Over 80 people joined us for our first ‘PEP together’ session, which was run on the Blackboard Collaborate platform. The session started with an invitation to participants to share accounts of how they were experiencing the crisis, and its impact on their work.

We ran two polls to kick the session off.

1. **How has your role changed in the light of the crisis?**
   - **Too early to tell** 11
   - **Actively involved using my skills to support my organisation to respond to crisis** 24
   - **Business as usual** 6
   - **Doing work that I didn’t use to have time to do** 22
   - **Currently under utilised** 12

2. **How is your organisation currently viewing public engagement?**
   - **Core part of an appropriate response to the crisis** 20
   - **Important, but not currently a priority** 24
   - **Nice to have, but not currently important** 14
   - **Not currently important** 7
   - **Other** 8

Delegates comments (captured in the ‘chat’ channel) emphasised how challenging the current situation is – but that there had been some unexpected positives. Some of the challenges included:

**PE not high on the radar**
- It’s very one way at the moment and PE team out of the loop which is frustrating
- Internal comms stripped back, virus only content

**With moving online...**
- How do we just ‘put everything online?’ How do we drive audiences and keep them engaged?
- We're keeping in touch with local communities and looking at the capacity and resources they have for virtual activity.
- The engagement and information space has become incredibly noisy and busy
- I am wondering whether we overlook something in the current push to do everything online
- Social media can be intimidating
- My role is all with communities, and definitely need to watch out for barriers in digital access too

**With adapting to new ways of working**

- I've found that just simply converting what I do (face-to-face) to digital online does not translate very well at all. 😖💖
- Online meetings are very tiring, I find. Not sure if this is because it's a change in practice or whether it's just harder to listen

**People observed that it was taking time to work out how to respond – and things are unfolding rapidly**

- Currently staying with existing strategic PE priorities but achieving them differently.
- Finding it frustrating how I can't do what I normally do, having to quickly learn and fail what works and what doesn't. All high risk it feels.
- I spend more time having online chats than I usually do in person
- It is a priority but need to adapt all plans
- I'm working on an externally funded project that engages with a large number of community groups, it's at a very early stage, but not sure how best to support them now & after the crisis
- Everyone's disappeared really into their own work really, especially as we're a health engineering centre, but we're about to set up some digital engagement projects for researchers to take part in when we'll see if people take the chance to do so!
- I can see a big push for schools stuff, but it will take a week or so while teachers, pupils and parents adjust

**Some unexpected positives**

- Using this time where research has slowed down to encourage Engaged research.
- Suddenly viewed as much more important, because they can't do business as usual!
- I'm finding a lot of the things that draw me to working in PE are being used to help keep our department engaged while remote
- Business as usual can also include getting to things that you didn't have time to do 😊
- Email traffic has died down, which is great
- PE has been core in terms of 'transmission'

**Lessons learned**

- I've resolved that I'll have to fail fast and learn from my mistakes. Doing lots of failing at the moment, not yet found easy solutions - but not stopped trying yet.

**Breakout discussions**

Delegates were then invited to work in small breakout groups to identify topics for discussion. The long list of suggestions included the following – which we have clustered. These topics give a good picture of people’s current preoccupations:

**Adapting PE delivery to the ‘shut down’**

- Collaborative PE that doesn't overwhelm our audiences
- The issue of safe guarding when running online classroom sessions for children
- Online evaluation
- How can we make online engagement meaningful and two way (in the past we have discouraged grants to fund websites etc.)
• How to avoid creating a cacophony of engagement!
• Is it insensitive to be sharing and celebrating non-Covid related research
• How to mobilise the expertise in the sector to help with the immediate crisis
• Work-life balance working from home
• How can we support PE freelancers at this time?
• How are relationships with researchers continuing into this new virtual world: processes, approaches, platforms?
• Overcoming echo chambers when confined to digital world
• The unexpected benefits of the new ways of working
• Maintaining work life balance
• Techniques to make people stop and think about thoughtful engagement rather than just creating content
• How do we reach audiences (new and old) in the first place with only online platforms at our disposal?
• What forms people’s opinions, and what causes people to have such strong beliefs and how to engage those and theory behind behaviour change
• Role of the university in this crisis

Looking ahead to when restrictions relax

• How can we use this time to start / build new relationships digitally for future projects?
• Finding opportunity in these uncertain times
• What does this mean for the way we work going forward?
• What do we do about student engagement?
• What does this look like long term

Additional topics (for which there wasn’t room for further discussion on the day)

• How do we plan for public engagement projects now? Encourage people to plan for future physical engagement or encourage going digital? (but are people rushing into digital too quickly and ineffectively? !)
• Balancing the need to share what Universities are doing to help with the CoVid19 against need to be sensitive and not overload the comms channels
• Strategies to continue working with communities OFFLINE who have barriers to access things online
• Festival engagement in a digital age
• How can we encourage the sector to be thoughtful and considered, not just rushing into "content creation" and really listening to what people might need right now
• Strategies to continue working with communities OFFLINE who have barriers to access things online
• I am really interested in the relationship between 'engagement' in the broadest sense and our own need to deal with inevitable anxiety and fear
• Will we just add to excessive online noise in the rush to create content
• How to support community organisations during the crisis but also afterwards, when many will be seriously impacted

Breakout Groups

10 breakout groups were formed. The numbers opting for each are given in brackets. Key points captured in chat and feedback included.

How can we support PE freelancers whose work will be massively impacted by the crisis? (5)

Supporting freelancers: Many grants have freelancers employed in them. It isn't ethical to drop freelancers with zero notice, especially if they are costed in to existing grants. Keep getting freelancers involved. If you are wanting a list of folks with specific skills in online engagement and training, then Ken Skeldon collated one via Twitter. Couldn’t find one anywhere – can NCCPE do this? Even if the project changes, freelancers can help reimagine the approach, and can bring valuable insights, experience and creativity.
Is it insensitive to be sharing and celebrating non-Covid related research at this time? (6)

Sharing non-COVID19 research: Concerned about sharing research which could be helpful or related to the situation without being insensitive to the context of the outbreak. Perhaps following the direction of the media can provide a better direction for what may be deemed socially acceptable to be published, along with how it might be framed.

How can relationships with researchers be sustained during the crisis? (3)

How to keep researchers engaged – don’t want to go silent. Focus on training – what do we run normally, can we do that online. Link in to advance planning for end of year. Might require upskilling of us. MS Teams, Zoom, Collaborate.

Provide online versions of existing training and look at getting freelancers in to provide other online training (they’re the experts at this already!)

Overcoming echo chambers when confined to a digital world (4)

Overcoming echo chambers: it’s not just about hearing/learning about other views, we need to also work out how to engage with those people. One way we can do this offline is through intermediaries or champions who provide access to groups that don't "look like us". How might we find these intermediaries online? How might we work through their networks to engage with those who sit outwith our echo chamber?

How do we reach audiences, when we are only relying on digital – both existing and new audiences? (8)

How are communities coming together digitally already? Home schooling, kids sharing, parents sharing, inspiring and helping each other. If that is what is happening for everyone, how do we get into these groups? Can we create groups like this and start to get people to join those? Topics, resources -- adding value where people are already looking

On the question of working with groups, it’s about leveraging relationships to intermediaries. We’re working with our refugee and carer groups, and librarians as community hubs for health and wellbeing across Scotland

People’s current head space is survival. We need to consider the balance between this and our own public engagement aims. Community vs public engagement

Community organisations in the rural areas where organisations that try to work out how they can keep engaged with their members. How do we support people to engage with topics beyond the virus? Packages of online events that can start reaching out to clubs and groups. Focused on getting people to engage and discuss

The unexpected benefits of the new situation we find ourselves in (3)

Unexpected benefits of this new way of working – massive mind-set change on so many fronts – could have taken us 30-40 years to get to this point if it was business as usual. How can we harness this way of working in the future?

Unexpected benefits include: contact with colleagues you wouldn't necessarily have; people appreciate all kinds of roles in society; more kindness, shakes us out of our complacency, appreciate things a bit more; less travelling = less pollution - do we really need to travel?; learning new technologies and skills, things we can use in the future; we're experiencing what it is to be a hard(er) to reach audience - remember what this feels like! (hopefully help more people to be IT literate and also speed up the roll out of decent connections to remote communities; more organisations moving to online working and meeting; a chance to slow down and reflect. To summarise: mindset change on so many fronts.

Techniques to make people pause and not rush into knee-jerk activity (12)

Techniques to support meaningful engagement rather than reflexively put up content. Keep connected with communities to know what they need. Create programmes for academics (and us) to deliver meaningfully. Provide training for academics (and us) to engage online. Worth considering supporting freelancers and asking them to provide training. Can we collate a set of successful examples in project design and delivery?
How can we make online engagement ‘two-way’ and interactive? (14)

To develop meaningful engagement online we discussed how hard it is to do this generally - hence the importance of focussing on how we can support specific groups we're working with or want to work with, rather than throwing things out there. Partners we can support with specific, tailored content, working with them to deliver something meaningful while building relationships with them.

We're experimenting with different approaches to support online community engagement. We're focusing on training and resource development for our community partners (e.g. librarians) and linking with researchers, which can then help support their communities offline too.

What is the role of universities in the crisis? (7)

The reflex is to put things online – might not be what people want or need. Apply PE to their thinking – what is the purpose of what they are doing? Crisis mode, then repair mode, then recovery mode. Have work ready to respond at this point.

Important as ever to ask what our community partners want and need. Some may not have time/heads to ask now but may in coming weeks.

Everyone, especially with statutory services/obligations, is firefighting at the moment. The time will come, so good to maintain relationships lightly so they know they can come back to you with questions/requests, but at the moment there's so much chaos and noise, and things have not settled at all.

Universities will emerge from this knowing if they're actually civic or not.

NCCPE working with UUK and others to try to help build a coordinated national response – looking beyond current crisis stage to 'repair' and 'recovery' stages.

PE teams have significant roles to play, needs planning and effort to do this well, and recognition within HEIs of these skills and expertise.

Taking the long view – what should we be factoring into our longer term planning? (4)

Concerned that there's a big move to online – questioned the value of doing it too quickly. Is this our time for slow engagement (like slow research – research revolution). Clear that we are not key workers – we need to step back a bit and think. There's a change in work practice to being more people centred. Long term, is this the opportunity for SLOW RESEARCH and SLOW ENGAGEMENT?

Building on the above, a couple of closing comments emphasised the need to take a breath:

I think we need to acknowledge that it’s early days, that priorities are now somewhere else and when we had some time, things will move on. Who is it who puts pressure on us to act?

Let’s take a breath and look after each other. How do we support each other on a logistic basis? VS topics beyond the current needs.

Finally a delegate suggestion relating to meaningful engagement

London based partners may find: www.london.gov.uk/coronavirus-civil-society useful. The Mayor is making support available to the CVS on issues like moving to digital platforms, how to volunteer safely, guidance for non-English speaking communities and more. This seems relevant to the topic we discussed today about what does meaningful engagement look like right now – and the answer that it is important to reach out to partners and ask, what can we do to help you do your work during the pandemic? University engagement departments can support local organisations in their area now more than ever and many new community partnerships can be made at this time.