



SCHOOL OF  
ADVANCED STUDY  
UNIVERSITY  
OF LONDON



# Public Engagement Practice in Arts, Humanities and Social Science in 2026: A Qualitative Study

September 2026

## Flow



# Table of Contents

|                                                                                   |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary</b>                                                          | <b>3</b>  |
| Public Engagement with Arts, Humanities and Social Science is at risk             | 3         |
| Challenges to effective Public Engagement are magnified within the AHSS landscape | 4         |
| Recommendations for Sector-Level Organisations and Initiatives to address this    | 4         |
| <b>Introduction: About this Report</b>                                            | <b>6</b>  |
| Background                                                                        | 6         |
| A sector at risk: public engagement in AHSS at a critical juncture                | 6         |
| Context: The Positioning of Public Engagement within institutions                 | 8         |
| Methodology                                                                       | 9         |
| <b>1 The Public Engagement landscape: crisis, challenges, and confidence</b>      | <b>12</b> |
| 1.1 Feelings of crisis in Arts, Humanities and Social Science                     | 12        |
| 1.2 Residual Confidence in Public Engagement                                      | 15        |
| 1.3 Challenges for Public Engagement                                              | 16        |
| <b>2 The Value of Public Engagement</b>                                           | <b>29</b> |
| 2.1 A Tension Between Institutional and Personal Drivers                          | 29        |
| 2.2 Institutional Drivers for Public Engagement                                   | 29        |
| 2.3 Personal Drivers for Public Engagement                                        | 33        |
| <b>3 Enabling Public Engagement</b>                                               | <b>37</b> |
| 3.1 Positive Enabling Factors: What currently exists?                             | 37        |
| 3.2 Opportunities for Sector-Level Organisations and Initiatives                  | 43        |
| <b>Appendix 1: Enquiry Framework</b>                                              | <b>53</b> |
| <b>Appendix 2: Focus, Region, Status and Role of Interviewees</b>                 | <b>54</b> |

# Executive Summary

## Public Engagement with Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) is at risk

The higher education sector is facing increasing financial pressures. However, our research has found that the consequences of this are falling disproportionately on AHSS – and arts and humanities in particular. Within this, public engagement work is often the most exposed. Participants described how these disciplines are being deprioritised with course closures and staff redundancies, reducing the capacity for high-quality public engagement. This is coupled with clear signals from the government and research funders that economic impact is being given precedence, risking a decline in the perceived importance of societal and cultural impact.

We found that Civic Mission and Social Responsibility is the top driver for doing public engagement work, both for our interviewees themselves, and in their perception, for their institutions. This is positive and speaks to the continuing importance of the civic agenda within the HE sector. But beyond this, researchers are driven by an intrinsic desire to engage the public with their research, in an ethical way, and to advocate for the value of their subject. Conversely, they see their institutions as prioritising extrinsic reasons including: profile-raising; student recruitment, income generation and the REF. While AHSS researchers and engagement professionals are highly motivated to do this work, there are gaps in institutional support, which many fear will only widen.

This mismatch can leave researchers feeling personally and morally responsible for delivering high-quality engagement without the support, recognition and resources they need. Many undertake this work despite, rather than because of, their institutional environment and culture.

Encouragingly, we frequently heard examples of high quality public engagement work, and evidence of a growing shift in focus from ‘informing’ to ‘collaborating’, and an appetite for innovation. This progress has been underpinned by substantial investment in engaged research over many years. Failing to nurture it risks squandering that investment, losing the gains already made and allowing engagement to regress towards a more passive relationship with the public.

In conclusion, the perception is that the environment for engaged AHSS research is increasingly precarious and unsupportive, creating a risk that researchers will disengage from public engagement altogether. If these factors prevail, public engagement work may become siloed from institutional missions, or worryingly, only seen as the domain of larger or financially secure universities. Sector-level organisations and initiatives have an important leadership role to play in ensuring that public engagement with AHSS is sustained throughout this period of turbulence.

## Challenges to effective Public Engagement are magnified within the AHSS landscape

AHSS researchers face many of the same barriers to public engagement as researchers in other disciplines, including insufficient time and funding, limited reward and recognition, uneven access to appropriate training, and a research-first culture in which public engagement is undervalued.

However, the nature of AHSS engagement can make the following particularly challenging:

- **Systems favour more ‘linear’ forms of engagement and impact:** Institutional metrics often privilege direct, transactional and quantifiable outcomes over the slow, relational and incremental work needed to build meaningful community relationships – an approach that can often characterise AHSS engagement.
- **Funding, finance and procurement systems are poorly suited to community collaboration:** Institutional processes and funding timescales are a poor fit to support sustained work with community organisations, NGOs and grassroots groups, which AH often partner with.
- **Engagement can be inseparable from research and creative practice.** Particularly in the humanities, engagement may be embedded within creative practice, participatory research or action research. It may therefore not be recognised as public engagement, meaning that it is neither adequately supported nor recorded. This creates a lose-lose situation: researchers do not receive the support or recognition they need, while institutions fail to see, value and evidence the full contribution of engaged AHSS research.

## Recommendations for Sector-Level Organisations and Initiatives to address this

- Offer AHSS researchers **strategic engagement support** to fill gaps left by the loss of public engagement teams at university level. This could include 1-2-1 advice, training, signposting to existing resources, or developing new guidance.
- Provide a platform for AHSS researchers to build engagement **networks** at sector-level, widening access to peers and role models and increasing visibility for researchers who lack connections within their institutions.
- Enrich existing university-led AHSS public engagement **training** by brokering the sharing of opportunities and expertise between institutions and by identifying and filling gaps – particularly practical training that focuses on the ‘how’ of public engagement (as researchers are already convinced by the ‘why’), and evaluation and impact.
- Continue to **champion** the value of AHSS Public Engagement at all levels in universities. Provide senior leaders with the language and evidence needed to make the case for embedding public engagement as part of research culture,

while advocating for public engagement skills to be recognised as a core part of researchers and public engagement professionals' roles – and rewarded alongside academic outputs.

- Offer tailored targeted **funding** specific to public engagement with AHSS subjects that facilitates grassroots partnership development, responds to local context and community needs, fits around slower timescales and provides opportunities for piloting, testing and experimentation.

# Introduction: About this Report

## Background

There is a lack of evidence on the needs and motivations of researchers and public engagement professionals doing public engagement work within Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) disciplines. The evidence we do have is out of date. This research project was initiated and designed to engage AHSS researchers and public engagement professionals in a conversation to help fill this gap.

Through broadening and evidencing their understanding of the research-based public engagement landscape, this project will enable the School of Advanced Study (SAS) to support the sector by providing the evidence they need to inform best practice. We hope these findings will provide:

- a contemporary view of the AHSS research community, helping them understand themselves better, and
- a foundation to support and inform the design and delivery of activities by the School of Advanced Study, the British Academy, and others.

For researchers and the wider engagement community, this evidence can inform conversations within their universities, helping them overcome barriers to public engagement.

For national organisations delivering supporting activities and schemes for public engagement, this work can have a number of benefits:

- For the new Centre for Public Engagement Practice in Arts and Humanities, this research is happening in parallel to the Centre's pilot schemes, so has the potential to highlight any gaps and contextualise their findings.
- For the British Academy, insights to inform decisions about their public engagement programme.
- For Being Human Festival, an increase in the number and quality of proposals submitted and the development of strong, equitable partnerships.

## A sector at risk: public engagement in AHSS at a critical juncture

This research shows two factors putting public engagement in AHSS at risk: the pressurised state of the higher education sector in general; and the precarity of Arts,

Humanities and Social Science (AHSS). However, there are practical challenges which, if addressed by higher education institutions and sector-level organisations and initiatives, could help to alleviate and mitigate this risk. There are also important opportunities to increase the capacity and quality of public engagement work further, even against a very challenging background.

The Royal Society published the study “*Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers*” in January 2026. This concludes that public engagement is now a strong feature of UK research culture and has evolved from being a peripheral activity to a shared expectation. The risk for the future, however, is that public engagement for AHSS may now be heading in the opposite direction.

A key pattern across the interviews was that many of the factors enabling the growth of public engagement over the past decade are being steadily eroded. Researchers are being made redundant. Professional services teams are shrinking. Central public engagement teams are disappearing. Universities are under enormous financial pressures and are focusing on activities that bring in income, namely student recruitment and large research grants. AHSS departments in cash-strapped universities are disproportionately and negatively affected.

The risk if these factors prevail is that public engagement is increasingly seen as a ‘nice to have’, only for large affluent research-intensive universities, rather than something that institutions should proactively support and invest in. People working in public engagement report that AHSS is particularly vulnerable in this situation. The pressures on these individuals force them to focus on keeping their roles and projects afloat, making it hard to innovate and push boundaries.

AHSS researchers and engagement professionals still believe in and want to do this work. What is changing is the feeling that their institutions may not continue to support, recognise and reward it. Given its vulnerability, this work needs validation. Many engagement-active researchers and professional staff may increasingly find that their public engagement work is not getting recognition from their own institutions, especially the ones facing financial pressures. National organisations can help signal that this work still matters, that it has value, and that those doing it are part of a wider community of practice.

The external environment is unlikely to become easier in the short term. Universities remain under pressure and there may be tougher times ahead affected by wider environmental, technological, political and economic factors. In that context, the Centre for Public Engagement Practice in Arts and Humanities, alongside the British Academy, AHRC and ESRC, could play a critical role in helping AHSS public engagement survive through challenging conditions, in order for the sector to contribute to improving or stabilising the wider context.

This research captures some practical opportunities for organisations supporting public engagement work in AHSS, such as:

- **Reward and recognition:** An annual AHSS public engagement celebration and awards programme (with organisations such as the AHRC). This should be less ‘winner takes all’ and more focused on recognising a breadth of excellent people, teams and partnerships. It could bring together researchers, engagement professionals, funders and leaders to identify best practice and future directions.
- **Small grants for partnership development:** This is rarely, if ever, funded. There is space to build the foundations of a thriving engagement culture through networking, co-design and partnership development. This could include supportive partnerships with community, creative, heritage and cultural organisations, who are similarly precarious.
- **Support around evidencing impact for REF:** There are established methods for evaluating and evidencing the impacts of AHSS public and community engagement. The gaps are the roles helping researchers, public engagement professionals and impact staff access and apply these methods.
- **Training ecosystem:** Universities in the same cities and regions could partner with others, leading on their strengths to provide training and methodology support, making these available to researchers at other universities. This would enable access to training, increase efficiency and reduce costs, and could also encourage new collaborations between institutions.

There may be no more important time than the next few years for supporting public engagement in AHSS, due to both its precarity and its potential to impact public understanding and social change. The question is how we ensure it survives the current period of turbulence with the people, expertise, relationships and enthusiasm that have been built over the last decade still intact.

## Context: The Positioning of Public Engagement within institutions

We asked our interviewees how their institutions have supported their public engagement, and which area of support was most instrumental. While these factors aren’t unique to AHSS subjects, their responses are still useful to acknowledge.

### Examples of support include:

- The continued presence of a public engagement support team, simply so you know they are there and can reach out when you need them.
- Protected time dedicated to thinking about public engagement, e.g. during a fellowship, or a drop-in public engagement cafe known to be available at set times.

- Dedicated institutes or teams, which provide funding, awards, and professional support that empower and enable researchers.

Many of the universities covered by this research have central teams or dedicated institutes to support public engagement efforts across faculties. These teams often sit within broader research services, such as their Research Enterprise and Innovation team, or a Research and Innovation Service. In other cases, public engagement support staff were situated within departments focused on Research Impact or Knowledge Exchange. Some universities have a split focus where public engagement support is split between the Research Service and the Civic Mission teams. In others, public engagement is linked to outward-facing promotional departments such as Marketing and Corporate Communications.

## Methodology

The design of this project emerged from a workshop conducted with the team at the School of Advanced Study in 2025 as they prepared to launch the Centre for Public Engagement Practice in Arts and Humanities. This workshop highlighted the key areas to explore. These focused on Arts Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) researchers' and institutional understanding of public engagement, attitudes towards and capacity for delivering it, and the wider context for AHSS subjects, and public engagement in the UK. Through this we looked to answer the following overarching questions:

- What is the **understanding** of public engagement within AHSS at an institutional, public engagement professional and researcher level?
- How do AHSS researchers, public engagement professionals and university stakeholders **feel** about public engagement?
- What capacity is there to carry it out? What are researchers, professionals and universities capable of?
  - What are the **enabling** factors? E.g. leadership, access to training, enabling access and inclusion, public engagement skills, finding partners and collaborators, navigating ethics
  - What kinds of **barriers** exist that prevent effective public engagement from happening? Are these personal, institutional or practice based?
- How does the wider **context** influence public engagement?

These questions formed the basis of our interview with researchers and public engagement professionals. See Appendix A for the overarching enquiry framework.

## Participant profile and selection

From January to April 2026, we spoke to 31 individuals across the United Kingdom, with participants drawn from each devolved nation. This included 7 early career researchers (ECRs), 8 mid-career researchers, 6 senior researchers, and 10 public engagement professionals. These participants were spread across 23 universities and 2 research institutes and charities with formal research functions.

The researchers were working in a range of arts, humanities or social science disciplines and included 8 focusing on the arts, 6 on humanities, and 5 on social science. The majority of the 10 professional services participants were also from an arts, humanities or social science research background.

All the researchers and public engagement professionals we approached for interview had a prior connection with the School of Advanced Study, for example through previous involvement in Being Human Festival. In some areas, these prior connections may shape participants' views and responses, and we note this where relevant.

We targeted a range of universities depending on their relative size and geographic location. A breakdown of participants by subject focus, region of institution, career stage and job title is provided in Appendix 2.

## **Interviews, analysis and synthesis**

The interviews followed a structured script asking the questions set out in our enquiry framework, and were conducted online. Google Gemini was used to capture a transcript of the conversation. After an initial tranche of interviews had been completed, the transcripts and written notes were analysed for themes relating to each question, which formed the basis of our report. All 31 scripts were then re-read and coded by the research team, with key quotes and insights grouped into the chapters of this report. Google Gemini was used as a search tool within the interview transcript documents to cross-check our coding, but was not used for analytical purposes – all initial coding and interpretation of data was done personally by the Flow team.

## **Further insights**

This qualitative research project took place independently of a broader quantitative study, *Factors Affecting Engagement by UK Researchers*, commissioned by the Royal Society in 2025<sup>1</sup>. The study was landscape research into the activities, attitudes, skills and funding structures shaping public engagement practice, building on similar research carried out in 2006 and 2015. The Royal Society has acknowledged that the UK research sector is facing unprecedented challenges, from funding pressures to evolving assessment frameworks and cultural shifts in society and they have conducted a survey to understand the current state of the sector and how these challenges impact researchers' ability to communicate, collaborate, and drive

---

<sup>1</sup> Allinson, R., Nielsen, K., Ray-Coquai, S., Seth, V., Sutinen, L. and Vingre, A., 2026. "Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers 2025: Final Report". London: The Royal Society.

meaningful change. This research, commissioned by the School of Advanced Study, aims to provide complimentary qualitative insights for the sector, drawing on the experiences and understanding of those AHSS researchers for whom public engagement forms an integral part of their work.

# 1 The Public Engagement landscape: crisis, challenges, and confidence

## 1.1 Feelings of crisis in Arts, Humanities and Social Science

Many interviewees told us that the resource and support available for public engagement within their institution has changed drastically in recent years, amid a wider culture of restructures and cuts, leading to a feeling that the humanities face a unique 'double squeeze' from both declining student interest and institutional deprioritisation.

*"When I started at [the University] we had an administrator for English literature. I mean that those days are completely gone now, right? So academics are doing a ton of the administrative work, and that means that when you take on a public engagement project, you are doing that work".* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

Many universities are facing deficits, leading researchers to feel that research and engagement is being deprioritised in favour of student recruitment. Supporting and adequately funding public engagement runs a risk of becoming the preserve of universities with high incomes and healthy student recruitment, as others seek to realign their budgets with surviving in a difficult financial climate.

*"I think certainly our organisation, we're in deficit at the moment and the financial challenges are really real and serious and that's the case in so many universities up and down the country. I think that the whole model of advocating for the value of public engagement with research is increasingly becoming relevant to a really narrow sort of subset of universities that are still financially stable. So, when you've got that, and then if you add in the Humanities, social science, arts as a kind of constraining factor, you'll increasingly just find yourself talking to like Kings, Durham, UCL...it'll start to get down to like 10 universities that are interested in working with you."* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)

In AHSS subjects this change is magnified as students and their parents prioritise STEM subjects which are perceived as having higher employability, salary expectations and job security<sup>2</sup>.

As subjects like English literature decline in popularity at A-level, universities are questioning the sustainability of these courses, leading to reduced research capacity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ashton, Heidi, 2023, "Cutting the STEM of future skills: beyond the STEM vs art dichotomy in England," Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, Vol. 22(2), pg. 148–163

[https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/174745/1/10.1177\\_1474022231156893.pdf](https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/174745/1/10.1177_1474022231156893.pdf)

*"The arts and humanities at a lot of universities are being kind of jettisoned really... many universities are questioning whether they can actually sustain those courses." (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)*

The impact of this is job insecurity for AHSS researchers, who then have to make strategic decisions about priorities, focusing on areas that have the best career prospects.

*"When you're under threat of voluntary severance, then you're thinking, you know, what's going to get me the next job? How's my time best spent? Is it going to be in a monograph, a highly rated journal article, or is it going to be doing some public engagement work?" (Public Engagement Professional/ECR, Arts)*

We found that many of the more experienced researchers and public engagement professionals wanted to use the interview to reflect on the contrast between support received in the past and the lack now, while early career researchers expressed frustration about a lack of security or opportunities to gain experience in public engagement. Public engagement professionals told us about cuts to jobs in their own departments, and changes to policy in response to uncertainty. For example, the central Public Engagement team in one university has only established a three-year strategy because their operating landscape is liable to change.

This situation is shifting researchers' approach to public engagement, for example, not applying to take part in complex projects with multiple stakeholders in favour of simpler ways to reach people. For two of the researchers, this included Being Human Festival.

*"There's a particular climate in higher education now isn't there, like it's precarious and quite turbulent and the way that I'm thinking about future projects at least in the next few years is what could I do that I can be in command of where there are the fewest variables but will still have a reach and benefit to people." (Senior Researcher, Arts)*

Financial instability has led to many smaller and "Post-92" universities finding themselves in deficit, leading to a 'tail spin' where research is deprioritised in favour of teaching and student recruitment.

*"There's a lot of not-so-subtle kind of messaging to say, 'Forget about research, it's all about teaching, it's all about student recruitment.'" (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)*

Even though many of the researchers we spoke to had a great deal of experience in public engagement, and a track history within their university of delivering high quality inclusive activities, cuts to external funding along with changing pressures on universities have led to a number of interviewees reporting that these activities are under-funded and under-supported.

*“We were involved [in Being Human Festival] every year sort of for about four or five years until after the end of the pandemic, since the university cuts really, and we just haven't had the bandwidth to do that since then”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

## **The wider arts and heritage landscape is also in crisis**

Many of the researchers have been working in partnership with arts and heritage institutions (i.e. outside or linked to HEIs). However, our experience of working with clients and colleagues in this sector is that they are also in a bad situation financially, with museums facing restructures and grass roots community arts organisations struggling to sustain themselves. In public engagement partnerships, these organisations depend upon budgets that cover their overheads, often looking to the Higher Education sector for funds lacking from other sources, and they don't have the means to pay for the researchers' time and other expenses themselves.

*“It's very difficult to say to an art gallery who's begging you to come down to do something, ‘Well, not unless you pay me or not unless you even cover my finances’. It's incredibly difficult to say that to a rape crisis organisation or to a woman's group.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

## **A personal burden**

Despite all of the above, researchers are still doing public engagement and personally taking on the additional administrative burdens of this.

*“We don't have administrators who have any capacity to help. and it's a time burden, but it's also this sort of mental load thing where colleagues get really stressed out with that... you've got to be the one setting up every meeting, responding to every person, following up, making sure the payments went through, all those things, it's just a lot to take on.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

Several of the researchers we initially approached for an interview declined due to pressures on their time and attention, a situation which was starkly illustrated by the Out of Office response we received from one researcher informing us they were unable to respond to emails due to being on strike in response to imminent compulsory redundancies.

*“We had 20% staff cuts across the board year before last, and another 20% in some schools last year, and that has extended to compulsory redundancies.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

It is not only the individual researchers who are feeling this overstretch when it comes to public engagement. Senior management are also unable to dedicate the time to supporting it.

*“I just don't think university high command has the bandwidth to nurture it and it doesn't have the resources to support it.” (Senior Researcher, Humanities)*

## 1.2 Residual Confidence in Public Engagement

Despite the very difficult sector situation and context, the researchers we spoke to were generally confident about public engagement, with the majority scoring themselves between 7 and 9 (out of 10) when asked to self-rate their confidence in delivering high quality, inclusive public engagement. This is an area where previous connections with Being Human Festival and wider public engagement activities may skew the results, as it meant we were talking to those with committed previous engagement experience.

Reasons for scoring highly included prior experience of delivering public engagement activity, for some over several decades, and having the support of public engagement professionals and departments within their institutions. One researcher specifically mentioned her experience of running a hub for Being Human Festival and how this has boosted her confidence, both through the resources and training offered, and the experience gained.

General reasons for not scoring themselves higher included acknowledging that there is always more to learn, and that the public engagement field itself is always evolving. More specific reasons included challenges to delivering inclusive public engagement such as difficulty in working ethically with diverse groups or working inclusively with a format outside their comfort zone.

*“I would feel pretty confident that we could run a very inclusive public talk, that feels quite easy to achieve with what we have and what we would understand in terms of inclusivity but things like exhibitions are slightly more tricky... they require slightly different ways of thinking about the delivery of information.”*  
(ECR, Arts)

For some, a lower score related directly to a lack of support from their university. One cited her frustration when hosting a Being Human Hub:

*“The 2023 experience was banging my head against a brick wall trying to get them to promote it. It was just like, almost there were times when I thought, are they deliberately not promoting it? Is there some kind of directive to not give arts and humanities attention, or it's not the direction that they want?”* (Early Career Researcher, Arts)

Several of the researchers we spoke to have pivoted from their original subject (e.g. archaeology or literature) to conduct and publish research into the benefits of public engagement, both as a way of legitimising their public engagement work and advocating for its benefit.

*“I’m in the process of trying to reframe a project that we put in for funding a year or so back for UKRI...to do a control trial study of the public benefits of participation in heritage and no one’s ever done a control longitudinal study of that.”* (Mid-Career Researcher, Humanities)

## 1.3 Challenges for Public Engagement

Many of the challenges mentioned by researchers and public engagement professionals in our interviews are general to public engagement across all disciplines. However, when set within the operating landscape for AHSS researchers these issues are magnified.

The most significant barrier identified is the dire financial state of many UK universities. A model of public engagement, characterised by targeted funding and dedicated ‘culture change’ initiatives, is increasingly rare. As such, outside of larger universities and the Russell Group, it was suggested that advocacy for public engagement is becoming relevant only to a small subset of more financially stable institutions.

*“Advocating for the value of public engagement with research is increasingly becoming relevant to like a really narrow sort of subset of universities that are still financially stable.”* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)

### Time and money

When asked what stands in the way of their public engagement work the most common answers given, and not just in this research, are the intertwined issues of ‘time’ and ‘funding’. However, the meaning for each individual varies depending on their unique situation.

*“It can take much longer, there are a lot more protocols or bureaucracy that’s involved in initiating any of these things. So I guess the bottom line would be, it’s easier not to do it than to do it. As a senior lecturer, that’s your bread and butter – the students are the clients, they’re the money bringers. It [public engagement] is not actually directly factored into my workload.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

Regarding time, we heard examples of all the below:

- Not enough time in their busy work schedule, they are already overstretched with teaching and administration.
- Prioritisation of other work means their time is allocated to other tasks.
- Metrics used to record public engagement activity do not include the time spent building relationships.

*"Public engagement takes a lot of time to do well. And that time is time that isn't easily accounted for."* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

- The infrastructure used to collate data to record public engagement activity is time consuming.
- Public engagement is frequently seen as an 'extra' or something done out of passion in one's spare time rather than being a core, remunerated part of a job description.

*"I am doing it, but I'm doing it in my own time."* (Mid-Career Researcher, Social Science)

- Time spent on public engagement is not recognised or even permitted within their role.

*"The current contract that I'm on is a teaching only contract. So I'm technically not allowed to do public engagement in my current post. But it's not stopping me. I'm continuing to do a lot of it [using annual leave]."* (ECR, Humanities)

- Time for necessary but peripheral activity (such as marketing) is not accounted for.
- Timescales of funding or festivals mean activity has to happen at times not aligning with the broader research context or lifecycle.

*"Who in our communities wants to go to a workshop about, oh, difficult modern monetary theory, you know...in mid-January."* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

- Time-bound funding means relationships with community groups cannot be nurtured with the patience needed to build trust and familiarity.

Comments about funding were just as wide reaching:

- There is an absence of centralised funding for public engagement within institutions for researchers to draw from.

*"Basically, no-one has core funding for it. So it's always got to be an add-on and therefore you've got to find funding to do it".* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

- Buy-out for teaching and marking is not available, that could release time for developing, delivering and recording public engagement.
- Even when research grant applications have included an allowance for public engagement, this money is later ringfenced for core costs.

- Funding only covers part of the activity necessary to deliver public engagement activity (e.g. no allowance for admin support or professional services within the university).
- While researchers value small grants for flexibility and agility, university management often views them as a poor return on investment.

*“Something like Being Human, it's not a useful sort of income to them [the university] I suppose, because it's just going directly to practitioners or venues.”*  
(Senior Researcher, Arts)

These are of course interlinked issues, particularly for AHSS departments where job freezes have meant that they have relatively small teams, which one interviewee described as ‘bare bones’.

*“At the moment, everybody's just trying to keep their jobs.”* (ECR, Arts)

This means there is no flexibility in the number of staff they have, and their time is extremely stretched. When they have to juggle research, publishing, teaching and public engagement, they may not be available for public activities at the optimum times for those audiences or when events are programmed.

Researchers we interviewed in institutions particularly focused on income generation (e.g. where ‘Knowledge Exchange’ translates as paid-for public short courses) felt there was an active push against their public engagement work.

*“The feeling one gets is that they don't really value anything that um doesn't generate income in one way or another. So obviously they're interested in students because they pay tuition fees. They're interested in research grants if one can bring them in.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

Even grant applications that rely on public engagement and therefore need an element of teaching buyout can go against institutional policy. For example, a researcher described a project where the Research Office will hold control of all grant money, regardless of how it was intended to be allocated.

*“The whole project was a lot of delivering workshops and giving them access to higher education. All that kind of stuff. We've been told that any money that comes in will not cover any teaching buyout. So we don't know how we don't know how we're going to fit in.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

## **Lack of training, skills and exposure**

While the AHSS researchers and public engagement professionals we interviewed were motivated and generally confident in their abilities in public engagement, many felt they lacked the specific skills needed for contemporary engagement practice, such as

media training, digital content creation, podcasting, or marketing. Formal training in these areas is not offered or is inaccessible due to cost, time constraints or location.

*“What we don't do enough of is actually educate [researchers] in media or media skills. I do think that that's a problem.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

Alongside this, a lack of basic training or even exposure to public engagement means that some of their less experienced peers lack the skills and confidence to even try, resulting in the ‘same old faces’, or a very narrow pool of practitioners. Experience and seniority combined can make it easier for individual researchers to say ‘yes’ to opportunities. This leads us to ask, how can sector-level organisations and initiatives induct people into public engagement who are earlier in their career, or less supported by their institution?

*“I am lucky that at my level of seniority I can say, yeah, on Thursday afternoon I've been asked to go and speak to this group and clear my diary so I can do that. I think it would be more problematic if I was a Grade Seven or Eight lecturer, I would probably be turning down more things than I do.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

It is important to note that some training, while beneficial, may be seen as more of a necessary evil than a desire. For example, there are skill gaps in technical production (blogging, video editing), marketing and finance, but offering training in these areas could be seen as adding to the burden. One researcher described how their public engagement work had forced them to develop skills in marketing and communications due to a lack of internal staff support. This felt not only beyond their skill set, but an additional pressure on their time.

*“As a researcher, you are managing these projects and we really don't have the resources to focus on marketing...I feel like there's a real pressure, and almost obligation, to be able to do that yourself - especially now with universities really cutting down their staff.”* (ECR, Arts)

## **Metrics and quantitative performance measures**

Many universities have systems in place to collect data on public engagement and impact, but the current metrics used by universities to capture the value of their work prioritise direct policy links or high-volume publishing, which does not suit the ‘necessarily slow approach’ of building community relationships or the incremental impact of AHSS research. Compared to subjects like health or engineering, the impact of AHSS public engagement may involve gradual shifts in mindset or long-term cost savings that are harder to quantify.

*“I do feel like we have to advocate for ourselves, even outside of those interdisciplinary spaces, where arts and humanities are always having to defend their space and value alongside engineering for example, or medicine. I think*

*part of it is that we are doing the necessarily slow work of engaging with the public, communities and people with lived experience.” (ECR, Arts)*

Some AHSS work has been devalued as ‘vanity areas’ or mere ‘add-ons’ to larger STEM grants. Researchers noted that they found making certain types of research (e.g., dance or philosophy) ‘legible’ or visible to the public and policymakers more difficult than those with more quantifiable outputs.

*“The central challenge is making dance research legible or readable or visible, because often when we say dance research people are like, ‘Why should we fund that? What’s the impact?’” (ECR, Arts)*

Many of the people we spoke to felt that it is more difficult to evidence conceptual or discursive impact than the more ‘linear’ pathways possible in STEM subjects, e.g. that a new drug leads to better health. They feel a need to focus more on qualitative evidence such as capturing stories, and testimonials rather than just ‘numbers through the door’.

*“When you do reports and you pull things out, you cannot really identify what public engagement was. It wasn’t measured. So it didn’t exist. But when you started to measure it, the measure forced you to focus on the wrong things, like numbers of people.” (Public Engagement Professional, Social Sciences)*

Even where public engagement work is valued at the very top of the university, internal systems and metrics to track success do not always match up with the requirements for effectively capturing the impacts of public engagement.

*“I am probably more recognised by the very top of the university than the structures in between. They see that stuff when it’s visible, and sometimes on the kind of metrics that lower level people are looking at, it’s like, well why hasn’t she got a half a million pound grant?” (Senior Researcher, Humanities)*

The impact of AHSS work is often transformative at an individual level, which researchers found hard to measure.

*“When we think about metrics, like the REF, that’s such a gold star, everybody wants to see that kind of impact. But when we’re thinking about research and the university’s role in our broader communities, I want to try to figure out how to get this kind of less tangible immediate impact. It would be interesting to know, for example, if that same participant had a different approach the next time she went to a medical appointment, or maybe felt a little bit more confident asking what for what she needed.” (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)*

Universities may actually be under-reporting their activity due to a lack of researchers’ time to document and evaluate the engagement, and sometimes even a lack of understanding that certain activities constitute public engagement. Public engagement professionals within universities noted that part of the value of their roles is in recognising that and enabling it to be captured.

*"I think probably, as with every institution, we under-report because it hinges on the individual to put the stuff in. So, if they don't know that they're actually doing [public engagement] then they don't log it." (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)*

*"I think a lot hinges on the term public engagement. People don't recognise that they are actually doing it, they just call it by a different name." (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)*

### **Lack of suitable infrastructure, particularly finance**

Within universities, there is often an 'admin gap' around public engagement, in particular organising finances. Researchers spoke of their difficulty in navigating systems, even with support from professional services. Internal university systems, particularly concerning finance and HR, are often described as 'Kafkaesque'. Paying external community partners for their time and expertise can be frustratingly hindered by complex forms and requirements for intrusive documentation like passports.

*"It's a b\*\*\*\*\* nightmare... Setting people up as consultants and suppliers through our bizarre administration here. It means that people that we work with get paid very late." (Senior Lecturer, Social Sciences)*

The varied nature of public engagement and the people and partners involved often fall outside of university HR and payment processes. For example, paying local community organisations, volunteer participant expenses or contracting with an international volunteer organisation. The end result is that researchers have to negotiate with and soothe frustrated parties who may go through months of bearing the cost of involvement in a public engagement event.

In other situations, researchers are also having to manage relationships with the internal support teams whose systems are the root of their frustration.

*"I really value the expertise of our HR and finance teams, and I know I can't do my research without those support staff and their expertise. So, I find myself also being in this position of needing to advocate for the community organisations, but also I need my colleagues in finance and HR spaces to also be on my side because I will need to work with them again and they are my colleagues." (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)*

### **The danger of adding to administrative bureaucracy**

Platforms introduced for gathering and centralising data may have benefits for those tasked with compiling and evaluating it, but for individual researchers they are adding to their already stretched workload. This is keenly felt in the context of AHSS subjects where time is already in short supply.

*"It's not that [the university] are not supportive. They do have [the Public Engagement Officer], and she's so passionate, so nice, but it just needs me to devote the time to keep up updating the platform. And gosh, time is the thing I'm most short of."* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

This lack of both time and a suitable infrastructure can have a knock-on effect. For example, this same researcher described how not having a finance code for public engagement in a previous university meant they were unable to use their coding system to generate a report on their public engagement work, resulting on a lack of visibility and insufficient measures. They reflected that this has been an issue in their work for at least 15 years.

*"When you got money for public engagement, it's sat somewhere else. So when you do reports and you pull things out, you cannot really identify what public engagement was. It wasn't measured. So it didn't exist. But when you started to measure it, the measure focus forced you to focus on the wrong things like numbers of people".* (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)

## **Navigating the practice–research blur**

The line between academic research and professional practice (e.g. being a part-time artist and an academic) can be blurred, making it hard to fit into metrics and frameworks. In art schools, faculties and colleges, you may find artists working as both an academic and teacher, as well as a practising artist. Interviewees who were artist practitioners/researchers, highlighted their strengths in public engagement, while at the same time noting that they are forced to identify as researchers for the sake of job security.

*"A lot of our active researchers are practice researchers...so there's quite a blurred line between research and their professional practice as artists."* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)

*"They've got two hats, they're an artist here and then they're an academic there, or a teacher, and it's quite a difficult space sometimes for people to think of themselves as academics in the way that funding requires."* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

Likewise, AHSS researchers who use public engagement tools and techniques within their research methodology find outputs and impact difficult to extract as measures.

*"People in the arts and humanities basically use co-production as their research methodology. So for them it's second nature. It's not an add-on. It's incorporated. However, that type of involvement or collaboration is not something that you can showcase somewhere else. It happens within the research."* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)

## Prevailing research first mindset

Many interviewees noted that ‘older generations’ of senior management still have a ‘research first’ mindset, prioritising work shared via monographs and journal articles over public engagement.

*“I’ve had advice from mentors saying ‘Well, you’ve done enough of that now for your career, you need to be thinking about other elements like getting more publications done’, or something like that. Like you’ve ticked the public engagement box.” (ECR Humanities)*

While this is a sector-wide issue, one senior researcher noted that there are many long-serving colleagues in the humanities, and therefore fewer opportunities for younger academics to rise up through the ranks. This could cause an outdated view of academia to persist if not addressed.

*“There are a lot of people in the humanities, and I was appointed last century, so I’m going to include myself in the ‘old’ category. There are a lot of people who have what feels now a very outdated view of what academia should be.” (Senior Researcher, Humanities)*

As a result the specific skills necessary to do public engagement work risk being undervalued and sidelined, not only in academia, but other research institutes which operate outside of HEIs.

*“[Participation and co-creation] It is a skill. Not everybody can do it. Not everybody can create the stories and the narratives and have the empathy to engage. But the problem is, those people who develop the skills are often on the most short-term contracts. We don’t value that at all because actually, our value system is what gets put into a formal record.” (Leadership, Research Organisation)*

## Inconsistent support within institutions

Even within institutions where public engagement is largely supported, the support available to individual researchers may differ. When asked what factors had been most valuable to them, researchers often cited a person, rather than a tool, process or even department.

This echoes the findings of the Royal Society research which suggested that a lack of support for public engagement may not be an institutional issue, rather the defining perception of support is formed by the attitudes of departments and individual line managers.

*“Levels of support vary little by institutional type (Russell Group, non-Russell Group, or non-HEI). Instead, the most striking differences are found within institutions. In interviews, researchers reported that perceptions of sufficiency*

*often differed between faculties, departments, or even individual line managers<sup>3</sup>.”*

Some researchers we spoke to feel they are under supported by other departments of the university, such as Marketing and Public Relations. This is evident even when activity is fully funded and has clear benefits to the university, such as the Being Human Festival Hubs.

*“We took [the university] right into the heart of [the city]. We should have been inundated and it was just a no-brainer for [the university] like just publicity, publicity, publicity, publicity – so I was really really surprised at that lack of support.”* (Senior Lecturer, Arts)

An example of a more systemic barrier to public engagement came from a researcher who told us that because of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), public engagement at their university is seen as a research activity. Therefore, even though they are extremely confident and experienced in public engagement, their teaching-only contract prohibits them from doing any public engagement activity or applying for public engagement grants. Other researchers echoed the experience of using their unpaid personal time to deliver engagement work and to sustain the relationships that their research depends on.

*“The contractual stuff limits time as well. So because I'm not entitled to [do] research, I'm not entitled to research time. And it's usually in that research time that people will do the public engagement and go out to schools or festivals or whatever. Whereas for me, it's then a case of taking that as annual leave to be able to go and do those things.”* (ECR, Humanities)

## **Inconsistent recognition**

A broader challenge within the institutions included in this research is the way in which public engagement is rewarded and recognised. It is inconsistent across institutions, with some acknowledging the value of public engagement experience of researchers in a light touch way, as part of their identity as a ‘well rounded academic’, while others have made a genuine move towards recognising public engagement as a valuable activity in its own right which is accounted for in their career progression.

Many universities have put measures in place to recognise the value of researchers' public engagement work, but the infrastructure and support vary in making them effective. For example, at one Russell Group university, public engagement and impact activity are included in career promotion criteria, but the word-count allocation for this section in the application is only half that for traditional research outputs. At another Russell Group University, a new PE-related category was recently added to academic promotion criteria, though it remains largely untested. At another University a

---

<sup>3</sup> Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers, 2025. pg.37

Knowledge Exchange pathway exists to enable promotion but academics rarely use it, often perceiving the traditional research pathway as an easier route.

In one university, we heard that a scheme to include public engagement activity in career promotion had existed in the past, but has since ended.

*"I think that's come to an end now. I see a reversal of things, but definitely to about 2022 that was working. It definitely did help. But since then, I've applied twice to be a professor and not getting anywhere with that at all."* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

Without this criterion being available, researchers with a strong focus on public engagement can be reluctant to apply for promotion, despite encouragement, due to their perception that this work isn't as valued as income generation and publication.

*"I'm a senior lecturer and there's quite a few people who've said to me, given your visibility and what you do, we'd expect you to be Associate Professor... but the criteria for that sort of promotion is generally about income generation and publication."* (Senior Lecturer, Humanities)

Internal rewards, while valued, risk feeling tokenistic. Several institutions have annual public engagement or 'Celebrating Excellence' awards that provide certificates, dinners, or in some cases payments for staff nominated for exceptional work in specific areas. While this is appreciated and valued, there is a risk of feeling tokenistic. One researcher felt that praise that she received on contributing to a successful REF submission was, in their own words, a "pat on the head" rather than a formal recognition which they can carry with them in their career.

## **Under-recognition of professional services staff**

Professional staff including marketing, events and finance enable public engagement but are often not recognised as collaborators in the research process, despite their vital role in its success. They are also feeling the same barriers as researchers in terms of time and funding.

This has a knock-on effect on the researchers who are increasingly having to include tasks in their workload that would generally require specialist expertise or training, such as managing accounts, marketing and social media, and event management.

*"I'm so focused on whatever I'm researching that I just don't have the mental capacity to do events management and take up a course in social media management."* (ECR, Arts)

*"In order to be a researcher now, I have to be accountant as well...all that kind of bureaucracy and admin stuff, which is really not my forte."* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

Several of the public engagement professionals we interviewed told us how the official remit of their department was to support thousands of staff across the university, while the operational reality was that their 'department' consists of just one or two individuals. These resourcing constraints mean that the support they are actually able to give is stretched extremely thin.

While reward mechanisms have sometimes been put in place to recognise public engagement and impact, these are almost entirely focused on academic staff. Professional services staff who support public engagement development and training, and handle the logistics, marketing, and admin that make public engagement possible rarely have equivalent promotion pathways or formal recognition for their collaborative role in research, although REF 2029 goes some way to recognising their contribution.

### **Funding is not designed for public engagement**

The dual challenges of time and money mean that even universities who value public engagement as a civic and social responsibility, or at least want to raise their profiles in their local areas, face barriers in the 'slow burn' nature of building relationships. Researchers emphasised that there is no such thing as a quick win, relationships are hard won and need constant nurturing. Current funding infrastructure, often dictated by grants, does not support the importance of 'hanging out' time and low stakes conversations that can build the foundations for meaningful inclusive engagement.

Applying for smaller pots of money, often the only way external funding for public engagement is offered, can be discouraged by senior leadership. Small grants do not include significant allowance for overheads. As such, time spent on developing and delivering work enabled by small grants is often eschewed for those which can support the bottom line of an institution.

*"They're not necessarily big grants, which can get us in trouble internally. This is something very relevant to the Centre. I think they have to be aware that academics will basically get a b\*\*\*\*\*g from their head of department for bringing in a £2,000 grant because they're just like, 'What are you doing? Add two zeros and then then I will give you the workload allocation to be able to do this!'"* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)

### **Challenges to creating the conditions for innovation**

Without the right conditions, innovative public engagement is unlikely to take place, and researchers will default to the 'traditional' tried-and-tested methods. One core need for innovation is psychological safety, where researchers feel able to share ideas, ask questions, and take risks.

*"Psychological safety refers to a person's belief that they can express themselves, share ideas, ask questions, and even make mistakes without fear of negative consequences or personal embarrassment. It's about feeling*

*comfortable – being yourself without worrying about damaging one’s self-image, status, or career.”<sup>4</sup>*

Other conditions for innovation include access to the right skills or partnerships, support networks, relationships and funding, all of which have been put at risk by pressures elsewhere in the academic system, and due to a combination of factors, are most keenly felt by researchers in AHSS disciplines. For example, AHSS researchers may be less likely to be experienced in working collaboratively with other researchers due to the solo nature of their research.

*“I think humanities and arts people are quite siloed in that they’re not used to working collaboratively unless it’s for a much bigger project. Often, they don’t write collaboratively whereas in the STEM subjects, there can be you know 5, 10, 15 people writing a paper.”* (Public Engagement Professional, Humanities)

## **Barriers to inclusive practice**

While the majority of those we spoke to were confident in their ability to do public engagement, they were less confident that their work is truly inclusive. When asked who they wanted to reach through their public engagement work, researchers often spoke about reaching beyond the ‘usual suspects’ of cultural consumption and participation (e.g. middle-class, retirees) to engage disengaged groups, working-class teenagers, or migrant communities.

*“I would say it would be people who might not have been through higher education. Anybody who thinks it’s not for them. Anybody who thinks, ‘Oh, I won’t fit in’.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

*“It’s so easy for the same people to come to those events...if there’s one criticism, I think it is that sense of inclusivity. Have people thought enough about who’s not in the room?”* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

While researchers want to make their subjects accessible to more diverse groups of people, they were unsure they had the skills, networks or background to do this successfully.

*“As a history team, there are five of us who cover the world. We’re all white. All the curators at the museum, not many of them, only about four of them that are actual curators anymore. All white. So that’s a really big barrier actually in a city.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

Researchers working with marginalised communities face specific ethical challenges regarding ‘extractivism’ in ensuring that their work benefits the community and is not

---

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Sutherland, Applied Innovation Lead, Government Communication Service, 15 January 2025 <https://www.communications.gov.uk/blog/creating-the-conditions-for-innovation-psychological-safety-and-some-pointers-from-behavioural-science/>

just used for academic career gain. This is compounded when research involving migration, refugees, or social justice issues is increasingly seen as 'woke' or politically sensitive, leading some institutions to withdraw support to avoid controversy.

*"This is a very sensitive topic...and many institutions are pulling away from being seen to be supportive of any work around migration and refugees especially."*  
(Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)

## 2 The Value of Public Engagement

### 2.1 A Tension Between Institutional and Personal Drivers

Our analysis of the reasons given by AHSS researchers and public engagement professionals for both their own and their institutions' public engagement work reveals some tension between them.

Civic Mission and Social Responsibility is the top driver for both our interviewees and, in their perception, for their institutions. Beyond this, researchers are driven by an intrinsic desire to engage the public with their research, in an ethical way, and to advocate for the value of their subject. Conversely, they see their institutions as prioritising extrinsic reasons including: profile-raising; student recruitment, income generation and the REF.

| Rank | Perceived Institutional Drivers                      | Personal Drivers                               |
|------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| 1    | Civic Mission and Social Responsibility (14)         | Social Justice and Civic Responsibility (11)   |
| 2    | Institutional Profile and Economic Viability (8)     | Democratisation of Knowledge (11)              |
| 3    | Strategic Alignment with Funding (including REF) (7) | Proof of relevance (5)                         |
| 4    |                                                      | Exchange of Knowledge and Research Quality (4) |

*Table showing the number of interviewees who mentioned each driver*

One area where this tension is particularly evident is the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which many of those we interviewed felt was a primary driver for their institution, even if in their opinion it was primarily a 'box ticking' exercise.

However, none of the individual researchers and public engagement professionals described the REF as a personal driver for their own work. For them, demonstrating impact for the REF is often a secondary or 'instrumental' driver of public engagement, not an intrinsic motivation. It is something they work towards because they have to, not because they want to.

### 2.2 Institutional Drivers for Public Engagement

Universities invest in supporting public engagement for a variety of reasons stemming from their specific context, focus and location. In our interviews we discussed each individual's understanding of these drivers and how they see them. It is important to note that these are the opinions of just one person within an institution where there are many others who may have different perceptions of institutional drivers and motivations. However, the key themes resonate with more general themes for the university sector as a whole.

Interviewees told us that outwardly, universities tend to prioritise Civic Mission and Social Responsibility as their primary focus for public engagement, while the reality, illustrated by the way resource is allocated, staff time, and which departments are providing support to public engagement, paints a different picture. This highlights a tension between organic engagement and institutional metrics.

*"if you look at the website, it's all full of the usual stuff about, you know, 'We want to be valued in our area and we want people in our area to appreciate the value we bring', but there's no resource behind enabling people in the wider area to be aware of what the university does."* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

We found that some researchers were unsure of their institution's top priorities for public engagement, often because of a changing landscape where priorities tend to shift in line with external influences such as the timing of the REF cycle and falling student enrolments. For example, one university had both an Impact and Engagement team (supporting skills needed to develop and evaluate impact) and a Civic Engagement team. To date, the latter has been more recognised and celebrated by senior management, but our interviewee felt this may shift as the next REF cycle approaches. A senior researcher at another university told us that their institutional focus is currently the REF, but that Civic Mission plays a very important part, to the extent that a member of the institution's senior executive team holds explicit responsibility for community engagement, including outreach to local schools.

*"Well, I suppose at the moment we're throwing a whole lot of stuff at REF."*  
(Senior Researcher, Arts)

As we may expect, the perceived drivers for these institutions correlate with their size, with the smaller, often more 'local' universities prioritising Civic Mission and social responsibility, while public engagement at larger universities is simply an expectation.

*"I don't think it's primarily motivated by REF, because we're such a small institution, we don't really have to submit many case studies. So a lot of the work has that ability to have a much more natural trajectory in a way. There isn't that, 'Well, here's the research, now we need some public engagement and now we need some impact'. I think things are evolving much more organically than that, but it is a tiny institution. We've got less than 3,000 students. I'm the only research academic. We have nobody in position who has the word public*

*engagement in their job title. It's very embryonic in how we're trying to build public engagement into research.” (Mid-Career Researcher, Arts)*

*“A large Russell Group university cannot not have a public engagement team.” (Public Engagement Professional, Art, Humanities and Social Science)*

## **Civic mission and social responsibility**

Commitment to local communities and being a good neighbour is seen as a primary driver for their institutions by just under half of the researchers we spoke to. This is the most common view for researchers at small and medium-sized universities, who recognise the importance of challenging the ‘ivory tower’ reputation of higher education. This includes demonstrating the relevance of their research to local communities, recognising their importance as local employers, and providing societal benefits and social value to the local population.

*“I do think there's a genuine sense [of focus] around social mobility as well, so the university is genuinely committed – and not just in a tickbox way.” (Senior Researcher, Humanities)*

*“I think it wants to see itself as a really valuable part of the city, a proper cog in the machine, that it's not just sitting on top of the city using it, or liaising with it. It's actually a fundamental working part of the city.” (Senior Researcher, Arts)*

*“It's an anchor institution, and it's very place-based. It's connected to societal impact, civic pride. We're really focused on regional regeneration, so kind of policy driven as well.” (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)*

Civic Mission is linked to the university's identity, where they feel the need to justify themselves within a community and their wider context.

*“As a Post-92 university former polytechnic, for a long time we had to justify ourselves and our status. I think public engagement is a really big part of actually showing that we don't just teach, that there is an important role that our research plays in the life of the region.” (Senior Lecturer, Humanities)*

*“We're in this space where there was a strong oil and gas focus for a long time, and I think it is going through a little bit of a rebranding...you know, establishing its sense of identity.” (ECR, Arts)*

This area is often a core driver for individual researchers, but several of those we spoke to pointed out that as a driver of public engagement for the universities themselves it is one of the most precarious. The slow relationship-building necessary to respond to community needs, combined with a lack of immediate measurable metrics, means that when budgets are squeezed, social responsibility is most likely to be sacrificed in favour of activities with a directly quantifiable return on investment.

## Institutional profile and economic viability

Universities are increasingly operating in a competitive marketplace, and several interviewees noted public engagement is often viewed as a way of increasing visibility to their university's institutional commitment and to demonstrate the value of AHSS courses, both internally and externally.

*"I think it's always a struggle maybe to really demonstrate the economic viability of arts and humanities courses. Um, and yeah, you know, I think that's a nationwide trend. Um, so it's just always about bringing attention to the good really good research we're doing and the impact it can have."* (Public Engagement Professional)

Several interviewees felt public engagement serves as a public relations or marketing tool for their institutions, enhancing brand awareness, projecting a positive public image and ultimately, attracting more students and revenue.

*"Invariably it does come down to ... a form of advertising to demonstrate that you're a good university, you're doing this work, maybe we'll attract more students because more students means more revenue right? I think that's kind of underlying everything what universities do"* (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)

This is particularly important for AHSS subjects which feel the need to prove their relevance to prospective students and parents, and value for money to the taxpayer.

## Strategic alignment with funding (including REF)

While some interviewees felt their institution focused their public engagement activity on 'box ticking' for REF or more fragmented impact evidence gathering, others recognised the importance of having a public facing alignment to funding agendas. Funders play a major role in setting the status of public engagement in institutions by making it a requirement of grants. Institutions recognise that prioritising public engagement that aligns with the interests of funders such as UKRI can support them to secure funding.

*"I think with universities, their values will shift according to funder interest. So if UKRI says we're shifting, and UKRI has just recently shifted their strategy to be really industry focused and engagement focused, universities are going to shift their values accordingly and encourage and support researchers to write research bids that are more about public engagement. So, I'd say it's funder driven."* (ECR, Social Sciences)

As part of this, the Research Excellence Framework's requirement to demonstrate the impact of research beyond academia is a powerful driver, with positive REF scores influencing both prestige and funding. Public engagement is often seen as a first step

towards achieving an impact case study and as a result, some interviewees told us their public engagement team is strategically situated within research and innovation services to ensure engagement is meaningful and leads to demonstrable impact.

*“We sit in the Knowledge Exchange and Impact team. So we are not that far away from impact.”* (Public Engagement Professional, Art, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Even universities where Civic Responsibility is more of a drive for their public engagement work, funding that is focused on impact, such as AHRC Impact Acceleration Accounts, can have huge benefits for public engagement in paying for activity, training and even staffing.

## 2.3 Personal Drivers for Public Engagement

For many of the researchers we spoke to, their primary drivers for public engagement differed from those they perceived to be priorities for their institutions. While it is likely that the goals of individual researchers of any discipline will differ from the broader institution, the balance of these drivers for AHSS is uniquely skewed because of the human element of their work, where engagement is often an integral part of their research.

*“I’m certainly not one who sees public engagement as a student recruitment drive. I think for me, it is instilling a certain curiosity and a passion for a subject.”* (Public Engagement Professional, Art, Humanities and Social Sciences)

The recent Royal Society research, which involved a broad quantitative survey of public engagement across all disciplines, found that AHSS researchers are less likely than those in other fields to disagree that there are no public benefits to them in carrying out public engagement. However, they are more likely to feel that other researchers have a negative view of those who incorporate substantial amounts of it into their practice<sup>5</sup>.

### Social justice and civic responsibility

In interviews, researchers spoke of public engagement as a form of social justice. Pushing against the idea of public engagement as outreach, they see it as an opportunity to use their academic platform for public good. This was particularly evident in universities in close proximity to city centres where researchers also see themselves as community members, with a mandate to respond to local tensions. One researcher described how racially motivated civil disorder in their local community had given colleagues a ‘wake-up call’ in realising they had both the responsibility and means to support those affected. The Royal Society research notes that there has been a

---

<sup>5</sup> Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers 2025, pg.11

significant increase of researchers reporting that they feel a 'moral duty' to engage with the public, rising from 37% in 2015 to 57% in 2026.<sup>6</sup>

*"We work a lot in our communities because there is a huge pressure in that we're post-industrial. There's a shift towards the creative industries and tech. A lot of people aren't skilled to go into that workforce. So, there are economic pressures and a lot of tensions around that. [...] We are trying to navigate those as researchers, as community members."* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

Interviewees described a desire to advocate for marginalised groups, shifting the balance of power and supporting people in these groups to tell their own stories. One described a feeling that their position means they are an 'indirect public servant'. In this sense, public engagement can become a tool for change, or even social activism.

*"I do view myself as a scientist who's an indirect public servant... because you have to think about the public good and you have to think about how you're using your expertise in a way that's helpful rather than harmful. And sometimes, you know, being 'the expert' can be quite a harmful thing in a crisis situation."* (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)

These close collaborative relationships with community groups can mean that researchers feel a sense of personal responsibility, adding to their own mental and practical workload.

*"You build up a relationship with these people, and it's like, I don't know, you feel a sort of obligation to follow through with things and to be where you said you were going to be and to deliver. So, it's also that aspect of the load. It's not just ticking the REF boxes."* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

## Democratisation of knowledge

A recurring theme in our interviews is the desire to break out of the 'ivory tower'. For researchers, public engagement can be a way of sharing their passion for their subjects. They do this by breaking down barriers to engagement for underrepresented groups who do not see universities as places in which they belong, making the research happening there relevant to their everyday lives. They also recognise the importance of avoiding 'extractivism' by ensuring their research is shared back in an accessible way with people who contribute their lived experience.

---

<sup>6</sup> Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers 2025, pg.13

*“Making research and those thoughtful scholarly conversations available to the wider public for free, to me, is what education is about. So yes, I really love it.”*  
(Senior Researcher, Arts)

*“I would personally prefer the term ‘engaged research’ rather than ‘public engagement’. It is all about bringing research out of the ivory tower for the benefit of society.”* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

One researcher, who described herself as a ‘first generation academic’, the first in her family to go to university, described how she was driven to ‘give something back’ from her position of privilege via public engagement by making research accessible to people who wouldn’t otherwise be able to access it.

*“It feels so much more valuable to me than publishing a journal article that five people will read that’s behind a pay wall.”* (ECR, Humanities)

## **Proof of relevance**

Another driver for ‘sharing the joy’ of arts, humanities and social sciences, or highlighting the importance of heritage, is to raise the profile and perceived value of these subjects with the public. This is particularly seen as valuable in an environment of financial threats, where these subjects are increasingly vulnerable. This leads to an investment of time and effort in festivals, such as Being Human, and public exhibitions. These activities aren’t just good PR; they are proof of the relevance to a society that often questions the return of investment on a history or philosophy degree.

*“We’re in a really tricky cultural moment where a lot of our subjects are under threat. I think public engagement is a really important means of keeping these subjects to be seen as valuable. I think public engagement is a way of keeping ourselves relevant, making it very visible to a wider public that these subjects matter, have an impact on their lives and can do good things. I think that’s particularly important right now with certain narratives that are afloat.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

*“It’s not public relations. That’s one of my standard phrases. We’re not the comms department.”* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

On an individual and personal level for researchers, engaging the public with ideas and research can provide a form of external validation. This researcher told us how, earlier in her career, it was important to her to seek opportunities to share her research with enthusiastic audiences who she felt recognised the importance of what she was doing, more so than the internal audiences at her university:

*“When I felt that actually I was getting nothing at the university, the fact that I could go out and you know talk about my research to enthusiastic groups who really told me and gave me feedback that what I was doing was important, that was incredibly helpful.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

## Exchange of knowledge and research quality

Researchers and professionals interviewed spoke of engagement not as an ‘add-on’, but as a fundamental way to do better research. For them, the public aren't just ‘audiences’; they are often co-researchers or custodians of knowledge.

*“I think proper public engagement is about allowing your research to be changed and influenced and shaped by conversation with people.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

Speaking about their research with a public audience can provide researchers with a different perspective and an opportunity to learn and practice communicating complex ideas more effectively to non-specialists. An interviewee who led public engagement at their university told us how they ‘sell’ public engagement to researchers as a way of building their communication skills in other areas. For example, the experience of trying to explain their research to a 10-year-old can give them immediate feedback that enables them to write clearer research proposals. As a theme, this emerged from researchers from across disciplines and seniority:

*“The public asks different questions...which gives you a different perspective...and gets you thinking about things in a different way and teaches you how to communicate your research in an accessible way as well.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

Building platforms for public input can effectively challenge researchers’ assumptions and create space for participants to steer the inquiry. When the public are viewed as experts in their own right they can provide the stories, data and lived experience that researchers need to inform their research, meaning their research is incomplete without this human engagement. Co-producing research in dialogue with the public can actively shape research questions making the final output more robust and accurate.

*“I think this comes from that interdisciplinary space, thinking about workshops as both public engagement but also as a way to think about prioritisation and getting some steer from different public groups. ... We were running some workshops and we were trying to get one specifically for women over 60, because often when you talk about categories of women's health, they're not included as postmenopausal women. We'd really expected them to highlight things like birth and menopause - typical women's health categories. Then they really surprised us, because they brought things up like domestic violence and damp in houses.”* (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)

## 3 Enabling Public Engagement

### 3.1 Positive Enabling Factors: What currently exists?

#### The collective potential of arts, humanities and social science researchers as advocates of public engagement

Our interviewees were confident, highly motivated and enthusiastic about public engagement, and the benefits for themselves, their subjects, and society as a whole.

This resonates with the Royal Society research which states that “*researchers in the social sciences and arts and humanities are more likely to take part in public engagement activities than those in STEM fields*”<sup>7</sup> and that correspondingly, AHSS researchers also value public engagement more,<sup>8</sup> feel it benefits their research more,<sup>9</sup> and feel more equipped<sup>10</sup> than their STEM colleagues.

Having a shared platform from which to evidence success and share best practice would give AHSS researchers a tool to advocate more widely for the benefits of public engagement.

#### Varied approaches to public engagement

The types of public engagement activity mentioned in interviews were very broad, reflecting the varied nature of the research subjects and disciplines of our interviewees. Nevertheless, they can be broadly categorised under the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) categories of Inspire and Inform, Consult and Collaborate:

- While **Inspire and Inform** was the largest category (46 mentions), many of the people we interviewed go beyond the ‘traditional’ broadcast style of sharing research through lectures, blogs and articles by collaborating with cultural and creative partners to produce exhibitions, immersive environments and performances.
- **Consultation** was the smallest category (16 mentions) but again, it encompasses a range of creative methods, such as accompanied field walks, ‘serious play’ sessions, and the use of ‘Digital Twins’ of otherwise inaccessible sites.
- **Collaboration or co-design** is a growing area (24 mentions). This encompasses both activities informing the design of research projects (such as working with community panels to reshape research questions or crowdsourcing in archives),

---

<sup>7</sup> Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers 2025. pg.21

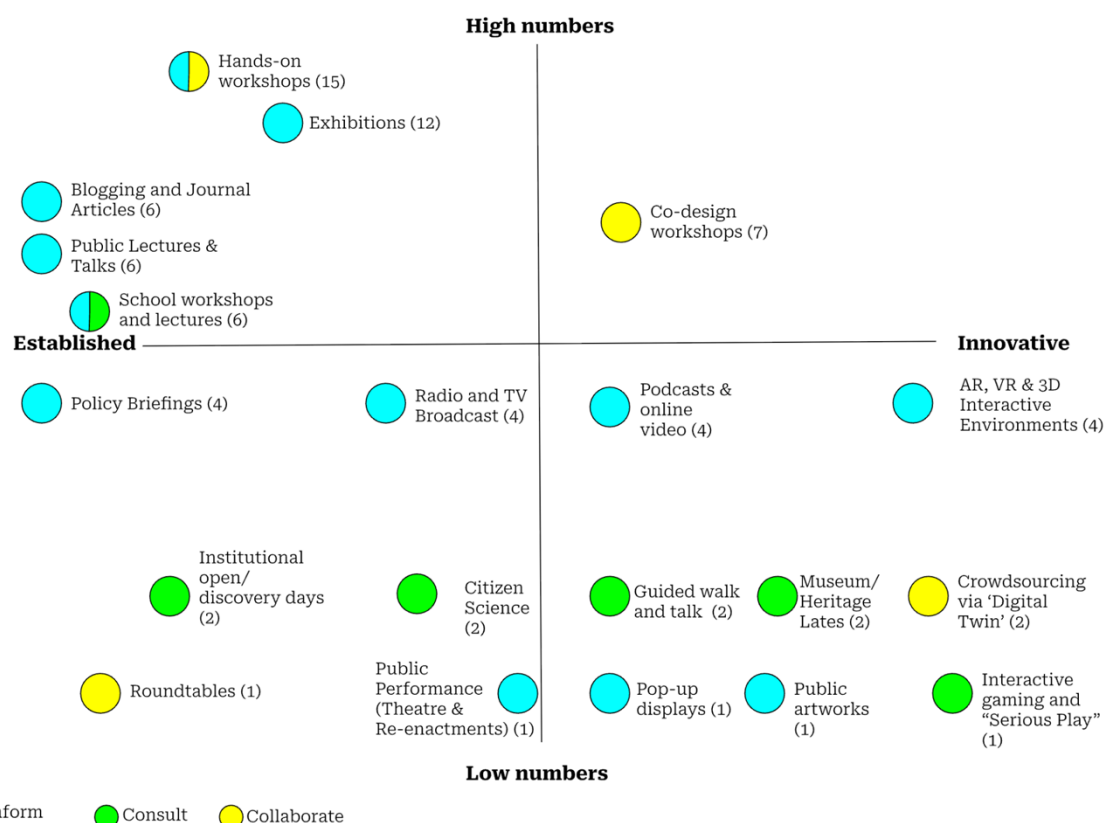
<sup>8</sup> Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers 2025. pg.9

<sup>9</sup> Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers 2025. pg.12

<sup>10</sup> Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers 2025. pg.30

and activities where the researchers and public participants collaborate to produce creative research outputs such as sculpture, poetry or craft.

Our light touch analysis of these kinds of public engagement activity demonstrates that innovation is happening. While these activities are low in numbers, and the majority of public engagement activity is still firmly on the ‘established’ end of the scale of types, we heard from researchers who are pushing boundaries in the ways they inform, consult and collaborate with the public.



*Sketch matrix showing our light touch analysis of activity as mentioned by interviewees, organised by frequency of mention and extent to which they are established or innovative formats.*

The researchers interviewed tended to forefront workshops and interactive sessions over more ‘traditional’ activities such as talks, lectures and panels. This suggests they are more motivated by active participation than dissemination, allowing reciprocal learning to happen through the interaction.

Collaboration is also happening between researchers, community partners or technical specialists, who combine skills and resources to deliver innovative work, particularly those which use interactive technologies or deliver large-scale public interventions and events. The list of activities that would have involved a partner to develop and deliver far exceeds those that can be delivered ‘solo’ such as blogging, journal articles, podcasts, videos, talks and policy briefings.

## Quality training is available

Training is a crucial factor in increasing the confidence and skills to deliver effective and inclusive public engagement with AHSS, but also across academic disciplines as a whole. The value of effective public engagement is generally understood and researchers are motivated, but the means by which it is delivered are less understood. This hints at a shifting need for training and support to move focus from the 'why' of public engagement to the 'how', prioritising practical guidance on delivering engagement activity for researchers over advocating for its value and benefits.

Examples of beneficial training shared both by professional staff who deliver and commission training and the AHSS researchers themselves tended to focus on practical skills, supporting them in presenting and translating complex academic concepts for lay audiences, and also supporting the logistics of event production. These have been delivered both by central communications teams within their university and external specialists.

Specific examples include:

- **Being Human Festival resources and training:** Researchers taking part in the festival are provided with guidance and templates for event production, including guides to accessibility, risk assessments, presentation techniques and promotion.
- **Writing for the public:** Specialised workshops focusing on writing in an engaging way for the public, enabling them to 'unlearn' their more formal academic training. Skills in writing engaging hooks, reframing outputs for blogs or media, and writing succinct policy briefings for time poor audiences.
- **Media and broadcast training:** Formal training in the practical skills needed to navigate the world of television, radio, or podcasts was mentioned by several researchers. Knowing how to handle a microphone and respond to journalist interviews gave them the confidence to step into this area.
- **Introductory evaluation and impact training:** Professional staff felt that a basic understanding of evaluation frameworks (such as the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement guidelines) helps ensure feedback mechanisms are embedded into projects rather than applied as an afterthought.

One university we heard about has an annual public engagement training programme with two levels: Associate and Fellowship. Associates receive basic training but once they have gone through the year-long programme they can call themselves a Public Engagement Associate for life. This programme creates a cohort of people with the appropriate training and skills who can be contacted about new opportunities with the confidence that they will be able to deliver. The interviewee we spoke to suggested this

could become a measure for each department's skill in public engagement – the percentage within the department who have undertaken the training.

## **The power of networks**

A recurring theme in interviews was the importance of having a network of peers and role models doing public engagement within an institution.

*“This position doesn't exist anymore, but we had a wonderful faculty Impact Manager who had a great deal of experience getting grants, writing budgets and delivering activities and I worked really closely with her...I don't know processes that are written anywhere, but it's about working with colleagues who have the right expertise and supporting each other.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

*“I think having role models – having the ability to say, ‘Okay, this is something that I'm supposed to do with my time and it is legitimate’.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

Combining peer networks with visible support from more experienced or senior staff can validate and empower them further. This may be through the practical support of someone with more experience in delivering public engagement and related activities, or the backing and understanding of a line manager or more senior member of staff.

*“I wouldn't say it's the resource that's most helpful. I think it's line management support... it's the people rather than the process.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

*“I think one of the things that helps is our VP is from a social science background. I think that can make quite a big difference and part of their role is public engagement.”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

While some public engagement professionals we spoke to had a remit to work specifically with AHSS researchers, others were more wide reaching, for example through platforms that encompass and encourage collaboration with science, engineering and medicine. This raises the potential for cross fertilisation of practice and discipline, where for example, scientists collaborating with researchers in arts and humanities can benefit from approaches that enhance the quality of engagement beyond traditional science communication. Conversely, science communication's focus on simplifying complex information and providing a hook to engage people can be a useful tool for AHSS researchers.

*“I worked with someone in design. We realised that we were kind of interested in the same things, but I was interested in them from a historical point of view. He was interested in thinking about design, and we actually did a project together that ended in an exhibition at the museum.”* (Senior Lecturer, Humanities)

## **Including and supporting public engagement in promotion criteria**

Including public engagement in promotion criteria can be beneficial, if the right support is put in place. In one university, where public engagement and outreach have been officially recognised as a criteria since 2016 around 30% of researchers use this optional question in their promotion application. Another university assesses what they refer to as 'Civic Engagement' on an equal footing with teaching and research for academic appraisals.

*"There's a space for [Civic Engagement] in progression. Certainly I've found when I've been going through progression, there has been an acknowledgement during the interview or the application process that that is valued as part of what we do."* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

## External funding for public engagement

Researchers shared examples of external funding which has supported them to do public engagement.

**The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE)** was mentioned several times, both because of the resources they make available, reducing the need for them to develop their own, and the Public Engagement Watermark. The latter is seen as a catalyst for public engagement by providing an externally visible validation which senior management can leverage and use to gain support<sup>11</sup>.

*"We usually fall back on NCCPE in terms of resources because there's no need to reinvent the wheel."* (Public Engagement Professional, Humanities)

*"Because of us going through the accreditation and the bronze awards, there has been more of a push top down for public engagement activities."* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

**The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)**'s Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) is an example of funding that supports public engagement, even if it is a side effect of their focus on REF impact.

*"We're really lucky that we've had an AHRC Acceleration Account because it's enabled us to create a portfolio for training people up in public engagement, impact generation, participatory research, commercialisation. Otherwise, without that as a kind of foundation point, I think we would have really struggled potentially to have [REF] case studies."* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

## *Harnessing the Research Excellence Framework (REF)*

Success in the REF can also generate funding for public engagement, and forms an important enabling driver in other ways. One researcher told us how success in previous REF cycles had resulted in funding to support their public engagement work. However,

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/engage-watermark>

this is not guaranteed. We heard from others that their institutions had decided to absorb the money awarded by the REF in favour of covering core costs rather than allocating it to specific departments.

*“We earned the money from our own REF submission which was very strong in 2021. We had a good amount of funding for a small team, a very good amount of funding, and as long as we could show that the things that we wanted to do fit with the strategy, then the institution was generally very happy for us to have money to do it within our budget.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

While many institutions and some professional staff view the primary value of REF as a driver for funding, the researchers we spoke to were more likely to see it as a way to justify the ‘slow work’ they were already doing to build relationships with communities.

Public engagement is often seen as part of a pathway to impact, or as a testing bed for future impact projects. We heard how less experienced researchers are doing more public engagement as a way to gain the skills and understanding needed for projects linked to REF case studies. This may have a positive effect on institutional support for public engagement work happening at a university. For example at one institution, only 50 of the previous REF cycle’s 184 Impact Case Study authors remain, and this loss of experience, or in other terms, institutional memory, means researchers are looking for opportunities to develop skills and experience.

*“We’ve had an exodus, for whatever reason, as with so many other universities, so the impact that is happening is not mature. There’s a lot of testing things out with public engagement.”* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

### **Smaller, less pressurised grants and funding**

While often bound to short time-frames or specific events, smaller grants can provide a lower pressure testing bed for ideas and experimentation. This can provide proof of concept and an opportunity to collect data that will form the foundation for larger funding applications in the future.

*“Often with research funding bids, funders will require some kind of foundational research that has taken place and it’s a kind of pilot project that has shown, there is real world impact, which in the arts and humanities, you’d be talking about humans changing their behaviour. Humans changing how they see the world. How they rethink a particular concept. So, having a smaller project that can be your proof of concept, will definitely help you in future funding bids and it’s good to have those as tools to get data in place.”* (ECR, Arts)

Where universities do not have central funding for public engagement activity, researchers have to find alternative means to pay for the material and resources they need. Some include allowance for public engagement activity in large grant applications, or apply for smaller ad-hoc pots of funding for one-off projects. We also

heard from a researcher who has resorted to doing public engagement as a freelance researcher, paid for through income generated from publishing independently in their own time, and taking on commissions from commercial organisations such as Seed Talks<sup>12</sup> who pay researchers for public speaking.

### **A drive for inclusion**

A clear trend was a desire to reach ‘harder to reach’ audiences, or more accurately, audiences who find that universities are ‘hard to access’ due to cultural differences, confidence, lack of awareness, or an exclusion from broader cultural forms and organisations. This resonates with the researchers’ motivations to engage with public engagement that often centres on social justice.

Several researchers shared techniques they have used to break down these barriers including:

- Paying for participation: Recognising that lower-income groups cannot always volunteer their time for free.
- Meeting in neutral spaces: Avoiding the intimidating ‘university architecture’.
- Sustained presence: Moving beyond a one-off event to create a ‘slow work’ relationship that builds genuine trust.

## **3.2 Opportunities for Sector-Level Organisations and Initiatives**

In this section we offer a range of proposals and ideas for programmes of work, actions or other steps which could be taken by national organisations and initiatives in further support of public engagement work. These bodies and initiatives would include AHRC, ESRC, SAS (Being Human Festival and CPEP), the British Academy, and others.

### **Offer practical training to increase confidence and ability**

The Royal Society research found that whilst the majority of researchers across all disciplines felt well equipped to carry out ‘informing’ activities, their confidence in two-way engagement through collaboration and consulting was significantly lower, and that practical training made a notable difference in researcher ability and self-belief to carry it out<sup>13</sup>.

Interviewees told us that free training and the option of an online offer significantly reduced barriers to access and helped them make recommendations to their colleagues or assistants more easily.

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.seedtalks.co.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers 2025. pg.31

Ideas for training that would develop their own and colleagues' skills and capacities included:

### **Practical and relational training, and exposure to creative engagement methods**

Building on the multidisciplinary and collaborative nature of AHSS to expand the formats for presenting research and how the public can engage with them. Although there is no shortage of inspiration from platforms such as Being Human as to how research can be shared creatively, there is a lack of confidence and knowledge as to how to make this happen. As such, researchers will often default to tried-and-tested engagement which they have seen modelled or that has lower barriers to delivery, such as a lecture or guided walk.

*"Some types of training I think would be helpful, beyond the institutional side of things, [are] things like podcasts, but also exhibitions, to whatever other sort of weird and wonderful ways there are to do public engagement. I think those sorts of things are helpful, seeing best practice."* (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)

Alongside this, training in relational skills such as the ability to listen, build trust, navigate different perspectives, communicate with empathy, and develop genuine partnerships over time will equip researchers with the tools needed to develop their own approach.

*"If we are serious about meaningful engagement, then perhaps we need to broaden our view of professional development. Technical knowledge matters, but so do self-awareness, empathy, relationship-building, and the ability to work constructively with people whose experiences and priorities may differ significantly from our own."* (Public Engagement Professional)

### **Support translation of complex research into accessible public narratives**

Training needs to be subtly different to general public engagement programmes to allow for the complex nature of the ideas held within AHSS research. Researchers expressed concerns that AHSS deals with abstract 'ways of thinking' or complex concepts that may be difficult to pitch concisely without perceived 'dumbing down'.

*"Being able to go to a festival and do a 10-minute pitch on your humanities subject is incredibly tricky because... how do you quantify it? ... If it was a philosophical question how do you take something that's this massive broad ether and boil it down in a way that is not dumbing down?"* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

One researcher made the comparison between history researchers who try to uncover the complexity behind seemingly simple things, and science communicators whose role is to make the complex simple, concluding that the latter are just more suited to the job.

*“I think we can be quite bad at it because the whole discipline of history is making simple things complicated.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

The challenge of taking research out to a new audience (e.g. through Being Human Festival) or experimenting with a new format such as audio or visual media can give AHSS researchers valuable experience in framing their work differently.

*“So they [researchers] obviously know their research inside out, but how do you interpret that for a public audience? What is a public audience going to enjoy? What's going to attract them? Being Human is a big example of that. How do you take research about the history of pro-political protest and then turn that into something that kids want to go to?”* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

*“I did work on a number of public facing research projects, but with the exhibition, the thing that was quite new and hadn't done before is media. I'd never had media training so that was a new experience. It was interesting to learn just how to really hone in kind of those key messages, but to also make them accessible.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

### **Work with creative partners to develop training**

Researchers are leveraging local partners and resources to strengthen the ecosystem of engagement. One public engagement professional told us how they are in discussion with a local arts collective to develop a reciprocal training offer, where potential creative partners learn about the university and research context, while researchers learn how effective public engagement activity is run outside of their sector. In order to make the most of reciprocal opportunities and expertise sharing, relationships must be brokered and sustained – a process which requires time investment.

*“There's a kind of... you need to understand the research context and we need to understand your context in terms of how you run effective festivals, events, workshops, podcasts, all of that, you know, and just a real kind of learning as a community together.”* (Public Engagement professional)

### **Offer strategic support and capacity building**

Giving researchers access to support, information and resources on a strategic level would fill some of the gaps highlighted by our conversations with researchers and public engagement professionals.

### **Provide access to 1-2-1 professional advice in the face of the loss of public engagement teams at universities**

Widespread feedback from AHSS researchers lamented the loss, or absence, of public engagement teams within their faculties and departments for ongoing formal and

informal guidance. This was particularly noted for researchers for whom public engagement was central practice and core to their research outputs who then had little support in understanding how to best communicate their achievements when looking at career progression and forming their academic identity. A mentoring programme which links established AHSS public engagement practitioners and professionals with those lacking ready access to guidance could be a valuable contribution from sector-level organisations and initiatives to lift up practice and support across the UK.

*“I think it might be really helpful to think about career progression for people who are working in public engagement in the humanities and social sciences. How do you brand yourself? I know that's a horrible phrase, but especially if you've got a CV that feels all over the place, how do you create a coherent narrative about what you've done and who you are as a researcher, if you know what I mean?”* (Mid-Career Researcher, Humanities)

### **Highlighting the need for administrative support**

It is recognised that public engagement carries with it significant administrative burden, and many researchers (and indeed institutions) have gaps in their knowledge on how to organise it. Sector-level organisations and initiatives can provide expert guidance in the absence of internal public engagement teams. Providing guidance on the infrastructure required to carry out high-quality public engagement and the roles of supporting departments may help to clarify institutional focus around the public impact of its work where to invest in activity.

*“Lobbying the sector for admin support, which is not the glamorous bit, but maybe that's the bit that's needed!”* (Senior Researcher, Arts)

### **Broker training from across UK research institutions**

Sector-level organisations and initiatives may help act as a broker for training sourced from other universities, leveraging its networks to better enable the sharing of resources and making use of expertise which is held at other institutions.

*“These public engagement teams, not every university can afford them. Is there something about a regional cluster? We can offer training for you, but you pay at the other end?”* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)

### **Developing ethical and inclusive engagement strategies**

Within public engagement practice, there is an imperative to formalise ethical frameworks that govern public engagement and participatory research methodologies. Achieving genuine representation of diversity requires a shift away from passive, ad-hoc outreach toward a deliberate, structural interrogation of institutional exclusion that actively identifies missing voices. Addressing these

demographic and systemic gaps often relies heavily on co-design and practices such as citizen juries. To move beyond tokenistic involvement, researchers are looking to align with and learn from policy-driven approaches, leveraging cross-institutional benchmarking and regional or national partnerships to establish standardised ethical guidelines for engagement. Ultimately, embedding these inclusive strategies into institutional policy ensures that public engagement transcends the top-down dissemination of knowledge, transforming instead into a reciprocal, representative, and diverse collaboration, contributing to a robust response to the REF 2029 SPRE profile.

*“I think there would be a lot of learning to do from our own local and regional partners, as well as more national partners, on how other regional arts universities think about public engagement. Can we draw up a policy of ethical public engagement as a strategy for academics to think about how they might get the right people in their spaces? Be more inclusive? Who's not there? That's the question you've always got to ask, haven't you?” (ECR, Arts)*

## **Respond to new developments in REF 2029**

Researchers would like to see sector-level organisations and initiatives support the development of a framework that defines methodological best practices from the point of view of funders and bodies external to their university, and provides evidence for the value of public engagement across disciplines.

*“I read Wellcome's statement on good interdisciplinary art research collaborations before I put my grant in. It would be interesting to see something like that come out of this, where it could be a way to think about methodological evidence based on how the methodology works with the funder, and the universities to think about how that could have an impact on some of those metrics. At least to have a way to say, ‘The funder needs this’. That's a big ask obviously, but maybe something to work towards to have a best practice that we can point to and say well actually I'm following this, or sharing it with some of my colleagues in different disciplines to say, ‘Oh here's actually what I use and this is why that's important beyond just getting your work cited in a parliamentary discussion.’” (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)*

At present, researchers find it difficult to communicate the impact of their engagement through existing metrics and frameworks, such as REF Impact Case Studies and policy citations. The introduction of REF 2029 provides an opportunity for national organisations and initiatives to support effective methodologies for evidencing practice and impact in preparation for this, as well as broader evidencing of engagement groundwork, such as relationship brokering, and institutional infrastructural support.

*“I think events that show pathways to impact engagement for smaller institutions, or any academics working, and how that works – really changing research cultures so public engagement is just seen as a part of what research is.”* (Public Engagement Professional, Arts)

With ‘Engagement’ set to be officially recognised in REF 2029 alongside ‘Impact’ it is likely that some universities who have paid less attention to public engagement in the past may start to focus on this area of researchers’ work, and be looking for structures and guidance for capturing evidence.

### **Grassroots Focus – building partnerships and trust beyond academia**

Even for those most confident in delivering public engagement work, finding a way into local communities and relevant audiences for research can be a barrier for researchers.

*“You need to find the partners that know how to get the audience in, and that’s not always the easiest thing, especially for a traditional academic like me who didn’t come from industry.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

Delivering high-quality engagement with the audience that they want to reach often relies heavily on the relationship building and deep knowledge of local communities that come through the partners that they work with. In line with this, researchers recommended shifting emphasis away from one-off or ‘touch and go’ events, such as festival stands, towards building long-term, sustained and non-extractive partnerships at a grassroots level.

*“That is something that has to be done in partnership with other organisations to gain that trust and it’s slow burning. It’s allowing for the importance of deep ‘hanging out time’ and just being able to have low-stakes conversations before running headlong into doing a big event or any event to be honest. I think sometimes the event becomes the point, rather than the actual work that you’re doing.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

Collaborators such as cultural partners often hold in-depth and segmented audience data which is used for developing their own marketing and engagement strategies, and for researchers, this is a powerful resource to draw from to build knowledge and understanding that they may not have.

*“When you build a relationship with externals, for them, it’s not a project engagement like it is for academics that then moves on to the next one. For them, it’s a contact with the university. And for me, the biggest success indicator is if people want to keep in touch and they want to do further stuff, with the next class, with the next cohort. They want to bring us back in because we add value to what they do. That’s not valued at the university to the same extent because it should always be new and innovative. Once you’ve settled the relationship, it’s full of trust.”* (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)

## Advocate for recognition of public engagement in career pathways

There was a call for sector-level organisations and initiatives to appeal to university leadership to formally integrate public engagement into workload models and promotion criteria. This would ensure it is recognised as a core academic activity, rather than an unrewarded 'add-on'. Even if high level leaders within universities understand the value of public engagement, without formal structures and measures there is no mechanism to recognise public engagement work properly.

*"It's always an add-on to something, despite the fact that it's been there for so long and people are asked for it. There is no work allocation model for it that actually works where you say, I'm going to spend X number of hours on this activity and I'm going to get rewarded for this activity. That doesn't exist in a structured way... So at the moment, for example, if you want to focus on public engagement, and you're an academic in the work model allocation, it would fit into admin."* (Public Engagement Professional, Social Sciences)

*"In our university, there were only two main routes to promotion: either through research or through teaching. Where does that public facing work fit in? That is quite difficult to work out."* (Senior Lecturer, Humanities,)

Alongside this, supporting researchers to advocate for their own public engagement work would give them the tools and language to champion themselves.

*"I think it might be really helpful to think about career progression for people who are working in public engagement in the humanities and social sciences. How do you brand yourself? How do you create a coherent narrative about what you've done and who you are as a researcher?"* (Senior Lecturer, Humanities)

## Act as an external champion

For individual researchers who are already committed to doing public engagement, national organisations and initiatives will have the most value in providing support for the 'how' rather than the 'why'. However, for senior figures in their universities with potential to become champions within their departments, there is still a need for advocacy and providing the language and evidence needed to embed that 'why' in their research culture.

*"There's really amazing and innovative practice happening across the country but often leadership, the deans and senior management are kind of catching up with that. The advocacy role is going to be really vital."* (ECR, Arts)

Leveraging their status, national organisations and initiatives could advocate to university leaders, encouraging institutions to position public engagement as a strategic mission. A recurring theme in our interviews was that researchers often feel they need external recognition before their own institution rewards or values their

public engagement work. For example, we heard from an arts researcher that their university only began to fund their public engagement work after they secured external validation through a Being Human Festival grant and a national impact prize.

*“I think it's still a question of how we work with senior managers as researchers to convince them of the value of it in an academic context. I imagine that a centre set up by an academic institution, that was focused on public engagement, would be hugely beneficial, especially to small universities like mine where we have no public engagement officers or departments. I think somewhere where you could go and I could convince the Dean of Research or the Vice Chancellor that this is being taken incredibly seriously by a very valued other university or sector leader in that way would be really helpful for those conversations to happen in smaller institutions.” (ECR, Arts)*

## **Recognise geographical differences**

Speaking with researchers in a mix of rural and urban locations highlighted the importance of not only making funding and opportunities available across the whole of the UK, but also to consider their specific context and issues arising from their geographic location. For example, universities with more dispersed communities may need specific support or examples of best practice when it comes to community engagement, while those with communities living in difficult social or economic circumstances, such as in the context of the loss of local industries or racial tensions, need specific support to navigate these.

*“I would see the Irish state as being much better at geographically diversifying its funding for public history initiatives than my experience of the UK, which I think does tend to veer towards a London centrality.” (ECR, Humanities)*

## **Targeted and agile funding**

The grant schemes being piloted by the Centre for Public Engagement Practice will disrupt the status quo, by focusing on connection, collaboration and innovation. The opportunities this will unlock directly relate to the other functions for the centre: enabling the training, platforms and support with funding that will allow AHSS researchers to develop skills and networks, innovate, and advocate for their public engagement work.

By offering small, agile grants for partnership development (which are rarely funded, if ever) sector-level organisations and initiatives will have the opportunity to create real change in relationship building, networking, co-design, partnership development and work with community, creative, heritage and cultural organisations.

Any funding opportunities should be flexible, available multiple times a year (rather than a single annual call) and inclusive of peripheral or rural institutions.

*“It would be good to have multiple opportunities to apply. I think sometimes when it's one date a year, if that date doesn't quite align with whatever else you've got going on, or sometimes public engagement comes at the end of a project, or there's something you want to align it with, I think having two or three points in the year that funding could be applied for can be helpful.”* (Senior Researcher, Social Sciences)

A recurring theme in our conversations with researchers is the need for funding that can be used to cover teaching buy-out.

*“Being Human Festival is wonderful. I love them. I learned so much from doing events with them. But you can't use their funding to buy yourself out of teaching. And the thing is with public engagement work; it's really time consuming. So, I think funding that allows for teaching remission or funding that's just more flexible, really broadly flexible, I think would be really, really powerful.”* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

For stand-alone projects, flexible funding can give researchers the resources they need to do the activity they want to, even without the allowance for time or ‘workload’ allocated to it. This includes funding for festivals, fellowships and the BBC New Generation Thinkers.

*“We have this Fellowship, which isn't workloaded, so I could get away with going for it because it didn't have any impact on what I was doing. That allowed me £1,000 to put together a sort of stall and activities for the festival, which is on a weekend.”* (ECR, Humanities)

## **Extending networks to embrace the possibility and richness of STEM and AHSS collaboration**

Researchers were interested in dissolving the barriers between STEM and AHSS. They felt that by doing so, they could show how AHSS are essential in today's world supporting inter-disciplinary thinking, as opposed to keeping these subjects siloed. The Royal Society report noted that AHSS researchers are also more likely to take part in public engagement activities than those in STEM fields, tending to work more closely within communities, rather than the schools focus of much of STEM engagement.

One researcher suggested a suite of grants to enable universities to host large, annual, cross-disciplinary events that combine AHSS and STEM to attract more diverse audiences. While there is a danger of diluting AHSS in service of STEM, such as positioning the arts as communicating complex ideas in simple creative ways, cross-disciplinary events focusing broadly on the human condition could also widen the

audience for AHSS subjects or even apply 'scientific approaches' to evidencing the value of public engagement work<sup>14</sup>.

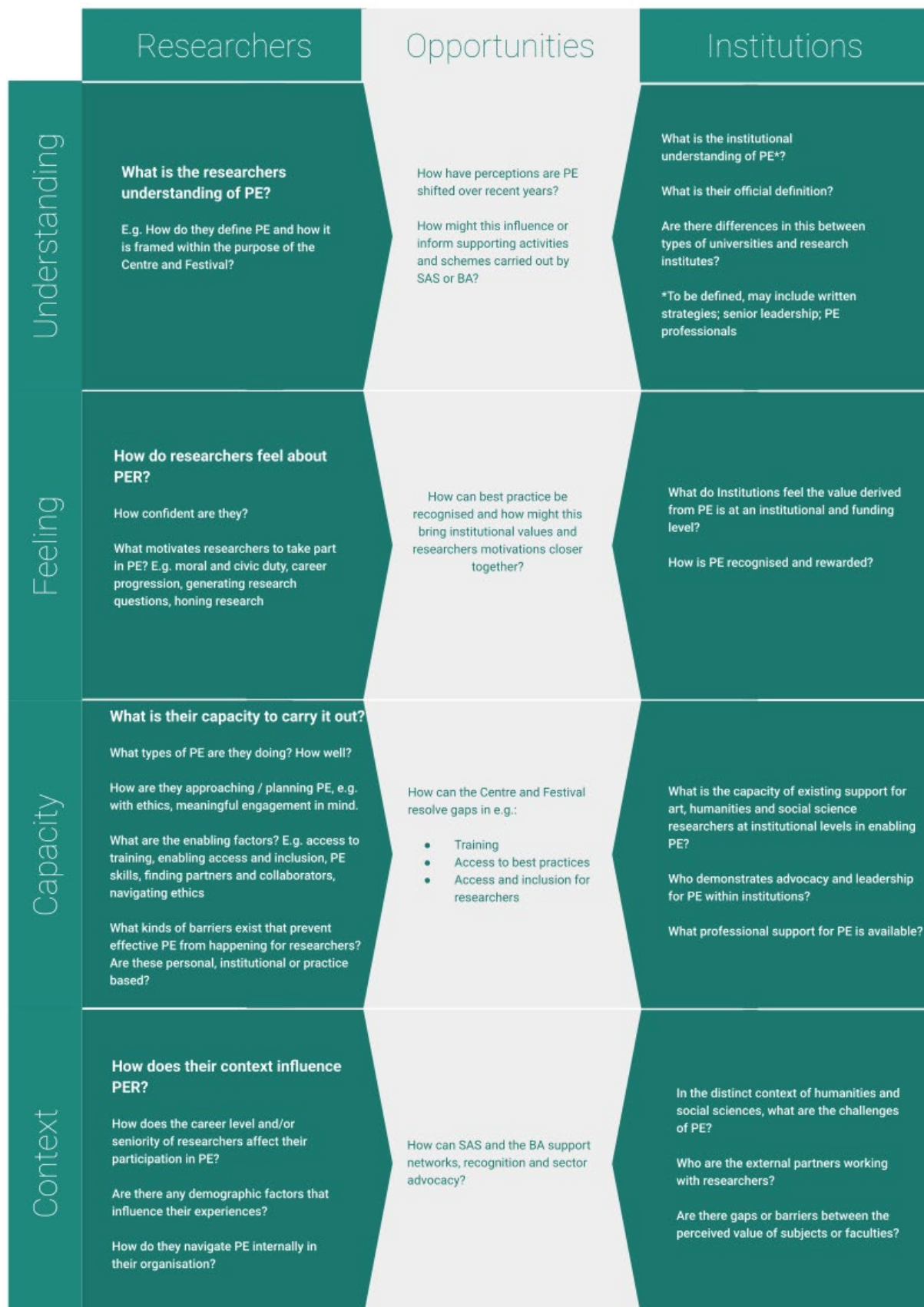
*"One of the things I think was really lovely and really effective, were the creative collaborations from the point of science which bring artists and scientists together to do the art, and to get the artists to do work that expresses the science research. I think that's really effective."* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

*"Some of it is humanities supporting science. Others are going to be science supporting humanities. So, what about scientific research that shows the benefit of participation or engagement?"* (Senior Researcher, Humanities)

---

<sup>14</sup> Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers, 2025 pg. 21

# Appendix 1: Enquiry Framework



## Appendix 2: Focus, Region, Status and Role of Interviewees

| FOCUS                | REGION                   | STATUS                    | ROLE                          |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Arts                 | North West               | ECR / Mid                 | Senior Lecturer               |
| Arts                 | North West               | Senior                    | Head of Dept                  |
| Arts                 | Northern Ireland         | Mid-Career                | Lecturer                      |
| Arts                 | Scotland                 | ECR / Mid                 | Associate Professor           |
| Arts                 | Scotland                 | Senior                    | Professor                     |
| Arts                 | West Midlands            | ECR                       | Assistant Professor           |
| Arts                 | Yorkshire and the Humber | ECR                       | Lecturer                      |
| Arts                 | East of England          | Mid-Career                | Senior Lecturer (Artist)      |
| External             |                          | Professional / Senior     | Executive Director            |
| External             |                          | Mid-Career                | Curator / Researcher          |
| Humanities           | East Midlands            | Senior                    | Professor                     |
| Humanities           | Northern Ireland         | ECR                       | Research Fellow               |
| Humanities           | Scotland                 | ECR                       | Research Fellow               |
| Humanities           | South East               | Mid-Career                | Senior Lecturer               |
| Humanities           | West Midlands            | Senior                    | Professor                     |
| Humanities           | East Midlands            | Mid-Career                | Senior Lecturer               |
| Professional Support | East of England          | Professional / ECR        | Research Associate            |
| Professional Support | London                   | Professional / Mid        | Head of Public Engagement     |
| Professional Support | North East               | Professional / ECR        | Research Fellow / Lecturer    |
| Professional Support | Scotland                 | Mid-Career                | Senior Researcher             |
| Professional Support | Scotland                 | Professional              | Public Engagement Manager     |
| Professional Support | South West               | Professional / ECR        | Lecturer                      |
| Professional Support | South West               | Professional              | Public Engagement Associate   |
| Professional Support | Wales                    | Professional              | Engagement Coordinator        |
| Professional Support | Yorkshire and the Humber | Professional              | Head of Public Engagement     |
| Professional Support | East of England          | Professional / Mid-Career | Senior Lecturer               |
| Social Science       | London                   | Mid-Career                | Senior Lecturer               |
| Social Science       | South East               | ECR / Mid                 | Senior Lecturer               |
| Social Science       | South West               | Senior                    | Professor                     |
| Social Science       | Yorkshire and the Humber | Senior                    | Head of Dept / Associate Prof |
| Social Science       | East Midlands            | Mid-Career                | Associate Professor           |