Indicators of a healthy public engagement system

A draft framework

BRITISH SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

if the ideas fund

collaborate
for social change

Introduction and purpose

This document identifies indicators of a 'healthy' public engagement system at a local level. It focuses specifically on public engagement with research, with an emphasis on creating more equitable partnerships between community groups and researchers. By 'healthy system' we mean a context that helps enable meaningful and equitable public engagement with research[1] and in turn creates social impact.

Our hypothesis is that intervening to strengthen different parts of the public engagement system (beyond only investing in one-off projects) will lead to more meaningful and sustainable public engagement in a place. The context will be different in different places, so the indicators can be used as a diagnostic tool to help identify how to support public engagement in a specific context – both to capitalise on strengths and address weaknesses or gaps. The framework could also be used to guide capacity building, inform public engagement strategies, and/or as a learning framework to understand progress and what it takes to achieve this in different contexts.

1. While we use the term 'public engagement with research', we recognise that for some audiences (e.g. community groups), different terms will be more familiar and should be used in that context.

Context

This document is one of a number of related initiatives exploring how to improve the quality of public engagement with research and the civic role of universities, and is intended to contribute to this wider conversation. In particular, the framework includes a focus on leadership for change, and aims to support an increase the level of ambition for the impact public engagement in research can make in local places.

While this document focuses on local systems,[2] many of the indicators are impacted by national academic policy and funding. There is an opportunity to use this framework in different places to generate learning about what leads to a healthy local context for public engagement, and use these findings to build understanding and influence practice at a national level.

2. Broadly town/city level, but could be used on a larger geographic scale.
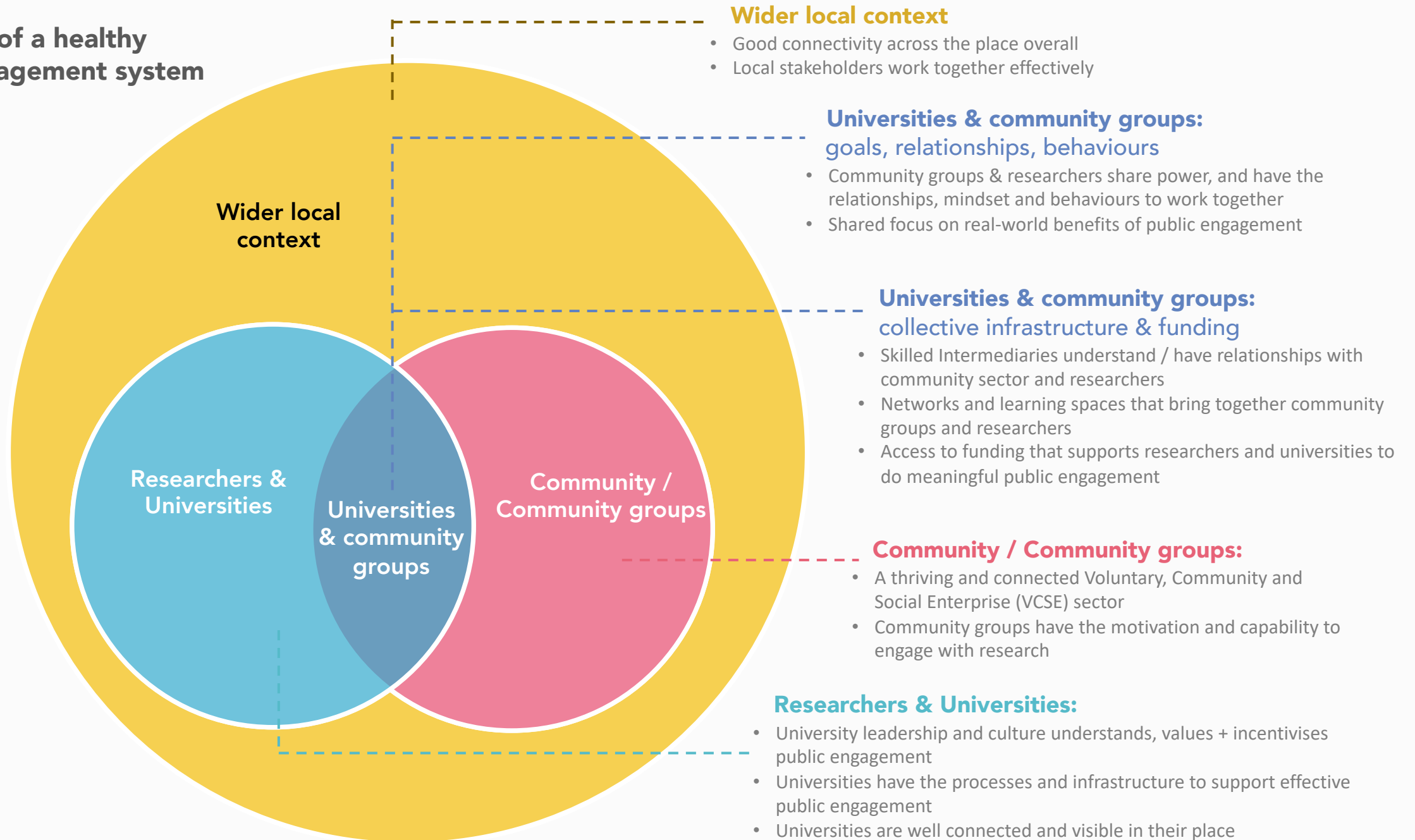
Further development of this framework

Collaborate created this draft framework as part of a short piece of work commissioned by the British Science Association (BSA) to inform the future development of The Ideas Fund, as well as influence practice more widely. The indicators were developed through a short piece of work which involved a desk review of key documents from the BSA and five interviews with public engagement experts.

We are now testing the framework in practice in areas receiving funding from The Ideas Fund, to explore opportunities for infrastructure funding in addition to investment in projects. This work will help support meaningful investment in the wider local public engagement system, as well allow iteration and improvement of this framework.

Overview:
Indicators of a healthy public engagement system

Wider local context

Researchers & Universities

Universities & community groups

Community / Community groups

Wider local context
- Good connectivity across the place overall
- Local stakeholders work together effectively

Universities & community groups:
goals, relationships, behaviours
- Community groups & researchers share power, and have the relationships, mindset and behaviours to work together
- Shared focus on real-world benefits of public engagement

Universities & community groups:
collective infrastructure & funding
- Skilled Intermediaries understand / have relationships with community sector and researchers
- Networks and learning spaces that bring together community groups and researchers
- Access to funding that supports researchers and universities to do meaningful public engagement

Community / Community groups:
- A thriving and connected Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector
- Community groups have the motivation and capability to engage with research

Researchers & Universities:
- University leadership and culture understands, values + incentivises public engagement
- Universities have the processes and infrastructure to support effective public engagement
- Universities are well connected and visible in their place

Wider local context

1) Good connectivity across the place overall

- **Good cross-sector relationships** across the place and a history of joint working

- Universities and/or community groups are part of **wider partnership initiatives** across the place, providing opportunities to **connect** with each other as well as engage and **influence** other agendas

- The contribution of community groups and universities to the place is **understood and valued** by wider stakeholders

- **Wider culture of participatory approaches** and **involvement of local people** in the place beyond research, and opportunities for alignment with complementary approaches (e.g. community organising and public patient participation)

2) Local stakeholders work together effectively

- **Local stakeholders work together to align resources** in a way that reflects the specific context, assets and needs of their place

- **Local stakeholders target resources** (including public engagement with research) effectively to make a difference in areas of greatest need

Universities & community groups (1)
Goals, relationships and behaviours

**1) Community groups & researchers share power and have the relationships,
mindset and behaviours to work effectively together**

- Community groups and researchers have shared values, complementary skills and aligned motivations

- Community groups and researchers are willing to invest in building trusting relationships.
In some cases, this means one-off work and 'quick-wins' to build trust

- Community groups and researchers share power and work together in a way that values lived & learnt experience

- Community groups and researchers are flexible, adaptable and open to a wide range of outcomes

**2) Universities and community groups have a shared focus on the real-world benefits
of public engagement**

- Community groups and researchers work in a way that puts the needs and interests of communities first

- Community groups and researchers are clear on where deep participatory public engagement does and doesn't add
value. They understand what is an appropriate ask and meaningful engagement, and are realistic about what this entails

- Community groups and researchers create a feedback loop with communities, where information and knowledge is
shared both ways

Universities & community groups (2)
Collective infrastructure & funding

1) Existence of skilled intermediaries who understand and have relationships with both the community sector and researchers/universities Also described as translators, connectors, stewards, brokers, allies.

- Intermediary acts as translator between both groups (e.g. making language accessible, helping navigate and understand dynamics)

- Intermediary supports community groups and universities to broker conversations, identify how they can best work together for mutual and community benefit, and help with problem solving

- Intermediary works to build a connected ecosystem between communities and researchers in the place, including reaching community groups that do not normally engage

2) Existence of networks and learning spaces that bring together community groups and researchers

- Convening and facilitation of networking and learning spaces that enable community groups and researchers to build relationships, share learning and provide peer support

3) Access to funding that supports researchers and universities to do meaningful public engagement

- Flexible, long-term funding for community groups and researchers to build relationships and get to know each other, not rush into short term project delivery. To include a range of funding types and scales

- Access to funding that helps challenge traditional power dynamics (e.g. community groups rather than researchers receiving the funding)

Community / Community Groups

1) A thriving and connected Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector

- **Strong relationships and trust** with a history of joint working between community groups, and with wider local partners

- Existence of **well-developed networks and shared communications** that enable community groups to find out about opportunities, and link strategically with universities/researchers

- Existence of community groups with **strong connections to and involvement of local people**, including groups that are led by and support minoritised communities

- Local anchor institutions that can **build the capacity of community groups** and provide necessary **infrastructur**e (e.g. holding funds for informal groups)

2) Community groups have the motivation and capability to engage with research

- Community groups **understand** the range of ways that research can help them achieve their mission (beyond just evaluation)

- Community groups have the **skills and capacity to meaningfully engage** with researchers

Researchers and Universities (1)

1) University leadership and culture that understands, values and incentivises public engagement

- Universities are committed to achieving **real world benefit through research**, can demonstrate this in practice

- Universities **think strategically** about where they can add value to public engagement, not assuming they are best placed to do everything

- University leaders have **an intentional commitment** to public engagement. They are willing to disrupt existing practice and enable new ways of working

- Universities **incentivise and support** public engagement through its approach to funding, reward and recognition

- Universities work with other institutions and places to **showcase** effective public engagement and **advocate** for wider change to enable it (e.g. changes to funding practices)

2) Universities have the processes and infrastructure to support effective public engagement

- Universities **proactively adapt** their processes to enable them to work better with communities/community groups (e.g. more accessible approaches to contracting, ethics, GDPR, money transfer)

- Universities have the infrastructure and relationships in place that help them **identify and connect** relevant researchers to public engagement opportunities/community groups

Researchers and Universities (2)

3) Universities are well connected and visible in their place

- Researchers have the **skills and understanding** to build relationships and engage beyond academia, including with community groups.

- Universities are **connected** to the wider research landscape (e.g. with independent researchers)

- Universities have **meaningful wider links** with community groups to enable communities to access their expertise beyond formal public engagement (e.g. subject experts giving talks)

- Universities are **engaged and visible** within their place as a foundation for public engagement (e.g. investing in building research capacity outside of the university), and are able to identify and access relevant expertise beyond the university