



National  
Co-ordinating  
Centre for  
Public Engagement

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# Where to locate your public engagement team?

Working out where to site your public engagement team to maximise their chances of success

## Choices, choices...

Many universities have chosen to create central public engagement units or teams. These can end up being based in a variety of places – from within the Vice Chancellor’s office, to marketing and communications. Each location will bring advantages and challenges. The table below outlines lessons learned about hosting teams in these different locations, and will hopefully help you make the best of where you end up being located.

This was informed by the work of the Catalyst for Public Engagement teams, and was developed as part of a longer report<sup>1</sup> on their learning about ‘what works’ in delivering effective support from public engagement. We interviewed staff at all 8 projects. For some, where the Catalyst team sat in the organisation was a critical part of the potential success and traction of the project:

- ‘There are always turf wars – it is incredibly important where you live – it influences what happens long term’ (Principal investigator)
- ‘Where the team was sited – in my view, meant they did not have the purchase on the organisation that they needed to deliver the project’ (Academic).

Despite these concerns expressed by some interviewees, others suggested that they were able to make it work irrespective of where they sat.

Location of team	Advantages	Challenges
<b>Marketing and communications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Externally focused so understand the need to engage with those outside the organisation</li><li>• Well resourced</li><li>• For some marketing is all about ‘<i>what stories we tell, the content we create, and the part research plays in this narrative</i>’ (member of professional services staff)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Confusion between engagement vs marketing the university</li><li>• Focus more on dissemination than collaboration</li></ul>

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<sup>1</sup> Culture change – embedding a culture of public engagement: Learning from the Catalysts for Engaging the Public with Research, NCCPE 2016

[https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/nccpe\\_catalyst\\_report\\_may\\_2016.pdf](https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/nccpe_catalyst_report_may_2016.pdf)

<b>Research services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports public engagement with research</li> <li>• Involves other key staff working across different aspects of engagement e.g. knowledge exchange</li> <li>• Focused on supporting research and research staff</li> <li>• Helps 'join up' PE with other types</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not engage with wider engagement agendas of institution</li> <li>• Lack of credibility with some academics who see this as part of the bureaucracy of their institution</li> </ul>
<b>Vice chancellor's office</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Senior level buy in and leadership</li> <li>• High profile</li> <li>• Gets onto agenda of key meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can feel top down</li> <li>• High profile, therefore if something doesn't work it has disproportionate negative impact</li> </ul>
<b>Distributed team (across faculties)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brings in a variety of perspectives from different parts of the university</li> <li>• Led by academics and support staff</li> <li>• Ground up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of resources to facilitate change</li> <li>• Lack of visibility</li> <li>• Expectation management – once the team exists there is an assumption it has dedicated resource in terms of people and funding</li> </ul>
<b>Researcher development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Links to core agenda re staff development</li> <li>• Supports public engagement with research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not engage with wider engagement agendas of institution</li> <li>• Can end up being part of training but not part of supported practice</li> </ul>
<b>Academic department</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credibility with researchers</li> <li>• Wealth of practical experience with engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funds buy more professional time than academic time with expectation the professional staff deliver the engagement on behalf of the department, rather than support</li> </ul>

