Learning and insights from
The Public & Community Panel –
University of Oxford

Lucent

CONTENTS

Inspiring social change

BACKGROUND

This report captures learning about the role of a Public & Community Panel (P&C Panel) that was recruited to support decision-making for the University of Oxford's Public and Community Engagement with Research Fund (PCER Fund) in the 2024/25 academic year.

This was the first time a participatory grantmaking approach was used for the PCER Fund, with the P&C Panel bringing insights from their lived and professional experiences of public engagement.
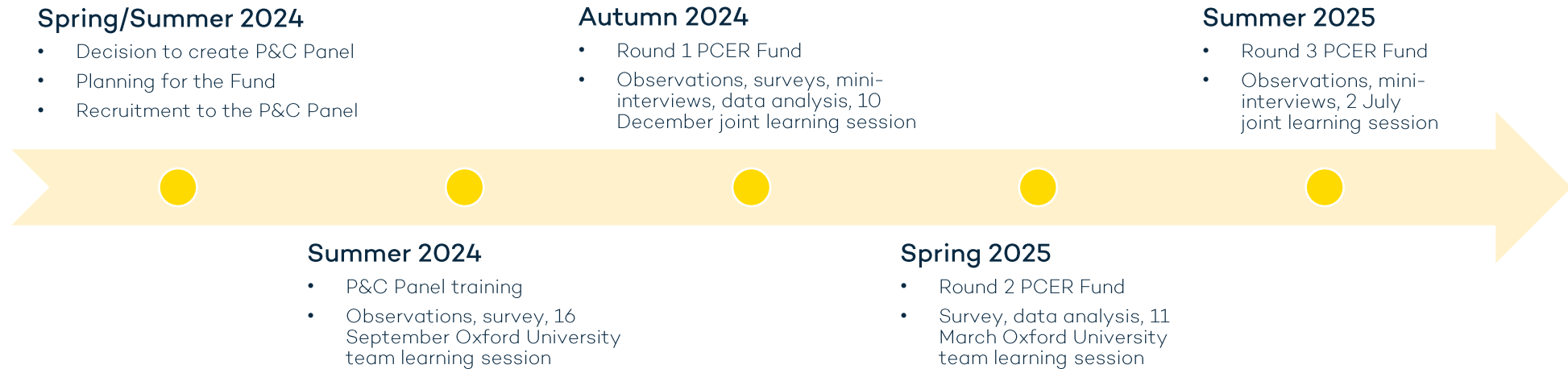
The University was keen to learn from this process, so engaged Lucent Consultancy as a learning partner in July 2024.

This is our final report written in July 2025.

Inspiring **social change**

BACKGROUND

The PCER Fund timetable and key learning activities

Spring/Summer 2024
- Decision to create P&C Panel
- Planning for the Fund
- Recruitment to the P&C Panel

Autumn 2024
- Round 1 PCER Fund
- Observations, surveys, mini-interviews, data analysis, 10 December joint learning session

Summer 2025
- Round 3 PCER Fund
- Observations, mini-interviews, 2 July joint learning session

Summer 2024
- P&C Panel training
- Observations, survey, 16 September Oxford University team learning session

Spring 2025
- Round 2 PCER Fund
- Survey, data analysis, 11 March Oxford University team learning session

For each of the **three rounds of the PCER Fund**:

- P&C Panel members were sent grant applications (around 5 each).
- The P&C Panel then met in-person to discuss their views and make a consolidated recommendation.
- Those recommendations were then taken forward into an Oxford University recommendations panel meeting where (near) final decisions would be made jointly by Oxford University academics, engagement professionals and divisional public engagement leads, and the P&C Panel representatives.
- The final decisions were ratified by the University's Head of PCER and the University's Academic Champion for PCER.

METHODOLOGY

This learning report draws on mixed methods undertaken between July 2024 – July 2025:

- Anonymous feedback surveys with P&C Panel members
- Mini interviews with P&C Panel members during key events
- Two learning workshops with P&C Panel members and Oxford University staff
- Two team learning workshops with Oxford University staff
- Observations by Lucent consultant of key events
- Analysis of P&C Panel grant recommendations

Inspiring **social change**

POSITIONALITY AND POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS

Lucent consultant Charlotte Ravenscroft was introduced to the P&C Panel at its first training session in July 2024.

Charlotte's role was independent of the University, acting as a learning partner to support the first year of running the P&C Panel.

This included a key role enabling the P&C Panel to provide feedback – anonymously via Lucent as a 3rd party – about what was and wasn't working for them, so that improvements could be made by Oxford University staff.

Building trust and rapport with the P&C Panel was critical to encourage candid feedback, and similarly with the Oxford University team to support them to act on feedback in real-time.

This report is mainly based on feedback from P&C Panel members, in their own words, as well as data analysis, but it also includes our own analysis and observations which are inevitably subjective.

There may be other limitations, such as if any P&C Panel members did not feel comfortable offering candid feedback or found any of our feedback processes inaccessible. To mitigate these risks, we used varied methods – such as anonymous surveys, learning workshops and mini-interviews.

All learning activities were optional. P&C Panel members were paid for their time attending two short online learning workshops.

LEARNING QUESTIONS

Lucent worked with Oxford University PCER team at the outset to understand their priorities for the learning partnership.

There were broadly two areas of inquiry – or learning questions – that were important:

- **What Works Now:** How can Oxford University support the P&C Panel, so they can have a positive impact on Oxford University's research and public engagement activity this year?
- **What Works for the Future:** Is this the best approach to enable communities to influence research at Oxford University? Is it replicable? Are there any changes/other options that should be considered for future years?

The findings shared in this report are structured around these questions.

The first question is broken down to explore (a) how well the P&C Panel was supported, and (b) how impactful it was.

We also drew inspiration from other participatory grantmakers' approaches to assessing impact. See next slide.

Lucent

"

A key measure of success in a grant making process should be ending each decision round by asking the staff team 'did these decisions vary from what we'd have funded, and do we now think our participatory grant makers made better decisions?'

NPC/Camden Giving (2024) *Measuring the impact of Participatory Grantmaking*

"

In our bold experiment with participatory grantmaking, the stakeholders involved are interacting in a power-sharing process. All stakeholders are engaged in the model, responding and adapting to each other so that what emerges and evolves is an ongoing cycle of learning.

Fenomenal Funds (2023) *Learning strategy*

Inspiring **social change**

How well did the University support the P&C Panel to have an impact in 2024-25?

lucentconsultancy.co.uk

Lucent
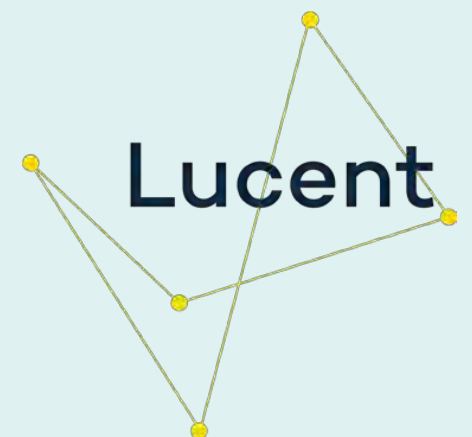
Onboarding and training stages

What enabled the P&C Panel's participation?

Recruited for experience and diversity: The P&C Panel members were drawn from Oxfordshire and were required to have previous experience with the University's research or public engagement activity. This was a conscious choice, based on advice from other participatory grantmakers. While these criteria limited the pool of potential applicants, the composition of the P&C Panel combined knowledge around public engagement with diversity in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity.

Onboarding and training: A 3-part induction and training was run before the grantmaking process began. There were mixed views from the P&C Panel about how lengthy this training was, given some had prior experience, but in general it was well-received. Later, members reflected it had been good to get to know each other before they had to embark on grantmaking decisions together.

Engaging sessions: Lucent observed the induction and training sessions and found engagement was high, with lots of participation in the exercises and plenaries. The sessions were thoughtfully designed, with co-created ground rules and opportunities to work in pairs, small groups and as a whole group, enabling everyone's voices to be heard.

Skilled facilitator/coordinator: P&C Panel members reflected (in their final learning workshop) that establishing an early rapport and single point of contact with Oxford University's facilitator — Rachel Piper — had been important for their engagement. Rachel led most of the in-person sessions and was the main point of contact with P&C Panel members throughout the year. Her background experience as a community worker and skills in inclusive facilitation were particularly valued by the P&C Panel members.

Payment for time: The P&C Panel were recruited as individuals (rather than representatives of specific communities or groups). The payment level was £20 per hour.

Onboarding and training stages

What hindered the P&C Panel's participation?

Recruitment issues: A few initial applications had to be rejected due to candidates' location (outside Oxfordshire) or immigration status (without the right to work). While this is not unusual for recruitment, the Oxford University team reflected that they could have been clearer about these criteria upfront.

Less clear benefits to the community: A small number of community groups declined the opportunity as it would not directly further their charitable objectives. Most P&C Panel members were involved in community groups, but also had a general interest in public engagement. At least one P&C Panel member said they wanted their organisation to benefit from their involvement, but weren't clear how this would happen.

Payment issues: The University did not initially have clarity about how it would pay the P&C Panel members for their time. Ultimately, casual worker contracts were used, per Finance guidance. This approach saw P&C Panel members waiting several weeks for small payments. This reflected poorly on the University given its resources and an alternative approach should be explored for the future.

Tech issues: The University required P&C Panel members to have a log-in for their systems to access the PCER Fund applications and to attend an IT security training. This presented difficulties for several panellists and took up additional un-remunerated time. Similarly, some members struggled to access online documents and sessions because they were using phones to do so. Most sessions therefore were held in person and integrating admin support into those in-person sessions partially mitigated this issue.

"I was close to backing out because I don't have time for admin and forms." – P&C Panel member, round 1

P&C Panel training with Oxford University PCER Team staff

During the grantmaking process

What enabled the P&C Panel's participation?

As above: All the enablers noted above in the training section continued to be significant throughout.

In-person: In-person events were the preference of the P&C Panel throughout. One short-notice change to a hybrid format (necessitated by a snowstorm) was not successful as people online felt unable to participate fully. Participation in (optional) online events was also more limited. P&C Panel members also rejected an option to submit individual scores without any meetings.

Community venue: Following suggestions from P&C Panel members, the key events were relocated to a local community space with more space and a less formal atmosphere. Lucent observed that this space felt more welcoming, conducive to networking and a better layout for the 'world café' style discussions. Buffet food and drinks were also provided at each event.

Support and adaptability: P&C Panel members were supported throughout the process by Oxford University's facilitator and the wider PCER team. This involved significant time, empathy and adaptability. For example, to welcome the Panel's contributions in whatever format they felt comfortable to provide them – whether written at length, short notes, verbal feedback at a meeting or via a separate 121 call. It was clear one size wouldn't fit all and the Oxford University team adapted quickly to this.

AI: In round 3, one P&C Panel member reported that AI translation tools had improved their ability to participate compared to round 1. Appropriate use of AI should be proactively agreed for any future rounds of grantmaking, given its widening use.

During the grantmaking process

What hindered the P&C Panel's participation?

Not feeling heard: As part of each grantmaking round, P&C Panel representatives attended a termly Oxford University recommendations panel meeting where final funding recommendations would be agreed. In the 1st round, the single P&C Panel member who attended this Oxford University meeting felt it was hard to make their contributions heard because it was rushed and they were expected to represent the views of the P&C Panel on all the applications. This feedback was acted on – in the 2nd round, 3 P&C Panel members attended and reported better experiences.

Burdensome process: Some P&C Panel members struggled with detailed feedback forms in round 1 and limited time for review of applications. Similarly, the representative who attended the Oxford University recommendations panel meeting reported doing unpaid preparation. In subsequent rounds, the time available for reading each application was increased, feedback forms were simplified and – as above – three reps split responsibility for attending the Oxford University recommendations panel meeting so less preparation was required.

Undeclared bias: While a clear process for declaring conflicts of interest had been set out, on at least one occasion a P&C Panel member later revealed a personal bias against a particular project. If this had been expressed earlier in the process, the application could have been allocated to a different person. Therefore, if this process was run again, careful consideration should be given to encouraging conflicts of interest and potential bias to be declared throughout the process, while being mindful not to prevent panellists drawing on their lived experience of an issue or an area.

"

Very positive experience. It was interesting to hear different perspectives, everyone had chance to share their opinions. Welcoming environment.

P&C Panel member comment on the Oxford University recommendations panel meeting in round 2. Survey response.

"

It is important to able to hear the views of colleagues. Their insights might lead to a revision of one's own score.

P&C Panel member comment on the value of in-person meetings. Survey response.

Inspiring social change

"

50/50 judging between balance between P&C and University panel is excellent.

Notes of P&C Panel feedback, after attending round 3 recommendations panel meeting with Oxford University

"

Values, ethos, listening, diversity, budget, one-point of contact, long-term relationships, grounded, inclusive.

Several elements for a successful panel listed by P&C members in a learning exercise (July 2025)
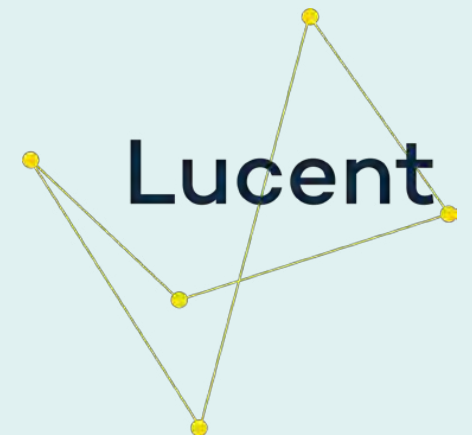
P&C Panel session at local community venue, The Old Fire Station

What was the impact of the P&C Panel
on PCER Fund decisions?

lucentconsultancy.co.uk

IMPACT ON DECISIONS IN ROUND 1

We can combine data analysis and observations to consider the impact of the P&C Panel on decisions.

Starting with data analysis – the diagram on the right shows how the recommendations of the P&C Panel (on the left) corresponded to the final decisions (on the right) about round 1 grants from the PCER Fund.

A regression analysis showed that in round 1, there was a clear association between the P&C Panel's recommendations and the final decisions (r=0.58), though slightly less strong than those of the University's internal reviewers (r=0.74). The total number of decisions was small (n=19) though.

P&C Panel recommendations   **Final decisions**
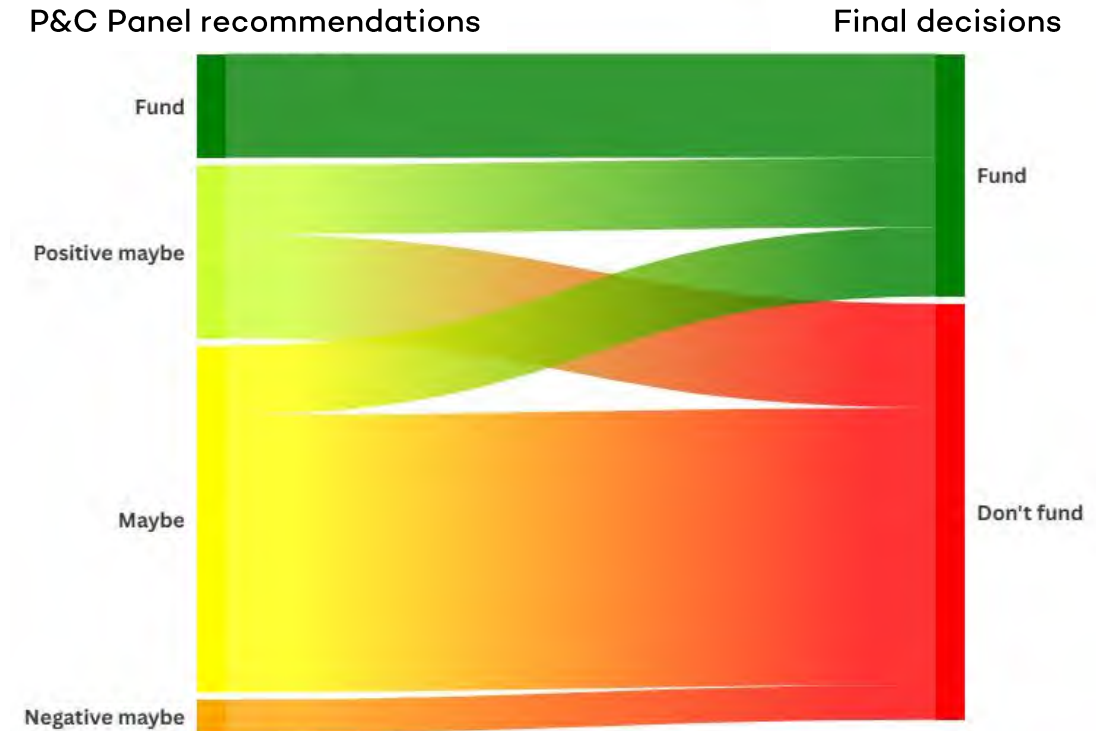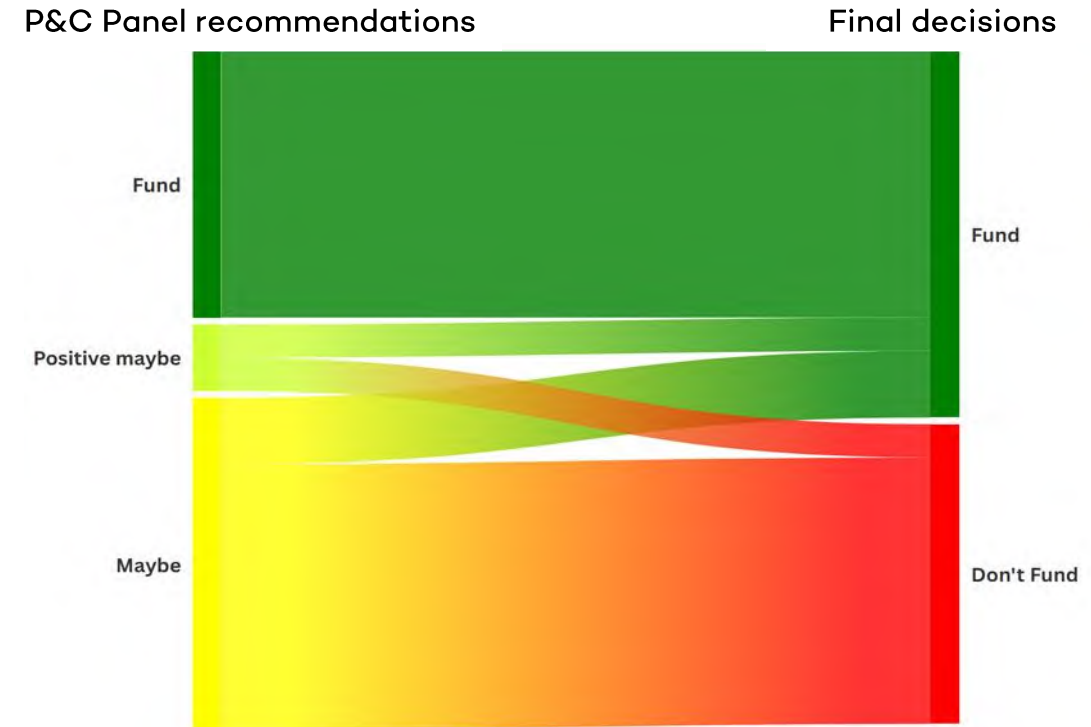

Round 1 decisions. Sankey diagram showing the link between P&C Panel recommendations (left) and final decisions (right)

IMPACT ON DECISIONS IN ROUND 2

Again, the diagram on the right shows how the recommendations of the P&C Panel (on the left) corresponded to the final decisions (on the right) for round 2 grants from the PCER Fund.

Regression analysis showed that in round 2, there was again strong alignment between the P&C Panel's recommendations and the final decisions (r=0.76). Compared to the University's internal reviewers (r=0.33). The total number of grant decisions was again relatively small (n=21).

It is helpful to augment this data analysis with qualitative insights to get a fuller picture of the P&C Panel's influence – see next slide.

P&C Panel recommendations **Final decisions**

Fund

Positive maybe

Maybe

Fund

Don't Fund

Round 2 decisions. Sankey diagram showing the link between P&C Panel recommendations (left) and final decisions (right)

Lucent

> "

Ultimately, our academic champion overturned the [do fund] funding recommendation for reasons that were very similar to the [don't fund] comments made by the P&C Panel originally.

Oxford University PCER Fund staff member, reflecting on a close-call grant funding recommendation

> "

I know the [country] political context and there will be limitations to this project because...

P&C Panel member, round 1, drawing on their lived experience to inform a grant decision

Observed impacts

How Lucent and Oxford staff saw the P&C Panel's impact on decisions

Lucent and Oxford University staff observed numerous valuable contributions from the P&C Panel to the decision-making process that drew on their diverse experiences e.g. *"As a teacher of 20 years, I can tell you this won't work..."*.

On one occasion where Oxford University's internal reviewers disagreed with the P&C Panel's recommendations, this was later overturned (see top side bar).

While there was evidently an impact on decision-making, the Oxford University team reflected (in a team learning session) that the greatest value-add of the P&C panel was in their feedback on each application. This led to a light-bulb realisation that some of the richness of this feedback was getting lost (as it was being consolidated during the decision-making process) and not being conveyed back to the researcher applicants.

"

[The P&C panel] helps to establish what is going to reach a wider community or have a more positive impact.

P&C Panel member, joint learning session (10 Dec 2024)

"

It was gratifying to be 'an equal' sitting with the rest of the panel to decide which applications would go through this time.

P&C Panel member, on attending the 2nd round Oxford University recommendations panel meeting, survey response

Inspiring social change

P&C Panel observations

How P&C Panel members saw their own impact on decisions

—

Assessing their own role, the P&C Panel felt that they had significant influence on what was and wasn't funded (see comments in the side panel).

P&C Panel members were reflective about their own power and influence during two learning sessions and in their survey responses.

Several expressed discomfort about decision-making on grant proposals that fell outside their areas of expertise – e.g. medical conditions. Oxford University staff offered reassurance that their insights were valuable because of their public engagement experience and suggested they could offer feedback to researchers, for example, about the need to consult with affected community groups. They were also reminded that Oxford University divisional and/or departmental staff reviewed each grant application. Nonetheless, the question of relevant subject expertise and lived experience may be worth revisiting in future (see next section).

The P&C Panel also offered several suggestions for other ways the P&C Panel could influence the University's research in future (see next section). Mainly these were around their desire to influence at an earlier stage.

IMPACT ON DECISIONS IN ROUND 3

The P&C Panel's role changed in the final round

Round 3 of the PCER Fund was significantly oversubscribed. This led to a discussion about how the greater volume of applications could still be assessed by the P&C Panel.

Different options were considered including:

- Oxford University staff doing a first sift, so only the most promising applications would be read by the P&C Panel.
- Increasing P&C Panel time to assess more applications.
- A lottery process whereby allocations would be made randomly for this round.

In practice, the University's PCER team decided to use a combination of the final two options.
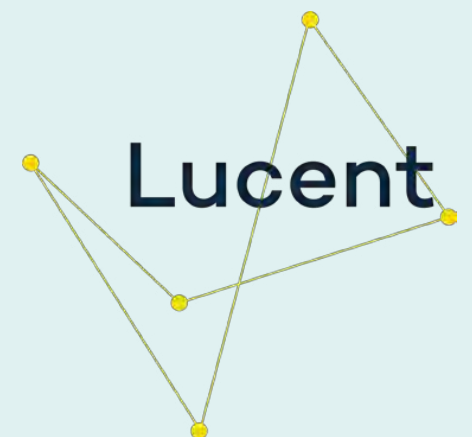
Budget for the next academic year was pulled forward to increase the funding pot available for allocation in the 3rd round.

P&C Panel members reviewed and scored the higher volume of applications; the most promising applications were then put into a lottery process.

Oxford University committed to staying in touch with P&C Panel members and finding an alternative approach for their involvement if further PCER funding was not available for distribution in the academic year ahead.

There was limited scope for Lucent to gather feedback from P&C Panel members about this change of process, as it coincided with the end of the learning partnership contract.

Should the P&C Panel approach be replicated – and what are alternatives?

Should the P&C Panel be replicated?

Weighing this approach and other options

The experiences of the P&C Panel this pilot year have highlighted many ingredients for the success of a participatory grantmaking process. If the P&C Panel's work continues or is to be replicated in future, this learning should help to set them up effectively next time. See the next slide for a summary of learning points.

However, the learning partnership prompted both Oxford University staff and P&C Panel members to raise questions along the way about the effectiveness of this approach. So, we also highlight some suggestions made by the P&C Panel about future opportunities for the University to engage with communities.

Finally, cost-benefit analysis was not part of the brief for Lucent as learning partners, but given limited budgets at Oxford University, it would be good to compare the relative costs and benefits of different suggested approaches for the future.

Lucent

> *There is no doubt that the P&C Panel brought unique insights to bear on the PCER Fund decisions. But there was a theme that we kept coming back to about whether the University could engage with communities at an earlier stage to actually inform the focus and design of their research.*

Lucent consultant

Inspiring social change

25

DOS AND DON'TS

How to get the best outcomes from a community panel in future

DO:

recruit for relevant individual experience and collective diversity

pay panel members appropriately and promptly

engage a coordinator with community engagement expertise, as the lead point of contact

ensure time expectations are reasonable and schedule around other commitments

ask what else panellists need to support their participation e.g. translation, accessibility adjustments, childcare, tech etc

make it easy to report conflicts of interest/bias issues

make the process enjoyable, engaging and accessible

encourage feedback so that processes can be iterated

celebrate key moments and offer recognition e.g. with photos/certificates

DON'T:

set everything in stone from the outset – provide scope for co-design if possible

make assumptions about panellists – ask their thoughts at each stage, check for understanding and consent

let tech be a headache – go low tech (print outs and pens!) if needed

rule out AI – agree appropriate uses of it upfront

design cumbersome processes – streamline, find workarounds

use acronyms and academic terminology – plain English is best, especially if needing to be translated

be boring – panellists are more likely to see through an opportunity with limited paid hours if they feel positive and engaged by it

leave people guessing – stay in touch and communicate what happened as a result of the panel's input

Inspiring social change

ALTERNATIVE SUGGESTIONS

P&C Panellists were keen to engage earlier with research

Pool research ideas: community groups could help identify research needs that would help communities and society.

Design research: in-depth engagement with relevant groups or individuals with relevant lived experience to design research projects, identify opportunities and risks, and strengthen bids.

Collaborate with communities to deliver research: create bigger research projects by working in partnership with community researchers.

Pitch to a community panel at an earlier stage: another option to gather feedback that could be integrated into research design.

Follow up: P&C panellists were also keen to hear back from researchers about how their projects went and felt this ongoing feedback loop would strengthen their role in future rounds.

Conclusions
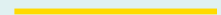
Lucent

Conclusions

Oxford University has benefitted from the involvement of community members in decision-making for the PCER Fund

This report has evidenced that the P&C Panel had a direct influence on PCER fund decisions in 2024-25. Its influence could have been enhanced if the Panel members' detailed feedback was offered to researchers.

The ability of the P&C Panel to have influence was contingent on the support of, and process designed by, the PCER team.

Many aspects of this were successful – particularly the recruitment of a diverse panel and the design of engaging interactive training and grant review sessions. However, administrative processes – particularly around payment and IT – threatened to undermine Panel members' engagement and were not fully possible to mitigate within current University systems.

In future, P&C Panel members would like to continue to be involved in future grant rounds, but also had ideas about how communities could engage with research at earlier stages. Depending on budgets, this could be an alternative or an addition to the current approach.

Lucent Consultancy

We are here to unlock the potential of social purpose organisations to make a meaningful and lasting difference. We help bring your bold ambitions to life.

Contact

e   hello@lucentconsultancy.co.uk

lucentconsultancy.co.uk

Lucent