Notes from workshop on public engagement in REF 2021

6 February 2018, London

A: Background

In his 'Independent evaluation of the Research Excellence Framework', Lord Stern recommended that:

> "Guidance on the REF should make it clear that impact case studies should not be narrowly interpreted, need not solely focus on socio-economic impacts but should also include impact on government policy, on public engagement and understanding, on cultural life, on academic impacts outside the field, and impacts on teaching."

A significant number of respondents to the funding bodies' consultation on REF 2021 (REF 2017/02, paragraphs 80-81) highlighted the need for clearer guidance on capturing impact arising from public engagement.

Responding to these concerns, the initial high-level policy decisions on REF 2021, published in September 2017, set out the funding bodies' intention to ensure the REF could better capture the multiple and diverse pathways and mechanisms through which impact arises, including working with the panels to provide additional guidance on impact arising from public engagement (REF 2017/01, paragraph 21).

A workshop was held on 6 February to explore the shape this guidance might take. It was attended by three main panel chairs and 14 sub panel chairs. Ninety people working in a variety of roles across the sector were also invited to attend, including impact officers, academic leads for impact and staff working in public engagement focused roles. Attendees were sent a discussion paper in advance of the workshop, which was used to structure the discussion.

The discussions at this workshop will feed in to the development of the guidance on submissions, and will inform main and sub-panels' development of the panel criteria. The draft criteria will be published for consultation in summer 2018.

B: Panel discussion

The main panel chairs reflected on their experiences of REF 2014, focussing on how impacts arising from public engagement with research were evidenced within their institutions, and across the main panels. There was a recognition that public engagement is an important route to impact. However they also noted that there was a perception that impacts arising from public engagement would be less successful that other impacts and that institutions were hesitant to submit them. This is largely down to:

- a lack of understanding of the difference between PE, knowledge exchange and impact;
- difficulties in evidencing the kinds of impact that typically arise from PE – often impacts on understanding and attitudes – which people have found hard to quantify in meaningful ways;

It was noted that this confusion is also shared by some research users, who were unaware that the REF is intended to assess the impact of excellent research, which may arise through engagement, but does not reward engagement per se.

The chairs reflected that the most successful PE case studies had identified their audience and the intended impacts on that audience, and were able to articulate them clearly. They had a clear idea who best to engage with at each stage in the research process in order to realise their impact objectives. They offered a convincing narrative, which clearly explained the difference that the impact resulting from engagement had made to people's lives, and backed up their claims with appropriate evidence. Successful engagement was often reciprocal, rather than one-way communication from researcher to audience (although it was noted that only impact on non-academic audiences is assessed in impact case studies).

The distinction between reach and significance was identified as an important factor: one chair commented that a case study showing that PE had led to impact with demonstrably significant influence on the life-courses of a small number of people (on the mental health of an isolated community, for instance, or in furthering the employability of a group of disadvantaged young people) could score well, as could PE resulting in impact with a very wide reach – economic (e.g. on a local visitor economy), or social, or in promoting a stronger public understanding of controversial or divisive policy issues.

Those that were less successful, focused on the engagement process without explaining what had changed as a result of the engagement. Weaker case studies often did not move beyond dissemination of varying degrees of ambition and success, and were over-dependent on commendatory testimonies and statements.

Looking forward to REF 2021, the chairs felt that, while institutions are still cautious about submitting PE-based case studies, researchers are more aware of how to build impact into research and are gathering evidence in a more systematic way. However, there are a number of questions around evidence that still need to be addressed, for example:

- what kind of social value evidence could be presented, given the difficulty of presenting metrics around wellbeing and inspiration?
- how can we move people away from the kind of over-reliance on testimony that was noticeable in PE-based case studies in REF2014?

C: Presentation by NCCPE

Sophie Duncan and Paul Manners from the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) offered their perspectives on public engagement and the REF. They drew attention to the fact that, contrary to popular belief, public engagement featured heavily in 2014 case studies and scored similarly to those case studies which did not feature PE. They noted that while public engagement sometimes featured as the primary 'pathway to impact' in case studies, it more frequently featured alongside other pathways – for instance, engagement with policy makers. However, they drew attention to the lack of strong evidence that was often a characteristic of PE-based impact, particularly where impact was on public understanding and awareness.

The presentation evidenced how good quality impact case studies focused on the purpose of the engagement, paid close attention to who was being engaged and why; and sought to evidence how the activities undertaken led to the desired changes.

Their presentation broke down the different 'publics' that may be involved in engagement with research and outlined the various forms of engagement that typically take place at different points in a research process. They identified three key impacts arising from public engagement:

- **Understanding** – stimulating curiosity, understanding and empathy;
- **Capability** – building capacity and strengthening networks; and
- **Innovation** – improving decision-making and the way things work.

These impact types are not unique to public engagement. They are derived from the ESRC's work to categorise impact (http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/impact-toolkit/what-is-impact/) which identifies three broad areas in which impact is typically realised: **conceptual impacts** (understanding); **capacity building impacts** (capability) and **instrumental impacts** (innovation). Looked at this way, public engagement is one pathway to impact, often working in parallel with other pathways which engage other research users.

These impacts form the foundation of the framework that is set out in the annex below and the attached slides. This framework visualises the 'links in the chain' which typically underpin the process of engaging the public and other users with research. These links, or stepping stones to impact, have been derived from the extensive literature examining how engagement and knowledge exchange processes typically work to effect change; and draws on an analysis of how these links in the chain underpin excellent practice. Picking up on the points made by the main panel chairs, convincing case studies will typically articulate clear evidence of how these different steps have been taken and how they have contributed, over time, to significant changes.

The framework also identifies six key areas where research makes a significant contribution outside academia. The presenters encouraged people to look to impact frameworks that have been developed to support assessments of impact outside of HE. For example, taking one of these areas – social capital – they referenced the Office for National Statistics Household Survey, which has developed a set of indicators of social capital which could be referenced in REF guidance. Another example is the NHS outcomes framework, which identifies a set of outcome areas which are used consistently across the health service in England.

Both the framework and the table of indicators formed the basis for further discussion.

D: Group discussions

Key questions:

- **What should be included in the guidance?**
- What concerns might prevent your institution from submitting case studies based on public engagement?
- What would give them the confidence to submit these case studies?
- **What should the guidance look like?**

- What level of detail is appropriate/helpful? How do we provide clarification without being perceived to be prescriptive?
- Are there any problems around terminology or definitions that need to be resolved?

Summary

There was clear consensus that institutions had less confidence in submitting case studies based on public engagement. The largest barrier was perceived to be uncertainty around the types of evidence that may be submitted to back up claims of impact on behaviour and understanding, and much of the discussion focused on how this might be addressed. Clear and consistent guidance from the panels was widely regarded as the most effective way to reduce institutions' risk aversion regarding PE-based case studies. It was agreed that guidance should strike a balance between providing sufficient detail and not being prescriptive. However, views diverged when it came to the format of this guidance. While many participants called for exemplar case studies, there was a concern that it could unintentionally narrow the range of submissions as HEIs would seek to model their case studies on the examples provided. Similarly, there was some disagreement over the provision of separate guidance on public engagement, which could reinforce institutions' concerns that PE is 'different' from other pathways to impact and requires extra effort.

In addition, it was suggested that targeted communications, led by the REF team and panel chairs, should accompany the guidance, in order to dispel enduring myths and reassure institutions that impacts arising from PE will be assessed equitably.

Key issues to be addressed in the guidance

Evidence emerged as the single largest barrier to submitting impacts based on PE. As identified by the panel chairs, this is largely due to the types of impact that typically arise from PE. According to participants, there is a perception in institutions that quantitative evidence carries more weight than qualitative, which is intertwined with the belief that impacts that can be measured in quantitative terms (e.g. economic impacts) are privileged over those which cannot easily be evaluated in this way (e.g. cultural impacts). Participants also identified difficulties in distinguishing between evidence that engagement took place and evidence that something changed because of the engagement. In broad terms, participants were keen to understand how the quality of evidence would be judged, what level of evidence would be required, and what would be regarded as 'good' evidence. It was suggested that this would need to be tailored to the different types of impact and it was suggested that a 'toolkit' of different types of evidence could be helpful. Questions also arose around evidencing 'negative impact' (i.e. where something bad does *not* happen as a result of the research). It was noted that many of these concerns could be applied to impact evidence more broadly, rather than that arising from PE. More specific suggestions included guidance on impacts arising from media activities, specific guidance on submitting testimonials (including data protection requirements), and the potential use of proxy indicators of impact (which are typically measures taken at the point of intervention, that provide confidence impacts will arise from the engagement, based upon previous research and evaluation of 'what works' in realising impact from complex interventions).

There was some debate around the definition of 'public engagement'. Participants pointed out that the term is used to mean different things by different subject/professional

association/funders (and its meaning varies depending on allied terms being alongside it such as 'public involvement') and suggested that, should the term be included in REF guidelines, there would need to be a clear explanation of what the term means in the specific context of the REF. Several delegates also suggested that the term itself is unhelpful, as it does not distinguish between the different types of public. This was related to a concern that the PE could become too broad a term and could hamper the panels' ability to think about giving clearer guidance on what constitutes good types of evidence for different user groups/publics, or good evidence of impact on 'public audiences'.

Understanding the criteria of reach and significance was seen to be problematic in the context of PE, where impacts are typically on people. There was a call for clarity on how the two criteria interact and whether, for example, having a profound effect on a local community is valued as highly as having lesser effect at national level.

Participants also identified issues relating to underpinning research in PE-based case studies. It was felt that the REF 2014 impact guidance implied a linear relationship between research and impact that does not reflect the 'messy edges' of user engagement. Participants agreed that it would be helpful for the panel criteria to contain explicit recognition of the complex and iterative relationship between underpinning research and impact. This discussion also touched on the role of broader expertise and bodies of work in PE-based impact and participants called for clear guidance on what can be submitted as underpinning research and how eligibility will be determined in the context of non-portable impact.

Format of the guidance

Overall, there was a call for guidance to be as simple as possible and to be accessible to non-expert and non-academic audiences. There was some discussion about what level and kinds of information belonged in the REF guidance and what should be sought from other sources e.g. NCCPE. A couple of participants identified the 2014 Main Panel reports as a good starting point.

Participants discussed the perception that there was a lack of consistency across the panels in 2014 and highlighted the need for all panels to build confidence in PE-based impact. It was suggested that providing different guidance on impact assessment for each of the main panels was confusing for those managing submissions at an institutional level in 2014. However, participants also acknowledged that guidance needs to take into account disciplinary differences and noted the value of subject-specific examples of impact. It was proposed that panels should seek a common language and format to set out the impact criteria and should only vary where this is necessitated by disciplinary differences.

Many participants were keen for the REF guidance to include examples of PE-based impact case studies, either as anonymised 2014 case studies or fictional case studies. One group suggested that several versions be created around the same basic impact to illustrate the difference between 2* and 4* impact. It was recognised that the guidance would have to provide a vast range of examples across each of the panels to avoid appearing prescriptive. An alternative 'pick and mix' model was also proposed, which would not take the form of a complete case study but would offer examples of good practice. This could be similar to the guidance provided by the Research Councils for writing Pathways to Impact statements.

Related to the previous point, there was little consensus on what level of detail the guidance should offer. Several participants were of the view that institutions would interpret any examples provided in a narrow way and that clear guiding principles/questions would be more helpful than a list of examples, which could never be exhaustive. However, it was also noted that vague generalities would not be useful to institutions or researchers.

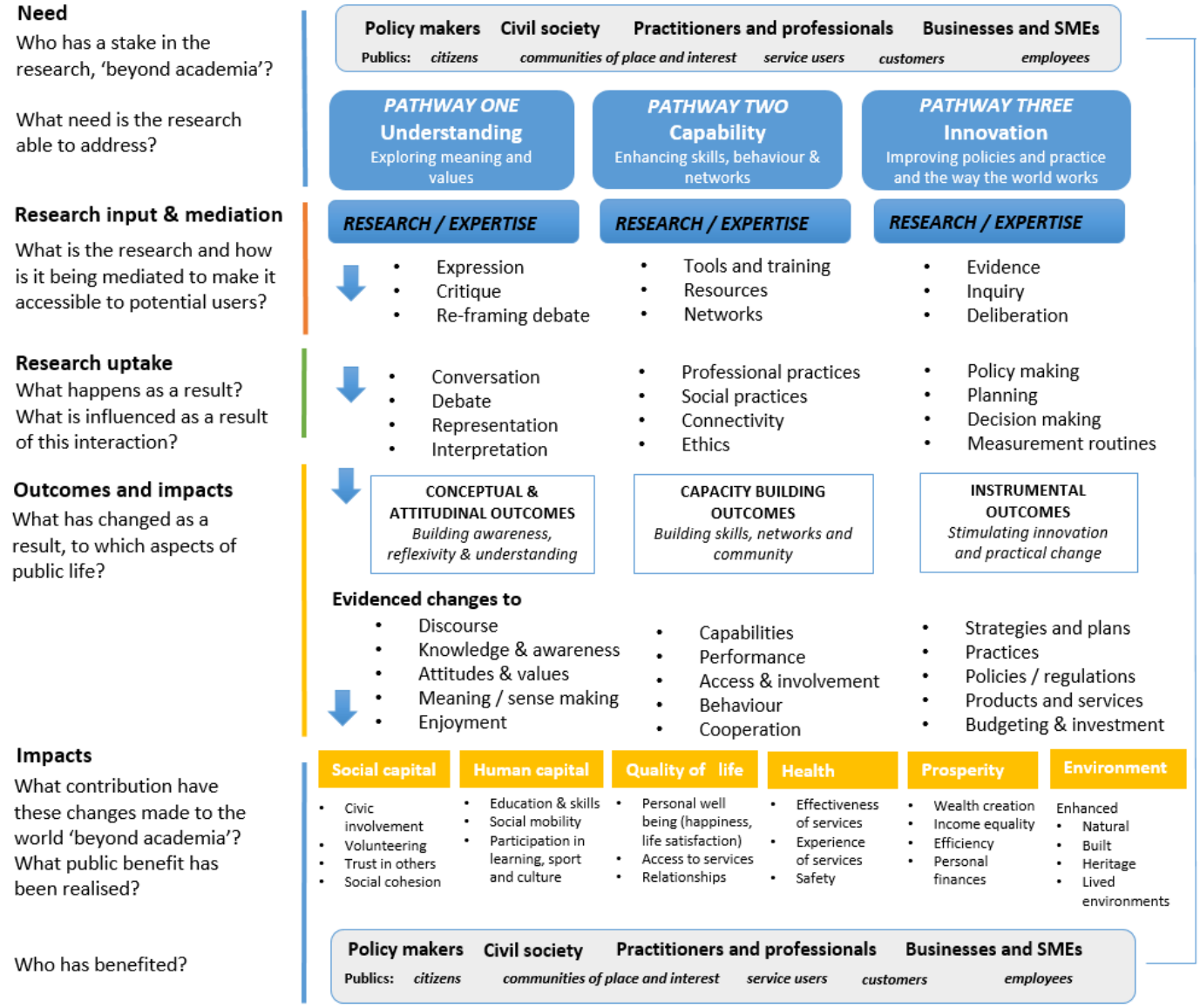
Similarly, opinion was divided over providing separate guidance for impact arising from public engagement. Typically, those who supported providing extensive examples and detailed guidance were also in favour of a dedicated section on public engagement. However, others regarded integrated guidance on PE as necessary to reinforce the message that PE is valued equally as a pathway to impact and is frequently combined with other pathways.

NCCPE's framework and indicators

Participants were provided with a draft framework designed by NCCPE to guide institutions seeking to develop case studies based on PE (see discussion paper, Annex A). Overall, the framework was welcomed by participants, , who felt that it offered a helpful articulation of how impact typically 'works' and would allow the contribution of public engagement to be described convincingly alongside other pathways to impact. The three categories of impact put forward in the framework were regarded as a useful way of conceptualising the types of impacts that typically arise from PE and other types of user engagement. Some modifications were proposed, such as the inclusion of methods in the middle section and the flipping of the framework to place the impacts (and evidence) at the top. It was also suggested that the framework could be represented differently to capture the non-linear routes to impact. NCCPE also offered a sample set of indicators (taken from a broader range covering a number of impact types) that might be used when considering how to evidence impacts. While the information was felt to be helpful for impact professionals, some participants felt that it was perhaps too complicated for non-experts.

Opinions were divided on whether the framework and indicators belonged in the REF guidance or whether it was more suitable as a planning tool for institutions. Concerns were expressed that its inclusion in the guidance might be perceived as prescriptive (see above).

Annex: NCCPE framework for assessing impacts arising from public engagement



The next page shows how one of the outcome areas (social capital) might be expanded to offer more detail:

Social capital

The concept of 'social capital' underpins the ONS choice of indicators of well being. They describe it as follows:

> *'In general terms, social capital represents social connections and all the benefits they generate. Social capital is also associated with civic participation, civic-minded attitudes and values which are important for people to cooperate, such as tolerance or trust. "Social capital is the glue that holds societies together and without which there can be no economic growth or human well-being" (Grootaert, 1998). Without the social connections that link people to each other and lead them to exchange resources, without trust and other cooperative norms of behaviours, society could not function. The networks of individual relationships with family and friends, local community and through civic engagement, form the fabric of a cohesive society.'*

Their framework identifies four key aspects of social capital: personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement and trust and cooperative norms. Data and indicators to measure these are drawn from the Government's Community Life survey, run annually by the Cabinet Office to look at the latest trends in areas such as volunteering, charitable giving, local action and networks and well-being; and from Understanding Society the UK household longitudinal survey which follows the lives of 40,000 UK households.

Drawing on this, and on their 'dashboard' of well-being indicators, we suggest that the following indicators of impact could usefully be applied to the REF:

Aspect of social capital	Indicators
Civic Engagement *This refers to "the actions and behaviours that can be seen as contributing positively to the collective life of a community or society" (OECD, 2013). It includes activities such as volunteering, political participation and other forms of community actions.* (ONS)	• Suggested measures include volunteering in the last 12 months; being involved in social action projects; voting in general elections; being involved in political action; being very or quite interested in politics
Relationships *This aspect of social capital refers to the "structure and nature of people's personal relationships" (OECD, 2013), and is concerned with who people know and what they do to establish and maintain their personal relationships.* (ONS)	• Suggested measures include average rating of satisfaction with social and family life; meeting socially with friends and relatives or work colleagues at least once a week; regularly stopping to talk to people in the neighbourhood
Trust and cooperative norms *This refers to the trust and to the cooperative norms or shared values that shape the way people behave towards each other and as members of society. Trust and values that are beneficial for society as a whole (such as for example solidarity and equity) can determine how much people in a society are willing to cooperate with one another.* (ONS)	• Suggested measures include: trust in national government; feeling that most people in their neighbourhood) can be trusted; feeling safe to walk alone after dark; agreeing that people around them are willing to help their neighbours
Social network support *This refers to "the level of resources or support that a person can draw from their personal relationships" (OECD, 2013), but also includes what people do for other individuals on a personal basis.* (ONS)	• Suggested measures include whether respondents: Have a spouse, family member or friend to rely on if they have a serious problem; Give special help to at least one sick, disabled or elderly person living or not living with them; Borrow things and exchange favours with their neighbours