NCCPE REF briefing event

January 20th, 2026

What to expect today?

- A **clear, high-level picture** of what has changed across the REF
- Explanation of **how engagement is now framed and judged**
- Explore **what this means for PE and engagement professionals**
- Identify **opportunities created by the REF, and how the NCCPE can help**
- **Q&A**

2. What has changed?

The three REF Profiles

REF2021

OUTPUTS (60%)

- Originality
- Significance
- Rigour

ENVIRONMENT (15%)

- Vitality
- Sustainability

IMPACT (25%)

- Reach
- Significance

The three REF Profiles

Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU)

55%

Our distinctive research philosophy and methodological strengths

Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE)

20%

How we organise ourselves to maximise the value of the work we produce

Engagement and Impact (E&I)

25%

How we mobilise knowledge to create impact

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The big shift that matters for Public Engagement

REF's changing centre of gravity

REF2029 is not asking:

- "Did you do engagement?"
- "How much activity did you run?"

It *is* asking:

- How does engagement **help research create value?**
- How are decisions about engagement made **responsibly and intentionally?**
- How do systems, people, and practices **work together over time?**

3. Contribution to Knowledge & Understanding (CKU)

The three REF Profiles

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CKU: what's shifted?

From outputs to contribution

Key changes:

- CKU is now about **collective contribution**, not output counting
- A **broader range of outputs and practices** are in scope
- Quality is judged through **explanation and context**
- Contribution is **not tightly tied to named individuals**

"Research involves a diverse set of research practices, which lead to a wide range of diverse outputs."
(Section 4 – CKU guidance, p.9)

What this means for Public Engagement

Why CKU matters for engagement

For PE, this creates space to:

- Show how engagement **shapes research questions, methods, and understanding**

- Legitimate **co-produced knowledge** and dialogic research practices

- Recognise enabling work that supports knowledge-building

- Position engagement as part of *how knowledge is made*, not just shared

4. Engagement and Impact

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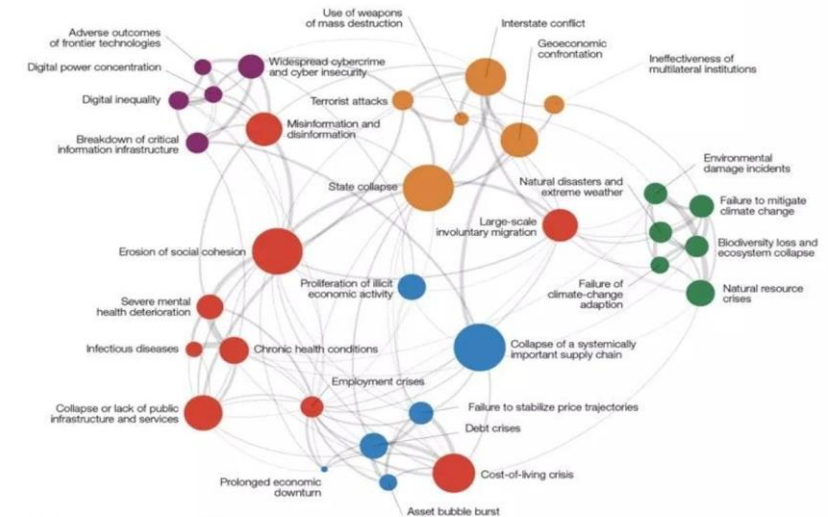*How we organise ourselves to maximise the value of the work we produce*

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How we mobilise knowledge to create impact

Impact paradigms

Engagement & Impact: what's shifted?

Clearer, more explicit framing

REF2029 now:

- Explicitly defines **engagement** (purposeful, responsible, contextual)

- Welcomes engagement **across the research lifecycle**

- Removes the 2★ threshold for underpinning research

- Allows richer explanation of **shared and incremental contribution**

> **"REF 2029 wishes to celebrate diverse types of impact and explicitly welcomes, in either the underpinning research or evidence of impact sections of the template, narratives expressing research engagement across the lifecycle of research."** *(Section 6 – Engagement and Impact guidance, p.6)*

Engagement defined

"For the purposes of the REF, engagement is defined as an interaction between the HEI and relevant individuals, groups, communities, organisations, the public, commercial partners, or policy makers, that is purposeful, responsible, and context appropriate."
(REF 2029 Section 6 – Engagement and Impact guidance, p.6)

THE ENGAGED UNIVERSITY

A Manifesto for Public Engagement

"Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public.

Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit".

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

What this means for Public Engagement

Engagement is now a legitimate part of the story

This encourages and enables institutions to:

- Explain *how* engagement contributed to change, not just *what happened*

- Use **qualitative and process-based evidence**, proportionately

- Be explicit about **judgement, care, power, and responsibility**

- Recognise contributions from **engagement professionals and brokers**

5. How panels will judge engagement

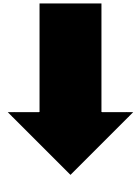# Expert judgement (not measurement)

Panels could ask:

- Was engagement **purposefully designed**?
- Did it play a **credible role** in shaping outcomes or change?
- Is that role **clearly explained**?
- Was it done **responsibly**, in context?

"Panels will apply their expert judgement based on all the information provided in the ICS" *(Section 6 – Engagement and Impact guidance, p.7)*
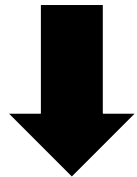
A REF-appropriate logic frame

Research contribution	Engagement & activation	System change	Why this mattered
What did the research offer?	How was it activated through engagement? Was it responsible?	What changed in the system?	Why is this change significant in context?

⬇   ⬇

Make the underpinning research work harder

Talk about engagement as a responsible mechanism, not an end in itself

Rigour and responsibility

REF2029 **explicitly welcomes** Impact Case Studies that:

- Explain **how engagement was designed and conducted responsibly**
- Reflect on **judgement, care, power, and accountability**
- Use **qualitative, process-based evidence** where appropriate
- Show how responsible practices **enhanced reach and/or significance**

> **"Narratives may also include specific consideration of appropriate responsible practices and use relevant qualitative evidence."**
> *(Section 6 – Engagement and Impact guidance, p.6)*

Community-based participatory research
A guide to ethical principles and practice (2nd edition)

Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University

National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement
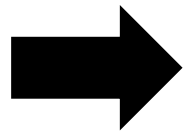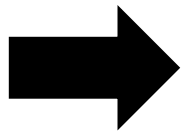
November 2022

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

Durham University
Centre for Social Justice and Community Action

A REF-appropriate logic frame

Research contribution	Engagement & activation	System change	Why this mattered
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The pay off: make sure you demonstrate how the research and engagement realised credible, meaningful change

Supporting REF judgement with proportionate evidence

Kind of change claimed	What changed (in this system)	Possible signals of change
Changes in understanding or meaning	What shifted in how issues were understood, framed, discussed, or interpreted?	Changes in discourse; references in policy, guidance, or debate; reflective testimony; uptake of concepts or language
Changes in decisions, practice, or provision	What changed in policies, practices, services, tools, or ways of working?	Policy or strategy documents; revised guidance; adoption of models or tools; changes to procedures or services
Changes in capability, confidence, or relationships	What changed in people's or organisations' ability to act, decide, or collaborate?	New skills, roles, partnerships, networks; sustained use of approaches; organisational learning

6. Strategy, People & Research Environment (SPRE)

The three REF Profiles

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What SPRE Asks For

1. **Context, Mission & Strategy** – How do you adapt intelligently to your environment?

2. **People** – Who makes research happen, and how do you enable them?

3. **Infrastructure & Facilities** – What systems and spaces underpin excellence?

4. **Collaboration, Engagement & Impact** – How do you connect beyond your walls?

> **"REF 2029 assessment will consider how research and impact strategies can enable the building of excellent cultures and research environments."**
> *(Section 7 – SPRE guidance, Introduction)*

EMBRYONIC

DEVELOPING

GRIPPING

EMBEDDING

Purpose — Why we do this

- What kinds of research and engagement are intentionally enabled?
- What is prioritised, protected, or made possible — and why?

Process — How things actually work

- How systems, practices, and ways of working support (or hinder) that purpose
- Where learning, adaptation, and improvement are visible over time

People — Who carries the work

- How roles, expertise, and responsibilities are recognised and supported
- How professional, technical, and enabling contributions are integrated, and how partnerships are built and supported

EMBRYONIC

DEVELOPING

GRIPPING

EMBEDDING

What this means for Public Engagement

SPRE creates space to:

- Make **engagement infrastructure and capability visible**
- Show how PE is **supported, learned from, and invested in**
- Recognise **professional and brokerage roles** explicitly
- Demonstrate a culture of **responsible, connected research**

> **"REF 2029 seeks to value all people who undertake, enable or support research, engagement and impact."**
> *(Section 7 – Strategy, People and Research Environment guidance, p.2)*

Institutional SPRE Maturity Snapshot

SPRE area	Emerging	Embedding	Stewarding
Strategy	Priorities exist but are implicit or fragmented	Strategy is clearer and used to guide decisions	Strategy actively stewards direction and learning
People	Contributions unevenly recognised	Roles and support becoming clearer	Roles and expertise are intentionally stewarded
Research Environment & Infrastructure	Systems exist but are uneven or uncoordinated	Infrastructure is more joined-up and accessible	Environment is deliberately sustained over time
Collaboration, Engagement & Impact	Engagement is ad hoc and individual-led	Engagement is supported and expected	Engagement is embedded

7. Pulling it all together

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One story, told three ways

CKU: What knowledge we contribute, and how it is developed

SPRE: How we enable, support, and sustain that work

E&I: How that knowledge connects with others to create change

What happened to culture?

Culture has not been removed from REF2029 — it has been **embedded**.

REF2029 asks institutions to demonstrate culture through:

- **Strategy** — what is intentionally prioritised and protected
- **People** — who is recognised, supported, and enabled to contribute
- **Change over time** — what has been learned, adapted, or improved since REF2021

The big opportunities for Public Engagement

REF2029 opens up space to:

- Treat engagement as a **core research practice**

- Value **process, learning, and responsibility**

- Make **engagement expertise visible and valued**

- Align **PE, impact, EDI, and civic** narratives

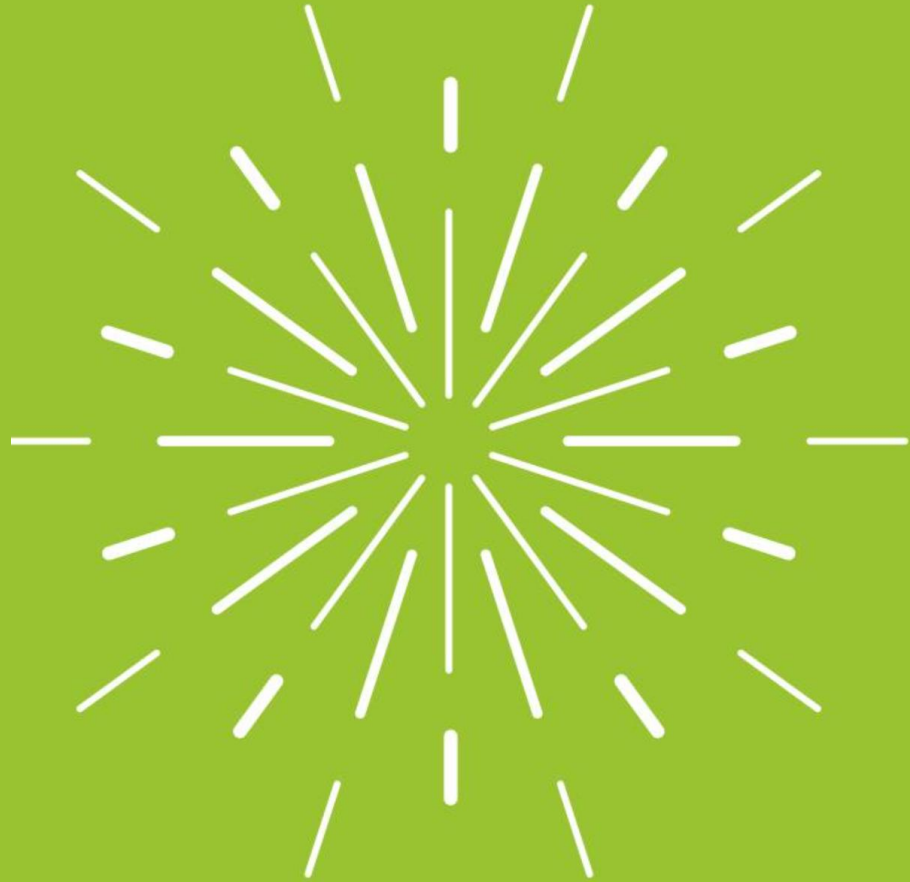- Move from retrofitting to **earlier, better-supported engagement**

What this means for engagement brokerage roles

Why your work matters more, not less

Engagement professionals help institutions:

- Design engagement that is **credible and purposeful**

- Support researchers with **judgement and reflection**

- Build shared language across research, impact, and PE

- Evidence **learning and stewardship** over time

- Translate complexity into **confident explanation**

Engaged Futures

- **Diverse and Open Learning:** Learning and knowledge production approaches are varied, knowledge is shared openly, and every person matters.
- **Listening and Adapting:** A sector that listens, learns, and adapts to change.
- **Connected and Community-Focused:** Institutions that are agile, inclusive, and deeply connected to their communities.
- **Ethical Collaboration**: Work with others in ways that are ethical, responsible, and valued by the public.
- **Inclusive:** A higher education sector where everyone feels they belong.

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

So, what should we be doing now?

- Support earlier thinking about engagement in research design
- Document engagement as **process and learning**, not just outputs
- Build institutional alignment across REF profiles
- Use REF as a **moment for clarity**, not panic
- The goal is not perfection — it's **credible, confident explanation**.

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

NCCPE support packages for REF2029

REF Planning workshop
Making sense of REF2029 together

- Helps teams understand what REF2029 is really asking
- Builds shared language and confidence across roles
- Supports early conversations — before drafting starts

SPRE Narrative Development
Telling a coherent institutional story

- Helps turn reflection into a clear SPRE, contextualised narrative
- Makes strategy, learning, and change over time visible
- Aligns institutional and unit-level accounts

Engagement & Impact Support
Making engagement count, credibly

- Helps explain how engagement contributes to change
- Supports thinking about rigour, responsibility, and judgement
- Focuses on clear stories, not activity lists

8. Q&A

Q1. Will REF 2029 really move away from the primacy of peer-reviewed publications and monographs?

REF 2029 does not remove peer-reviewed journal articles or monographs from the centre of assessment — but it does remove their automatic primacy. Quality is still judged in terms of originality, significance and rigour, but REF 2029 explicitly widens what counts as a legitimate research output and makes clear that no output type is inherently privileged over another.

REF 2029 does not abandon peer-reviewed publications, but it no longer treats them as the default or privileged form of research output. Instead, it asks institutions to demonstrate contribution to knowledge and understanding through a diverse, representative portfolio of high-quality research outputs, assessed on an equal basis

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What the guidance says explicitly

The CKU guidance is very clear that REF 2029 recognises diverse research practices and outputs, and that assessment is not format-led: *"Research involves a diverse set of research practices, which lead to a wide range of diverse outputs."*
(Section 4 – CKU guidance, para. 5.4)

It goes further in stating that this diversity is not secondary or exceptional: *"The funding bodies welcome the submission of a very wide range of output types that are consistent with discipline-specific and interdisciplinary approaches to scholarly communication."* (Section 4 – CKU guidance, para. 2.0.3)

Most importantly, the guidance removes any hierarchy between output forms: *"An underpinning principle of the REF is that all forms of research output and research practice will be assessed on a fair and equal basis. Sub-panels will not regard any particular form of output as of greater or lesser quality than another per se."*
(Section 4 – CKU guidance, para. 5.6)

Q2. *Is it "too late in the cycle" for these changes to influence behaviour?*

Many delegates felt universities are risk-averse, locked into REF habits and focused on protecting score rather than experimenting.

This is the reality – but there are three very strong signals in the guidance that this REF is different.

1. Excellence is demonstrated through contribution, not prestige
What matters is what a coherent body of work contributes — not the status of individual outputs or individuals.
2. Excellence is responsible, engaged and collective
Engagement is a core mechanism for building research contribution and impact — not a peripheral or optional activity.
3. Excellence demands strategy – not 'business as usual'
Business as usual is no longer defensible. Show how deliberate choices have shaped your approach over time.

If your REF2029 approach would have looked the same in REF2021, you're probably missing the point.

The NCCPE is producing a set of resource packages to support you to have these conversations within your institution

Q3. How will panels exercise *"expert judgement", and how will they be trained?*

Questions raised

- Who are the "experts"?
- Are panels trained to judge engagement and responsibility?
- Are panel members diverse?

Clarifications

- Panel recruitment was via **open call**
- Panels include:
  - academics
  - public engagement experts
  - research users
  - professional enablers
- Panel-specific guidance will follow, shaping how generic guidance is interpreted

Q4. *How do we evidence that engagement was "responsible"?*

This was raised a number of times. Delegates were concerned about the risk of boiler-plate claims ("we followed X framework"); reliance on testimonials being seen as insufficient; and there was uncertainty about how panels judge *degree* of responsibility, not just intent.

Clarifications

- Responsibility should be:
  - **woven into the narrative,** not treated as a compliance tick-box
- Evidence can include:
  - process descriptions
  - design choices
  - reflections on power and care
  - adaptations based on learning
- Proportionate, qualitative evidence is legitimate.

There are a number of useful tools and frameworks you can draw on to give structure and coherence to how you address responsibility, for example the Responsible Knowledge Exchange, Engagement and Impact (RKEEI) Framework developed by the University of Oxford
https://www.socsci.ox.ac.uk/rkeei

By adopting the RKEEI Framework, researchers, professionals and their organisations commit to the following principles:

1. Integrity and Ethics

KEEI activities will be conducted with integrity and reflexivity, including appropriate scrutiny of ethical implications and responsible data management.

2. Equity, Inclusion, Diversity and Belonging

KEEI will be encouraged and conducted in a manner that fosters inclusive collaboration, enables representation of diverse voices and values, ensures fairness in outcomes and the distribution of benefits.

3. Reciprocity and Sustainability

Trusted relationships with stakeholders will be fostered through KEEI activity, cultivating meaningful, reciprocal and lasting benefits to those involved or impacted, and steps will be taken to minimise the risk of harm to people, places and the environment.

4. Contextual sensitivity and cultural respect

Sincere respect will underpin all KEEI interactions, with careful attention to how the accessibility and acceptability of actions, behaviours and language may shift in different contexts, and whose interests and worldviews are being prioritised.

5. Sharing and openness

A culture of sharing and openness in KEEI will be promoted, whilst acknowledging and negotiating issues of confidentiality, trust and differing timeframes and agenda of KEEI stakeholders.

6. Support and recognition

KEEI will be recognised and supported as an important component of research, with acknowledgement of the time, skills and resources required and the diverse array of contributions required by KEEI's collaborative nature.

Q5. *How do we evidence change when engagement is small-scale, relational, and slow?*

Q6. *How do we evidence changes in "public understanding"?*

Delegates were keen for help with the challenges of assessing impacts arising from public engagement.

The NCCPE will launch a support package to help tackle this in pragmatic ways, informed by lessons learned from previous REF exercises. There is also guidance already available on the NCCPE website, for instance:

Engaging publics with research

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

Reviewing the REF 2014 impact case studies and templates

This review of high scoring case studies from REF 2014 provides a host of hints and tips about how to evidence impacts arising from public engagement

LINK

Evaluation

How to use evaluation to help develop effective public engagement practice and to inform culture change.

5 minutes

We have a host of evaluation guides and support materials on our website

LINK

9. Useful resources

NCCPE tools and resources mentioned

REF2029 Briefing	A briefing about the key developments in REF 2029 relevant to public engagement
REF Collection	A compilation of all our REF resources
EDGE Tool – assessing institutional engagement maturity	Our EDGE tool – a self assessment matrix to assess how well your institution supports public engagement
Engaged Futures – values-led system change	Our project to explore long term visions for the future of the UK HE system
Community-Based Participatory Research – Ethical Principles & Practice	Guidance on ethical practice in participatory research

Other useful tools and frameworks mentioned

Responsible Research & Innovation (RRI)	Details about the RRI framework, which is referenced in UKRI's Funding Service
Responsible Knowledge Exchange & Impact (Oxford)	An excellent framework for planning responsible engagement practice
Participatory Action Research (PAR) toolkits	Essex University have produced a useful tool for planning ethical PE activity
REF PCE pilot (as precedent for SPRE)	Report on lessons learned from the PCE Pilot

We have created a webform to allow you to express interest in accessing NCCPE support for your REF developments: https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/ref-support-services