collaborate
for social change

Reimagining research collaboration:

How universities can help their local places thrive

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Engaging people outside of academia in research is an important opportunity for universities to deliver greater impact in their local communities. But without two fundamental shifts in how such research engagement is approached, we risk focusing on transactional collaborations rather than the bigger prize of achieving together the things that no organisation can alone. We need to create the conditions for deeper collaboration across the local system and reimagine research as an opportunity for actors across a place to work together to support people and places to thrive.

This paper draws on learning from Collaborate's experience in supporting place-based collaboration across different sectors, along with specific insights from County Durham. Our starting point was insights that surfaced from a workshop about the experiences of research collaboration from a small number of stakeholders from Durham University, Durham County Council and Durham Community Action. We have then extrapolated from those specific experiences and examples to explore a possible future for the academic sector as a whole. We also draw on Collaborate's knowledge of The Ideas Fund[2], a grants programme run by the British Science Association (BSA) and funded by Wellcome, which supports more equitable community-researcher collaboration with a focus on mental wellbeing, for which Collaborate is learning partner[3].

This work has been supported by a bursary as part of NCCPE's Engaged Futures Catalyst[1], which aims to build a vision for how universities might work in more inclusive and engaged ways in 2045 and establish actions to help realise these futures. In that spirit, we are sharing this provocation with the wider academic and research sector to help universities and their place partners reimagine how they conceive of and go about research collaboration. We offer it as an invitation to think ambitiously about how the long-term trajectory of collaborations between universities and their place partners could have maximum impact.

Context

Universities are key anchor institutions in a place and impact it in multiple ways, but they are not one homogenous body. They are large and complex organisations with many different facets, and while they can often be seen as in some way removed from the local context in which they operate, there are many points of connection. Universities bring in and host students from all over the world, who live side by side with the local population. They are large employers and businesses, contributing significantly to the local economy and opportunities for regional growth[4]. They undertake many different kinds of engagement and outreach activities related to education, culture and public engagement. And they have bricks and mortar - a physical presence in the community, which some may use and interact with more than others.

Research is another key element of what universities do, and is the focus of this paper. The world of research can seem particularly disconnected from the 'real people' who might pass by university buildings or whom staff bump into at the corner shop. Its centre of gravity can appear to be located not in the local context but in a globalised, competitive world of grants, research and journal articles, whose impact on local people can be difficult to discern.

But we believe that research, reimagined, can be a powerful collaborative force between universities and their local place to improve outcomes and help people and places thrive. And in a challenging context for universities, local councils and the voluntary sector that continues to demand ever more is done with ever diminishing resources, impactful and brave collaboration around research offers an important opportunity for real community impact.

"Research can sometimes become a little transactional… about trying to solve policy problems. But there's something more powerful when it's energising and connected to lived reality."

Workshop participant from Durham University

Already there are green shoots of change, many linked to three key movements. There is the civic university movement which seeks to create a "network of universities committed to transforming lives and places", harnessing the "collective power of the higher education sector to drive societal, economic, and environmental advancements in the places they call home", and "work with governments and strategic partners to ensure that a university's geographic role and responsibility is used more effectively as an agent to drive positive societal change"[5]. In addition, the policy engagement movement brings an increasing emphasis on how research engages with and informs policy decisions, with the expansion of this capacity across most UK universities and in particular through Universities Policy Engagement

Network[6]. Finally, public engagement approaches are shifting, championed by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement[7] and others, and "the imperative to work in inclusive and socially engaged ways is now mainstreamed in policy and funding"[8]. This manifests in efforts to make research cultures and practice more open and engaged.

Each of these movements have prompted needed change in universities, but the risk is that these agendas are managed as separate concepts or in university silos. The greatest opportunity comes in bringing these different strands together into a cohesive, strategic and collaborative approach to place-based partnerships. Doing so requires an intentional focus on the foundations needed to build effective collaboration[9] - both across organisations and within them. This change requires different things from universities but also new relationships and ways of working with partners. We believe there is a lot that can be learned from collaborations in and between other sectors.

In this paper, we focus on research engagement and the shifts required for universities to foster meaningful place-based partnerships, through research collaborations that help local people and places to thrive. We draw on a practical example of cross-sector collaboration in Durham to identify lessons and questions relevant for universities more widely.

Research collaboration in County Durham

Durham University and Durham County Council have a long history of working together and first signed a Memorandum of Understanding to strengthen their partnership in 2017. A 2022 refresh of the MoU focused on strengthening collaboration particularly on economic regeneration and development, cultural events and research.

To support this ambition, additional capacity was put in place in the form of a joint steering group and a joint knowledge broker role to foster stronger connections between university research activity and local authority priorities.

Now, partners in Durham want to build on their strong foundations but recognise that future success is dependent on continued capacity and effort. They are seeking to continue to recognise and support existing relationships and initiatives and move into new spaces, including expanding the focus on synergies between different existing areas of collaboration (research, teaching, business, civic engagement) and new partnerships such as the Rural Community Research Network.

What has contributed to Durham's success?

A prolonged 'test-and-learn' approach over a number of years: Collaboration takes time and despite changes in context, both organisations have remained committed to the goal of collaborating to improve outcomes for people in their place. There has also been a patient understanding that being too heavy-handed in terms of performance management or too demanding in terms of deliverables/KPIs while still relying heavily on existing capacity would be counterproductive. A growing test-and-learn attitude which recognised that temporary failures are part of learning, has allowed for different approaches and initiatives to be tested.

Leadership support: Support for collaboration has come from the top, with leaders in both organisations clear on the benefits and committed to realising them. When people have come and gone, time has been taken to restate the case and continue to develop a shared sense of purpose.

Practical examples of what this leadership support looks like include:
- The Memorandum of Understanding between the University and County Council as an overall framework, covering research collaboration as well as many other partnership activities;

- The engagement in and approval of Areas of Research Interest by Heads of Service and Senior Management giving mandate and support to staff participating in collaborative research activity.

Relationships and ideas have developed organically at different scales: As well as leadership support, there has been time and space for relationships and opportunities to develop organically, built on the enthusiasm, ideas and initiatives of staff. These have developed primarily in a bottom-up, interest-based manner, across different service and research areas and at different scales

Examples of relationships include
- Individual academics and council officers with shared interest in a specific area exchanging knowledge and ideas through informal conversations or joint events/activities. Over time this accumulated shared knowledge informs service delivery as well as shapes research questions to more closely align with local contexts, experiences and challenges, making future research outputs more relevant.

- Specific teams maintaining longstanding relationships around shared interests, on themes such as renewable energy solutions or

developing better support for children and young people with SEND and Autism. Over time these relationships have enabled not just joint research projects, but also events, student placements and projects, as well as a jointly supervised PhD.

- Broader communities of practice such as those around Education involving multiple university and council stakeholders, coming together online or in collaborative workshops to develop ways research activity can be more deeply linked with local schools, and providing a space for continued, shared reflection and learning.

Funding opportunities as galvanisers: A shift by funders towards place-based funding that pushes for greater engagement in research, with an emphasis on co-creation and collaboration, has meant that there have been more opportunities to match both smaller and larger pots of funding to opportunities at the right time and place. This has led to opportunities for individuals and teams to engage with each other on specific subjects, but larger bids in particular have galvanised a larger, organisational degree of momentum and collaboration, despite not being successful in winning the funding.

Examples of larger funding bids that have created such momentum include:

- An ultimately unsuccessful jointly developed bit for Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) funding ultimately become the cross-sector partnership Research and Engagement Across Communities for Health (REACH), which develops local research capacity and infrastructure to tackle wider determinants of health.

- The collaboration to write the bid to become the 2025 City of Culture, which led to increased collaboration around cultural events and led to several other joint funding bids
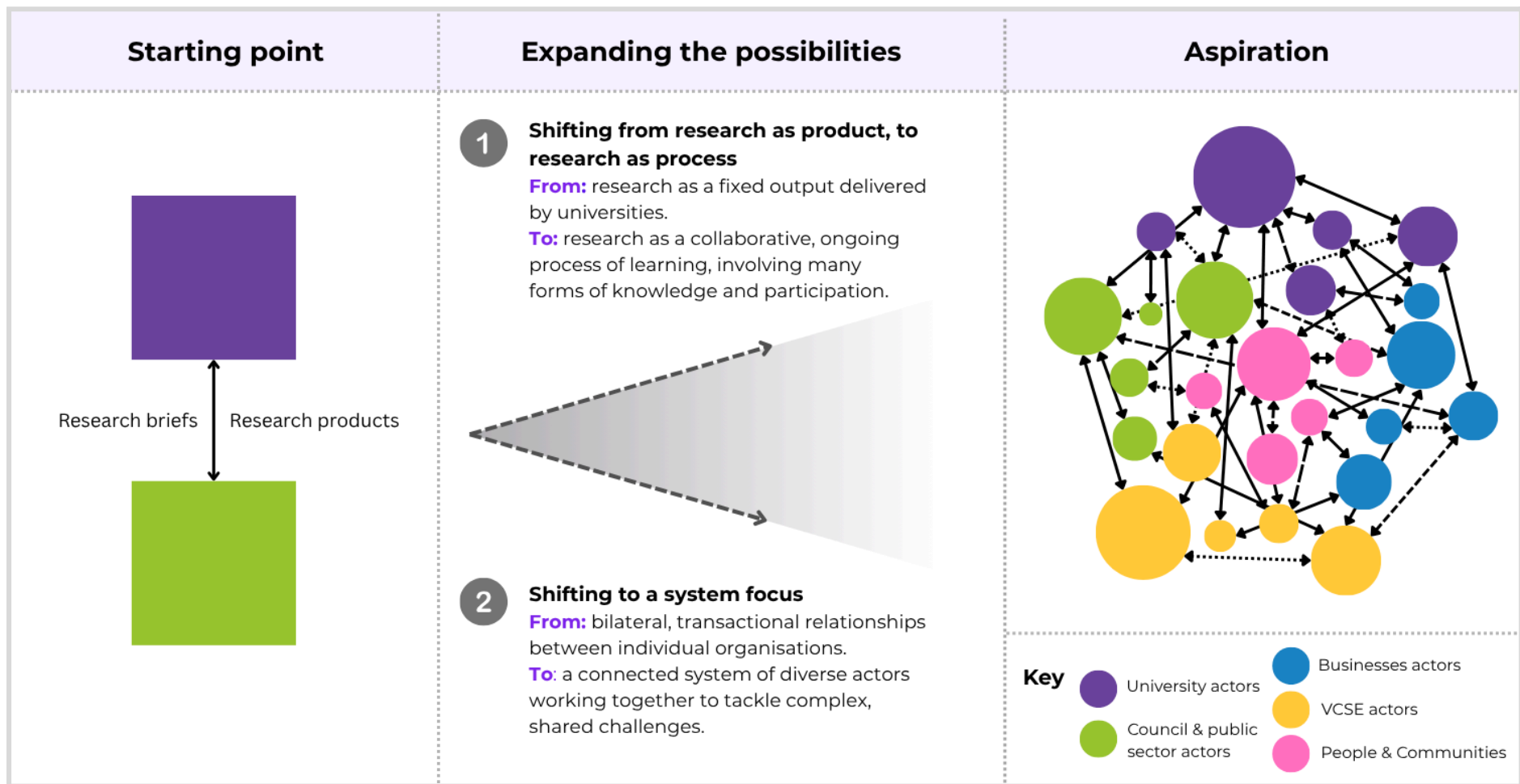
Making the case and match-making: The acknowledgement that drawing purely on existing capacity would be inadequate led to a funded post which sits across the university and the council. This has been key to building shared understanding across organisations and roles, advising and matchmaking people to one another and spotting and seizing opportunities for action and helping to build trust.

Expanding the possibilities

Collaborative research projects are not unusual. Often driven by small pots of available funding, they may initially consist of staff from a university and the local council working together to commission and conduct research with the aim of providing insight or evidence to inform policy making or service delivery to improve outcomes. Often, the impetus for collaboration is that it will help to unlock previously inaccessible resources or knowledge, that will allow people to do the thing they are responsible for (e.g. delivery of a service) more effectively. But while such relationships can produce useful results, they can be transactional and a focus purely on the finished result misses wider opportunities for shared learning that can (and sometimes do) come from local collaboration. This approach can only get us so far in tackling the most complex challenges in our local places.

We believe that great opportunity lies in going beyond short-term, bilateral and transactional relationships to develop a shared learning culture across organisations that enables ongoing, open and inclusive knowledge creation and sharing across the local system. This is what's needed to make the best use of our collective resources in challenging circumstances, and tackle the most entrenched and complex problems in local places which no organisation or service provider can address alone. We must be brave in naming and focusing our limited energies and resources on these things.

Making the shift to more open, inclusive and exploratory collaborations focused on achieving local impact requires changes in mindset, relationships and culture as well as policies and procedures. We believe there are two key shifts in perspective that are needed to deepen and strengthen research collaborations between universities and partners in place: **a system approach**, and **an expanded interpretation of research**. These are both essentially mindset shifts, which can be the most fundamental and powerful levers of change that in turn enable aligned structural and technical changes. Both shifts can be characterised as broadening of our view from a narrow starting point to something more expansive that creates space for more possibilities and action.

Starting point	**Expanding the possibilities**	**Aspiration**

Research briefs   Research products

① Shifting from research as product, to research as process
From: research as a fixed output delivered by universities.
To: research as a collaborative, ongoing process of learning, involving many forms of knowledge and participation.

② Shifting to a system focus
From: bilateral, transactional relationships between individual organisations.
To: a connected system of diverse actors working together to tackle complex, shared challenges.

Key
- ● University actors
- ● Council & public sector actors
- ● Businesses actors
- ● VCSE actors
- ● People & Communities

A new interpretation of the role of research in local places

The word 'research' means different things to different people, and as more partners seek to collaborate together, reaching a shared understanding of this term and a shared interpretation of the purpose of research is crucial.

If collaborations are to have more impact, we believe an expansion in the understanding of research is helpful. Often, research is viewed as a **product** (facts, findings or evidence) that is generated by university researchers through a narrow and traditional set of research activities. It is something which is created in one 'world' (the university's) and then 'given over' to another to be acted upon (e.g. the council delivering a service) in a transactional way. This is valuable for the assurance it gives, particularly in risk averse cultures, in creating a sense that something is 'proven' or 'correct'. But this narrow interpretation of evidence and focus on research outputs (e.g. journal articles) as the end goal does not reward collaborative, co-produced research with less tangible, but no less powerful, impacts through more informal and relational kinds of knowledge sharing.

An expanded understanding makes space for research to also be seen as a **process** of exploration, learning and knowledge creation, of which research findings are just one element with which people might engage. This expansion creates more space for collaborative action and allows a much wider spectrum of actors to be involved in and more activities to be classed as research.

There are examples of co-production in research and methods such as participatory action research which do value and acknowledge the processes of shared learning and collective problem solving between communities and researchers as much as the outputs and outcomes. But such approaches remain a minority and too often we see this language being co-opted without a practical change in the experience of research on the ground, so we suggest a further expansion is needed.

"Research is not just about finding the answer to the problems that we have in County Durham, but about using the doing of the research, the activity, the convening power that it has, in a different way. That has a lot of potential"

Workshop participant from Durham University

This expansion opens the door to a greatly expanded role for the VCSE and community members themselves to actively participate in research - and we (among others including colleagues at the Ideas Fund) would argue that this should go even further in shifting power to communities so they are the ones setting the research agenda. Viewing research as a process also reflects the fact that when seeking to address complex social issues, we often need to

constantly learn and adapt rather than look for 'what works', because there is not a single provable 'right way' that will work in every context. Finally, this interpretation also expands the possibilities for what activities constitute research, using the convening power of research in different ways and focusing not on research outputs but on building partnerships that give value to those participating in them as well as through the knowledge they unlock.

"Some of our researchers are offering workshops to our partners which are tangential to their research such as 'Yoga and Myth' but beneficial to the charity partner and helps build the partnership"

Workshop participant

A system approach

Collaborations often start as bilateral agreements or approaches between two actors - often a university and a council - and focus on delivering discrete projects. Deeper collaboration is unlocked by making a shift to a system approach, where the task becomes to build an integrated and networked approach which includes more actors and perspectives.

A system approach recognises that outcomes for local people and place cannot be changed by individual organisations acting alone. Complex challenges and the solutions to them are the result of the combination of multiple actors and factors, and many different kinds of knowledge, skills and resources will be required to enable improvements.

To address complex challenges we need to look beyond bilateral partnerships to involve more and more diverse actors in our research collaborations. We must acknowledge that our own and our organisational perspectives are limited, and that we need to work in partnership with others who see different parts of the picture to build our understanding. An obvious starting point for expanding approaches beyond universities and councils is to work with voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) organisations and infrastructure bodies - although the ultimate end would be to include communities more directly. Business, both large employers and SMEs, should also be considered key partners. Taking a system approach to working with more partners across a place not only brings in a range of perspectives, but creates more routes for collaboration and in turn sparks more possibilities for how research is done and how it creates impact.

This approach also seeks to re-balance power to communities[10], enabling not just decision-making but agenda-setting to be more democratised and representative of local people's views and experiences. This requires not just tokenistic involvement, but giving people meaningful decision-making power and purposefully re-building trust and relationships that may have been damaged in the past. This is the route to maximising impact.

Neither universities, councils, the VCSE or business are homogenous bodies. By acknowledging that these organisations and collectives are multifaceted and made up of individuals with many different experiences and perspectives, it opens up new routes and opportunities for sustainable collaboration, as we create networks of connections rather than relying on single relationships or points of entry.

There are likely already various instances of partnership working between institutions at different levels, such as involvement on partnership boards or joint project delivery teams. But the extent to which these different connection points add up to a strategic approach that is more than the sum of its parts may be underdeveloped without deliberate efforts. By 'strategic approach' we do not expect (or desire) that all different parts of the system will agree on a single top-down goal which they all directly work on together. There will of course be different pockets of activity, on different themes, working at different paces and scales. It may look (and feel) 'messy' to some extent. But taking a strategic approach means that the research activity is underpinned by purposeful, intentional efforts to actively build the foundations that enable collaboration[11]. We are less focused on the outputs of a process and more on creating the conditions that allow effective collaborative work to take place.

Effective system stewardship[12] is therefore key. System stewardship is the work of purposefully nurturing healthier systems and developing enabling conditions for collaboration. Investment in stewardship is essential to accelerate a purposeful shift towards a systems approach, as without it, practice and behaviours often default to traditional organisation and project-centric ways of working, rather than the cross-boundary, relational and learning-focused practices needed. System stewards can operate from many different positions in the system, and Collaborate have also learned a lot about how funders can help to nurture healthy systems for equitable research[13] through our work with BSA. Offering long-term, flexible funding - of which The Ideas Fund is an all too rare example - is essential to creating the conditions that enable people to have the trust and confidence to take risks and follow the seeds that a co-produced approach plants, rather than working to specified outputs.

"It's like we've got a big reservoir and we've got the sea, the reservoir discharges out to the sea but the land around it doesn't benefit from the passing water and nutrients. So we need Beavers. We need to dam it. We need to somehow allow the flow of water and nutrients.

"I'm describing it as a one way flow, of course it's not, but the knowledge, energy and commitment flow through and out too quickly to actually spread and benefit [more researchers and more people in local places]."

Workshop participant from Durham University

Making the shift

We recognise that organisations and places are at different points of maturity in terms of their research collaborations and that each place has its own starting point and will progress in different ways. The table below sets out some suggestions for those who want to build more collaborative practice, offering ideas for how you might start if you are at the beginning of the journey, as well as an ambitious goal you might reach for as things are more developed. We recognise that making these shifts in practice is not down to universities alone, but requires a range of actors, including their partners in place, funders, regulators and central government, to play their part.

These suggestions have emerged from our discussions with partners in County Durham about their ambitions for the future of their research collaboration work, drawing on a workshop with a small number of partners from Durham University, Durham County Council and Durham Community Action.

In addition, we have drawn on our understanding of what is needed to support effective, sustainable cross-sector collaborations as set out in our publication **A Guide to Collaboration.** This short resource sets out what collaboration is, why it matters and what it takes to make it work. It includes six core foundations for effective, sustainable collaboration which we have used to organise the suggestions below.

We hope these suggestions will give some practical starting points and serve as provocations for further discussion and exploration. If you'd like to discuss how to strengthen your collaborations, get in touch.

In addition to these resources, look out for more coming soon from the British Science Association about the impact of the Ideas Fund and the practice that has underpinned its success. This will include a detailed resource about the role of the 'broker' - the key stewardship role that has underpinned collaboration in local places. NCCPE also offers a range of tools and resources including the EDGE tool[14] to help you self-assess how well your institution currently supports public engagement.

Foundation	Start by…	Reach for…
Collaborative mindset	Acknowledging 'together is better' and being open to doing things differently in order to accommodate working with others	Focus energies and efforts on the things that we can only do together and cannot do alone to make best use of collective resources. Acknowledge where power needs to be re-balanced, especially towards communities, in order to enable true and equitable collaboration.
Healthy, trusting relationships	Create opportunities for match-making between staff from different organisations/sectors and build understanding about each other's perspectives. Bring together people working on similar themes to identify areas of shared interest and opportunities to work together. Build trusting relationships across different stakeholders - including rebuilding trust with those who have had poor experiences in the past	Move beyond relationships between individual people and create roles and structures that ensure connections that persist even as individuals move on. Acknowledge who is holding what power and work purposefully to rebalance power to communities to determine what is researched, who by and how, how what is learned is interpreted and how changes are made as a result. Integrate the voluntary and community sector and business into governance and decision-making alongside universities and local government.
Shared vision and purpose	Articulate why 'together is better' in a way that resonates with people across different sectors and positions	Give collaboration a 'mission focus'. Set ambitious collaborative goals that tap into people's intrinsic motivation and are too bold and exciting to ignore.
Collaborative behaviours	Support those who are already enthusiastic about collaborative research to work together across organisational boundaries. Identify opportunities to experiment and	Strategically embed collaboration and take a systems approach. Create collaborative measures for impact that recognise

	deliver collaboration supported by small funding/grant opportunities. Showcase your collaborative work so people can see what is already happening and the impact its having, and be inspired by others' examples	the process as well as the outcome Build collaborative activities and behaviours into people's job descriptions and make this part of how they are appraised. Value collaborative activities alongside research outputs when considering progression.
Shared learning	Understand 'research' as a process of shared exploration and learning, in which many people and roles participate and multiple forms of knowledge are needed. Encourage people to reflect on their experiences of collaboration, what went well and what they'd do differently next time.	Invest in creating a learning culture (across organisations and hierarchies) across the local research system so everyone understands their role in enabling ongoing learning and improvement. Create learning loops that connect those undertaking collaborative work on the ground with those who are able to reshape the conditions in which they are working e.g. by changing policies and guidance.
Collaborative infrastructure	Create a shared post working across the university and council to broker connections and match-make. Use governance structures such as a steering group or MOU to give collaborative efforts a home and create clear permission for this work.	Nurture healthy systems for collaboration by investing in system stewardship (relationship building, shared learning, convening, inspiring hope and collective responsibility). Build the conditions and infrastructure to make collaboration the default choice, not a workaround Identify processes and procedures such as ethics, intellectual property and how people are recognised and rewarded for their work that need to change to enable collaboration, and make the changes. Align these across organisations to create aligned incentives. Invest in and lobby for long-term flexible funding that allows space to truly explore collaboration and co-production.

Footnotes

1; [NCCPE "Engaged Futures - Pathways to an engaged future for higher education"](#)

2; [The Ideas Fund, fund by the British Science Association, funded by Wellcome](#)

3; [Collaborate CIC "Beyond project funding: How can funders nurture healthy systems"](#)

4; [Durham University "Report shows Durham's major contribution to regional economy and job creation"](#)

5; [Civic University Network](#)

6; [Universities Policy Engagement Network](#)

7; [National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#)

8; [NCCPE "The policy and funding landscape for public engagement"](#)

9; [Collaborate CIC "A Guide to Collaboration: What it is, why it matters and what it takes to make it work"](#)

10; [The Ideas Fund "Introducing the Ideas Fund Impact Framework"](#)

11; [Collaborate CIC "A Guide to Collaboration: What it is, why it matters and what it takes to make it work"](#)

12; [Collaborate CIC "System Stewardship: A summary"](#)

13; [Collaborate CIC "Beyond project funding: how can funders nurture healthy systems"](#)

14; [NCCPE "Assess you institutional culture: Introducing the EDGE tool"](#)

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