



Research
England

PURPOSE THROUGH DATA

**SUPPORTING EQUITABLE
AND ACCESSIBLE,
DATA-INFORMED
DECISION-MAKING**

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**National Civic
Impact Accelerator**

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Background

The [National Civic Impact Accelerator \(NCIA\)](#) is an ambitious three-year programme to gather evidence and intelligence of what works, share civic innovations, and provide universities across England with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. The programme is funded by Research England, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It aims to drive collaboration and policy and practice innovation, involving universities, local government, business groups, and the community sector to inform place-based transformations

Introduction

Between 2022 and 2025, the Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation carried out primary and secondary research in support of the NCIA programme. This included exploring, with a range of academic and NCIA partners, how to create practical resources and guidance to help universities use data to understand their civic impact and contribution to their local place.

This work led to the design and development of the [Civic Impact Dashboard](#), a data solution supporting HEI staff to better understand, evaluate and showcase their institution's civic contributions to the communities and places in which they are based.

Through taking a [user centred design journey](#) to develop the prototype dashboard, it became apparent that this standalone tool would not be enough to fully meet user needs. Feedback from an [expert user testing group](#) of Higher Education Institute (HEI) staff surfaced several challenges that occurred repeatedly and early on in users' journeys. This highlighted a need to more deeply understand the current lived and learnt experiences of HEI staff.

This guide is the product of this deeper, qualitative exploration. It sits alongside the Civic Impact Dashboard and wider NCIA resources, highlighting current operational and structural barriers and the practical ways these may be overcome, based on the learnt experiences of HEI staff in civic impact, evaluation and public engagement roles.

Our gratitude and thanks go to all the HEI staff and NCIA partners who gave their time generously to speak with us, and were so open in sharing their experiences, passion and expertise.

Audiences for the guide

This guide is designed for a range of stakeholders including HEI staff members, senior leaders in the HEI sector, and local as well as regional councils who are looking to understand how universities can embed a civic agenda into their core activities as place-based anchor institutes. Below is a breakdown of how this guide would support these profiles:

Who is this guide for?	What would they use it for in practice?
HEI staff	To make the case for better processes to support their day-to-day civic impact work. To identify resources that can help make identifying and working with data easier.
HEI senior leadership	To prioritise internal investment in effective ways to support and embed data driven civic impact work within universities.
Local or regional councils	To better understand the current situation within universities and how to work as place-based partners.

Approach and methodology

This guide has been created following the User Centred-Design (UCD) framework by the Interaction Design Foundation (IxDF). In this framework, UCD is defined as an iterative design process in which designers focus on the users and their needs in each phase of the project development. In UCD, design teams involve users throughout the design process to create highly usable and accessible products.³ For this guide, our users were defined as Higher Education Institution (HEI) staff members whose role involved working with university and place-based data in a range of different ways. These included data experts, partnerships and community engagement managers, and evaluation experts. A breakdown of these user profiles along with accompanying descriptions is as follows:

Table 1: An overview of key roles along with their pains, gains and goals. This table has been developed based on a combination of user needs workshops and in-depth interviews with HEI staff across universities in the UK.

HEI Role	What do I do?	Why do I do it?	What do I want?	What's stopping me?
Data experts	Gather data in a streamlined way	Create accessible data for different functions and partners	Give a 'birds eye view' of what is happening across university	University data collection is partially centralised at best
	Hold institutional knowledge of available data	Support other civic staff in understanding impact	Identify additive / interactions between different university civic activities	Capturing quantitative vs qualitative vs storytelling
	Enable comparison and benchmarking (across time / places)	Demonstrate ability to deliver against targets (incl. govt targets) and access more funding	Isolate impact of university vs. other causes, comparison with other universities	Availability of metrics and other reliable high quality quant data
	Implement a civic impact framework	Set and measure KPIs against civic impact domains	Accommodate priorities of university, community	Capacity in analysis teams

³ <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/user-centered-design?srltid=AfmBOopNsxjXL5W66Ehpg2-KlnxIk7CN611wqBv8R7-RoO9Xrbrro8rl>

HEI Role	What do I do?	Why do I do it?	What do I want?	What's stopping me?
Partnerships and community engagement managers	Communicate with partners and the public, attract more and better partners especially for knowledge exchange.	Create a positive impact in place (achieve civic goals)	Show people collective and additive impact of civic work rather than in isolation	Partners provide low quality data
	Demonstrate impact of work / ROI to different parts of the university	Create opportunities for other university objectives eg, recruitment, research	Evidence impact of civic work, especially in relation to e.g. gov missions around regional growth	Reflecting community and partner priorities against university priorities
	Capture real world impact	Improve reputation and standing of university	Encourage more civic work within university	Fragmented ownership of how data is captured and used across the university
	Get to know communities to work in a participatory way	Incorporate community voice in civic work	Embed thinking of civic impact in all university activity	View of communities as laboratories and not partners, as driven by the funding cycle
Evaluation experts	Set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to use to monitor impact	Show if we are meeting our civic goals as an institution	Compare to other HEI institutions (benchmarking)	Lot of data is qualitative and therefore hard to use for KPIs/ benchmarking
	Gather evidence to report against KPIs	Identify what is needed for internal transformation	Consistent KPIs that don't require creation of new data sources	Capacity - data work is intensive and don't have much capacity
	Identify good practice and areas for improvement	Make the case for investment in civic	Evaluative frameworks that can be used to understand impact	Relying on opinions of how we are performing
	Understand staff and student contributions to civic impact and experience of civic impact	Engage with exec board on civic	Broad understanding of civic impact, including eg, arts and culture	University provides complex and unsustainable data

Our methodology involved an iterative cycle of working with identified HEI experts to gain quantitative and qualitative insights. This included:

Type	Aim	Outcome	Participants
1 x user needs workshop	To carry out an initial user needs analysis, defining the data questions that potential users want to answer by interacting with an evidence guide for civic universities.	To develop the context for the guide's use, specify user requirements, and move towards designing potential solutions for further refinement and testing with users via interviews.	Seven participants across the NCIA partnership.
10 x in-depth interviews	To understand the on-the-ground reality of working with place data across the HEI sector via projects, experiences and institutional knowledge in the university landscape.	To consolidate emerging themes and sense-check against user needs workshop outcomes, further develop scenarios and translate into guidelines for how to address various challenges across the HEI sector based on matching needs highlighted with existing resources.	10 participants across the UK HEI sector.
Monthly insight sharing and alignment calls with NCIA partners NCCPE and City-REDI	To support an ongoing dialogue between the NCIA Workstream 1 partners and ensure a collective approach to the development of resources, and how these might be brought together most effectively to meet sector needs.	Increased shared understanding about the challenges faced by staff when carrying out civic partnership and impact work, and how we can signpost to our different outputs to support the journeys and needs of individuals, academic institutions and HEI sector.	Staff members from the Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation, NCCPE and City-REDI.

Interviewees

The interviewee pool consisted of 10 participants across HEI Roles in the UK. These were:

1. Engagement Manager, Lancaster University
2. Professor of Economics Education, King's College London
3. Evaluation Officer, Imperial College London
4. Universities Partnership Manager, University of Leicester
5. Public Engagement Lead, Herriot-Watt University
6. Head of Engagement and Place, Royal Holloway University
7. Head of Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement, University of Manchester
8. Head of Public Policy Engagement, Wrexham University
9. External Stakeholder Engagement Advisor, University of Sussex
10. Civic Engagement Lead, Queen Mary University of London

All 10 interviewees were women. The initial selection of potential interviewees was identified through engagement work undertaken in 2024, when considering involving HEI sector staff as an expert user group in the design and development process for the civic impact dashboard. As a result of this work, The Young Foundation were able to follow up with those people who had given consent to be involved in wider research for NCIA, to understand HEI sector staff experiences when working with data.

Whilst limited publicly accessible data currently exists on the specific gender breakdown of staff undertaking civic related roles within universities, the noticeably higher number of women engaged appears to be generally representative of an ongoing gender divide. This is evidenced through current [HESA data](#), which shows that considerably more women than men work in non-academic HEI roles. This gender imbalance is similarly mirrored in public engagement roles, where [recent research](#) has identified a focus on relational work.

What to expect from this guide

This guide aims to complement the use of wider NCIA resources – such as the Place Navigator, Civic Impact Dashboard and Civic Outcomes Framework³ – in providing advice and guidance on taking a data-driven approach to civic university impact work, and how to effectively navigate university systems and structures whilst doing this. Based on the learnt and lived experiences of HEI staff, it brings together practice perspectives, personal stories, challenges and innovations as shared by those undertaking civic work across universities in England, Wales and Scotland in 2025.

The guide's findings are grouped under four key themes, where practice development and/or strategy or policy change could advance both staff ways of working with data and university civic impact.

These themes are:



Within each theme are examples from HEI staff of the challenges they currently experience and the innovative approaches they have undertaken to address these. These examples are supported by direct quotes from interviewees, which bring to life the learnt experiences of staff within different university contexts. Through cross-analysis of staff experiences, the guide then brings together transferable recommendations for strategic change and practical action, and how these may advance not only the civic focus of universities but the public positioning of universities, potentially contribution to financial sustainability.

Each recommendation is supported by signposting to key NCIA resources and reports that individual members of staff, departments and universities can draw upon, to help advance their practice or make an evidenced case in relation to wider learnings and policy recommendations from across the HEI sector.

² Report in preparation by NCCPE, due to be published late 2025.

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Key themes and learnings

Through analysis of the collective learnt experiences shared by HEI staff, several areas of focus, or critical need, surfaced. These effect the extent to which universities can develop strategic, data-driven approaches to civic impact:

- The fragmentation paradox, where universities have strong individual partnerships but lack institutional coordination
- Data infrastructure challenges highlighting the ‘messy and obstructive’ data-sharing processes that hinder civic work
- The need for flexible frameworks that can accommodate different institutional contexts (e.g. rural vs urban campuses)
- Lack of leadership and governance requirements for embedding civic priorities.
- Challenges with integration with existing academic frameworks like REF and KEF
- The vision for systematic coordination that prevents community over-engagement while maximising collective impact

To help address these issues, the journey for change is broken down into a series of thematic areas or stages and explained in more detail on the following pages.

University insight and learnt experience



- Putting people and communities at the heart of placemaking
- Investing in skills and expertise
- Enabling experimental approaches to place-based work

People and skills

- Promise and fragmentation in the current landscape
- Systems for sharing
- Shifting scales in place and campus
- Leadership and governance support for system change
- Place-based partnerships not short-term projects

Places and systems

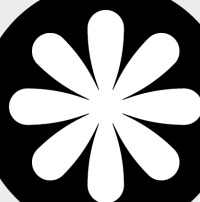
Mindset and understanding

- Putting people and communities at the heart of placemaking
- Thinking of universities as place-based anchor institutions
- Understanding civic impact through evidence

Conditions and structures

- Aligning civic purpose and university strategy
- Role security for teams and individuals
- Collaborative approaches to data tracking
- Integration with existing academic frameworks

Civic impact





THEME 1: Mindsets and understanding

Putting people and communities at the heart of placemaking

“ So when I hear the word data, it suggests certainty. And actually, I think there is an obliquity and ambiguous nature to this work, which I think institutions really struggle with. Because you have to get in with it. It’s about leaning into bits of work [...], and you don’t quite know in which direction it’s going to go [...] trusting the process.”

External Stakeholder Engagement Advisor

A cross-cutting point across all interviews was a difference in how people understand terms such as ‘place data’, ‘placemaking’ or ‘place-based work’. These differences had a direct co-relation with the individual’s background, expertise, and role in the HEI sector. For example, those with qualifications and an orientation towards data analysis leaned more towards understanding civic impact via place data, however those who came from partnership roles had a preference to classifying this type of work as ‘placemaking.’ One participant expressed her understanding of place data as not just physical characteristics, but also people characteristics. Therefore, in her work, place data is applied through a lens of local people in the area and what is meaningful to them:

“ [...] for me, place-based data is an insight into the community that you’re seeking to influence in some form or seeking to help [...] it’s an insight into that community as a starting point for a discussion about what would work for them, what would help.”

Professor of Economics Education

There is an acknowledgement of the gains from place data, in terms of how a product, service or educational offer can be delivered and to whom, but how that offer can be made and what it contains needs to be co-created with relevant communities in their environment. This necessitates a layered approach to using place data, and how it is often looked at as a problem-solving tool, rather than a way to define the problem itself. The importance of co-creation is brought to light in terms of relational practices and rhythmic interactions with the local community that need to be built in at an organisational level to best deliver impactful solutions.

Thinking of universities as place-based anchor institutions

Irrespective of the term used to describe place-based engagement, a shared understanding of why place-based work matters. in the context of a university's civic responsibility, emerged through the interviews, with agreement on why it is imperative to ensure that universities understand their role as place-based anchor institutes:

“ They [universities] have sort of woken up to the reality that we need to think about ourselves as a place-based anchor institute and what that means. [...] when we speak about the data, we speak about place-based things, but it's that soft, sometimes totally unquantifiable things, which is about the relationships. And it's being a neighbour, being a good neighbour, within your local community.”

Head of Engagement and Place

While data is important, this participant stresses the critical role of relationships, lived experiences, and everyday interactions with the local community - adding that these are things her institution currently lacks. She reflects on the confusion within higher education around terms such as placemaking, place-based work, and community, urging a clearer, shared definition of 'place' to move beyond academic debate. For her, grounding place in geographical terms (local, regional, national) would help universities better map relationships and impacts. She argues that universities must reinvent themselves not just as centres for students, but as ambitious, place-based institutions actively engaged with their localities. This shift from community engagement to place engagement, she believes, offers a powerful opportunity for systemic change:

“ [...] At the moment we are in a financial crisis, universities are failing, and redundancies are there [...] we need to shift. It's not anymore just about the students. Universities must reinvent themselves and think about themselves as place-based institutions and place-based partners ready to link and connect with those who are in that locality [...] how can you make new opportunities? But I think there has been this [...] lack of seeing the opportunities and being ambitious and being daring.”

Head of Engagement and Place

Understanding civic impact through evidence

A crucial factor that emerged was the importance of place data in building an evidence base that can challenge unconscious biases about local communities. For example, a participant spoke about systemic biases and prejudices that exist in a university context about student populations, and how certain communities are often excluded from the consideration of a university's target group. The importance of place data here is that it supports understanding a university's local place and communities based on lived experience:

“ I’ve been quite startled in the lack of knowledge that academics have of the student body that lives next door to the university. And so, if you ask most academics in my department, ‘what is the usual student King’s has in economics?’ they would not describe the young people we visited at that school in Whitechapel [...] your narrative doesn’t include this group. So yeah, it’s good for challenging some of the things that we are unconscious biases about the local community.”

Professor of Economics Education

While universities may be at different points in their journeys when it comes to gathering, applying and communicating evidence to support their civic impact, the first step lies in how they consider the value of evidence, be it in the form of data or lived experience, to guide the direction of their research. For example, a participant noted that while they can evaluate internal shifts in how public engagement is embedded into proposals, they currently lack evidence of external community impact:

“ So, I suppose for us [...] we could evaluate, like, how we’ve shifted our approach. Yeah. I couldn’t tell you what the impact is in the community at this point. But I know for us it’s shifted how we work and how and how that’s embedded within our proposals.”

Public Engagement Lead

Another participant uses various measures and data types to understand local impact holistically. These include index of multiple deprivation data, despite its infrequent updates, complemented by community listening exercises involving local residents and non-profits to gather feedback and manage expectations. Public consultations have also been a focus, especially regarding new campus developments. Additionally, she tracked employment outcomes for Imperial undergraduates, particularly the proportion who remain working locally in London:

“We do what we call community listening exercises, so we regularly meet with local residents. Also not-for-profits in the area. We [...] give them the chance to tell us what we’re doing well and what they want us to do more of [and] we look at employment outcomes for those undergraduates as a university, and how many of our graduates stay in London, [and how many] stay in the local area.”

Evaluation Officer



Three steps to broadening understanding of university civic impact:

1 Reframe place data as more than numbers.

Encourage universities to see place data not just as quantitative evidence but as a layered understanding that includes people's lived experiences, relationships, and rhythms of local life. This shift helps move away from purely problem-solving approaches towards co-defining problems and opportunities with communities. The NCIA [Place Navigator](#) can help universities to make sense of the complex ecosystem of the organisations and sectors that exist within places.

2 Foster shared language and clarity around 'place'.

Differences in how staff interpret terms like 'placemaking' or 'place-based work' can fragment efforts, so institutions need spaces to build a common vocabulary. Grounding definitions in both geography and community relationships enables universities to align their civic mission and better communicate their role as anchor institutions. Participatory tools such as the [Priority-Setting in Partnership Method](#) and [Effective Community Engagement Guide](#) can help in designing more inclusive processes and approaches to identify shared goals and build collective understanding, both within universities and when working with communities and local partners.

3 Embed co-creation and evidence into organisational practice.

Universities should combine traditional metrics (eg, deprivation indices, graduate outcomes) with community listening, consultations, and lived experience evidence. This dual approach helps challenge unconscious biases, ensures relevance of initiatives, and strengthens accountability in demonstrating real civic impact. See this NCIA case study on carrying out [Peer Research in universities, and the Thames Futures project](#).



THEME 2: People and skills

Communities as partners, not laboratories

Across all interviews, HEI staff emphasised that evidence must include people's lived experiences, since local attitudes, perceptions, and biases shape how communities interpret data about their area. For instance, a participant described current modes of interpreting data as not taking community input into account and often relying on historical models of interpretation that continue to perpetuate biases (with reference to racist and exclusionary frameworks). This can create a feedback loop of inaccurate representation about place and people:

“ Tower Hamlets [...] has a high proportion of Bengali families [...] but [that data] doesn't tell me why or how that manifests itself in how they access university. And how they access a business education and why they might struggle between choosing, finance and marketing, for example [...] and it's assuming that a Bengali folk community in east London is the same as the one in the Midlands or whatever and that is the nuance ”

Professor of Economics Education

HEI staff strongly believed that communities should be treated more equitably as partners and not as testing groups. This indicates a need for a perception shift in collaboration and practice at a university level:

“ I'd really like to challenge social science a little bit more to stop treating communities as laboratories and seeing them as partners. ”

Professor of Economics Education

Investing in skills and expertise

“ I think time is a real challenge [...]. I don't have any contact [with] a data analyst within the universities. [...] So, there's not that resource to kind of tap into for support. I suppose because I've had quite a lot of historical use of data to kind of inform policy and to measure performance, I feel like I'm quite confident in how to set that, what I'm looking for and what I need to be able to see, to understand what we need to be able to do.”

Universities Partnership Manager

Across the board, HEI staff indicated how challenging it is to coordinate data use across the university sector because there is no single team or person responsible for such a task. Gathering, analysing, interpreting and communicating data is spread across various departments and roles without always taking into consideration the skills that may be required to navigate this well, making it hard to know what others are doing or how to create collaborative environments. This also increases the pressure on staff who feel inexperienced or not adequately trained or resourced to do the work. However, there is a discrepancy where universities that are better staffed, have adequate funding, and a skilled team in place, can navigate the data landscape with a lot more ease. An example of this can be used as inspiration for best practice around investing in the right skills and expertise, and the result that has on driving civic agendas forward:

“ At the moment we've been doing kind of okay with what's available publicly. I think we're well-resourced in the fact that we have a number of evaluators who know about that data within the public community engagement and outreach, we don't do that much data purchasing and when we do it, it wouldn't be place-based data. [...] one of the benefits of being within London [is] we can draw upon like the London Data website/ONS, which is useful and kind of has a lot of summaries and easier to use formats than you get directly.”

Evaluation Officer

Enabling experimental approaches to place-based work

“ I would like my institution to be more experimental [...], ringfencing people and budgets to do that test and trial work with the community, [...] and less of project management of memorandums of understandings. The things that actually won't make a difference, that won't turn the dial on our relationships with the communities but yeah, look good on a KPI return sheet.”

External Stakeholder Engagement Advisor

HEI staff consistently expressed a desire for institutions to adopt a more experimental approach to establishing civic agendas, recognising the value of dedicating people and budgets specifically to 'test and trial' initiatives with communities. A common critique of the current focus was on project management, which focuses on sole bureaucratic exercises and often does little to genuinely strengthen community relationships. There was a desire for meaningful, impact-driven engagement that goes beyond ticking boxes for KPIs:

“ [...] it's time to reinvent what universities mean in today's world [...] universities could do magic if they wake up to this opportunity and [look to] not just the local residents, but further afield, their businesses, their local authorities, their national agencies like NHS and so on and so on [...]. And that means that our core business product, knowledge, [...] could be transferred and worked with local partners in a way that we can bring in the lived experience.”

Head of Engagement and Place



Three approaches to nurturing people and skills for civic impact:

1 Grow equitable partnerships with communities:

Shift from treating communities as ‘laboratories’ to recognising them as equal partners, embedding lived experience into data interpretation, and challenging historical models that perpetuate bias. [The NCIA Equitable Partnerships Toolkit](#) provides guidance on how to do this in practice, alongside [learnings from the NCIA’s Action Learning Group participants about university journeys to become civic](#).

2 Embed skills and infrastructure within institutions:

Invest in data expertise, training, and dedicated teams that can coordinate, interpret, and communicate place-based insights effectively, ensuring staff feel supported rather than overstretched.

3 Cultivate experimental and impact-driven approaches:

Create space, resources, and flexibility for universities to test, trial, and co-develop initiatives with communities —moving beyond box-ticking KPIs to embed civic agendas that deliver genuine social benefit. [Watch inspiring stories from across the civic university network](#) about how different universities have approached their work with communities and local partners.



THEME 3: Conditions and structures

Aligning civic purpose and university strategy

A key point of disconnect that was commonly experienced by HEI staff was how to align and advocate for their university's civic purpose and potential - as understood through people's day-to-day roles - in relation to the wider university vision and strategic priorities. Interview participants expressed the impact of disjointed internal ways of working and a lack of dedicated resources, funding, and permanent roles. All of which were identified as necessary, in terms of organisational structures or scaffolding needed so that civic impact and engagement work could progress beyond being project focused or ad hoc, and become an embedded, strategic commitment and data driven in its approach:

“ I think joining up how we’re using data across the university is a big challenge. [...] we don’t have one single team or individual who kind of owns that for the university. It’s all over in different departments. [...] And I don’t think it’s that unique. I think a lot of universities [are] doing this.”

Evaluation Officer

Role security for teams and individuals

It was often apparent that many people's engagement roles had evolved over time into the civic impact space, rather than through strategic or intentional design. This resulted in widespread feelings of staff precarity or vulnerability about the continuation of their civic work, which was compounded by a perceived lack of strategic understanding or prioritisation at a leadership level, and little investment in the soft infrastructure needed to develop a joined-up approach to using data and evidence. Whilst many individuals described with passion the innovative bottom-up or grassroots approaches they had been developing, they still viewed these as emergent, rather than telling a compelling strategic story about their university's civic impact:

“ I almost operate as a social enterprise within a university context. [My team are] all brilliant, they’re all committed, they’re all dedicated, they’re all passionate, highly skilled. They do it because they care. So, the challenge I’ve got is that they’re constantly on fixed-term contracts. That’s the one thing that makes me feel really uneasy with the whole work I do.”

Head of Public Policy Engagement

Collaborative approaches to data tracking

However, there were some examples where universities were further advanced in their thinking and practice. As a result, they had invested in centralising and formalising their approach to working civic impact data, and had not gone on the journey alone, but by working with other academic institutions and place-based partners. One participant described a social value portal, which was set up in collaboration with the local authority, and other universities with whom they had a civic university agreement. This supports them, collectively, to prioritise their areas of intended impact and be more data-driven, as well as providing a strategic profile for the work, and the infrastructure needed to sustain and grow it in future:

“ [...] from the social value portal set of indicators, the three universities and Leicester City Council selected a subset of those indicators, which they all agreed were the things they wanted to kind of drive through the social value process. We’ve got a civic agreement with the signatories and we’ve got five local authority signatories and three universities. [...] that that’s the type of thing that I think we need to sort of build into our processes [...] what are the key things that as a system we want to change? I think is where I’d like to see us moving in maybe the next iteration of our agreement.”

Universities Partnership Manager

Integration with existing academic frameworks

One of the most significant barriers to scaling civic engagement is the perceived tension between civic work and traditional academic performance metrics. Staff shared how important it is to align civic and place-based activities with existing [Research Excellence Framework \(REF\)](#)³ and [Knowledge Exchange Framework \(KEF\)](#)⁴ processes, thereby reducing duplication and ensuring wider academic buy-in. However, it was also noted that current academic frameworks are inadequately designed to capture the full scope of university civic contributions, especially in terms of activities that significantly impact local communities but remain invisible in traditional academic metrics. Having an expanded view of civic engagement was seen as critical, better reflecting universities’ true social purpose and providing a more comprehensive foundation for tracking progress against civic commitments. Aligned to this was feedback from staff whose roles had originally centred on knowledge exchange and impact, but by moving into more civic engagement-focused positions now understood and appreciated the value of civic partnership work, providing a sustained route to impact through the opportunity for ongoing collaboration with place-based organisations and communities.

³ The REF is the UK’s system for assessing research excellence in higher education institutions.

⁴ The KEF provides a range of information on the knowledge exchange activities of higher education providers (HEPs) in England



Three steps to strengthening internal structures:

1 Invest in internal civic impact teams and permanent roles.

So that staff have the financial and job security to move away from working reactively and dedicate time to developing cross-cutting approaches and a more strategic role in how they support departments, faculties and the university. A NCIA report that can be used to support this is [Civic capitals at risk: the fragile foundations of the civic university](#).

2 Agree a core set of civic university outcomes with local partners.

Ensure these connect community and place priorities with university knowledge and expertise - and socialise these internally and externally. This means place-based needs and opportunities can become more closely aligned with strategic areas of research and teaching. Key NCIA resources to support this include the [Place Navigator](#) and [Civic Impact Dashboard](#).

3 Recognise the civic contribution made by university-wide functions.

Develop a parallel excellence framework system to support this, including HEI professional services, engagement teams, and facilities management alongside research and teaching staff. This means universities can tell a comprehensive place-based impact story that is complementary to, not overshadowed by, the REF and KEF. A key NCIA resource that may be used to support this is the [Civic Impact Framework](#).



THEME 4: Places and systems

Promise and fragmentation in the current landscape

“ If we had better data, we could tell a better story about ourselves, which I think [is important] in terms of how universities are viewed at the moment. So, it’s on two levels...being able to tell a narrative and then also better relationships with communities in your place because you’re not all kind of yet working. It’s collaborative but not necessarily overlapping.”

Public Engagement Lead

Many universities across the UK are increasingly recognising their role as civic institutions, with many in the process of signing civic universities agreements that signal a commitment to evidence-led, place-based approaches. This growing momentum represents a significant opportunity to transform how higher education institutions engage with their local communities and contribute to regional development. However, beneath this promising surface lies a complex web of systemic challenges that prevent universities from realising their full civic potential.

The current state of civic engagement in universities is characterised by a fundamental paradox: while individual academics and departments often maintain strong community partnerships — particularly around pressing social issues such as homelessness—these efforts remain largely uncoordinated at an institutional level. This fragmentation means universities are simultaneously over-engaging and under-utilising their civic capacity, with communities potentially exhausted by multiple, unconnected university outreach efforts while institutions struggle to demonstrate their collective impact. This is made more challenging by political flux in the external environment, compounded by the ‘devolution deal’, which interviewees described as a systemic blocker to both being able to confidently agree ‘place’ data, and impacting relational working dynamics with partners, including local authorities:

“ But with the devolution deal, that’s changing things again, because we might have built up relationships with officers, but then we just had a new authority, and kind of administration. [...] we’re having to constantly match what we can offer with people’s priorities. And those priorities are shifting.”

Engagement Manager

Systems for sharing

At the heart of many of these challenges lies a critical weakness in data infrastructure and sharing processes. HEI staff reported that their data sharing mechanisms to be “messy and obstructive”, creating significant barriers to effective place-based work. This dysfunction operates at multiple levels: internally, universities lack systematic approaches to collecting and coordinating data about their community partnerships; externally, they struggle to establish effective data-sharing relationships with local authorities and community organisations. The consequences of these data infrastructure failures are far-reaching. Without robust systems for capturing and analysing place-based data, universities cannot adequately measure their civic impact, identify opportunities for collaboration, or make evidence-based decisions about resource allocation. More critically, they cannot learn from successful models or scale effective interventions across different contexts.

“ Data sharing at [my university] is very messy. [...] just the sheer volume of admin it takes to get a data sharing agreement. I would say that no one does that, it’s just too overwhelming to do it. Who owns the data? Whose is the IP? All of these questions are, I mean, they’re always there.”

Professor of Economics Education

Shifting scales in place and campus

The challenge of civic impact and engagement work was also seen to vary significantly across different types of university campuses and geographic contexts. Smaller, rural campuses often spoke of closer, more embedded community relationships, with local academics naturally developing place-specific partnerships:

“ I suppose that my university has kind of four places, with different campuses in each [and] those places obviously have very different kinds of communities within them. So, we’ve got on campus in an island community and [...] we work really closely with the businesses there [and] with the local community. But that’s the nature of it being such a small place. So, you wouldn’t be able to not work in that way. But that’s something that’s being very much led by the academics at that campus rather than something centrally done.”

Public Engagement Lead

In contrast, larger urban campuses tend toward broader, less geographically-focused engagements that might have a global reach but lack deep local roots. This variation suggests that for civic impact measurement frameworks to be effective, they must be flexible enough to accommodate different contexts while maintaining sufficient structure to enable meaningful comparison and learning across institutions. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to civic impact work would fail to recognise the unique opportunities and constraints that different universities face based on their location, size, and community context:

“ we use existing data sets to figure out where those underserved areas of the UK are and where those underserved communities are closer to our campuses.”

Evaluation Officer

Leadership and governance support for system change

Universities that have made significant progress in place-based work consistently demonstrate pro-engagement leadership that embeds community engagement as a core priority across faculties and departments, which is often visible not just internally but externally, as in the case of [Wrexham University](#). This top-down commitment, when combined with governmental mandates that require civic considerations in university growth agendas, creates an enabling environment for prioritising place-based data generation and decision-making. However, leadership commitment alone is insufficient without accompanying structural changes. Universities need governance frameworks that integrate civic responsibilities with existing academic and operational priorities, ensuring that place-based work is peripheral but becomes central to institutional identity and planning:

“ I am constantly firefighting at different levels, on top of a significant workload, supporting and enabling a team, secure resources and funding to be sustainable and operating on a regional level, it is really challenging.... and we have clear and strong support from our Vice Chancellor. There is no money in the system [...] But then when you do get traction [...] the achievement you get is quite immense. [...] I just want to know that I'm making a difference. And I think my whole team feels the same way, so there's a frustration with the system.”

Head of Public Policy Engagement

Place-based partnerships not short-term projects

Successful civic universities demonstrate the importance of establishing clear, well-structured partnerships with external organisations. The most effective collaborations are characterised by transparent data-sharing agreements, shared evaluation frameworks, and mutual benefit structures that respect the needs and constraints of all partners. Staff highlighted that these types of partnerships require sustained investment in relationship-building and trust-based collaboration mechanisms. But of equal importance is a focus on how these relationships were set up, from a reciprocal, mutually beneficial standpoint. Critical to these partnerships is the recognition that effective civic engagement requires moving beyond extractive research models toward genuine co-creation processes. This includes co-production, co-sharing, and co-learning approaches that position community partners as equal stakeholders in defining problems, developing solutions, and evaluating outcomes:

“ And what would [communities] like us to do rather than us deciding what we think is best for a region? [...] We do that somewhat with like with local schools. We talk to them. What activities do you want? What can we help with? How can we raise attainment, aspirations, things like that. But it’s all very like small pockets. If it became something [...] the universities were told, [...] we could then gather all this data. And I think there is probably so much data out there, but we’re not gathering it because it’s not a priority.”

Public Engagement Lead



Four ways to support equitable data-driven partnership working:

1 Focus on developing and using shared measurement frameworks

To enable consistent measurement of civic impact across institutions. This would support benchmarking activities, facilitate learning from successful models, and provide a foundation for collective action toward shared civic goals. The [Civic Impact Framework](#) and [Civic Impact Dashboard](#) can provide help on identifying and analyses key measures and metrics for civic impact for universities and places, with these [reports by City-REDI](#) providing further guidance on understanding and measuring your university's economic impact.

2 Create inclusive and accessible data-sharing protocols

So universities can navigate the complex landscape of community engagement while respecting privacy and consent requirements. These protocols should address both technical and ethical dimensions of data sharing.

3 Build more equitable collaboration and partnership approaches

To prevent community over-engagement, while ensuring comprehensive coverage of civic needs both within and between institutions. Key resources that can help universities in the setting up better relationships include the [Equitable Partnerships Guide](#) and the [Theory of Civic Change](#), which can be used with partners to together identify the activities and outcomes that can create positive impact together in place.

4 Put in place regional learning networks

To share insights, coordinate activities, and jointly address place-based challenges that exceed the capacity of individual institutions. Developing a [Civic Agreement](#) in partnership with other local universities and organisations can provide the foundations for this, with example agreements from across universities in England available [here](#).

3 Recommendations

In a world where it's easy to be overwhelmed by the volume of information available, HEI staff interviewed were clear that more data was not the end goal for those involved in civic university impact work, rather being more data-driven was critical. This would help staff to make the case for where universities should prioritise civic work with place-based partners.

To navigate the noise of working within complex academic institutions, this research reveals that staff want support in advocating for better ways to collect, access, analyse and collaborate around internal and external insights and evidence.

Interviewees' views on what hindered or enabled HEIs to do this came down to a lack of job security or leadership recognition for the value of civic-focused work. Many spoke with great uncertainty about the current financial climate of universities and whether - against such a challenging backdrop - there would be sustained commitment to retaining staff, or investment in the structures and systems they need to be able to connect their data work, both within and beyond universities.

However, for those who had secured strategic backing at a leadership level (supported by recent [educational policy commitments](#)), there was hope in terms of building momentum and starting to scale ambitions for their university's civic impact. But this remains fragile. One institution was described as reliant not only on the continued dedication of passionate and knowledgeable staff, but also university leaders who recognise might be gained through prioritising civic work and what might be lost if action was not taken. They recognise this in terms of the university's external reputation, and the perceived social purpose and value with key stakeholders such as students, staff, funders, local partners and neighbouring communities.

Our recommendations for addressing these challenges through targeted investment are shown on the next page.

Recommendations:

1 Lead with a civic focus

- Reframe place data as more than numbers, but as a layered understanding that includes people's lived experiences, relationships and rhythms of local life.
- Foster shared language and clarity around 'place' within universities, building a common vocabulary.
- Embed co-creation and evidence into organisational practice, through combining traditional metrics with community listening, consultations, and lived experience evidence.

2 Value and invest in staff

- Nurture equitable partnerships with communities by valuing the different perspectives and skills they bring, embedding lived experience into data interpretation, and challenging historical models that perpetuate bias.
- Embed skills and infrastructure within institutions by investing in data expertise, training, and dedicated teams that can coordinate, interpret, and communicate place-based insights effectively.
- Cultivate experimental and impact-driven approaches through creating space, resources, and flexibility to test, trial, and co-develop initiatives with communities, and by embedding civic agendas that deliver genuine social benefit.

3 Strengthen internal collaboration

- Move away from project to core funding for internal civic impact teams and invest in permanent roles.
- Agree a core set of civic university outcomes with local partners - that connect community and place priorities with university knowledge and expertise - and socialise these internally and externally.
- Develop a parallel excellence framework system that recognises the civic contribution made by university-wide functions, including HEI professional services, engagement teams, and facilities management alongside research and teaching staff.

4 Prioritise local partnerships

- Focus on developing and using shared measurement frameworks that enable consistent measurement of civic impact across institutions.
- Create inclusive and accessible data sharing protocols so universities can navigate the complex landscape of community engagement while respecting privacy and consent requirements.
- Build more equitable collaboration, coordination and partnership approaches to prevent community over-engagement, while ensuring comprehensive coverage of civic needs both within and between institutions.
- Put in place regional learning networks to share insights, coordinate activities, and jointly address place-based challenges that exceed the capacity of individual institutions

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- Emma Watson, Evaluation Officer, Imperial College London
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- Nora Davies, External Stakeholder Engagement Advisor, University of Sussex
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