

Participatory Research Funding: The Role and Value of Public Engagement Professionals

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Executive Summary

Participatory Research (PR) is a collaborative approach where researchers and community partners work together to shape the research process, ensuring outcomes are equitable and socially relevant.

Research England supports this via the Participatory Research Fund (PRF), which distributes annual funding to Higher Education Providers (HEPs). Because both PR and the PRF lack strict definitions or rigid reporting frameworks, HEPs are given significant autonomy in how they utilise these funds.

This report explores the **value-add of Public Engagement Professionals (PEPs) in managing the PRF**. Drawing on surveys and workshops with PEPs across England, the findings reveal that PEPs are well equipped to maximise the PRF's impact due to their adaptability, relational expertise, and deep understanding of both community needs and institutional contexts.

To effectively manage the fund, **PEPs seamlessly blend six key approaches** tailored to their specific HEP and funding context:

- **Institutional Strategist:** Aligns PRF with broader university strategies to secure senior buy-in and unlock additional internal resources.
- **Relationship Builder & Networker:** Brokers trust-based connections across academic departments, professional services, and external communities.
- **Innovator & Change Agent:** Experiments with new funding models and embraces risk to support emerging, non-traditional research needs.
- **Training & Capacity Builder:** Delivers bespoke training to equip researchers and community partners with the skills to navigate co-creative methodologies and university systems.
- **Compliance & Systems Operator:** Challenges and redevelops rigid institutional processes (like ethics, HR, and finance) to ensure they support genuine PR rather than tokenistic consultation.
- **Embedded Outsider:** Uses an independent perspective to spot system gaps, question assumptions, and drive institutional reflection.

The report concludes that the varied, flexible nature of PR requires the tailored management style that PEPs provide. By utilizing these approaches, **PEPs ensure that PR standards are upheld, institutional processes are improved, and the PRF delivers its maximum strategic value**. Consequently, the report advises Research England to protect the PRF, implement multi-year funding models, and officially recommend that the fund be stewarded by dedicated PEPs.

Key Messages

Public Engagement Professionals (PEPs) are essential to the success of collaborative research with communities at UK Higher Education Providers, actively guiding and supporting projects by adopting six key approaches: acting as Institutional Strategists, Relationship Builders, Innovators, Capacity Builders, Systems Operators, and Embedded Outsiders.

Participatory Research Funding operates effectively and delivers high value when actively managed by PEPs. Their flexibility, participatory expertise, and ability to challenge restrictive university systems ensure that funds are used for genuinely collaborative, impactful research rather than surface-level consultation.

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Introduction

Participatory Research (PR) is a collaborative research approach where those affected by the research, often called community partners, are actively involved in shaping the research process: from identifying questions and designing methods, to collecting and analysing data, and sharing results. This approach helps ensure the research process and its outcomes are equitable, inclusive, and socially relevant. However, there is no standard definition for PR as this varies for each discipline, research approach, and the groups of participants involved. It is often thought about as a way of working, an approach, or a shared understanding.

Research England does not have a standard definition for PR. They do provide funding for PR through the **Participatory Research Fund** (PRF) to higher education providers (HEPs) in England through the quality-related research funding process. The amount each HEP receives is based on their latest performance in the Research Excellence Framework (REF), with HEPs getting between £5,000 and £150,000 each in 2025. 125 HEPs received funding, totalling just under £6,000,000.

There is no explicit measurement of PR quality within the REF, so a smaller HEP with exemplary PR practice may receive a smaller amount due to their overall score in the REF being lower. The funding is annual, but confirmation for upcoming cycles is often left until late in the process, sometimes within that next cycle. Universities are given significant autonomy and independence on how to spend this fund.

Public Engagement Professionals (PEPs) are professional services (PS) staff whose primary role is to support, develop, and lead activities that engage community partners, other stakeholders, and the public within research processes. PEPs can have Public Engagement (PE) as part of their official job titles (such as a PE Manager), but not all PEPs do.

Over the last few years, PEPs have been advocating within their HEPs to manage the PRF received. A network of PEPs from seven HEPs (Universities of Bath, Bristol, Exeter, Leeds and Plymouth, Imperial College London and King's College London) have met since 2022 to share learning and experiences of the PRF. They commissioned this work to look at how PEPs across England have managed the fund, what activities they did with it, and what value their experience as PEPs brought to the process. This report focuses on that **value-add**.

Methodology

Dr Dominic Galliano, an independent PEP consultant with over 12 years' experience in the sector, was commissioned by the network to carry out this project. Their past roles include being Head of PE at UCL, and established the Northwest of England PEP Network, a regional network of PEPs that meets every quarter in both informal and formal settings to share learning. The PRF is often a topic of discussion at these settings.

For this work, because of the lack of consistency in who counts as a PEP, the network and author agreed that participants would be restricted to staff who:

- Were responsible for managing the PRF. A few survey respondents were still in the process of acquiring the PRF within their HEP.
- Were based in central university teams. In some HEPs the PRF is managed by staff based at a faculty level. While their insight would be useful, limiting the work to those in central teams allowed for a more focussed discussion.
- Self-identified as a PEP, so this included staff based within the Research Office, Impact teams and senior leaders within smaller universities. Staff who manage the PRF but did not to identify as a PEP were therefore excluded from this work. It is therefore outside the scope of this work to explore how they managed the fund.

This work included:

- A survey that was distributed through national and regional PEP networks, receiving 29 responses. 21 of these fitted the above criteria, two responses being from one HEP. Out of the remaining eight responses, five were not PEPs, one was a PEP but not a central PEP, and the final two were central PEPs but did not receive the money.
- Additional informal conversations with those managing the PRF or looking to manage the PRF but did not fit the criteria.
- Two online PEP workshops with 16 participants from 13 different HEPs.
- An additional survey exploring examples of how the PRF was used. This received four responses.

The surveys mostly focussed on how the funding was acquired and how it was used. The workshop conversations explored the value-add PEPs brought to the management of the PRF. The workshops were transcribed, and an emergent thematic analysis was carried out.

PEP & the PRF: A Model

What commonality do these PEPs have in relation to their approach to managing the PRF?

From the survey and conversations, it was clear that PEP approaches to the PRF were varied. Some focussed on setting strategic direction within their HEP, others on building PR capacity. There was not a single methodology to managing the PRF that bound the PEPs together. These methodologies also varied within HEPs, years of PRF funding, and individual PEPs themselves!

It was possible to form a link between these varied approaches and the undefined nature of both the PRF and PR itself through the conversations. This variability, along with how the PRF itself does not come with a reporting and reflection framework, means most value can be derived from the funding by using a flexible approach. Staff who are used to **uncertainty** and have a very good understanding of their HEPs and local context are best placed to bring most value, along with structure and process. PEPs provide this through a blend of communication skills, facilitation techniques, community knowledge, partnership experience, strategic insight, and evaluative practice.

Why the need for flexibility and variability in approach?

Each HEP is different. Their PR practices and researchers are different or at least have different types of distributions across their disciplines. Their local communities, and therefore their research needs, are different. The amount of funding is also different. There is a risk that a strict definition for PR with rigid reporting and reflective framework could reduce the quantity and quality of PR that emerges from the PRF. This flexibility, along with that understanding of the HEP and its local context, is key, and PEPs are well placed within their HEP to be **trusted** with this.

On looking through the survey data and conversations, different approaches and projects could be classified and grouped together. Six different approaches were identified that show both the different ways PEPs add value to the managing of the PRF, and how the PEP's flexibility to work across these different approaches makes them well-placed for the management process.

These approaches have been developed specifically through this piece of work and are therefore directly applicable to the PRF. If they are applied to other activities undertaken by PEPs, not all approaches may be relevant, and additional approaches not identified here may also be required. (For example, running festival / engagement events, there would be an additional type around logistics).

“(PEPs are) bringing all of those different types of skills and roles ... working across community, civic engagement, and ... what unites all of that, is practice. So, it's the doing. ... I don't only see it as public engagement as well, because huge part of my practice at the moment is the amount of time I spend with our legal team to try and create collaboration agreements, and they are just as much part of this holistic practice, you know, institutional practice around trying to address equity as I am.”

The Six Approaches

Type 1: Institutional Strategist

The Institutional Strategist aligns the PRF with institutional strategies (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Research Culture, Civic Mission, Knowledge Exchange (KE), PE) and national strategies and frameworks (REF, Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)). In smaller HEPs they bring together different funding sources to make better value of different smaller sized funding pots (Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF), Research Culture, PRF, other quality-related research (QR) funding). Through this, their goal is to secure senior buy-in.

Value-Add to the PRF:

Through aligning the PRF with university strategies, the PEP can unlock additional internal funding, and resource allocation, which is used to sustain PR partnerships between academics and community partners beyond the annual funding cycle, and the periods of PRF uncertainty.

Through strategic reporting, impact from PRF is fed into reporting for other strategies, widening the internal impact from PRF-related activities. This ensures the PRF-related activity remains visible with the HEP. PR practices can then be embedded in other strategies, such as research culture.

From Conversations:

“We met (as a team) and talked about the way that we wanted to do this, and where the risk levels were, and then that also went to Research Policy Committee, which is the most senior policy, for a sign off.”

“I think that visibility does make a difference, that transparency.”

From Survey question “What benefit did you bring as a PEP to how the PRF was used?”:

- *We raised the profile of the PRF with senior leaders/academics, aligned PRF with other strategic initiatives to maximise impact.*
- *Our ability to secure other forms of funding to support ambitious projects*

Additional Survey Data: 2/18 PEPs formed new committees around PRF, while another developed their PE strategy using PRF funds.

Type 2: Relationship Builder & Networker

The Relationship Builder & Networker focuses on building networks across academic departments, professional services, and external communities. This is done through facilitating knowledge-sharing, brokering connections, and providing a space for collaboration.

Value-Add to the PRF:

Through networks, the reach and influence of PRF activities is expanded. Stronger partnerships built on trust and local need are essential for PR related activity closer to co-creative practices. PEPs also play a role in connecting and mediating between community groups, academics, and professional services. Examples of practice in conversations included incubator activities, which brought groups together with a funding opportunity.

From the Survey:

“What types of activity did you do with your PRF allocation?”:

External communications (6/19)

Internal communications (8/19)

Building of communities of practice (9/19)

“What benefit did you bring as a PEP to how the PRF was used?”

Networks of community partners that have existing relationships with the university. (13/19)

Knowledge of types of PR related activity within the university / Knowledge of hot / cold spots. (16/19)

Access to internal networks of researchers at the university with an interest in PR. (16/19)

Type 3: Innovator & Change Agent

The Innovator & Change Agent experiments with new programmes, often trying and refining new funding models. They will trial or support riskier or more experimental projects, helping to reshape what can be achieved through this type of funding. They will embrace risk and reframe perceived failures as opportunities for institutional growth and learning.

Value-Add to the PRF:

That innovation and experimentation, and advocacy for new projects pushes the boundaries of what the PRF can support, which makes funding more relevant to changing research and community landscapes. They are responsive to changing and urgent community need. They challenge complacency and help the sector adapt to emerging needs.

From Conversations:

“We’re really trialling out really new ways of working for us where potentially there’s no research, academic researchers in the process—really about exploring sort of untapped knowledge that sits within communities, and then bringing researchers in...”

“I ran a session that was based around just this idea of failure, success and failure... when we think of participation, (compared to standard research), it’s not exactly the same. It’s kind of like you actually learn by making some mistakes, ultimately...”

“We can shoulder high risk at an engagement stage. You know that we can... actually, we don’t have to force a university collaboration at this point... if we don’t make opportunities where different things can happen, then the same thing will always... keep happening.”

Type 4: Training & Capacity Builder

The Training & Capacity Builder focuses on developing skills through bespoke training for both researchers and community members. This training develops understanding of co-creative research methodologies and often incorporates the navigation of local systems for this type of work (for example, ethics and payment services). PEPs are skilled in commissioning, designing and delivering training and development.

Value-Add to the PRF:

This skill-building activity boosts the overall confidence of both academic and community partners in doing this type of research, navigating their HEPs, and implementing ethical and equitable collaboration that lasts beyond the duration of a funded project.

From Conversations:

“We were able to just do a kind of focus piece on training around engagement with care, partnership, working, participatory working, and we have been able to see an improvement in the quality of the applications through that.”

“I’ve kind of been running some basic participation research training for — it’s open to anyone at (our

institution), but especially early career researchers have been taking it up quite a lot... .. based on some feedback from that, I'm going to run some more bespoke sessions that people want as well”

From the Survey:

“What types of activity did you do with your PRF allocation?”:

PEPs surveyed funded with the PRF:

Running skills sharing events. (7/19)

Running information sharing events. (8/19)

Training Workshops (12/19)

“What benefit did you bring as a PEP to how the PRF was used?”

PEPs surveyed said the benefit they brought in included:

Developed programme structures (such as funding, training) that could be adapted for use with the PRF. (17/19)

Type 5: Compliance & Systems Operator

The Compliance & Systems Operator works on challenging and developing institutional systems which are not designed for PRF types of activity. This often includes HR, financial, and ethics processes.

The other aspect the Compliance & Systems Operator brings is the generalised participatory expertise PEPs hold, ensuring funds support research that is truly collaborative, inclusive, and impactful, rather than superficial or tokenistic. PEPs can distinguish genuine participatory research from more standard PE projects or consultancy, ensuring rigorous, meaningful use of the PRF.

Value-Add to the PRF:

Through both the development of the HEP's processes, and support to those navigating those processes, the PEPs safeguard the quality of PR activity being carried out by HEP staff. The PEP ensures more genuinely co-created, community-engaged research projects receive PRF funding, filtering out token “consultation” proposals, and providing accountability and transparency. By making the processes more suited to genuine PR, PEPs make it more appealing for researchers to work in this way, and for communities to collaborate with institutions.

From Conversations:

“I'm going to run some more bespoke sessions that people want as well, which is useful... A few people from the ethics team also came to the training... which is important because they get a lot of participatory research applications, and they don't always know how to assess them—because it's quite different than assessing a traditional research project.”

“I use the word being the champion and quality control, like, rather than it going into a black hole and given out to (the faculties) and you don't really know what's happening. So it's having somebody who understands what the funding is for and sort of fighting for the right use of the funding. It's hard.”

From the Survey:

“We knew that there was demand for PR support. From the requests we'd had in the past we also knew that lots of people who claimed to be doing participatory research weren't doing [PR]. This shaped our initial approaches to the PRF and how we would work with it (ie we didn't just distribute it through a funding call). ”

“What benefit did you bring as a PEP to how the PRF was used?”

PEPs surveyed said the benefit they brought in included:

Knowledge of university structures to use within the PRF activity (Ethics, Payment systems, Press, Internal Comms). (15/19)

“Did your PRF work help develop, inform, or influence institutional structures, processes, or approaches?”

PEPs surveyed said the PRF helped develop, inform or fluence:

Ethics Processes (8/18)

Payment Systems (9/18)

Write-In: Guidance around participatory research and ethics in specific contexts

Type 6: Embedded Outsider

The Embedded Outsider is a PEP who has influence but not final and / or complete say over how the PRF is managed. This may be due to the PEP being new to the HEP, or the PRF being managed through another team. Some PEPs use this type to build their influence and eventually manage the PRF themselves. This type brings new perspectives to existing processes: spotting gaps, questioning assumptions, and driving change through reflection. PEPs have used this type of work as a stepping stone to gain influence within their HEP, and secure more of the PRF in future years.

Value-Add to the PRF:

Identifies unaddressed needs, system gaps, or unconscious biases in existing processes. Offers new solutions and independent critique, fostering reflexivity and innovation.

From Conversations:

“I think being able to come with fresh eyes, and I think that central role, again... you can bring in your kind of knowledge and experience from all these other places and spot things that perhaps those who are closer to it can't, and to improve the process, I think is the main thing in my experience.”

“I had to ask to become something to do with it. But I think that put me in a unique position of, kind of being removed, being able to come into it and just spot things and ask questions.”

Summary of approaches

Type 1: Institutional Strategist

The Institutional Strategist aligns the PRF with institutional strategies (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Research Culture, Civic Mission, Knowledge Exchange (KE), PE) and national strategies and frameworks (REF, Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)). In smaller HEPs they bring together different funding sources to make better value of different smaller sized funding pots (Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF), Research Culture, PRF, other quality-related research (QR) funding). Through this, their goal is to secure senior buy-in.

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Joint Approach Combinations

A PEP's approach to how they manage the PRF will be a combination of the above approaches. Some combinations that were seen within the surveys and conversations include:

Institutional Strategist with Relationship Builder & Networker:

They build internal alliances within professional services, often joining different committees. They focus on building programmes, processes and alliances that can endure against institutional change.

Institutional Strategist with Compliance & Systems Operator:

They advocate for policy change and create robust governance structures around the PRF, which are frequently linked to evaluation of PRF activity.

“We make the reporting work to show the value of this when there’s no formal reporting from Research England... the way of splitting was agreed by our PVC for research. So, it went straight to them.”

Relationship Builder & Networker with Training & Capacity Builder:

PEPs can use networking activity to help build capacity through the sharing of skills and experience across partnerships.

Innovator & Change Agent with Institutional Strategist:

They can challenge the status quo for PR processes.

Innovator & Change Agent with Relationship Builder & Networker:

PEPs can deliver microgrants or rapid-response calls tailored to emerging partnership needs.

Compliance & Systems Operator with Embedded Outsider:

PEPs who may only have access to some or none of the PRF funds can still influence PRF management through embedding themselves in existing processes, developing a reputation and applying higher standards for funded activity from the PRF.

Why the PEP?

PEPs in an HEP will either work as individual operators or within teams (either of PEPs, or form informal teams with other PS staff) to bring the appropriate approach to PRF-related programmes, strategies or projects depending on:

- The amount of funding available.
- Knowledge of where they are in the current PRF funding round and if more funding is forthcoming.
- The institutional and national strategic contexts.
- Their local community's knowledge, skills, experiences and needs.
- Their academic colleagues' knowledge, skills, experiences and needs.
- Their academic colleagues' understanding and definitions of PR.
- The local politics within the centre of their HEP.

The variables listed above, and how they evolve over the years, make PEPs well placed to manage these funds. PEPs offer a unique blend of strategic alignment, relational expertise, creativity, research leadership, operational reliability, and critical insight. This is tailored to the context of PR and engagement methodologies, ensuring the PRF delivers its maximum value across varied institutional settings.

Case Study: Funding Participatory Research

All survey respondents funded participatory research projects with the PRF (19/19 HEPs). Details on how exactly the research was funded through the PEPs was discussed in the workshops and seen in the case study survey, showing how these different approaches have been applied.

Case Study 1: The Institutional Strategist & Relationship Builder

In a smaller HEP (under 300 research staff), where the PEP had a wider remit over different pots of QR-funding, and greater influence within local institutional politics, but with a smaller PRF pot (£20,000), the research funding process was not formalised. Instead, using their personal networks within their HEP, they identified high profile PR projects, with strong local links and potential for impact, and funded those. One of these projects became a flagship for PR within the HEP, and reported impact was part of a strategic report plan that embedded PR within the institutional strategies.

“If anybody ever said to me, where did the money go, we can show really clearly where it's gone and the impact that it's had. So in terms of return on investment, it's huge.”

Case Study 2: Training & Capacity Builder

In this HEP, the PRF pot was larger (£75,000 to £100,000) with just over 1,000 research staff, the PRF was distributed using funding rounds framed as a Pilot and Follow-On round. This is a more standard model of distributing funding, but this HEP's PEP added value through establishing a cohort of those funded. They were gathered at the start, middle and end of their projects, with those funded ranging from researchers experienced in PR, to those new to the approach. This support included sessions on enhancing participatory research methodologies, planning for impact and next steps post-project, navigating complex university processes such as contracts, ethics approvals, and payments to partners and participants.

“These sessions have proven invaluable in helping researchers feel less isolated, build confidence, and form meaningful connections that often extend beyond the life of their projects.”

Case Study 3: Compliance & Systems Operator & Innovator & Change Agent

This HEP received the maximum PRF allocation (£150,000) but also has between 3,500 and 4,000 academic staff. The initial PRF allocations were distributed through internal funding panel not managed by a PEP. These rounds funded projects, but levels of participation within these projects were often low, in part because the panel did not collectively hold the specific expertise required for PR. When the PEP started managing the PRF, they decided to use some of the allocation to redevelop the process and use it as an opportunity to establish a common understanding of PR and build the network within the HEP.

The final guidance for the first PEP-led call was co-developed with members of several relevant research networks, and Research and Innovation Services colleagues. The resulting guidance and application form are intentionally flexible, with minimal criteria and structured questions to accommodate the varied nature of participatory research, including research projects and case studies.

Alongside this redevelopment of the call itself, an innovative approach to reflection and evaluation was developed with a local researcher that, at its core, acknowledges failure alongside success. This enhanced critical reflection is proving to be a gamechanger in how evaluation is addressed. Via externally facilitated sessions throughout the year, awardees were introduced to and continually supported to implement the approach. This is crucial when encouraging innovative projects.

“The collaborative approach by the PE team for the guidance development led to better connections between people from different disciplines and research methods to a community that is united through the purpose of participatory research, namely that conventional academic hierarchies are challenged by acknowledging local knowledge, that stakeholders are engaged, and diverse perspectives are respected.”

Case Study 4: Embedded Outsider

Our final example comes from a medium HEP (2,000 to 2,500 academics) with a £75,000 to £100,000 allocation. Here the PEP was new to the role and did not manage the PRF. They asked to join the local PRF process, which was framed as a funding round. As an embedded outsider, they could question *“how it’s always been done”*. For example, they noted there was no support or training, and a lack of shared understanding of participatory research. They also identified gaps in decision-making around ethics, inclusion, and sustainability. This used that embedded outsider status as a strength, not a weakness. Using this approach, and showing their value and knowledge, the PEP has since then become responsible for the PRF allocation.

“I just think being able to come with fresh eyes... and to improve the process”

Recommendations to PEPs looking to secure, maintain and get additional value from the PRF

There are still many PEPs who are advocating to manage the PRF within their HEP. Here are some tips that arose from the conversations:

1. **Anchor the PRF to institutional priorities, with you, the PEP as the central node:** Explicitly tag PRF outcomes to Research Culture, KEF, REF, any Civic Agendas, EDI, and faculty strategies. Make PRF the “delivery tool” for existing priorities, not a standalone pot. Think programmatically, not just projects.
2. **Build allies centrally and within faculties:** Use your networks and include known PR practitioners. Make it easy for them to champion your role.
3. **Create a governance structure which is built on allies who understand PR:** Secure a senior champion (PVC/Associate Dean) to chair panels and to whom you will report. Keep structure commensurate to your PRF award size.
4. **Report visibly, not heavily:** On a similar note, run a simple, repeatable reporting structure. Think short Case Studies, a few metrics, and a short overall summary of the work. Make PRF activity legible to leadership without burdening projects.
5. **Define PR and hold the line:** Co-create (if possible) and make that definition known. Require any applicants to justify their participatory approach.
6. **Remove delivery friction upfront:** Be explicit about “hidden” work you would have done on this already. Look at existing changes you may have made to institutional structures and processes and show how these can now be used for PR. Highlight any places where they may still need changing. Demonstrate your readiness to deliver. This may include thinking how different funding pots could be brought together. Be explicit about challenges in how PRF is managed nationally and how you can tackle those challenges.
7. **Use your local, regional and national networks:** PEPs are often in communities of practice with other PEPs either within their cities, regions or across the UK. These networks hold a lot of tacit knowledge on approaches that have worked, or more importantly, have not worked as well. PEPs are not alone when bringing their approaches; they bring this tacit knowledge from across the sector, which is practical, pragmatic, of value, and rarely codified.

Recommendations to Research England

Through these conversations PEPs developed some recommendations for Research England based around their experiences managing the PRF:

1. **Protect the PRF:** Ensure PRF remains specifically designated for PR and actively prevent institutions from redirecting funds to other priorities, such as funding being absorbed into more general research budgets.
2. **Multi-Year Funding Approach:** Move away from strictly annual funding models. Consider funding in tranches that support long-term relationship building. Allow projects to continue beyond a single financial year and aid piloting and refining programmes and activities
3. **Recommend to HEP that the PRF is led or co-led by a dedicated PEP:** They would need clearly defined time, status, and administrative support to steward the fund strategically and relationally. Embedding the PRF with a PEP enables the fund to operate as an engine for culture change rather than simply as a pot of money.
4. **Develop a Flexible Reporting and Impact Evaluation Framework: Along with multi-year funding approach (2.)** include similar multi-year reporting windows (2-3 years instead of one year), which recognise that meaningful PR, culture change and impact take time. Require qualitative reporting on relational outcomes, like relationship building, and the “invisible work” behind the PRF..
5. **Enhance the National Understanding of PR:** Develop materials and case studies that explain the value of participatory research. Help institutions understand PR's long-term strategic benefits and how it can deliver on bringing society and communities closer to research.

The Approaches and PEPs: What Next?

The approaches taken by PEPs outlined in this report are specific to how they have managed and brought value to the PRF.

Some of these approaches are used by PEPs in other programmes they run, or for embedding other types of engaged practices within their HEPs.

These approaches are a subset of wider practices, built on changing academic cultures, that are often relational and invisible within a sector focussed on quantitative returns and capital gains. The contribution of the PEP can be overshadowed by the impact achieved by the academics and their community partners they support.

“It's really hard to say (what) my role was in this... People don't care. ... they're like, why are you telling us about yourself? ... I'm like, because [if] I don't tell you. You don't know, and then you think I'm doing a \$&£! job. But look how great the work is.”

This largely invisible work is both demanding and often undervalued. As a result, PEPs tend to be modest about their contributions. In conversations for this work, individual PEPs found it difficult to talk explicitly about the value they brought to managing the PRF. It was easier for them to discuss the contribution in terms of a hypothetical or generic PEP, and only then recognise that value-add as their own.

This framework of approaches can be used to help show and understand the value PEPs bring to their HEPs and the PRF. The different approaches can also be explored by different types of PEP roles and types of HEPs. This raises two key questions: What are the minimum requirements for each approach? And what barriers do PEPs face using some of these approaches?

This work also gives tools for PEPs themselves to champion their roles within their HEPs and across the sector. With this piece, the hidden work and value of the PEP is brought out explicitly and celebrated.

Conclusions

PR is a practice which is varied across disciplines, places, community partners, and HEPs. A PRF which is flexible on structure and reporting suits the practice but also runs the risk of HEPs not funding PR practice which is participatory, or funding being used in a way that is not responsive to strategic direction of the HEP, or the local community.

PEPs bring the essential expertise and flexibility needed to manage the PRF effectively. Their contribution is grounded in a strong understanding of engagement practice within their own HEP and across different disciplines and contexts, combined with experience in programme management, established relationships with local community partners, and detailed knowledge of institutional systems that can sometimes hinder PR. The PEP knows how to approach each context, and how to evolve this approach as people, partners, and their contexts change.

Through their approaches, PR standards are maintained, institutional processes are adapted, academics and community partners develop their skills, PR activity is reflected on critically and fairly, and innovative PR practice is given a safe space to develop. PR activity is reported through relevant communication channels and in formats that are of use within the HEP, and the national frameworks to which they report.

The flexibility of having multiple approaches, in addition to the approaches themselves, bring value to how the PRF is used within HEPs, therefore ensuring greater value to the PR itself.

This project makes clear that PEPs do far more than manage a funding process, they enable PR to thrive and sustain. Recognising their essential role is crucial to securing the future effectiveness of both the PRF and PR across the sector.