

Community Connections Grant Pilot

What is this project about?

About the Communities Connections Grant pilot

This grant challenges traditional models of public engagement work by recognising and supporting community expertise. It will enable up to three community groups to define their needs, priorities, what excites them and how they want to work with arts, humanities and social sciences researchers.

Each project will be driven by the community group and created in a way that ensures all voices and experiences are valued.

The community groups taking part in the pilot will receive funding of up to £5,000 to support them to deliver their activity. They will collectively decide how the funds will be allocated. CPEP officers are working with trusted brokers to identify these groups. For definitions and examples of different types of communities, see our [Glossary](#).

For the pilot, we will learn from this process to create an open call for the same grant to which other community groups and individuals representing community groups can apply. The open call will launch next year.

Your role

Researcher participation in the pilot will take place between February and May 2026.

Your role as a researcher on this grant will be to support a community group to produce a project around an issue, idea or topic that is important to that group, drawing on your area of expertise and relevant skills.

Through informal and formal meetings, you and the group will get to know each other and shape the project together. In workshops you'll collaborate on planning and delivering the project.

The experimental nature of this pilot means we cannot predict the exact nature of the commitment involved. However, we anticipate that it will take between 30 and 40 hours of your time, across the 4-month period.

Eligibility

To be eligible to participate in this pilot, researchers must be employed at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) or AHRC-recognised Independent Research Organisation (IRO), either full time or part time. If selected, researchers will be asked to confirm that they will be employed for the duration of their part of the pilot project (Feb-May 2026).

Aims and why we think this grant is valuable

The aims for the grant are to:

- Break down boundaries and assumptions between universities and the public
- Bring people with different experiences together
- Celebrate existing knowledge within communities
- Find creative ways to address community issues
- Share skills that may seem inaccessible to people outside university

We think the grant is valuable in supporting communities to take forward an activity that is meaningful to them.

Aims for the pilot are to:

- Learn from a process of doing and evaluation
- Understand practical and ethical challenges within the project process and partnership development
- Shape the full grant application form, guidance and any associated administrative forms
- Create a full grant that is flexible and responsive to communities and researchers' needs

Why might you want to be involved?

We recognise that participating in this pilot would place additional pressure on your time as a researcher. We anticipate that participating in the grant will enable researchers to gain valuable professional development experience through sharing their expertise with communities via dialogue and support.

These are the benefits that we believe will result from being involved:

- Enhance transferable skills in building partnerships, public engagement and creative production
- Share your knowledge, experience and skills with those outside the higher education sector through a focused and responsive scheme

- Build your research leadership experience by supporting skills development in others and acknowledging their expertise
- Help contribute to positive change in wider society
- Build new connections with and confidence in working with community groups
- Be part of a peer community of practice through learning with other participating researchers
- Have access to relevant trainings and support to build your engagement practice and engagement identity
- Gain new understanding of and responsiveness to community agency

The pilot is also a way for us at CPEP to learn more about how best to support researchers in working with communities.

How will the pilot project work?

The £5,000 granted to participating community groups will be distributed to them through payment methods and timescales that are as responsive to their needs as possible. The learning from this will be used to inform more equitable ways of dispersing funds.

With the funding, these community groups will plan an activity based on their interests, strengths and priorities. For example, they may want to create a podcast, an archive or performance. Or they may want to record local history or stories and share them through a film or exhibition.

Selected researchers will contribute their skills to help communities develop their plans. For example, researchers may be asked to help communities:

- Look through archives or build their own
- Conduct interviews on topics that matter to them
- Create a narrative for an exhibition
- Put communities in contact with other creative experts
- Learn more about a topic they're interested in
- Explore different ways of communicating their passions
- Voice their opinions on local issues

How will researchers be selected?

We are asking researchers from across the UK to express their interest in being involved in the Community Connections pilot or grant. We have designed an [Expression of Interest form](#) to help us identify researchers to introduce to communities. The form will enable researchers to highlight their areas of interest and expertise, and their ambition and vision for community-led collaborations.

Once we hear more from communities about what they would like to do and what support they think they will need, we will review the Expression of Interest forms to identify a researcher with relevant expertise. CPEP will then contact the researcher to confirm availability, interest and consent to share their information, before proposing the researcher to the community group.

As this is a community-led project, CPEP will arrange an introductory meeting between the community group and the researcher before a final decision is made and participation is confirmed.

Although the pilot project will run in a set timeframe (February–May 2026), researchers can also indicate their interest in being considered for the full grant scheme, which we aim to open in June 2026 (with projects to start from Autumn 2026).

What are the practical steps?

The pilot will run through a series of workshops, each designed to guide community groups and researchers through different stages of the project. The stages will be:

1. CPEP officers get to know the community groups and together discuss what they would like to do as a creative project
2. Based on community group identified criteria, CPEP will review Expressions of Interest and propose a suitable researcher to work with
3. Once mutually agreed, community groups and researcher get to know each other
4. Community groups develop their ideas for the creative project with researcher
5. Community groups produce the desired project with researcher support

The project that the community group decides to do may be just for their group, or it may be a public-facing activity. If the latter, researchers working with community groups should be prepared to help them to follow any relevant legal and ethical compliance at their institution relating to public-facing activities.

Some important things to consider during the project

- Listening to different voices in the group
- Balancing ambition with being realistic
- Thinking about long-term benefits
- Making decisions collaboratively and fairly
- Regular check-ins to assess project's alignment with aims and ambitions
- Continuous evaluation

- Anything else that you want to add!

Impact and evaluation

The pilot is designed to help us learn from it to inform the design for an open call for similar community projects next year.

Throughout this pilot, CPEP will be developing an application form and guidance for future applicants; we would be very grateful for your opinion on the language we use and the questions we ask.

Near the end of the pilot, we will run a reflective session asking questions about how we have run the project and your experience of participating in it.

We want to understand what elements of the project process and partnership building may present logistical challenges or be difficult to navigate. What we learn together will help shape the final grant scheme that we will launch next year, to which community groups would need to apply.

Communities and researchers involved in the pilot will therefore be directly feeding into creating a grant that as flexible and responsive to their needs as possible.

CPEP officers' role throughout

We will facilitate workshops to guide community groups and researchers through different stages of the project.

We will be the key point of contact for any questions.

We can provide templates for and help with partnership agreements, budgeting, planning, and risk assessments.

We will provide access to training to help facilitate the work.

As this is a pilot, we will be trying out new ways of doing things and are always open to ongoing feedback.

Practical information

Budget + payment

Direct costs that researchers incur in working with the group (e.g. travel) will be covered by CPEP in addition to the £5,000 grant. Staff time for salaried researchers is not an eligible cost for this grant.

Additional resource is available for reasonable access costs for researchers and pilot scheme participants.

In the pilot, CPEP will offer community groups £5,000 to support them to deliver their activity. The budget can be allocated to a variety of eligible costs, including:

- Reasonable adjustments for audience access needs within public-engagement activity
- Inclusion costs e.g. childcare
- Direct costs incurred by researchers e.g. travel
- Non-HEI staff time
- Venue hire
- Transport costs
- Fees for creatives
- Promotional costs
- Materials
- Translation services
- Childcare

If budget planning support is needed, CPEP officers will be available to help. We will be trialling various payment types, where possible and appropriate, so that we can work with communities to find a method of payment and a timescale for dispersal that meets their needs.

In the early stages of the project, we work with communities to complete a draft budget using a budget template that we will provide. However, as this is a pilot, we recognise that the budget is being formed in real-time, and may change, so we aim to be as flexible as we can be.

Timeline

The pilot will commence in January and run through May 2026. Researchers are likely to be asked to work with communities from February or March 2026. This timeline may be subject to change according to community group and researcher availability.

Commitment

We will work with communities and researchers to decide on the best schedule for working together. For example, we could deliver workshops during communities' regular meetings, or set up an agreed time that suits everyone involved. Selected researchers may be asked to meet community groups outside normal working hours, if communities are only able to meet at that time.

The project will be a mix of meetings and workshops. Meetings will be shorter and based around conversation (max. 1 hour) and workshops will be longer (max. half a day) and will also incorporate guided, sometimes creative, activities. If more than half the group can't make one of these meetings or workshops, we will aim to reschedule. If most of the group can attend, notes will be shared with those who can't make it.

About us

The Centre for Public Engagement in Arts and Humanities (CPEP) is a funded initiative to test and create new ways to support ambitious, experimental ways of doing public engagement.

We will do this through offering grants, resources, training and learning opportunities to foster meaningful collaboration and lead to long-term impact and relationships.

We are based at the School of Advanced Study at the University of London. We work with people all over the UK. More information about the CPEP can be found at our website: www.engagementpractice.org

CPEP's funding comes from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

Lorna Powell and Amara Thornton are Public Engagement Officers for CPEP, and are leading the development of this pilot and grant. They are your contacts for this pilot. They are available to answer any questions you have and will be guiding you through the pilot.

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