

Report of the Research Ireland Public Engagement Consensus Conference

June 2026



Executive Summary

On 7th May 2026 approximately 200 people interested in Public Engagement met for a one-day Consensus Conference. This was the first time a large group of people committed to aspects of Public Engagement came together to explore ideas and look to the future. This Consensus Conference was convened by Research Ireland with three objectives for the day:

- 1) Provide a forum for the Public Engagement community to discuss **co-creating a vision for the Public Engagement ecosystem** for the next decade.
- 2) Explore whether a **Community of Practice of engagement professionals and practitioners is needed** in Ireland and, if so, what form it should take.
- 3) **Reimagine the funding landscape for Public Engagement and Engaged Research.**

Three round-table discussion sessions were held in groups of up to ten people to address the objectives outlined above. Each session opened with a short provocation and discussions were facilitated by an independent facilitator, using a structured series of Mentimeter questions designed to explore areas of consensus as well as points of divergence.

Some of the themes discussed in relation to a **shared vision** for Public Engagement included inclusivity, the importance of long-term collaborative relationships, and broader community engagement. For the **Community of Practice**, participants emphasised diversity, saying it should be open and engaging, and be grounded in shared values and practice. It should recognise barriers to participation, enable knowledge exchange, and be adequately resourced. The key themes which emerged in relation to funding included the need for longer-term funding, flexible funding, and community-led **funding** approaches. There were also calls to support communities more directly, alongside interest in piloting new approaches.

Although the Consensus Conference fostered some lively dialogue and the exchange of ideas, it did not fully succeed in building a clear and widely **shared vision** for the future of Public Engagement in Ireland. However, it did succeed in generating a strong mandate to move forward with the development of a **Community of Practice**, despite some uncertainty around how such an initiative should be designed and delivered. Participants most frequently identified the strength, diversity, and collaborative potential of the Public Engagement community in Ireland as the single most valuable takeaway from the conference, highlighting the importance of connection, shared understanding, and the value of collective learning.

Research Ireland is only one part of the Public Engagement ecosystem, and we are making a number of commitments for the coming years which we hope will deliver some system wide improvements. However, we do not, and cannot, fully represent the breadth and diversity of voices across the Public Engagement landscape. As such, this event and report should be seen as a starting point for us all.

Introduction

On 7th May 2026 approximately 200 people interested in Public Engagement met at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Kilmainham, Dublin for a one-day Consensus Conference. This was the first time a large group of people committed to aspects of Public Engagement – research, thought, practice, and promotion – came together to explore ideas and look to the future of Public Engagement in Ireland.

This Consensus Conference was convened by Research Ireland. The Research and Innovation Act (2024, Section 9, Clause m) stipulates that one of the functions of Research Ireland is to:

‘Promote and support an awareness and understanding of the value of research and innovation to society and facilitate engagement of members of the public with those engaged in research and innovation activities’

Similarly, following the launch of the Research Ireland Strategic Plan 2026-2030 the new agency aspires to be *‘more than a funder’* within the research and innovation ecosystem. Research Ireland also aims to play a greater role as a *‘strategic leader, partner, and connector’*¹. This will involve working collaboratively with the research community, across public and private sectors, and with wider society, while continuing to broaden inclusion, deepen engagement, and ensure that future conversations meaningfully reflect the diversity of perspectives, experiences and expertise that shape this space.

This was our first attempt to bring together such a group of people in this way, creating an important opportunity to begin shaping a shared vision for Public Engagement. However, Research Ireland is only one part of the Public Engagement ecosystem, and we recognise that those in the room did not, and could not, fully represent the breadth and diversity of voices across the Public Engagement landscape. As such, this event should be seen as a starting point for us all.

A Consensus Conference is a structured Public Engagement method designed to bring together a broad range of stakeholders to learn about, deliberate on, and give recommendations regarding complex issues, such as the challenges of delivering funding across a diverse research ecosystem. As part of the process, engagement stakeholders are recognised partners, not passive recipients, and impact will be measured through the changes we bring about together.

There were three objectives for the day:

- 1) Provide a forum for the Public Engagement community to discuss **co-creating a vision for the Public Engagement ecosystem** for the next decade.
- 2) Explore whether a **Community of Practice of engagement professionals and practitioners is needed** in Ireland and, if so, what form it should take.
- 3) **Reimagine the funding landscape for Public Engagement and Engaged Research.**

¹ [Charting Ireland's Research and Innovation Future 2026–2030](#)

Three round-table discussion sessions were held in groups of up to ten people to address the objectives outlined. Each session opened with a short provocation, thoughtfully delivered by Shane Bergin, Jackie Gorman, and Fergus McAuliffe, who also contributed as members of the Expert Advisory Group in the lead-up to the conference. Discussions were facilitated by an independent facilitator, Chris Chapman, who guided participants through a structured series of Mentimeter questions designed to explore areas of consensus as well as points of divergence.

Anonymous data collected for this report includes (a) notes from the table discussions; (b) Mentimeter responses; (c) postcards submitted on the day for general comments; and (d) feedback gathered through the post-event evaluation (n=88 responses). This report presents a synthesis of these data under the three main thematic areas.

Direct quotes from participants are denoted by *purple italics*.

By its very nature this report is the work of staff from Research Ireland. Therefore, the report concludes with an outline of suggested next steps, alongside a set of short- and medium-term commitments from Research Ireland. We would, however, encourage all attendees to consider what steps need to be taken next and to reach out to each other, and to us, as appropriate.



Co-creating a Vision for Public Engagement

The first session focused on the co-creation of a vision for Public Engagement in Ireland, introduced through a provocation by Shane Bergin (Appendix A). Participants were invited to reflect on the following questions:

What words come to mind when you think of Public Engagement in the future?

What must happen for Public Engagement to be valued and trusted?

What should be at the heart of our approach to Public Engagement?

In response, approximately 800 submissions were received via Mentimeter. Analysis of these responses revealed several key themes, including **inclusivity**, the importance of **long-term collaborative relationships**, and the role of Research Ireland in facilitating broader **community engagement**.

Inclusivity

Participants expressed a strong and consistent view that inclusivity must be central to future Public Engagements efforts. This was understood to mean:

‘All voices included from conceptualisation to evaluation’

‘All disciplines and all areas of society’

‘All types of expertise’

There was also a clear emphasis on expanding participation beyond academia, ensuring that the expertise and experience of practitioners are recognised and valued. Participants highlighted that meaningful inclusivity requires time to build the relationships and trust:

‘Experienced people should be welcome, pretending past work doesn’t exist is not inclusive’

Engagement approaches must be responsive to the needs of communities themselves. Participants stressed the importance of listening to communities and allowing them to shape how engagement takes place:

‘Engagement with as many different audiences as possible in a way that is meaningful for them – ask people what matters to them and start from there’

‘Ask the community (students, public, patients) how they want to be engaged’

Looking ahead, many participants advocated for deeper levels of involvement and shared responsibility with communities:

‘Shift budget and leadership to community organisations’

‘More real involvement of community members in the research process... perhaps through bidirectional “Community Fellowships”’

‘Having community champions to engage with locals on the ground’

Closely linked to this was the recognition of the value of lived experience and existing community infrastructures:

‘Make the community feel valued, the value of lived experience’

‘Learning from community rather than assuming we are there to teach - symbiotic learning not one directional’

‘Building on existing community infrastructures’

It was also acknowledged that, to enable full participation, communities may require access to training and capacity-building opportunities.

Long-term Collaborative Relationships

Participants highlighted the central role of sustained, long-term investment in building meaningful engagement. Short funding cycles were widely seen as a barrier to trust and impact.

‘Funding cycles / research projects are time bound but building TRUST takes time!’

‘Impact is long-term, hard when funding is short term’

‘Significant multi-annual funding is needed, or the best people are lost’

Some participants suggested exploring new funding models, including a potential role for collaborating with industry in supporting Public Engagement activities:

‘Industry should commit a percentage of their profits to Research Ireland and then they can distribute it between the projects’

There were also calls for Research Ireland to play a stronger convening role, enabling collaboration rather than competition between stakeholders:

‘Research Ireland should work like a convenor, giving the opportunity for researchers to connect, and to work together and not compete against each other for funding’

‘Award seed funding for building a consortium for an EPE programme similar to EI fund for applying for EU funding’

Role of Research Ireland

Several recurring themes emerged regarding Research Ireland’s role within the Public Engagement landscape. Participants raised concerns about language and framing, particularly the perceived use of ‘science’ as synonymous with ‘research’, which may unintentionally diminish the visibility of the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. As one participant noted:

‘Research Ireland uses “science” as a synonym for “research” and places less importance on the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Talk about good research or good evidence rather than polarising STEM and AHSS’

Participants also expressed the need for clearer signalling from Research Ireland regarding the value it places on Public Engagement and its expectations in this area. There were consistent calls for greater clarity and definition, particularly around key concepts:

‘Research Ireland needs to show it values Public Engagement more. There is a lack of clarity in terms of the Agency’s expectations in this space’

This was closely linked to a broader request for clearer distinctions between science communication, public engagement, and engaged research, to support a more shared understanding across the sector.

While the majority of participants supported an expanded role for Research Ireland, as a strategic leader, partner, and convenor, a minority view suggested that the organisation should remain solely a funding body and not act as an active partner in Public Engagement activities. This perspective reflected concerns about maintaining academic and professional integrity where funders are directly involved in delivery:

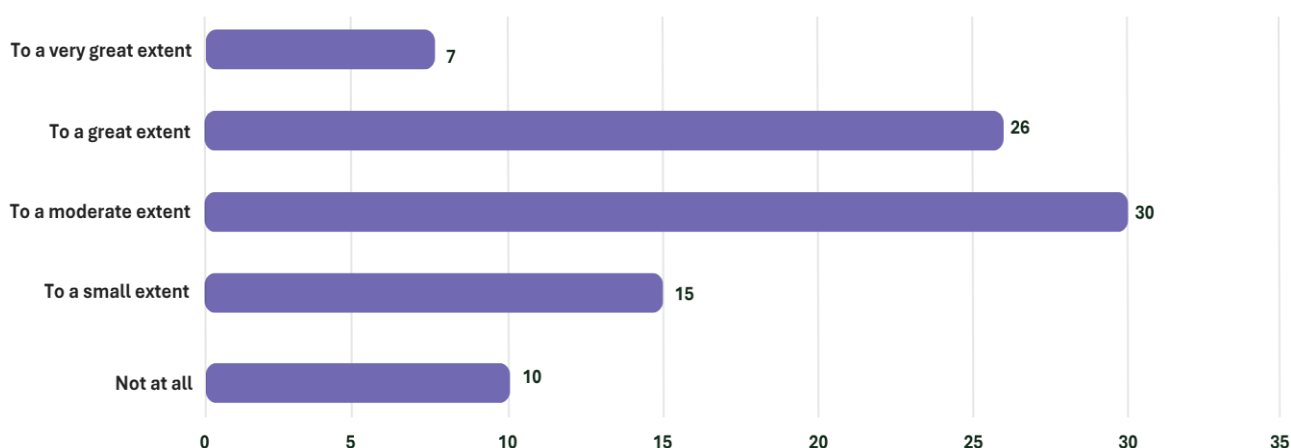
‘Research Ireland should not be a partner in any future Public Engagement activity and should remain solely as a funding agency’

It became clear that Research Ireland will need to maintain a balance between working to support and partner with researchers and practitioners versus imposing structures on them.

A Shared Vision?

Insights from the post-conference evaluation survey further reinforced these findings. In response to the question, ‘To what extent do you feel a clearer shared vision for Public Engagement emerged from the day?’ (n=88), participant responses were distributed across the full scale, indicating a mixed overall picture. As shown in Figure 1, the largest proportion of respondents indicated that a clearer shared vision emerged to a ‘moderate extent’ (n=30). A further 33 participants reported that this occurred to a ‘great’ or ‘very great extent’ (n=26 and n=7, respectively), suggesting that some participants perceived meaningful progress. However, 25 respondents felt that this occurred to only a ‘small extent’ or ‘not at all’ (n=15 and n=10, respectively).

Figure 1: Participant responses to the question ‘To what extent do you feel a clearer shared vision for Public Engagement emerged from the day?’



Taken together, this distribution highlights that, although the conference fostered meaningful dialogue and idea exchange, it did not fully succeed in building a clear and widely shared vision across participants. Many attendees appear to have left with individual insights rather than a cohesive collective direction, reinforcing the need for stronger mechanisms to synthesise discussions, clarify key messages, and translate engagement into a more unified and actionable vision.

When considered alongside the qualitative feedback, these findings underscore the need for Research Ireland to play a clearer role in coordinating opportunities for discussion, articulating shared priorities, and translating engagement into a more unified and actionable vision for the sector.



Exploring a Public Engagement Community of Practice

The second session explored the concept of a Public Engagement Community of Practice (CoP) introduced through a provocation by Jackie Gorman (Appendix A). Participants were invited to consider the following questions:

How should a CoP look and feel?

What principles should underpin a CoP?

How can a CoP be supported?

Based on almost 900 Mentimeter responses, several key themes emerged, including **inclusivity, collaboration, and knowledge sharing**.

Participants emphasised that any future CoP should embrace diversity, be open and engaging, and be grounded in shared values and practice. It should recognise barriers to participation, support collaboration, enable knowledge exchange, and be adequately resourced. Importantly, it should also foster a culture that is respectful and critically reflexive.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity was understood as ensuring participation from *‘as many voices as possible’*, spanning communities, disciplines, organisations, and forms of expertise, including the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Participants stressed that a CoP should accommodate diverse organisational types, communication styles and community contexts.

There was also recognition of gaps in representation at the conference itself, with specific reference to the absence of voices such as the Traveller community and Public Participation Networks. At the same time, participants raised important critiques about engagement processes, noting that poorly designed initiatives can risk wasting participants’ time. Structural barriers were highlighted, including:

‘...Rigid systems’ (in universities) ‘that make external stakeholder involvement impossible’

‘... Academic requirements of universities’

‘Opportunity for representation which is not available to all communities’

Despite these challenges, there was optimism about the potential of a CoP to shift perspective with some participants stating:

‘Help (universities) see with new eyes, new perspectives outside of our privileged tower’

Collaboration and Structure

Participants highlighted that, for a CoP to be genuinely collaborative, it must create a space that feels both supportive and challenging:

‘... Open, collaborative, and psychologically safe’

‘Uncomfortable, where assumptions are questioned, knowledge is shared, and no single voice dominates’

There were mixed views on how such a community should be structured. Some participants suggested that a network of smaller, theme or region-based CoPs may be more effective than a single national structure. The role of Research Ireland within a CoP also generated mixed views. While some participants saw a clear convening role for the organisation, others raised concerns about its presence influencing openness and trust, suggesting that Research Ireland should be:

‘Custodians as opposed to owners’

‘Not present. Research Ireland could jeopardise the comfort and honesty of contributors’

Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building

Knowledge sharing was widely recognised as a core function of a CoP, both across disciplines and between individuals at different career stages. Views differed on how this should be achieved. Some participants called for new, dedicated infrastructure to support long-term knowledge exchange, while others pointed to existing models, such as the PPI Ignite Network as an example model of best practice.

Suggestions included:

‘Include an online forum (like Reddit) for knowledge sharing - at both practitioner and public level’

There was also strong emphasis on the need for training and more effective use of existing resources:

‘Training. OMG so much training is needed’

‘Identify existing Public Engagement training; don’t reinvent the wheel’

‘Set up and resource a National Centre for Public Engagement, where people can avail of training, share best practice, and set up collaborations’

‘National micro-credential for training people in Engaged Research or Public Engagement’

Among recipients of Research Ireland’s Discover funding, there were also calls for more regular opportunities to connect:

‘Semi-regular meetings or touch points with Research Ireland would be really beneficial for keeping up with projects. Would also help with the More Than A Funder goal’

Resourcing and Sustainability

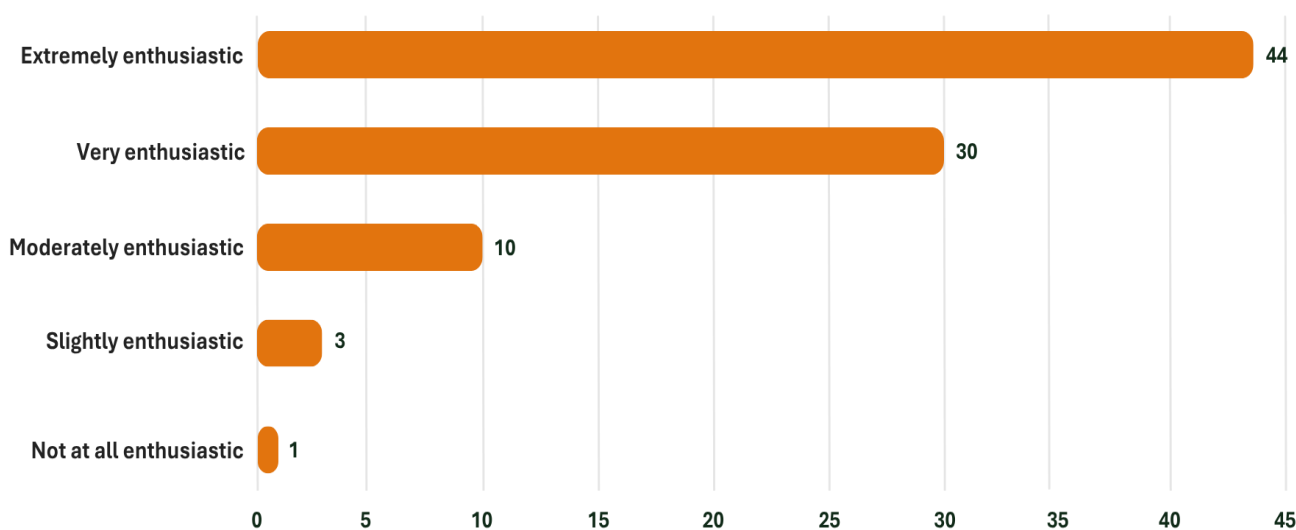
Finally, participants acknowledged that establishing and sustaining a meaningful CoP would require significant and ongoing investment. In particular, there was recognition of the need for dedicated coordination and support structures:

‘Sustained resourcing ... including a funded secretariat to plan, facilitate, sharing material, and follow up’

Findings from the post-conference survey indicate a strong enthusiasm for the development of a Public Engagement Community of Practice (CoP). In response to the question, ‘How enthusiastic are you personally to support the development of a Public Engagement Community of Practice?’ (n=88), the majority of participants expressed positive support.

The distribution of responses shows a clear and compelling mandate for Research Ireland to move forward with establishing a Community of Practice. Almost half of all respondents (n=44) selected ‘enthusiastic’, making it the single most common response, while a further 30 respondents indicated that they were ‘very enthusiastic’. Together, this represents 74 participants expressing high levels of enthusiasm. By contrast, 10 respondents reported being ‘moderately enthusiastic’, and only a very small number of participants indicated low levels of enthusiasm, with 3 respondents ‘slightly enthusiastic’, and 1 ‘not at all enthusiastic’.

Figure 2: Participant responses to the question ‘How enthusiastic are you personally to support the development of a Public Engagement Community of Practice?’



Taken together, this distribution reflects not just general support, but a strong leaning towards very high levels of enthusiasm. While discussions during the session highlighted important questions and differing views around structure, inclusivity, and the role of Research Ireland, the post-event evaluation findings indicate a clear willingness among participants to engage and contribute.

Overall, these results point to a strong mandate to move forward with the development of a Community of Practice. Despite some uncertainty around how such an initiative should be designed and delivered, there is clear momentum within the community, presenting a significant opportunity for Research Ireland to act as a facilitator and enabler in shaping its next phase.



Reimagining Funding for Public Engagement

The third session began with a provocation from Fergus McAuliffe, exploring ideas for a reimagined funding landscape (Appendix A). Participants were invited to consider:

What does there need to be more of in funding?

What does there need to be less of?

How can funding help encourage collaboration, co-creation, and the participation of marginalised groups?

Based on almost 700 Mentimeter responses, several key themes emerged, most notably the need for **longer-term funding, flexible funding, and community-led funding approaches**. There were also strong calls to support communities more directly in accessing funding, alongside interest in piloting new approaches and providing seed funding. In contrast, the most prominent themes relating to ‘less of’ centred on lengthy application processes, disproportionate paperwork, and burdensome reporting requirements.

Long-term Funding

The need for longer-term funding was the most prominent theme. Participants emphasised that sustained funding is essential for building relationships, maintaining engagement, retaining skilled practitioners, and supporting meaningful evaluation:

‘Longer project times to ensure relationships can be built’

‘Longer funding timelines is more sustainable, retains institutional knowledge and builds momentum’

There was particular emphasis on the importance of allowing sufficient time to assess impact:

‘Funding for longitudinal studies - allowing longer timelines for work’

‘Support for capturing longer term impact’

Many participants identified five-year funding cycles as a minimum requirement to enable meaningful engagement and impact:

‘Difficult to get a significant partner, 3–5 year engagement with partner’

‘Minimum 5 years, like Wellcome Trust’

‘Longer-term perspective on funding for EPE to track project participants’ choices and attitudes, to assess long-term impacts of Research Ireland projects’

Current short cycles were widely seen as inadequate:

‘2 years is too short... by the time you have set the project up there isn’t a lot of time to work with’

‘Tracking deep impacts... requires time, and short-term funding makes this extremely difficult’

‘By the time you have set the project up there isn’t a lot of time to work with. Tracking deep impacts such as changes in attitudes and behaviour requires time, and short-term funding makes this extremely difficult’

Flexible Funding

In a similar way, a number of participants highlighted the value of shorter, more flexible funding opportunities to support experimentation and early-stage collaboration:

‘Small flexible pots for experiment, community relationship building, networking - not tied to big project or outputs’

‘More small pots of money (with less paperwork)’

More flexible funding mechanisms allow projects to evolve over time rather than being tied to predefined outputs:

‘Funding that allows adaptation over time, rather than locking projects into rigid outputs or predefined outcome’

There was also a clear appetite for stronger learning and knowledge-sharing mechanisms within the funding ecosystem:

‘Create an open directory of past mistakes and challenges other projects have experienced... seeing a history of successful grants and why they were awarded would be helpful’

This points to a broader need for a more open and reflective funding culture, where learning from both success and failure is actively shared. Feedback from postcards also highlighted specific issues with the Discover Programme, including questions about the limited number of funding streams, and a need to include eligible costs related to training and capacity development, such as evaluation and communication skills.

Community-led Funding

Participants emphasised the need to widen access to funding beyond the university sector, including charities, artists, community groups, and volunteers. Models such as the UK National Lottery and Creative Ireland were referenced as more inclusive approaches:

‘Creative Climate Community Action Fund is an excellent example → funding, ease + recognising different skill roles’

There were strong calls to shift power towards communities and enable them to lead:

‘Flip the norm – fund community groups over the universities’

‘Funding should go to artists/small organisations... so the artist can lead the project. Give up the power that is currently only held by universities’

‘Fund Community Fellowships (bi-directional)’

‘Small organisations in the community (are) better set up to use the funding. It could be life changing for the community group’

Participants also highlighted the importance, and complexity, of compensating participants fairly:

‘Must remunerate people for their time’

‘Challenges in paying members of the public: institutional policy, government policy and the impact on tax and benefits’

Reducing Barriers

Participants consistently identified administrative burden as a major barrier to participation. There were widespread calls for shorter and simpler application processes, with requirements proportionate to the level of funding:

‘Less very, very long application forms’

‘Paperwork and difficult impenetrable questions’

‘Application forms are quite heavyweight... the effort of applying is quite high’

Concerns were also raised about reporting requirements:

‘Less reporting for reporting’s sake. More reporting to understand the project and support’

‘The reporting for small money feels as in-depth as some large money’

These challenges were seen as disproportionately affecting smaller organisations and those outside academia:

‘Time that goes into funding applications is a risk for small organisations... people in a university are better supported’

Participants suggested practical supports to address these barriers, including access to feedback during the application process and support for evaluation:

‘Having someone who can help provide feedback on application process for small organisations’

‘It would be really useful if Research Ireland could provide (evaluation support) for first-time applicants’

Participants also highlighted the need for clearer pathways within funding systems, including the use of seed funding to support progression to larger-scale projects, and a greater emphasis on supporting people and long-term capacity rather than short-term outputs:

‘Seed funding and pathways to larger scale funding’

‘Funding roles... for career security and progression’

There were also suggestions to formally recognise excellence in engagement practice:

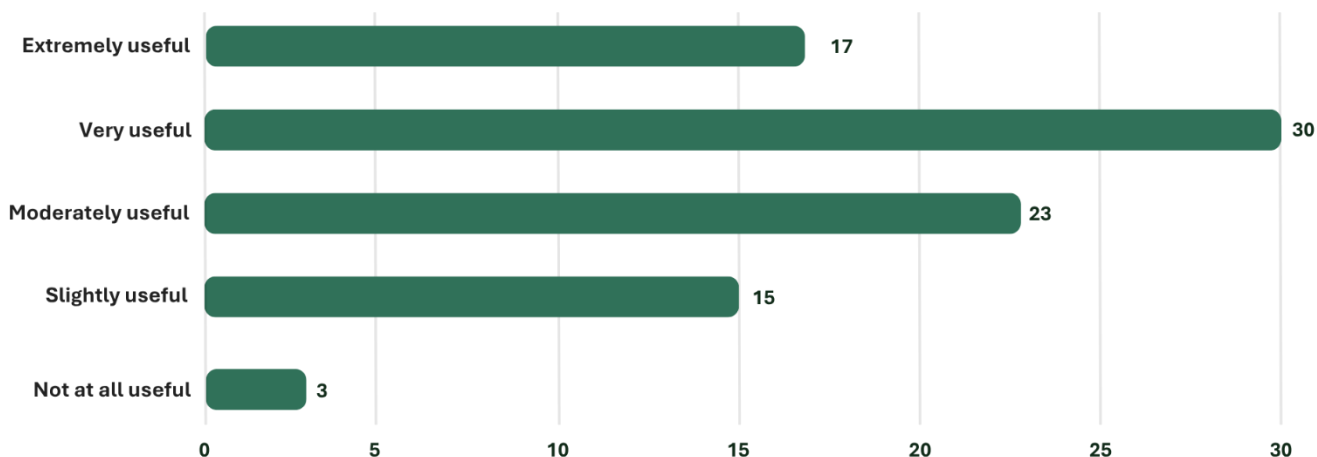
‘Get engagement medals – bronze, silver, gold’

‘Engagement like Athena Swan, you can’t apply without it’

Across the discussions, accessibility emerged as a critical issue, particularly for community and non-academic actors, with participants advocating for *‘lower barriers to entry’* and more inclusive funding pathways. There was also strong support for flexible, tiered funding models, including *‘seed funding and pathways to larger scale funding’*, as well as a shift toward funding people and long-term capacity, rather than only short-term projects, with calls for *‘funding roles... for career security and progression’*. Overall, responses highlight the need for funding systems that are longer-term, simpler, more flexible, and more inclusive, better aligned with the realities of Public Engagement practice and capable of supporting sustained impact.

Findings from the post-conference evaluation survey provide additional insight into how participants experienced the session on reimagining funding. In response to the question, ‘How useful were the discussions on reimagining funding for Public Engagement?’ (n=88), responses indicate a mixed but generally positive assessment.

Figure 3: Participant responses to the question ‘How useful were the discussions on reimagining funding for Public Engagement?’



As shown in Figure 3, the largest proportion of respondents rated the discussions as ‘very useful’ (n=30), followed by ‘moderately useful’ (n=23). A further 17 participants found the discussions ‘extremely useful’, meaning that 47 respondents in total rated the session positively. At the other end of the scale, 15 respondents considered the discussions ‘slightly useful’, while 3 rated them ‘not at all useful’.

Taken together, this distribution suggests that while the session was valuable for many participants, a substantial proportion experienced it as only moderately or slightly useful. This indicates that, the discussions successfully surfaced important issues and perspectives but did not fully meet expectations in terms of practical relevance or actionable outcomes.

In particular, the spread of responses suggests that some participants appreciated the dialogue but felt it lacked clarity, focus, or concrete next steps. This reinforces a broader theme across the evaluation: the need to move from high-level discussion towards more structured, solution-oriented approaches that translate insights into tangible actions.



Other Perspectives

Participants most frequently identified **the strength, diversity, and collaborative potential of the Public Engagement community in Ireland** as the single most valuable takeaway from the conference. Many responses highlighted the importance of connection and shared understanding, noting that it was *‘great to see so many people from different backgrounds’* and that *‘the community is strong and engaged and committed to sharing practice’* reflecting a widespread recognition of the value of collective learning and collaboration.

Community, Connection, and Collaboration

Networking and collaboration emerged as central themes, with participants emphasising *‘the importance of collaboration’* and the value of opportunities to *‘connect with other organisations’* and exchange ideas. For some, the conference provided a broader perspective on the field, with one respondent noting:

‘When you work on your own project, your work becomes very insular... this reminded me there is a wider EPE community and what you can learn from shared discussions’

Alongside this, there was also a strong recognition of shared challenges coupled with collective motivation. Participants reflected on *‘similar frustrations... but enthusiasm, passion and will to change the system’* and noted that *‘there is enthusiasm and agency within the community’*. This sense of shared purpose underpinned the overall experience, reinforcing the idea that while challenges exist, there is a strong foundation for progress.

Some participants also pointed to key ideas and conceptual shifts in how Public Engagement is understood and practised, including moving towards more participatory and inclusive approaches:

‘Magnets for inclusive systems, not megaphones’

‘We need to address socio-economic and geographic bias. We need to work in the most disadvantaged communities and the most rural isolated communities. We cannot assume that the public can come to us due to financial and other barriers and biases’

Proposals and Possibilities

Participants also articulated a range of concrete ideas and proposals for strengthening the Public Engagement system. These included embedding Public Engagement more clearly within research roles, addressing structural inequalities for broader inclusion, taking a balanced approach to different forms of engagement and strengthening collaboration and inclusive thinking:

‘Fund the person, not the project, and fund the organisation, not the project’

‘In terms of ensuring good use of public money, it is important that simpler forms of engagement and learning practice are not completely thrown out at this stage. These forms of engagement have real benefits to people. Funding engaged research and co-creation brings with it the high risk of very resource-intensive work that fails. Its benefits can be significant, but it should not be the only way. Value should be placed on both and understanding the distinct benefits of each’

‘Can you explore opportunities for bi-directional community fellowships? Allowing different community partners to immerse themselves in the ecosystem and vice versa’

Critical Reflections and Challenges

While many reflections were positive, some participants expressed more critical views, highlighting tensions around recognition, direction, and inclusion. These included concerns about acknowledging existing work and expertise, gaps in representation and pathways and global societal challenges that demand cross-cutting attention:

‘The world is burning, pretty much everything else pales by comparison. Both the causes and solutions can be provided by science. Unless climate science is front and centre of everything Research Ireland does, it will be failing our public’

‘Opportunity for folks with valuable past EPE experience to assist with brainstorming + troubleshooting among funding awardees would eliminate a lot of reinventing the wheel’

‘We need to engage arts and humanities - in their own right and as “STEAM”- to leverage our shared humanity and creative, critical thinking’

General Feedback About the Event

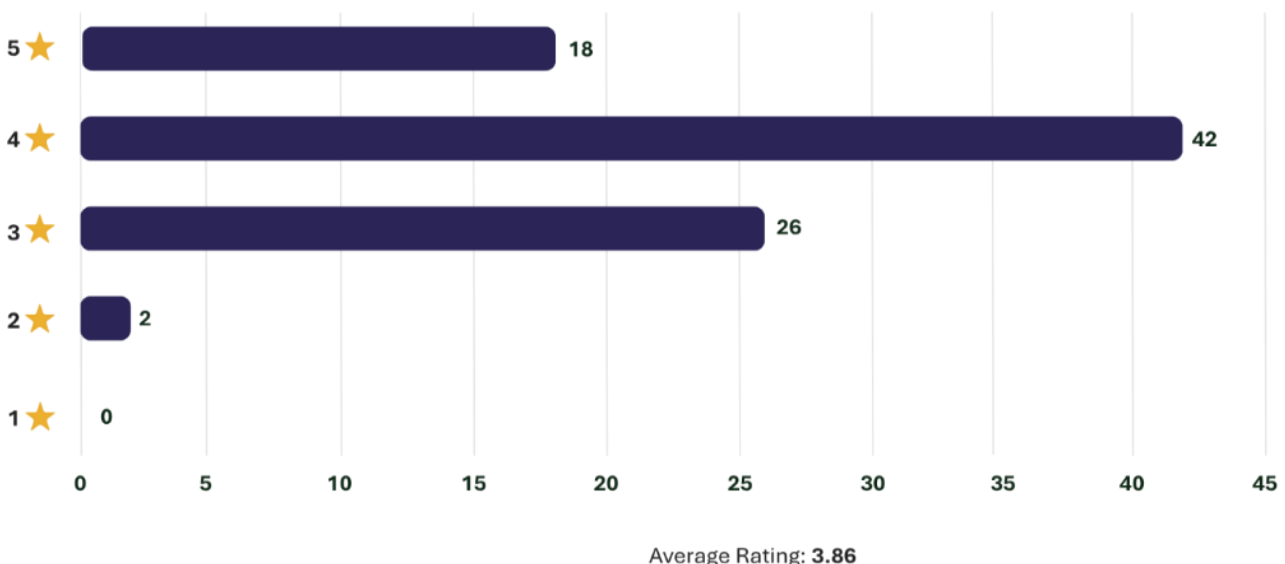
Most of the feedback on the organisation of the Consensus Conference was gathered through the post-conference evaluation survey. Overall, the findings highlight a well-received and engaging event that successfully brought together a diverse community. At the same time, they highlight clear gaps in achieving consensus, clarity, and actionable outcomes. The conference can therefore be understood as a strong starting point for dialogue and community-building, with further work required to translate this into clearer strategic direction and tangible impact.

As one participant reflected *‘There was a lot of positive energy in the room during and at the end of the event and a lot of support for change, and this needs to happen soon’*, capturing both the momentum generated and the shared expectation for timely follow-through.

However, a small number of responses highlighted areas for improvement. These included concerns about the diversity of speakers and the accessibility of the venue, with specific issues raised such as the absence of ISL interpretation, limited space for wheelchair users, and being a very noisy environment. Some participants also felt that more time should have been dedicated to discussing *‘what do we need less of’*, suggesting an imbalance in how discussions were structured.

There were also concerns that the strong focus on future change may have unintentionally undervalued existing work and achievements in the sector. While participants generally appreciated the opportunity to reconnect with colleagues and peers, it was noted that the Public Engagement community has evolved significantly since 2012.

Figure 4: Participant responses to the question ‘Overall, how satisfied were you with the conference?’

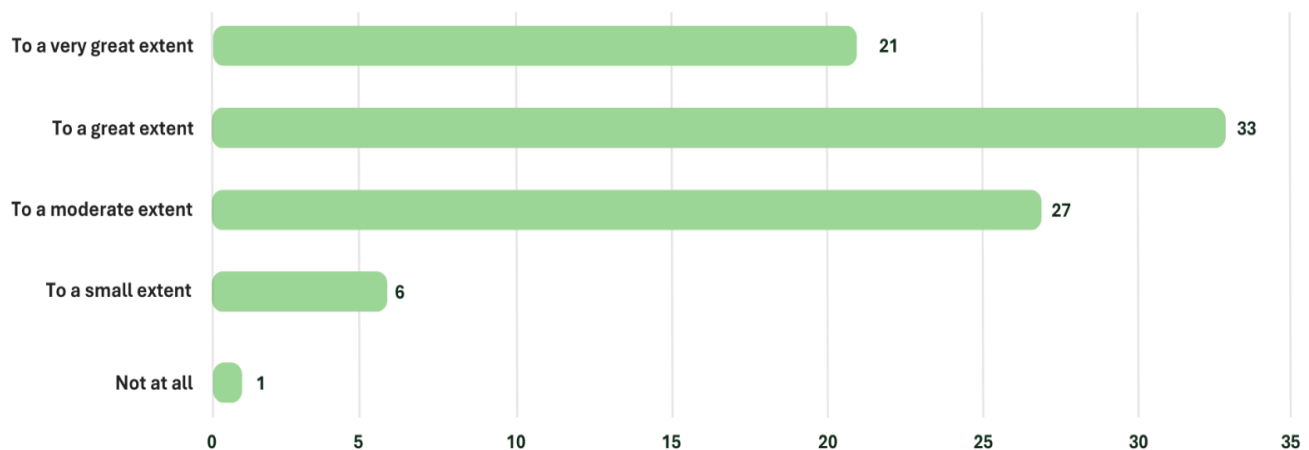


From the post-conference evaluation survey, participants demonstrated overall satisfaction with the conference with an average rating of 3.86 on a 5-star scale. In response to the question, ‘Overall, how satisfied were you with the conference?’ (n=88), responses were strongly skewed towards the positive end of the scale.

As shown in Figure 4, the largest proportion of respondents selected 4 stars (n=42), followed by 5 stars (n=18), meaning that 60 participants in total rated their experience positively. A further 26 respondents selected 3 stars, while only a very small number indicated dissatisfaction, with 2 respondents selecting 2 stars and none selecting 1 star.

Taken together, this distribution indicates that the conference was well received and broadly successful in delivering a positive experience. However, the sizeable proportion of mid-range ratings suggests there is scope to strengthen certain elements of the event. In particular, there is an opportunity to build on this strong foundation by enhancing aspects that could shift more participants from being satisfied to highly satisfied, including greater clarity, inclusivity, and more actionable outcomes.

Figure 5: Participant responses to the question ‘To what extent did the conference meet your expectations?’



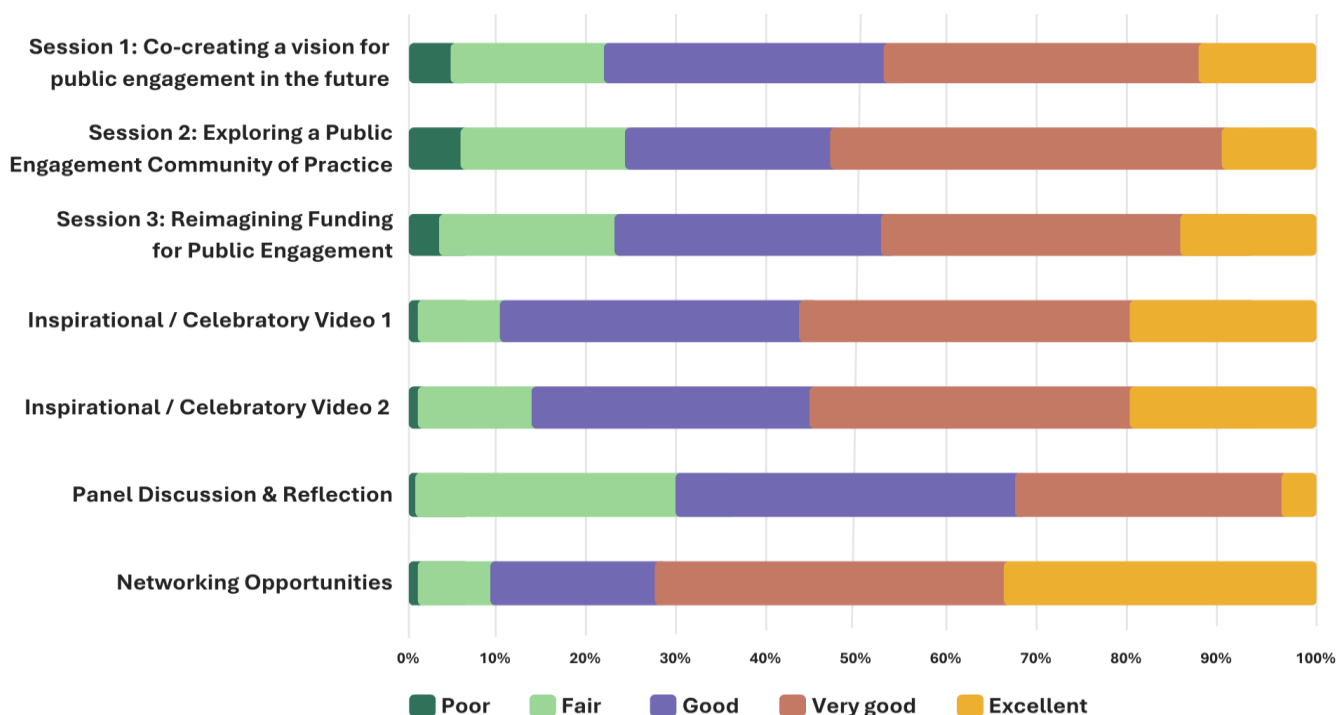
As shown in Figure 5, the largest proportion of respondents felt that the conference met their expectations ‘to a great extent’ (n=33), followed by ‘to a moderate extent’ (n=27). A further 21 participants reported that expectations were met ‘to a very great extent’, meaning that most respondents experienced the conference as broadly aligned with what they had anticipated.

However, 6 respondents indicated that the conference met their expectations to ‘to a small extent’, and 1 respondent selected ‘not at all’, highlighting that for a minority, expectations were not fully realised.

Taken together, these responses suggest that while the conference was successful in meeting expectations for many participants, a substantial proportion experienced it as only moderately aligned with their expectations. In the context of the broader feedback, this reinforces the importance of strengthening clarity, accessibility, and the translation of discussion into more tangible outcomes. Addressing these areas will be key to enhancing the overall participant experience and ensuring that future events more consistently meet expectations.

Finally, participants were also asked to evaluate specific elements of the conference programme, providing a more detailed view of their experience across different sessions. As shown in Figure 6, across all sections of the conference, participant feedback indicates a generally strong performance, with most components rated positively, particularly in the upper categories of ‘very good’ and ‘excellent’. Networking opportunities emerged as the standout element, receiving the highest proportion of ‘excellent’ ratings, highlighting the strong value participants placed on opportunities to connect, collaborate, and learn from peers.

Figure 6: Ratings of Conference Sessions and Components. Participant ratings of individual sessions and elements of the conference programme.



Both inspirational and celebratory videos were positively evaluated, with a strong concentration of ‘very good’ and ‘excellent’ ratings, indicating that these elements contributed effectively to engagement and tone. In contrast, the panel discussion and reflection session received comparatively lower ratings, with a noticeable shift toward ‘fair’ and ‘good’, suggesting that this format was less effective or less aligned with participant expectations. Overall, the results highlight that interactive, peer-driven, and experiential elements were the most valued, while more traditional or structured formats, such as panels, may benefit from refinement in future events to improve clarity, engagement, and perceived impact.

Next Steps

In the final session, we asked the question ‘*what are the most immediate actions that should be taken next*’? Participants suggested some clear practical next steps, with a strong emphasis on follow-through, clarity, and sustained engagement from Research Ireland. A dominant theme was the need to **translate consultation into visible action**, with respondents urging that outcomes should go beyond reporting, including calls to ‘*not just write a report, make specific changes*’ and to ‘*come up with actions... make us believe we’ve been truly consulted*’.

There was strong demand for clear communication and direction, including ‘*... with a timeline and deliverables*’ and greater clarity on funding priorities and the future role of Public Engagement at Research Ireland:

‘It’s still really not clear if everything will move towards engaged research and away from other engagement. We need to know urgently because we are planning 2027 projects now’

‘It would be incredibly helpful as EP practitioners to have clear definitions, guidance & training/support for the delivery of engaged research’

‘Deliver workshops on what engaged research looks like for new researchers, community members etc’

Participants also highlighted the importance of progressing the development of a Community of Practice, with clear suggestions for next steps:

‘Clarify purpose and structure of the community of practice’

‘Hold a regular Community of Practice conference with space for knowledge exchange’

Beyond immediate actions, there was a strong call for system-level improvements, particularly around longer-term funding cycles and structures, and support for capacity-building and career pathways. More broadly, respondents encouraged Research Ireland to take a leadership role in coordinating the ecosystem, strengthening partnerships across sectors, and involving a wider range of stakeholders, including communities, in future decision-making. Overall, participants expect Research Ireland to move from consultation toward a coordinated, transparent, and action-oriented approach that delivers tangible impact across the Public Engagement landscape.

Research Ireland Commitments

Short Term Commitments (By the end of 2026)

- Undertake a review of application processes and application forms so that they are simpler, straightforward and proportionate to the level of funding being requested.
- Provide greater clarity on the use of terms such as Public Engagement and Engaged Research by Research Ireland.
- Establish a working group of external stakeholders to advise on new Public Engagement and participatory research funding programmes.
- Continue to consult on how best to establish and grow a Public Engagement Community of Practice in Ireland.
- Actively seek out collaborations and opportunities to be ‘more than a funder’ with the community.

Medium Term Commitments (Throughout 2027)

- Publish a Public Engagement and Participatory Research Framework setting out Research Ireland’s ambitions in this space.
- Launch new funding calls.
- Create a repository of best practice examples in Public Engagement and promote exemplars on the Research Ireland website and with the media.
- Consult on opportunities for enabling the community to develop and deliver a range of activities to help develop the Community of Practice.
- Convene another event for the Public Engagement community in Ireland in 2027.

Longer Term Commitments (From 2027 onwards)

- Work with partners to ensure greater recognition and value for Public Engagement activities as part of the criteria for promotion within universities.
- Create structures for more inclusive engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders, including the public themselves, in shaping the future of Public Engagement in Ireland.
- A new Societal Initiative of Scale will be developed following a consultation and scheduled for launch in 2027/2028.

Conclusion

The conference was highly successful as a convening and engagement exercise, bringing together a motivated and diverse community and fostering meaningful discussion and collaboration. Participants clearly valued the opportunity to connect, share ideas, and contribute to shaping the future of Public Engagement in Ireland. However, the conference was less successful in achieving some of its strategic objectives, particularly in advancing a shared vision and clear direction. While discussions were rich and productive, they were not sufficiently synthesised into coherent, actionable outcomes.

A key insight from the evaluation is that the community is ready, engaged, and willing, but requires clear leadership, structure, and follow-through to translate this momentum into meaningful impact. This was reflected in participant feedback, with one respondent underscoring both the strength of commitment and the urgency for action saying:

‘Everyone in that room wants public engagement in Ireland to reach its full potential, we just need to act on it now’

The conference has generated significant momentum, enthusiasm, and goodwill across the Public Engagement community. The challenge now is to ensure that this energy is not lost, but instead translated into visible, coordinated, and impactful action. As one participant succinctly expressed:

‘Use the momentum... don’t squander it’



Appendix A: Provocations

Co-creating a Vision for Public Engagement. A Provocation by Shane Bergin

There are moments when a community is invited not simply to reflect on its work, but to imagine what that work might become. The Research Ireland Consensus Conference on the Future of Public Engagement in Ireland felt like one of those moments. It offered a rare opportunity to step beyond the immediate pressures of funding cycles, programme calls, and institutional plans, and instead ask a more ambitious question: what should Public Engagement in Ireland be for in the decades ahead?

I have worked in Public Engagement with science in Ireland for many years, and throughout that time I have believed this country to be an extraordinary place in which to do this work. That is not only because of the quality of the initiatives, institutions, or programmes that have emerged here, but because of the people. The community that has formed around Public Engagement in Ireland has consistently demonstrated imagination, generosity, and a willingness to experiment. It has been collaborative rather than territorial, open rather than defensive, and ambitious in ways that often exceed the structures available to support it.

Research Ireland's decision to convene a deliberative space of this kind reflects that same spirit. It recognises that the future of Public Engagement cannot be developed through isolated strategy documents or institutional silos alone. It must instead emerge through collective reflection, constructive critique, and a willingness to imagine futures that are genuinely transformative rather than merely incremental.

Looking forward to imagining the future of Public Engagement in Ireland inevitably requires us to reflect on the conditions from which we have emerged. The early years of SFI's Discover Programme and the science engagement landscape in Ireland were shaped by the wider national context. Much of that work took place in the aftermath of economic collapse, during a period when Ireland was attempting to rebuild confidence, capacity, and growth. Public Engagement with science became closely associated with economic recovery, skills development, recruitment into 'STEM' disciplines, and national competitiveness. In many respects, that focus made sense. Science and technology were framed as engines of growth and resilience, and Public Engagement became one pathway through which those ambitions could be realised.

But the Ireland and, indeed, the world we inhabit today is profoundly different from that of 2012. The existential challenges we now face are increasingly complex, interconnected, and global in nature. Climate emergency, biodiversity collapse, democratic fragility, rapid technological change, artificial intelligence, migration, inequality, and public health crises cannot be understood solely through scientific or technological lenses. They are social, political, economic, ethical, and cultural challenges as much as they are scientific or technological ones. They demand responses that draw upon multiple forms of expertise, multiple disciplines, and multiple ways of knowing.

If Public Engagement is focused primarily on encouraging participation in STEM, or on persuading people that science is ‘cool’, relevant, or economically valuable, then it risks becoming inadequate for the scale of the challenges we are living through. Those models emerged from a particular social and economic context, but today’s challenges require something more ambitious: forms of engagement that are also participatory, reciprocal, and capable of connecting expertise with lived experience in meaningful ways. These require universities, researchers, educators, artists, communities, policymakers, and publics to work together in ways that acknowledge uncertainty, value lived experience and recognise that expertise itself must remain open and accountable.

At the same time, the wider environment in which knowledge operates has become increasingly unstable. Expertise is contested. Public trust in institutions is under strain. Disinformation circulates with extraordinary speed and sophistication. Some of the very technological ecosystems that science and higher education once embraced as vehicles for openness and connection are now actively contributing to fragmentation, polarisation, and distrust.

Against that backdrop, universities and research institutions cannot afford to see Public Engagement as peripheral work. Nor can it remain something carried primarily through individual passion, isolated projects, or short-term funding schemes. I believe Public Engagement must become central to how research, scholarship, and higher education understand themselves. It must be embedded not only in communication practices, but in institutional culture, structures, leadership, and values.

This is not simply a strategic consideration. It is increasingly a democratic one.

Without meaningful Public Engagement, research risks becoming disconnected from the lived realities of the communities it seeks to serve. Universities risk being perceived as distant, elite, or inaccessible. Knowledge risks losing legitimacy in public life. In contrast, meaningful engagement strengthens trust, deepens relevance, and reinforces the idea of higher education as a public good. It allows institutions not only to share expertise, but to listen, learn, and collaborate more effectively with society.

For that reason, I increasingly think about Public Engagement not as an ‘add-on’ to research and education, but as part of the infrastructure required for societies to navigate uncertainty successfully. Public Engagement is not secondary to our response to existential challenges; it is integral to it.

That demands ambition from all of us working in this space.

We need to think beyond maintaining existing models and ask instead what a genuinely transformative vision for Public Engagement in Ireland could look like. What kinds of structures, systems, and leadership might be required to support it? What skills and professional pathways do we need to cultivate? What forms of recognition and value systems must institutions adopt if engagement is to become truly embedded? What kinds of partnerships and coalitions will allow us to respond collectively rather than competitively? And perhaps most importantly, what should the ethos of Public Engagement in Ireland actually be?

I do not believe we will answer those questions perfectly or quickly. But I do believe we now have an opportunity and perhaps an obligation to ask them seriously.

The Public Engagement community in Ireland has already demonstrated extraordinary creativity and resilience. The challenge ahead is whether we are willing to match that creativity with structural ambition. Can we move from excellent individual initiatives toward a more connected and transformative ecosystem? Can we position engagement as essential to the future of research, education, and democracy itself? Can we transform universities, research, and Public Engagement into sources of hope capable of helping society imagine possible futures, respond meaningfully to shared challenges, and remain deeply connected to the communities that give them social licence and purpose?

Despite the uncertainty of the present moment, I remain optimistic about what Public Engagement can become in Ireland. I believe universities, researchers, cultural institutions, educators, communities, and publics still possess enormous collective capacity to imagine better futures together. But realising that potential will require courage, humility, and sustained commitment. It will require us to challenge inherited assumptions about expertise, authority, and institutional success. And it will require us to see Public Engagement not as a communications exercise, but as a core expression of public purpose.

The conversations I had at the Research Ireland Consensus Conference left me optimistic that many across the Public Engagement sector recognise both the scale of the challenge ahead and the need for a more ambitious vision of Public Engagement. I left with a renewed sense that the work ahead belongs to all of us, and that responding meaningfully to this moment will require imagination, courage, and collective ambition.

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This essay was commissioned by Research Ireland as a provocation for the ‘Co-creating a vision for Public Engagement in the future’ session at the 2026 Consensus Conference on Public Engagement, held at IMMA, Royal Hospital Kilmainham. The conference brought together researchers, practitioners, funders, educators, and community partners to collectively imagine the future of Public Engagement in Ireland.



What if a ‘community of practice’ isn’t what you think it is? What if it’s not a room full of academics refining projects for other academics, polishing language and references for journals that few people beyond those circles will ever read? This isn’t to diminish the value of research for science or society, but to question how we practice outreach. What if the version we have now, more inward facing than it needs to be, is something we’re ready to move beyond? In Ireland, science already lives far outside our institutions. It’s in community centres where people gather to talk about sustainable energy, mental health, and how to make their communities better places to live. It’s in youth clubs, where young people are figuring out their futures. It’s in libraries where people can borrow citizen science kits, join maker groups, and contribute to seed libraries. It’s on farms experimenting with crops and new products, and around kitchen tables where families share concerns about health.

Outreach lives in the questions people ask about their health, their environment, and their futures. It shows up in conversations about housing, biodiversity, food, and energy, and in who we trust when we talk about these things. So why do we still design outreach as something delivered *to* people, rather than built *with* them? A community of practice worth having should feel, at times, a little uncomfortable. It should stretch us. It should challenge who we see as ‘legitimate’ contributors and what kinds of knowledge count. Because expertise doesn’t only sit in universities, it lives in lived experience, local knowledge, cultural memory, and practical problem-solving. If we are serious about outreach, we also have to be serious about sharing power and access and about doing so respectfully. Two moments from my own experience stay with me. Once, a well-intentioned outreach study invited participants we worked with to take part in a focus group. One woman responded plainly: *‘I’m tired of being a disadvantaged guinea pig—what do I get out of this?’* It’s a fair question—and one that speaks to how outreach and research can feel from the other side. Another moment came when I returned to the Irish language and took a botany course. I learned that the Irish word for foxglove is *méaracáin an dhiabail* ‘the devil’s thimble’. Long ago, this likely served as a warning not to touch it. We now know foxglove contains digitalis, but clearly people understood its danger long before modern science named it. Local knowledge, folklore, and language all carry learning. We shouldn’t overlook that.

Building a truly inclusive community of practice, one that brings in as many people as possible, may require us to rethink roles and expectations. It might mean valuing facilitation and dialogue as much as publication. It might mean recognising that listening, deeply, consistently, and without defensiveness is as important as explaining. It might also mean accepting that the outcomes we can measure are not always the ones that matter most. And it raises harder questions:

- Who has time to participate and who doesn’t?
- Who is paid, and who is expected to volunteer?
- Whose language, norms, and confidence shape the conversation?
- Who feels they belong immediately and who has to work for that feeling?
- Who never quite gets there?

And beyond participation:

- Who actually benefits?
- Does this help a researcher secure their next grant?
- Does it support a teacher engaging students with real-world science?
- Does it enable a community group to influence decisions that affect their lives?
- Does it help someone who has never seen themselves as ‘a science person’ feel they might belong?

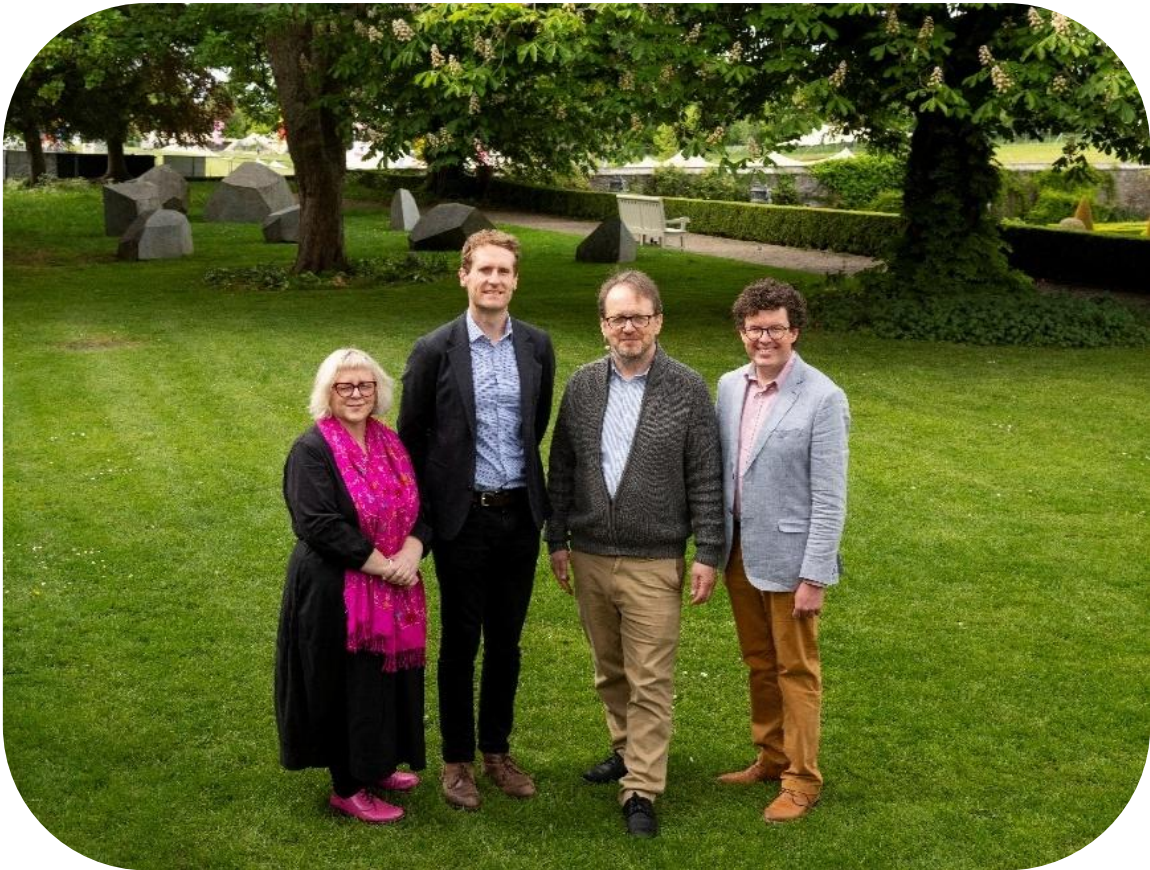
If the answers cluster around institutional gain, we should be honest about that. But if we want something more meaningful, something rooted in public and social value, then the community has to be designed differently, from the ground up. A real community of practice is not just a network. It’s a shared space of learning, trust, and sometimes respectful disagreement. It requires care. It requires openness to being changed by the people you encounter. It asks us to move away from seeing outreach as transmission, and towards seeing it as relationship. So perhaps the provocation is this:

- Who is missing from your idea of this community of practice?
- Who gets to belong and who decides?
- What kinds of knowledge are recognised, and what is overlooked?
- Who benefits, in tangible ways, from this space existing?

And perhaps the most challenging question: **What might we need to let go of, control, status, certainty, to make this a community of practice worth being part of?**

Because if we are not willing to reflect on how we work, who we work with, and who we work for, then we risk recreating the same spaces, just with more open doors through which people can visit but aren’t made feel welcome to stay. We should become magnets for all those who want to engage with science and how we develop science outreach together, not megaphones broadcasting the latest findings or idea. Being a megaphone is exhausting for everyone, being a magnet is a lot more interesting.

What would it take to do something braver, and a little more uncomfortable and become a little magnetic?



What could reimagined funding for Public Engagement look like?

In this provocation two ideas were outlined for consideration. The first idea was that of reimagining what local funding could look like to create more bottom-up opportunities for Public Engagement with research.

Inspiration was drawn from models such as:

- (i) the Local Action Groups in the LEADER Programme that are responsible for designing development strategies and selecting projects for funding;
- (ii) the Community Development Committees that exist in each local authority area and are designed to drive meaningful citizen and community engagement in the planning and evaluation of local programmes. These panels shift power from traditional, top-down bodies to bottom-up, collaborative decision making;
- (iii) the Ideas Fund run by the BSA, a Public Engagement fund that was created in response to the realisation that for many reasons, including how grants are awarded, community-researcher partnerships can often be led by the researcher rather than the community. This fund specialises in supporting individuals, community groups and charities to lead funding applications, in concert with universities.

Questions were posed around could participatory budgeting methods be used, enabling local communities to decide how a portion of the public funds for engagement with research is spent.

The second idea focussed on a more top-down, systems level reimagining. Currently, researchers are incentivised to prioritise high-impact publications, citations, and traditional academic outputs, often at the expense of engagement with communities, policymakers, or civil society. This creates a structural conflict as even when researchers value engagement, the system discourages them from investing time in it. Research excellence can still be measured somewhat narrowly, with insufficient recognition of societal impact or engaged research practices. As a result, Public Engagement is often treated as peripheral rather than integral to research careers.

At the systems level the idea of the creation of a national, cross-sectoral unit for societal impact, jointly supported by funders, universities, and community stakeholders was put forward. Such a body could:

- (i) Build capacity for engagement across the system and advocate for change in how Public Engagement is recognised and rewarded
- (ii) Provide shared infrastructure, networks, and best practices
- (iii) Facilitate connections between researchers, policymakers, and communities
- (iv) Standardise processes, for example compensating participants fairly and consistently.

Models were highlighted where learnings could be drawn from in the creation of such a unit. UPEN, the NCCPE, the Cape Higher Education Consortium in South Africa, and SciVil in Flanders provide templates that have been transformative for how research and society are interlinked.

The two ideas discussed are deeply interconnected. Bottom-up reform seeks to democratise funding and empower communities to shape research engagement, while top-down reform aims to realign incentives and supports for Public Engagement funding so that researchers are supported and rewarded for participating in this more inclusive model. Without grassroots reflections on how portions of funding could be allocated, engagement remains institutionally dominated, yet without system reform, it remains undervalued by that same system. Together, addressing both could transform Public Engagement with research into an embedded part of societal and researcher life rather than a somewhat peripheral activity.





For further information contact:

Dr Rachel Iredale

Head of Public Engagement with Research

Taighde Éireann/Research Ireland

Three Park Place, Hatch Street Upper, D02 FX65.

Mobile: +353 86 8246137

Email: Rachel.Iredale@researchireland.ie

