

Provision for Public Engagement: Ten Common Pitfalls

Planning your public engagement is an exciting process, but there are some common pitfalls that can be easily avoided. These are the most common areas where applications might be improved. Have a look as these could help shape your ideas.

1. **Starting with the activity first.** Think about *why* you are doing public engagement and what you want to achieve first. For example, do you want to open up dialogue between researchers and public audiences, or increase interest and motivation in science at school? You might have an idea about the kind of activity you would like to do, but take a step back and think about your aims before launching into planning. You could then find that there are better ways of achieving your goal.
2. **Applying for engagement work that should form part of your research.** Some engagement may be essential for your research. For example, providing information about your research to study participants, or establishing community advisory boards. The provision for public engagement is for engagement that is *additional* to any of these essential activities. Ask yourself, can you conduct your research in a sound and ethical way without doing the engagement? If the answer is no, then the engagement is integral to your research and should be included within your research costs.
3. **Targeting audiences that are too specialist or are too general.** The provision for public engagement is for programmes with non-specialist audiences – so this doesn't include other researchers in your field, students in your university, or clinicians and doctors. Likewise, targeting 'the general public' might be too broad to be useful; there are many different types of 'publics'. Think about the specific groups you need to work with to achieve your public engagement aims. Some examples might be community or cultural groups, families, secondary school pupils or patients. Once you have decided on your audiences you will need to ensure that your plans are suited to them. Think about where you hold your activities and how you will make them engaging. For example, holding an event in a university could be off-putting for family audiences. You might want to work with more than one of these particular groups, and would therefore need to think of different approaches to engage each of them.
4. **Planning dissemination activities rather than two-way engagement.** Good public engagement enables all parties to participate in the conversation in a meaningful way. A question and answer session at the end of a presentation or lecture is not the best way to facilitate this. Similarly, communication and media activities such as websites, articles or YouTube videos often focus on transfer of information rather than two-way engagement, and therefore may not be eligible for public engagement funding. Previously funded projects involving strong two-way dialogue aspects have included a programme of workshops, café events and festival activities about immunology and the future of vaccines, as well as a series of debates around ethics.
5. **Conducting public engagement only at the end of your research.** Your public engagement interactions will likely raise valuable insights, questions, directions and approaches which could be beneficial to your research. When public engagement is undertaken from the beginning, the research can benefit from these new perspectives, but this opportunity is missed if the conversations happen at the end. This is why you are required to have at least two years remaining on your research grant to apply for



provision for public engagement.

6. **Not considering how you will measure success.** Checking your progress allows you to refine and test your ideas, so you know whether you are on track to meet the aims set at the start. You will also need to demonstrate what difference your public engagement activities have made at the end of the project. Therefore, it is important to think about how you might evaluate your programme. What information will be useful before you start your project, as you develop your activities, and at the end of the project, and how will you gather this information? You will probably be interested in what your public audiences are getting from the experience, but don't forget that there might be impacts on your collaborators as well, and even your own ideas and practice. Evaluating your public engagement well will also mean that it is more useful to you in exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework.
7. **Not being involved yourself.** The provision for public engagement aims to support researchers to develop their experience in public engagement, so you should have oversight of the public engagement plans and be directly involved in the activities. Also think about how you can support your own public engagement skills development. You can use the provision for public engagement funding to attend courses, training and conferences in public engagement.
8. **Not collaborating with others.** Whilst you should be leading your public engagement plans, there are many other individuals and organisations who would like to work with you and can support you. Public engagement is a rich and expert field underpinned by robust academic knowledge. Think about other researchers and collaborators you have access to within your institution and the public engagement officers or education advisers there, as well as external engagement professionals. Involve potential partners from the start of your planning; only getting them involved at the last minute will mean they cannot contribute in a valuable way, and are not able to collaborate meaningfully. Partners can add value to your engagement by utilising their professional skills in different approaches to engagement such as theatre, experience with particular audiences such as young adults, or offering a particular service such as evaluation.
9. **Not planning engagement at an appropriate scale.** The provision for public engagement supports your public engagement *plans* which we expect to be more than a single one off activity or event. We are looking for a stream of work that enables the development of researchers' public engagement skills and experiences. That said, there are many different levels of experience or 'starting points' – so plans or programmes can operate at different scales at whatever is appropriate for your experience, position and size of the associated research grant. Don't forget that you can use funding to support additional time, for example for teaching cover or to pay contractor fees.
10. **Focusing on policy rather than public engagement.** Although your ultimate aims in your research might be to influence policy, the activities paid for by the provision for public engagement need to involve the public. We believe that community or public voices can add to your argument so you might, as a result of your public engagement, create interest or evidence that could then be used to inform policy, but you should not be aiming to engage only policy makers in your activities.