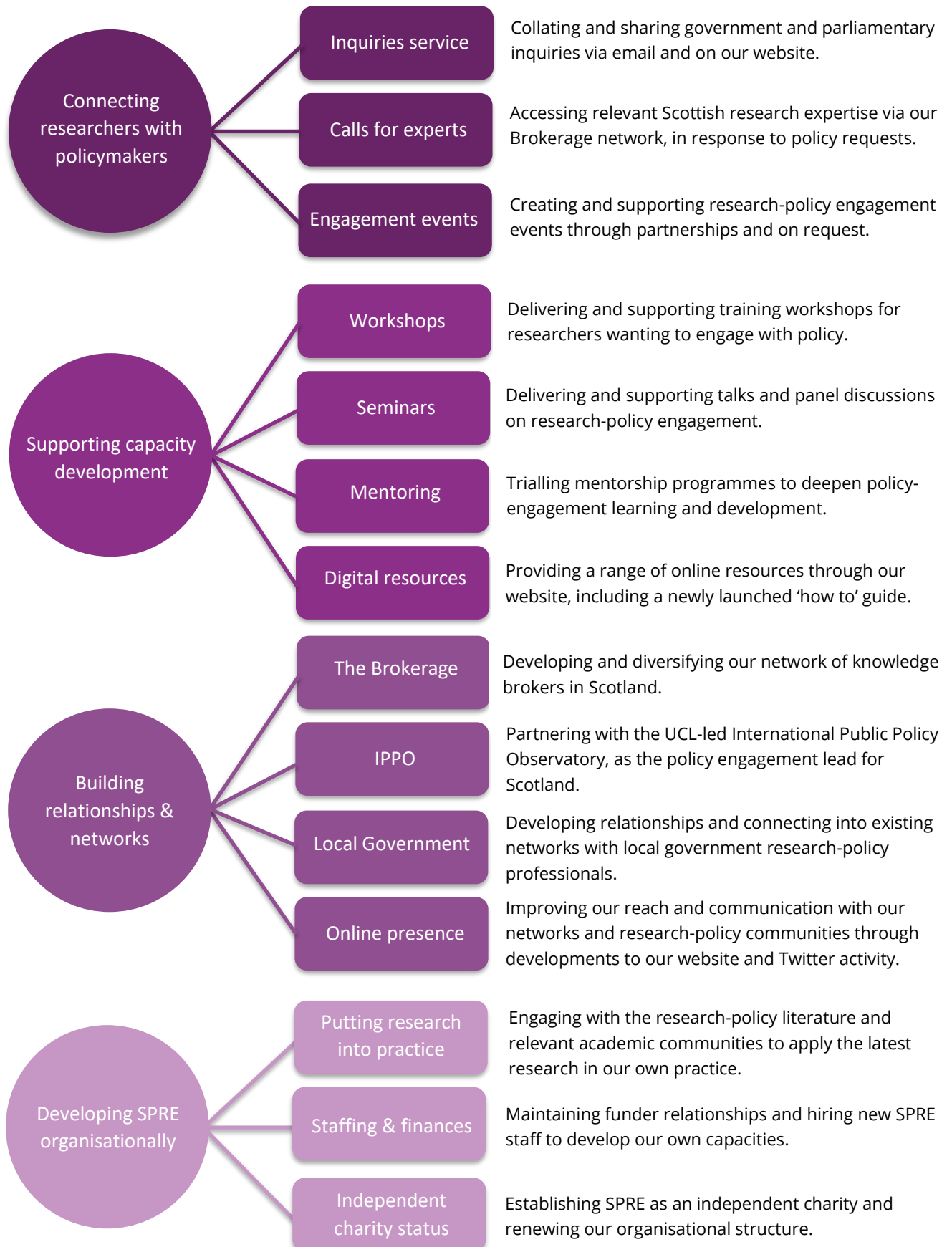
As SPRE looks to the future and moves out of its pilot phase, our own experience and the growing body of research tells us that we need to build networks and sustainable relationships between scholars and officials rather than thinking in terms of individual interactions. Towards this end, in the new year we will be establishing new networks that allow academics, brokers and officials working in different areas of policy to engage with one another over the long term. This work will run alongside our continuing training, brokerage and development work. As part of our relationship- and network-focused approach, we are working with other research-policy brokers to share learning and develop innovative approaches to how we improve our practice.

None of what we have accomplished so far, nor what we are setting out to achieve in the years ahead would be possible without our supporting organisations. We are very grateful for the financial support and support in kind that we receive from the University of Aberdeen, the Academy of Social Sciences, the University of Dundee, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Heriot Watt University, the University of the Highlands and Islands, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament, the University of St Andrews, the University of Stirling and the University of the West of Scotland.

We look forward to continuing our work with all these partners and others on the next steps of our journey.

Nick Bibby,
Director

2020-21 Highlights



2020-21: Training

We have continued to provide workshops and lectures to researchers at all career stages but particularly PhDs and ECRs. We have expanded our suite of online tools and piloted a mentoring programme and a growing number of longer, more specialist workshops. We have worked with most of Scotland's HEIs and a growing number of Doctoral Training Programmes to deliver this work.

WORKSHOPS AND MENTORING

We've run around forty workshops in the last year, all online. We have worked at every tier of our partner organisations from research centres and smaller administrative units to college- and even university-wide events. Some training activities have been also hosted by doctoral training partnerships including MASTS, SGSSS, SGSAAH and E4. We have also delivered talks and training for specialist networks such as Sense About Science, the British Ecological Society (Scottish Policy Group) and a collaborative event with Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum.

We also piloted our first mentoring programme this year with scholars from Queen Margaret University and have been reflecting on how that worked over the summer. We plan to roll out more of these programmes in the months ahead for academics who want to delve beyond the 'Policy 101' level.

We have also undertaken some longer events, either half- or full days. These have allowed us to take a more discursive approach allowing participants to learn in a more hands-on manner and receive more in the way of direct feedback. Although our introductory sessions will remain an important tool in our training kit, we plan to make increasing use of this more interactive approach.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

One of our most exciting developments this year has been the launch of our [online training resource for researchers](#). This guide will allow scholars to identify their own pathways into policy and works both as a stand-alone guide or in conjunction with our workshops. We have continued to provide online lunchtime webinars for large groups of researchers, with these routinely attracting audiences approaching a hundred viewers.

We have drawn together the videos of some of these sessions, along with our short films following three researchers on their first steps into policy, to form the basis of [a resources section](#) on the website. Over the course of the next year, we aim to pull together content from all of these films, along with some original material, to form a set of video FAQs.

The next big development on the site will be to change how our listing of government and parliamentary inquiries works. It had always been the intention that it should be possible to search this service by topic but there were a number of challenges faced in making this happen – not least that all four governments and all four parliaments tag their inquiries in different ways. However, we believe we have solved the problem and will launch this adapted service soon.

2020-21: Networks & Communications

SPRE is a series of networks overlaying each other. This has been our greatest strength to date and will inform the next stage in our development. It is worth reflecting on three aspects of this approach; The Brokerage, our most active network; IPPO, a new venture for us; and our expanding reach in social media and through our website.

THE BROKERAGE

Our [Brokerage](#) network remains popular as a tool for connecting policy professionals to the right academic, with some recent calls put out on behalf of Scottish Government, the Scottish Leaders Forum, and the Improvement Service. Our inquiries service, which delivers details of inquiries launched in the preceding seven days by the Scottish, UK, Welsh and Northern Irish assemblies and governments direct to subscribers' inboxes, remains among our most popular services.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY OBSERVATORY (IPPO)

[IPPO](#) is an ESRC-funded project based at UCL, in which we are the Scottish 'arm'. IPPO scans the world for evidence to inform policy discussions of the societal aspects of the pandemic and the associated lockdowns. We have been able to connect the IPPO team to scholars across Scotland and support its engagement with officials in central and local government. It has allowed us to learn from policy engagement colleagues elsewhere in the UK and across the world, and influence recovery plans and policies with Scottish research insights.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

Over the last year, we have expended the resources available on our website and increased our newsletter and social media audiences. Although we hope to make a cautious return to some live events soon, but videoconferencing will remain an important tool

The SPRE website continues to be popular with an increase in the number of users this year compared to last. Figures have improved further since the launch of our training guide in August.

Metric	Sept 2020	Sept 2021	Relative change
Unique website users preceding 12 months	4,897	6,590	+35%
Twitter followers	1,598	2,454	+54%
Brokerage subscribers	216	307	+42%

2020-21: Staffing, Governance & Finance

Our partners initially agreed to support SPRE for a trial period of three years. That initial phase is now coming to an end, and we can look ahead to putting SPRE on a permanent footing having established SPRE clearly on the policy and research landscape and learned hugely valuable lessons during this time. This process of transition will be an important part of our work for the next six months.

STAFFING

In the last twelve months, SPRE has been joined by Dr Dave Bell who is leading our work developing networks within the policy community and connecting these to researchers in ways that deliver meaningful change. Unfortunately, Dr Mariola Tàrrega, who was leading our work in digital space accepted a new job in Barcelona earlier in the summer. An amended version of that post, with a greater focus on training resources, will be advertised once our new structure is in place. We also anticipate the creation of a fourth role before the end of 2022.

All terms and conditions will be secure as we transition to a new structure and SPRE is being advised by Thorntons LLP both on the creation of the new charity but also the staffing implications of existing and new employees.

GOVERNANCE

SPRE is currently responsible to the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS) which agreed, as one of the initial donors, to take on legal liability, oversight and to provide support services when we were formed. The project also has an advisory group, which is co-chaired by the chief executives of the Academy of Social Sciences and the Royal Society of Edinburgh. The director and staff of SPRE are hugely grateful to our colleagues in the Academy and the RSE for their ongoing support and to the advisory group for their advice and guidance.

As we take steps towards a new structure, the Academy's Council and Chief Executive will have oversight of the creation of the new organization, and the AcSS Council has to give final approval. AcSS sees the proposals as an important next step in SPRE's development and are supportive. Trustees of the new organization will be appointed from within our existing network.

FINANCE

Most HEIs in Scotland help fund the project, along with the Scottish Government and Parliament. Additional funding in the last year came from our involvement with IPPO.

We spent a little less than we raised last year, as had been the case in the previous two years. This has allowed us to develop healthy reserves as we look to take our steps organizationally.

Although we may consider other funded projects in future years, we are conscious of the risk of being dominated by the demands that these present, and our current intention is that the substantial majority of our funding should come from in the form of donations from our partners.

All of our services are provided free of charge at the point of delivery and there are no plans to change this.

2021-22: Looking Ahead

The remainder of this year and the beginning of next represent a moment of organisational transition for SPRE. However, this will not prevent us from continuing to deliver our services and resources, nor from expanding those into new areas.

Taking stock

In the last five years, SPRE has changed from being just an idea in a report to being the organisation outlined in the above pages. In the last three years, it has moved from one member of staff to three and established a reputation as the go-to source for policy engagement in Scotland. Over the last year, we have redoubled our efforts to learn from the best available research and practice about how knowledge can best be exchanged between policymakers and researchers, how evidence and expertise are used in the development of policy, how individuals, groups and organisations learn, how expertise is framed and identified, and how voices that are too easily drowned out can be amplified.

We are very grateful to researchers and other experts in Scotland and elsewhere who have shared their ideas and analysis with us on how an organisation such as SPRE can best support meaningful and productive relationships between academics and policy professionals. The next part of this report draws on what we have learned from them and our experience to date and sets out the next steps for the project.

Renewing our Structure

When SPRE was first launched, we had no particular way of knowing whether there would be an appetite for a specialist project working in this area. Those partners who made donations to the project committed to an initial period of three years and, as one of those initial donors, the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS) agreed to take on legal liability for the project, providing oversight and support services.

We are hugely grateful for the support of all our partners during this period; it is no exaggeration to say SPRE would not have existed without it. As we look to the future, it makes sense to establish SPRE on a more permanent footing, with its own legal identity and systems of governance.

Over the next few months, we will establish SPRE as an independent organisation. The vast majority of those who interact with SPRE and use its services should notice no difference whatsoever. We have discussed these changes with many colleagues in both policy and research and will continue to do so as we make these changes.

The process to achieve this is set out below.

- 1) SPRE will be established as an independent charity in its own right; specifically, a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Institution (SCIO). Once established, the new organization will be accountable to a board of trustees drawn from academia and policymaking and will be regulated by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR).
- 2) We are working with our solicitors (Thorntons LLC) to secure charitable status and the Academy of Social Science's Council and Chief Executive will have oversight of the creation of the new organization and the AcSS Council has to give final approval. AcSS sees the proposals as an important next step in SPRE's development and are supportive.
- 3) We will continue to liaise with our partners and brief our advisory group on a regular basis.

- 4) Our core activities will continue to be funded by donations from Scottish HEIs and policy institutions, as set out in the Finance section above. We will continue to offer our services for free at the point of delivery.
- 5) SPRE staff have been consulted on this process and no significant changes to their terms and conditions are anticipated. These and all other existing commitments will be transferred to the new organization in agreement with AcSS.

Expanding our Resources

The big development of the last few months has been the launch of our [training guide](#). This currently consists of four 'steps' and has been launched in beta mode with the intention of discovering what users find useful and what they would like to see added. Based on that feedback, we will refine the existing content and develop additional steps in 2022.

We will make a particular focus of expanding online training tools throughout the next twelve months. These will include an increased use of video resources, including combining existing and original content into a series of short FAQ vlogs.

We will expand the available training options to provide more in the way of mentoring opportunities. We will also develop provision for particular audiences, such as KE professionals, research developers, PIs and so on.

In addition to our weekly roundup of inquiries, SPRE also hosts [a complete list of inquiries](#) running throughout the UK. This part of the service has presented a number of problems, not least the lack of any means to filter inquiries by topic. We believe this problem is now solved and we will be relaunching this service in a way that allows users to search all currently live inquiries using tags based on policy topics such as 'public health' or 'children and young people'.

There is a huge amount of research available on the relationship between academic research and policymaking. We will curate a library of some of these on our website alongside some additional resources such as interviews with the researchers involved or key lessons from particular articles.

Extending our Networks

One of the most striking lessons to be drawn from both from the literature and our experience of the last three years, is that relationships are key to effective policy engagement. Translating that knowledge into practical reality for an organisation such as SPRE, however, is easier said than done.

We have spent much of this summer grappling with this problem and have plans for some initial networks that draw together researchers and policy professionals around particular topics of practice on an ongoing basis. Our intention is to learn from the process of convening these networks and apply that to our own practices going forward.

We will also expand the existing Brokerage network to allow its members to meet one another and share their experiences and examples good practice. We see this as a significant gap and opportunity in Scotland. SPRE will not set particular goals for this network but will let its members determine what they would find useful. One of the great strengths of the Brokerage is that it welcomes any knowledge mobilisers themselves to opt in rather than seeking representatives of any particular tier within institutions.

Policy engagement has both a supply (academia) and a demand (policy) side. In the light of this, we will use our convening power to develop networks that draw from both these communities.

Refining our Practices

As well as encouraging others to do so, SPRE also tries to be led by research in its own practices. Toward this end we undertook a major exercise of analysis, reflection and renewal over the summer of 2021. During this period, we considered everything about the organisation, from the concepts that underpin our work right through to how we deliver our services and who determines what is successful. The outcomes of this work will help shape our work moving forward.

Recent developments from various fields of research on research-policy engagement have underlined the imperative to move away from linear, 'deficit model' ways of working and towards more relational and systemic practices. We have been reviewing this literature and pursuing approaches to implementing its insights and advice in our own practices. Most notably this is through the development of a SPRE Theory of Change and organisational learning framework, and by initiating conversations and collaborative working with other leading UK research-policy engagement organisations and initiatives.

Conclusion

Over the course of three years, SPRE has established itself as the go-to source of expertise on policy engagement in Scotland. It has built collaborations across the HE sector and beyond, established tools that are used every day by colleagues around the country, launched and delivered a suite of learning resources in real and digital space, and drawn together a network of interested professionals from the worlds of higher education and policymaking.

As we move onto the next phase of our journey, SPRE faces new challenges; deepening and expanding those networks, establishing processes that facilitate enduring relationships between researchers and policy professionals, finding new ways to encourage the widest possible range of researchers to connect with the world of policy, creating and supporting new ways to measure the efficacy of our work and that of our partners, and more besides. We will also continue to work with our partners and others to ensure that the services we have already developed reach an ever-wider audience and are refined over time to address their changing needs.

As our new structure is established, we will continue to be accountable to our partners through reports such as this but will also benefit from the scrutiny of a board of distinguished trustees drawn from Scottish higher education and policy. Our director will also continue to meet with funders and other partners regularly to discuss our progress.

We will begin 2022 well-placed to continue our work, with reinvigorated processes and structures, pilots established for two new networks, fresh ideas for new resources and tools, and a financially secure position from which to operate. The last year has seen a dramatic increase in the number and quality of our relationships across Scottish public life, and we look forward to enhancing these still further in the years ahead.

Three years ago, we set out to answer a very simple question: Was there an appetite for a specialist policy engagement organisation in Scotland. The process of answering that question in the emphatically affirmative, we encountered a huge number of new questions; each one intriguing, fascinatingly complex, and beguiling both intellectually and practically. The answers to some of these questions and others yet to be identified will provide the next chapter in SPRE's story.