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Designing the UK's Good Practice Exchange for research culture

A co-created delivery model

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Executive summary

Background

The United Kingdom's (UK) global competitiveness in research and innovation (R&I) is shaped not only by the research undertaken, but also by the behaviours, values and environments underpinning it. Based on the growing evidence that the culture or environment in which research happens substantially impacts its quality and helps to attract and retain talent, improving the underpinning environment has become a major focus for UK R&I strategies.

The UK is home to an expanding group of initiatives seeking to drive research culture change, with over 340 identified in the Research Culture Initiatives in the UK report (Shift Insight et al. 2024). Many more have been developed and supported by research funders since then. To transform fragmented initiatives into a collaborative and effective community, the UK government's Research and Development People and Culture Strategy (UK Government 2021) proposed establishing a UK Good Practice Exchange (GPEx) on research culture. This initiative aims to connect these efforts within a coherent, inclusive research culture change community and to provide evidence on what works.

To inform the design of a UK GPEx, UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI's) report, Research Culture Initiatives in the UK (Shift Insight et al. 2024), explored early ideas and outlined three core objectives for GPEx: 1) building networks and collaborations among stakeholders, 2) supporting more and better evaluation of research culture initiatives, and 3) strengthening strategic leadership across the sector. In March 2025, UKRI commissioned CRAC-Vitae, CultureBase Consulting, RAND Europe and the UK Reproducibility Network (UKRN) to co-develop GPEx delivery models with the full breadth of the R&I community – centred around a Theory of Change (ToC) approach. This co-creation process involved iterative focus groups, a sector-wide survey and interviews with stakeholders from academic institutions, businesses, representative bodies, charitable/non-profit organisations and funders. The result is a proposed GPEx delivery model designed around the motivations, expectations and priorities of the wider R&I community.

Strategic framing

While this work was underway, the 2025 Spending Review (HM Treasury 2025) and subsequent Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) Research and Development (R&D) plans to 2029/2030 (Department for Science, Innovation & Technology 2025) signified a change in how UKRI allocates funding and manages its budgets, with emphasis placed on 'strategic, outcome-focused investment and dynamic budget management.' UKRI's strategic priorities evolved towards stronger alignment with industrial strategy, mission-led research and demonstrable impact, leading UKRI to design programmes and calls aimed at improving efficiency for the research and innovation community. Read through this lens, the findings of this report reinforce the case for GPEx as a mechanism to improve efficiency by increasing coordination, productivity,

evaluability and cross-sector learning across the R&I system. GPEx can help create a research environment in which researchers deliver high-quality, trusted research to support the UK government's missions.

What GPEx needs to deliver for stakeholders

Stakeholders agreed GPEx should function as a coordinating and enabling platform for existing research culture activities, rather than a standalone programme. Priority functions included:

- **Evidence curation and synthesis**: Maintaining a trusted, actively managed evidence base on research culture interventions, linked to existing standards and centres of expertise.
- **Evaluation capability**: Providing practical tools, templates and examples that embed evaluation as a learning process rather than a compliance exercise.
- **Peer learning and exchange**: Enabling structured cross-sector learning through thematic sandpits, challenge labs, mentoring, shadowing, and short placements.
- **System learning**: Aggregating insights from local initiatives to inform leadership decisions, funding design and policy development.

Stakeholders saw equity and inclusion as a priority, emphasising the need for meaningful participation from underrepresented groups, ringfenced resources to remove barriers to access and governance models that fostered shared leadership to build legitimacy and trust.

Design and delivery model

Insights from the literature review and stakeholder engagement inform the vision of GPEx as a sector-owned 'learning commons', connecting people, projects and evidence on research culture. An independent, cross-sector consortium would operate it to ensure added value, neutrality, credibility and representation across disciplines, regions and sectors. Stakeholders viewed this as the foundation for broad, meaningful participation, effective leadership development, productive cross-sector collaboration and a pathway to long-term sustainability.

Investment and scalability

To inform resource allocation for GPEx, we conducted cost modelling across three budget scenarios: £0.5m, £2.5m, and £5m. Modelling indicates that the vision for GPEx outlined above requires a minimum of £2.5m in initial funding over five years to fulfil its objectives, maintain inclusivity and deliver the intended benefits. Notably, this accommodates ringfenced budgets for participation grants, covering a proportion of staff time so that individuals and smaller organisations can engage without relying on goodwill. A lower budget (£0.5m) would see delivery become substantially more dependent on in-kind contributions, while the highest investment level costed (£5m) would allow the incorporation of multiple thematic sandpits, developmental evaluation across five years, and sector-wide skills exchange and mentoring programmes to create a national platform for research culture learning.

If delivered effectively, the proposed GPEx model could align fragmented activities and evidence, enable organisations to learn from one another efficiently, embed evaluation and reflection as standard practice, and strengthen the UK's position as an international leader in responsible, inclusive and high-quality research.

Why GPEx meets current UKRI priorities

The proposed GPEx model could directly support UKRI's strategic priorities by improving the conditions under which mission-led, translational and cross-sector research can deliver impact efficiently and at scale, as outlined below:

- **Productivity and value for money**: GPEx would reduce duplication by coordinating access to evidence on effective research culture interventions and enabling organisations to learn from existing practice, rather than repeatedly designing and testing similar approaches.
- **Translation and mission delivery**: By strengthening research cultures that support collaboration, openness and effective leadership, GPEx could accelerate research from discovery to application. A focus on shared learning and evidence synthesis could support the faster adoption of effective research culture practices needed for interdisciplinary and cross-sector mission delivery.
- **Cross-sector collaboration**: GPEx would operate across academia, industry, funders and intermediaries, providing structured mechanisms such as thematic challenge labs, peer learning and targeted exchanges to enable the transfer of practice in effective research culture interventions between sectors and to support durable partnerships aligned with industrial strategy goals.
- **Demonstrable impact and evaluability**: GPEx could strengthen evaluation capability across the Research and Innovation (R&I) system by providing practical tools, shared frameworks and learning-driven approaches related to research culture change. This would enable UKRI and delivery partners to better understand what works, for whom and under what conditions, supporting evidence-informed decision making and accountability.
- **System coherence and scalability**: Operating as an enabling infrastructure rather than a standalone programme, GPEx could aggregate lessons across organisations and projects on what works in research culture change, translating local experimentation into system-level insights that can inform policy, funding design and leadership practice.

GPEx is a crucial component of the enabling infrastructure for the UK R&I system, at a time when productivity, translation and value for money (VfM) are under increasing scrutiny. If delivered effectively, it could align fragmented activity, strengthen evaluation capability and accelerate the transfer of effective practice – helping the R&I system to function at its best in service of the UK's long-term economic performance.

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Abbreviations

ECR	Early career researchers
EQ	Evaluation question
FTE	Full time equivalent
GPEx	Good Practice Exchange on research culture
HR	Human resources
KE	Knowledge exchange
NHS	National Health Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
R&I	Research and innovation
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SME	Small- and medium-sized enterprise
ToC	Theory of change
VfM	Value for money
UK	United Kingdom
UKRI	United Kingdom Research and Innovation
UKRN	United Kingdom Reproducibility Network
WTP	Willingness to pay

Chapter 1. **Introduction**

1.1. Policy context

Recent United Kingdom (UK) policy highlights the need for collaboration, skills development and system-level efficiency to strengthen global competitiveness. As part of this endeavour, research and innovation (R&I) policymakers have placed increasing emphasis on improving the research culture – the behaviours, values and environment underpinning how research is conducted and supported. This stems from the principle that the culture or environment in which research is conducted substantially affects its quality. Central to the UK's R&I strategy is talent. The Science and Technology Framework and subsequent updates highlight the need to create stable, inclusive and sustainable conditions for research careers (UK Government 2024), while the subsequent Post 16 Education and Skills white paper (UK Government 2025) and the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy (Department for Business and Trade 2025) both stress that better alignment across education, skills development and research is essential to ensure that public investment translates into higher-quality outcomes and attract industrial investment to the UK.

UK and international studies demonstrate that supportive research environments contribute to better research practice, stronger collaboration, skills development and improved researcher attraction and retention, all of which are essential for achieving the UK's long-term economic and research goals (Budtz Pedersen 2025; Wellcome Trust 2020). The growing evidence base confirms that organisations with clear expectations, effective leadership, fair recognition and well-supported teams deliver stronger research and make better use of public investment.

UK research funders and universities are already putting policy into practice regarding research culture and environment. For example, UKRI's Enhancing Research Culture Fund provided short-term institutional grants to projects that contribute to positive research culture (Research England 2022), Wellcome conducted a large-scale survey assessing researchers' views on the culture in which they work and launched the Institutional Funding for Research Culture programme to test a new model for culture change (Wellcome Trust 2023), and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) explored ways to assess people, culture and environment in its next iteration (REF2029). University-led initiatives, such as the University of Glasgow's Lab for Academic Culture (2026), the University of Leeds Open Research Hub (2026), and the National Centre for Research Culture established by the University of Warwick (2026), illustrate the higher education sector's commitment to taking action. This groundswell of activity reflects the UK's potential to lead the way in strengthening research culture – driven by a strong appetite for change, proactive institutions and a community of motivated champions. However, it also highlights the risk of a fragmented response where valuable initiatives become less than the sum of their parts, and struggle to reach – or seem relevant to – the full breadth of individuals and organisations within the R&I system. To meet the government's ambitions, these emerging efforts to strengthen the research culture must connect.

A UK Good Practice Exchange (GPEx) on research culture aims to provide a mechanism for achieving a coherent, inclusive approach to research culture change. The creation of GPEx was initially proposed in the UK government's Research and Development People and Culture Strategy (2021) to connect the rich set of UK-wide initiatives and foster open, collaborative knowledge sharing. GPEx aims to promote cross-sector learning and support the sharing of 'what works' in improving research culture, encouraging openness to lessons (including those from failure) and promoting collaboration across the research system. This vision is built on the existing 'What Works Network' (Evaluation Task Force 2024) and the UK government's wider aim to shape decision making with robust evidence.

An effective and inclusive GPEx is an opportunity to amplify existing research culture initiatives by reducing unproductive duplication, nurturing shared measures of success and strengthening the leadership and skills needed to create sustained change. By connecting the fragmented landscape of initiatives, GPEx would enable organisations to more efficiently trial, implement and share effective research culture practices in a collaborative and coordinated way. This shift would propagate practices that underpin high-quality research and move the UK further along the path towards a high-performing, coherent and competitive research system.

1.2. Study purpose

UKRI's report on Research Culture Initiatives in the UK (Shift Insight et al. 2024) explored early ideas for a GPEx delivery model and highlighted broad interest across the R&I sector in shared learning. The report also informed the co-design of the three core objectives for GPEx:



Building networks and collaborations among stakeholders



Supporting more and better evaluation of research culture initiatives



Strengthening strategic leadership across the sector.

In March 2025, UKRI commissioned CRAC-Vitae, CultureBase Consulting, RAND Europe and the UK Reproducibility Network (UKRN) to develop GPEx delivery model options in close collaboration with the R&I sector. Our consortium has approached this through an iterative co-creation process that includes focus groups, a stakeholder survey and interviews. Our supplementary report presents a more comprehensive background to our methodology and the detailed findings from this process, capturing the insights from extensive stakeholder engagement and evidence synthesis to identify priority outcomes, activities and funding models for operationalising GPEx.

This report presents the culmination of these findings, a GPEx delivery model captured as:

- A Theory of Change for GPEx
- Ownership, governance and evaluation requirements for GPEx
- Three budget scenarios for GPEx delivery.

Chapter 2. Overview of the approach

We used a four-phase iterative approach to explore and refine models in close collaboration with the R&I community, drawing on existing evidence sources and examples from outside the R&I sector.

We targeted all engagement activities across sectors to ensure a diverse, representative set of perspectives, including stakeholders from academic institutions, private-sector industries, representative bodies, charitable/non-profit organisations and R&I funders.

Table 1 below summarises the study's methods and offers an overview of the stakeholders engaged in each phase, with further details provided in the supplement report.[1]

Table 1. Project approach

Phase 1: Understanding desired outcomes and impacts	
Desk research	Learning from the design, delivery and impacts of existing good practice exchange programmes in the UK and internationally
Scoping interviews	Exploratory conversations with seven organisations active in research culture reform and R&I engagement
Vision focus groups	Eight focus groups with 49 cross-sector stakeholders, who all assessed outcomes identified from desk research and scoping interviews
Phase 2: Mapping activities and desired model characteristics	
Desk research	Comparative analysis of activities and mechanisms adopted by existing good practice exchange programmes in the context of the outcomes shortlisted
Consultation survey	A community-wide short survey that collected 179 stakeholders' priorities on the activities, values and five proposed models for GPEx
Implementation focus groups	Eight focus groups with 48 stakeholders from across sectors who assessed three proposed models, refined from survey results
Phase 3: Establishing resource requirements	
Desk research	Review of financial statements and annual reports of existing organisations, such as the What Works Centres, to identify relevant cost categories for GPEx
Resource interviews	Interviews with four financial experts who contributed to a core costs profile and three budget scenarios for GPEx
Phase 4: Developing Theory of Change (ToC)	
Workshop	Two project workshops to refine the models that the implementation focus-group participants selected and incorporate them into the ToC

1 GPEx supplementary report (2025) – reference to be updated after UKRI's review.

The project's iterative approach to stakeholder engagement enabled consensus-building among participants and provided feedback loops, with outputs from each phase validated through subsequent activities. While the number of private-sector stakeholders engaged grew across the phases, overall participation from this group was limited. Insights shared by small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the survey and implementation focus groups underscored stark differences in research environments and priorities between industry and academia. The proposed GPEx model addresses these concerns with additional recommendations.

The following sections present a synthesis of the co-design process, highlighting stakeholders' expectations and requirements for a future GPEx.

Chapter 3. Designed for impact – the GPEx Theory of Change

To design an impact-led GPEx that serves the sector's needs and aspirations, we anchored our design process in a ToC. This was built around UKRI's vision of GPEx as a mechanism to surface, share, adapt and apply effective practices, underpinned by three objectives: enabling collaborations, strengthening evaluation and supporting strategic leadership (Shift Insight et al. 2024). The ToC also built on the wider principle that good practice exchanges help stakeholders to learn from peers and adapt useful ideas to their own local priorities and contexts. While there has been limited evaluation of such programmes, evidence suggests that these principles of knowledge sharing and flexibility are effective in tackling complex, system-level challenges across sectors, from health and education to public administration and research (Adeinat & Abdulfatah 2019; Rigby et al. 2021; Shared Intelligence 2020).

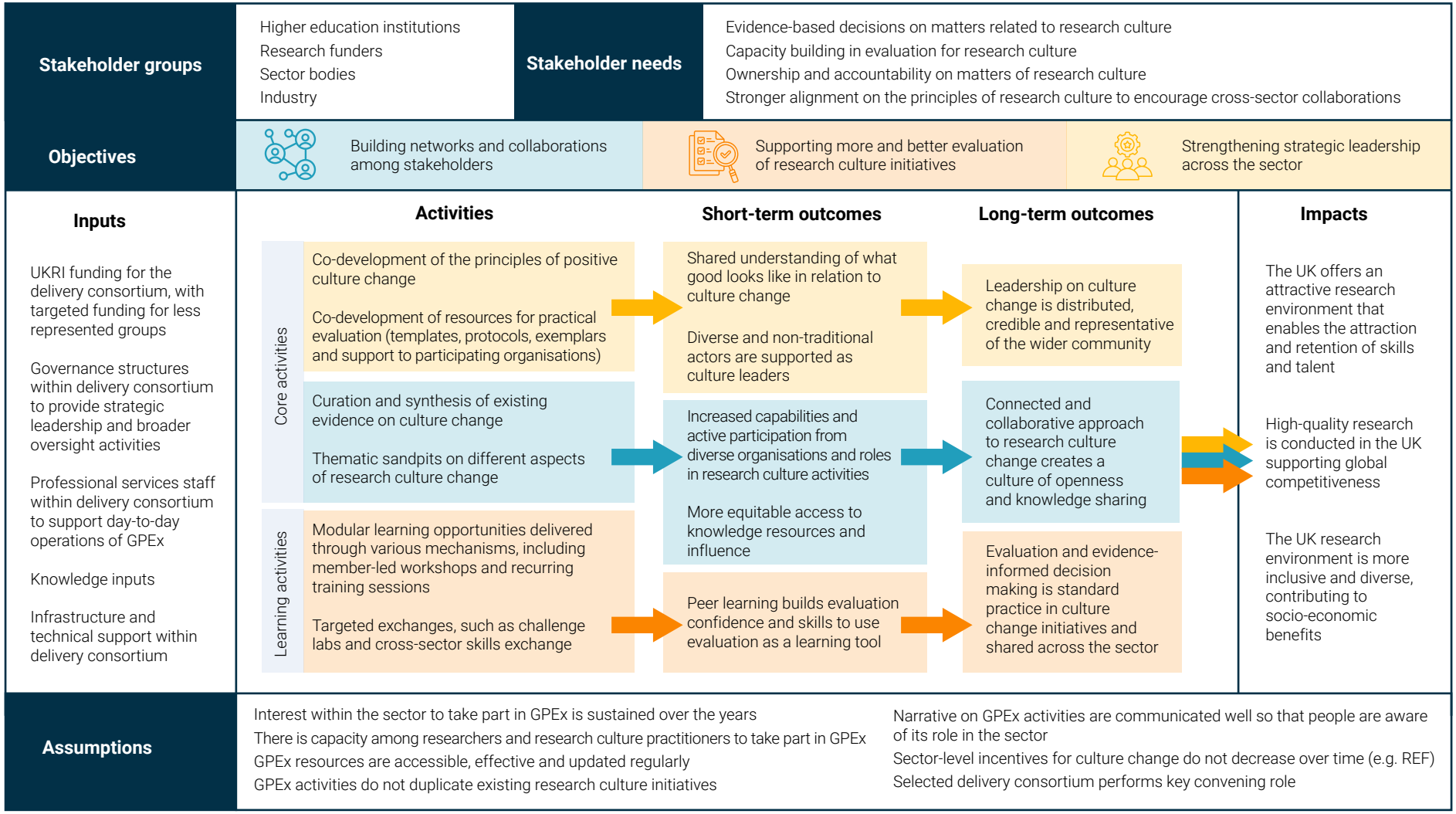
Based on these foundations, our ToC approach was designed to help stakeholders sequentially explore and address trade-offs across the inputs, activities and impact pathways to enable GPEx to achieve meaningful change. The result is a GPEx model that directly reflects the R&I community's collective priorities for shared learning, inclusivity and evidence-informed improvement around research culture.

The ToC is built around the three core objectives identified for GPEx: enabling collaboration, strengthening evaluation and supporting strategic leadership (Shift Insight et al. 2024). This ToC approach clarifies the necessary inputs, activities and impact pathways for achieving meaningful change, while identifying the assumptions critical to its success. In doing so, it positions GPEx to respond directly to the R&I sectors' priorities for shared learning, inclusivity and evidence-informed improvement in research culture.

The proposed ToC is based on the priorities identified by the R&I community throughout this project. The model identifies 'core activities' as fundamental to realising the added value of GPEx, and 'learning activities' as mechanisms for engagement and capacity-building that can be scaled up or down depending on resource availability. While core and learning activities are presented as distinct categories, the model foresees a cyclical interplay between them, providing feedback loops and encouraging the adoption of improvements identified from the first phase into activities and engagements in the next cycle (see section 3.5 for further information on GPEx activities). The suggested activities are also modular, meaning that each component is designed to be separable, combinable and adaptable to the priorities and capacities of different stakeholder groups and resources.

Figure 1 sets out the ToC and demonstrates how it connects decisions about inputs, activities and short- and long-term outcomes/impacts, alongside cross-cutting themes such as underlying assumptions and stakeholder needs. We use these ToC sections to structure this project's recommendations and the stakeholder feedback underpinning them. Notably, we have chosen to work in reverse, starting with what stakeholders want GPEx to achieve (i.e. impacts and outcomes) and working backwards to the prerequisite conditions and choices for achieving this goal (i.e. activities and inputs).

Figure 1. Theory of Change for GPEx



3.1. Stakeholders – who is GPEx for?

We identified five connected stakeholder groups from the UK R&I community whose involvement in GPEx would be relevant to its success. However, motivations and appetite to engage with GPEx vary across these groups and should be considered throughout the programme's delivery.

Stakeholder groups encouraged to participate in GPEx included:

- **Academic organisations, including higher education institutions (of varied size and income), research institutes, representative bodies and staff networks.** Our stakeholder engagement indicated that this group has the strongest appetite to participate in GPEx as the programme's added value is more apparent, potentially reflecting academic stakeholders' more common use of the term 'research culture.' GPEx participants in this stakeholder category include researchers at all career stages – e.g. early-career researchers (ECR) and senior researchers – as well as technicians, research-enabling professionals, research managers and those supporting research culture activities.
- **Private sector organisations, including R&D-intensive large businesses, SMEs, professional bodies, trade associations and unions.** Our stakeholder engagement indicated that this group values knowledge-exchange initiatives focused on cross-sector themes such as collaboration, evidence sharing or access to academic research and expertise. While GPEx could help bridge the cultural gap between academia and industry, stakeholders felt that further clarity on its added value to industry would be necessary to encourage this group's participation. GPEx participants in this stakeholder category would include R&I leads, human resources (HR) managers, knowledge-exchange professionals and those collaborating with other sectors. To encourage this group's participation, GPEx should adopt language that resonates with organisations in which 'research culture' is not the default term.
- **Public and non-profit/charitable organisations that fund R&I activities.** Our stakeholder engagement reinforced the view that funding is a key driver of behaviour across the R&I community, with several funders already prioritising engagement with research culture. This group's participation in GPEx would help align these ambitions, nurture responsible leadership among funders and ensure that expectations on funding applicants do not fragment. GPEx participants in this stakeholder category would include programme and portfolio managers, policy and strategy staff and workforce development leaders.
- **Organisations from the wider R&I community conducting research, such as independent research organisations, National Health Service (NHS) bodies, museums and heritage institutions.** Our stakeholder engagement indicated that specialised research organisations can feel distant from other parts of the R&I community, and that there is an appetite for GPEx to foster greater collaboration and alignment. GPEx participants in this stakeholder category would include principal investigators, applied-research leads, curators and research managers.
- **Convening organisations, including learned societies, policy and public engagement organisations and knowledge exchange bodies.** Our stakeholder engagement revealed an appetite among this group for GPEx to act as a platform for sharing knowledge and connecting

with relevant organisations to develop and deploy the ideas generated within the group. GPEx participants in this stakeholder category would include membership and engagement leads, policy advisers and organisational representatives.

Our extensive stakeholder engagement reveals several areas of common ground among groups, as well as a shared desire to reduce barriers to cross-sector collaboration. For example, all stakeholder groups wanted to see GPEx address the fragmented access to – and limited sharing of – evidence on good practice in research culture. Similarly, stakeholders welcomed the prospect of greater cross-sector alignment on the principles of research culture, encouraging partnerships, evidence-sharing and capacity-building among academic, public and private R&I organisations. Other shared priorities for designing GPEx included shared ownership, accountability and recognition of the importance of culture change; funding to experiment with different approaches; and embedding robust, accessible evidence into decision making.

3.2. Dependencies and principles – what needs to be in place first?

Our stakeholder engagement programme and wider desk research helped identify three dependencies underpinning a successful GPEx model, and six broad principles that stakeholders wanted to see any future GPEx embody in its structure and operation. The three dependencies surfaced during our stakeholder engagement were:

- **Appetite and capacity to host GPEx.** Stakeholders from the academic sector showed substantial appetite to support the hosting and operation of GPEx. There was consensus support for a consortium-based hosting model, selected based on the breadth and inclusivity of their networks and sufficient technical and administrative capacity to deliver GPEx for the duration of the programme.
- **Appetite and capacity to participate in GPEx.** While we saw substantial appetite among stakeholders to participate in GPEx, the intensity of this interest varied across groups and was notably lower among industry stakeholders, who found it harder to see the value-add for their work. Stakeholders felt that the unique value of GPEx participation needed to be communicated well to sustain interest and protect the capacity to participate across the years.
- **Strategic endorsement and alignment.** Stakeholders wanted to see organisations, including the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), UKRI and learned academies, continue pursuing a strategic vision for the community and offering consistent support and incentives. The UKRI's endorsement and alignment with wider R&I incentives, notably the REF, were identified as critical for sustaining interest and participation in GPEx over time.

Building on these dependencies, stakeholder feedback and desk research, we identified six principles that should underpin the structure and operation of any GPEx model to maximise its chances of success across all R&I stakeholder groups:

1. **Equity and inclusivity** should be embedded into GPEx design and governance to ensure that underrepresented groups can participate meaningfully in research culture work. Stakeholders asserted that existing structural inequalities within the R&I community, reinforced by size, resources and visibility, might similarly limit access to GPEx activities and products, especially for smaller institutions and organisations outside academia. To address this,

stakeholders suggested that the selected delivery consortium should establish targeted access mechanisms, such as co-design project teams, shared leadership, funded access to activities and light-touch equity audits.

2. **Cross-sector collaboration** should be intentionally built into the GPEx design and delivery plans to support active involvement from all stakeholder groups. As well as using language that resonates with all stakeholders, stakeholders felt the model should include cross-sector participation in GPEx leadership structures (e.g. the Programme Board), dedicated resources for engaging underrepresented groups, and thematic sandpits[2] on mutually relevant topics. Moreover, they felt that the delivery model should recognise variation in motivations and capacity to engage across organisations and roles, providing diverse modes of participation from open resources and peer-learning sessions to targeted learning cohorts and challenge labs.
3. **Long-term sustainability** should be incorporated from the start, with stakeholders calling for a GPEx model driven by clear planning and sustained funding. Stakeholders interpreted sustainability as encompassing both long-term funding and sustained collaborations beyond the initial funding period. Stakeholders (including R&I funders) agreed that for GPEx to achieve its expected impacts and outcomes, funding should be available beyond the initial five years to avoid GPEx being seen as a short-term 'task and finish' initiative. There was a desire for all proposals from potential GPEx delivery consortiums to include a long-term plan for financial sustainability over a 10–15-year horizon, and an operational structure that supports collaborations able to access wider funding sources in the long term.
4. **Clearly articulated added value** should be central to the presentation of GPEx to researchers, culture change practitioners, organisations and policymakers. Stakeholders were concerned that GPEx risked duplicating existing initiatives rather than targeting critical gaps. There was a strong desire to see GPEx designed around sector needs from the outset, leading to a warm reception for this project alongside demand for a co-design approach embedded in GPEx delivery. Clear communication of the programme's added value was seen as a crucial enabler for securing participation from underrepresented stakeholder groups in culture change, and stakeholders emphasised that careful attention should be paid to identifying and sharing tailored communications that could convey this added value to stakeholder groups with different incentives and motivations.
5. **Leadership development opportunities** should be integrated into GPEx design and implementation through collective ownership of discrete activities or thematic sandpits. Stakeholders felt that opportunities to lead individual projects were a powerful route to developing decentralised leadership capabilities and supporting the next generation of research culture leaders. Strategies to engage senior institutional leaders could also help create visible champions of culture, though focus group participants emphasised that this

2 Sandpits are intensive, highly interactive discussion forums that convene experts to generate innovative solutions for specific themes or challenges. For an example of UKRI-supported sandpits, see UKRI (2026).

senior-level engagement was likely to be substantially influenced by the prominence and priority of research culture within broader incentives, such as the REF.

6. **Simple participation norms** should be incorporated into GPEx design and facilitation to help promote psychological safety and trust (e.g. Chatham House Rules; accessibility baselines). Stakeholders felt this was essential for supporting constructive challenge, peer accountability and an openness to sharing failures and emergent ideas. The selected delivery consortium's ability to create a safe environment for discussion, trust and skilled facilitation is essential for effective implementation of such participation norms.

3.3. Impacts – what change should GPEx contribute to?

We asked stakeholders what impacts they would want to see from 'successful' GPEx, representing structural shifts in the R&I sector over a 10–15-year horizon. This vision for the future was based on the premise of sustained investment in GPEx for at least two five-year funding cycles after the initial period, and on the acknowledgement that impacts are rarely attributable to a single intervention and that GPEx would influence research culture alongside wider individual, organisational and policy factors.

The R&I community's views on GPEx impacts:

- Stakeholders saw an opportunity to address fragmentation within the sector, with GPEx acting as a coordinating force to reduce duplication, normalise failure and embed evaluation.
- Stakeholders saw the potential for GPEx to facilitate a higher-quality research culture and an evidence-informed narrative of its impact. They also saw it as an opportunity to better connect 'culture' with the harder (often fiscal) objectives of national R&I programmes.
- Stakeholders wanted to see underrepresented communities more involved in the design and delivery of evaluations to support equity and improve research quality. Focus group participants cautioned against homogenising culture change and called for GPEx to adopt a distributed ownership model.
- Stakeholders cited mechanisms such as co-design panels, shared leadership and equity audits as effective ways to embed equity principles into GPEx practice.
- Stakeholders from large businesses and industry more broadly were particularly interested in GPEx models aligned with business goals, such as access to talent.
- Over 54% of survey respondents identified 'opportunities for professional development, including skills and leadership training' as a motivating factor for their organisation to participate in GPEx.
- Stakeholders wanted to see GPEx supporting leadership activities that could engage senior leaders as visible champions of research culture, while also supporting practitioners and mid-career staff with opportunities to develop their skills and agency in shaping culture.

What this means for GPEx:

Based on the three core GPEx objectives set by UKRI and on feedback from stakeholders gathered through focus groups and a sector-wide survey, we identified three impacts that should shape GPEx's structure and operations. For further information on the underpinning evidence, please refer to the accompanying Supplementary Information document.

Impact 1: The UK produces more high-quality research, which in turn supports global competitiveness:

- The open exchange of ideas, feedback and failures enables faster learning and methodological refinement, leading to more robust, high-quality research with wider application and global relevance.
- The widespread focus on evidence-driven interventions to improve research culture supports organisations in adapting and raising their research practice standards, fostering environments that enable high-quality research.
- Strategic resourcing and sector-wide alignment reduce duplication and fragmentation, leading to a well-coordinated system that translates into efficiencies, better collaboration and, ultimately, higher research standards.

Impact 2: The UK R&I environment is more inclusive and diverse, contributing to socioeconomic benefits:

- Open dialogue empowers diverse voices and perspectives to participate in R&I, breaking down disciplinary and sectoral silos and ensuring that the benefits of collaborative research extend to a broader community.
- By monitoring representation and promoting evidence-led inclusivity approaches, the UK's research environment is more socially beneficial, and research outputs reflect a wider range of experiences and needs.
- Alignment across the sector ensures that diversity principles are consistently embedded, producing greater socioeconomic benefits through fair participation and representation. Diverse perspectives can contribute to novel problem-solving approaches and ensure that findings are more robust and address a wider range of societal needs.

Impact 3: The UK research environment is attracting and retaining skills and talent:

- Embedding openness, reflection and peer accountability improves collaboration and support within the UK R&I community. This, in turn, creates a working environment where skilled researchers are more likely to stay, and where the visible commitment to learning and improvement attracts new talent.
- A credible base of evidence on effective research culture change empowers research organisations, funders and policymakers with the tools to create more positive and equitable workplaces, enhancing the international reputation of UK research organisations as priority destinations for a diverse range of talented researchers and innovators.
- Strong leadership and recognition for culture change demonstrate that the UK's commitments to improving research culture and environments are visible in practice, making UK institutions more appealing destinations.

3.4. Outcomes – what should GPEx deliver?

We asked stakeholders to explore their preferred outcomes for GPEx, representing the direct and measurable results they would expect GPEx to achieve upon completion of the first funding cycle (short-term outcomes) and three to five years after the first funding cycle concludes (long-term outcomes). In simple terms, outcomes explore the question 'what needs to happen?', while impacts explore the question 'so what?'.

The R&I community's views on GPEx outcomes:

- Implementation focus group participants agreed that GPEx should contribute to wider system change as well as to individual projects by generating cross-organisational learning, producing evidence-informed guidance and building credibility to influence policy. To achieve this, evidence must be synthesised across initiatives in ways that are robust and accessible, and GPEx must include mechanisms to transfer learning beyond the original participants.
- Inclusivity was a key priority across all stakeholders engaged in this project. There was a preference among stakeholders for using distributed leadership and ownership to help build trust and legitimacy across sectors through action-oriented methods, such as live peer review and open-house sharing, rather than one-sided exchanges.
- Stakeholders noted that hidden contributions through voluntary and unpaid labour are a significant driver of exclusion. They wanted GPEx to balance scale with intimacy to ensure participation from broad stakeholder groups while creating safe, small-group environments for collaboration.
- Survey respondents felt that all three GPEx objectives were important to address. Enabling more comprehensive and effective evaluation of research culture initiatives was identified as the most important objective by 40.8% of respondents, followed by strengthening connections and collaborations (32.4%) and fostering strategic leadership (23.5%). Participants in the implementation focus group also regarded the enhancement of evaluation practices as the most significant gap to address. There was considerable interest in reframing evaluation as a participatory, learning-oriented process that values narrative, lived experience and transparency about failure.
- Stakeholders saw GPEx supporting reflective practices, such as peer-to-peer feedback, regular feedback loops and transparent accounts of failure, as more credible and useful than compliance-driven accountability.

What this means for GPEx:

Based on the three core GPEx objectives set by UKRI and stakeholder feedback from the focus groups and sector-wide survey, we identified three long-term and five short-term outcomes to shape the structure and operation of GPEx. For further information on the underpinning evidence, please see the accompanying Supplementary Information document.

3.4.1. Long-term outcomes

Long-term outcome 1: A culture of openness and knowledge-sharing extends across a more connected and collaborative R&I sector:

GPEx encourages participation from a broader range of R&I organisations by aligning with the sector's priorities. The emphasis on co-developing activities allows topics and modes of interaction to be refreshed and rotated in response to demand. Over time, GPEx activities generate stronger and broader connectivity, not through fixed membership, but through evolving collaborative communities and shared practices on culture change, as outlined below:

- Structured formal and informal pathways to collaboration within GPEx help participants build partnerships and exchange knowledge on research culture across organisational, disciplinary and sectoral boundaries. This connected, collaborative approach to culture change boosts the sector's cohesiveness by ensuring individuals and organisations feel

comfortable sharing and helping others learn from their successes *and* failures.

Long-term outcome 2: Evaluation and evidence-informed decision making is standard practice in culture change initiatives and shared across the sector:

- GPEx encourages cross-organisational learning, yielding evidence-informed guidance and building credibility to influence policy. GPEx's evidence-sharing tools and platforms are accessible and adaptable across different contexts, including beyond organisations well-versed in culture change and evaluation practice.
- GPEx participants share a commitment to using GPEx-generated evidence to support organisational culture change. Evidence on what works is regularly collected and used to inform decision making in culture change initiatives across the sector, contributing to improved practice.

Long-term outcome 3: Leadership on culture change is distributed, credible and reflective of the broader community:

- Leadership and management of GPEx activities are distributed across participants to promote mutual investment and collective ownership of culture change. Rotating hosting or facilitation roles within modules helps democratise ownership and fosters a culture in which responsibility for exchange is shared.
- Support for more equitable access to GPEx resources and collaboration platforms, including dedicated financial support, encourages the involvement of underrepresented groups in key leadership positions within their areas of interest and supports R&I priorities that better reflect those of different stakeholders and organisations, creating new opportunities for participation and income sources.

3.4.2. Short-term outcomes

Short-term outcome 1: Increased capabilities and active participation from diverse organisations and roles in research culture activities:

- Learning opportunities within GPEx help more individuals to gain the skills and confidence to lead or support culture change. For example, the R&I community's involvement in co-designing practical evaluation support tools and member-led training modules encourages participation and upskilling.
- Through dedicated funding to increase capabilities and active participation from diverse organisations and roles in research culture activities, GPEx brings new and diverse viewpoints into research culture change, leading to a more connected and collaborative approach.

Short-term outcome 2: More equitable access to knowledge, resources and platforms on research culture:

- The evidence base curated by GPEx supports participants in identifying gaps, partners, tools and examples for research culture change. Digital resources reduce duplication and support fairer access to resources, especially for stakeholders new to research culture work or those outside well-resourced organisations.
- Inclusive platforms support participants in sharing insights, increasing visibility and shaping sector-wide conversations on research culture. For instance, flexible peer-learning activities conducted online, in person and at multiple time points could enhance equitable access by allowing participation at different levels and times according to need and capacity.
- Providing various entry and participation points for those who could not otherwise

engage supports a more connected and collaborative approach to culture change.

Short-term outcome 3: Peer learning has built evaluation confidence and skills to use evaluation as a learning tool:

- GPEx activities, such as evaluation support tools and training sessions, encourage reflection and capacity building among participants. This builds participants' confidence to use evaluation techniques in their own contexts and fosters knowledge sharing, such that evaluation tools are seen as useful and supportive beyond organisations' need to satisfy compliance requirements.
- Increased support, confidence and skills in using evaluation as a learning tool enable organisations to introduce evaluation and evidence-informed decision making as standard practice in culture change initiatives.

Short-term outcome 4: Shared understanding of what 'good' looks like in relation to culture change:

- Co-developed principles for positive culture change make it easier for people and organisations to work towards common goals, recognise progress and know what 'good' looks like. This mutual understanding of research culture progress incorporates insights from across organisational types and contexts, reassuring stakeholders who are concerned about rigid or unresponsive research culture standards.
- Reflection exercises at the end of each funding cycle further empower GPEx to include and address evolving research culture needs. A shared understanding of what 'good' looks like in relation to culture change supports a distributed, credible leadership for culture change that is representative of the wider community.

Short-term outcome 5: Diverse and non-traditional actors are supported as culture leaders:

- GPEx's modular structure empowers the R&I community to prioritise topics within culture change and select engagement platforms.
- Mechanisms to co-develop principles, broaden access, support evaluation and facilitate peer learning enable diverse organisations to participate in and lead culture change activities in their areas of expertise. For example, challenge labs support a broader range of stakeholders in recommending solutions and promoting the adoption of lessons learned within their institutions.

3.5. Activities – what should GPEx do?

Stakeholders explored the portfolio of activities that could best enable GPEx to achieve its objectives and outcomes, such as promoting peer learning, synthesising evidence or building capacity. We used the proposed model's impacts and short- and long-term outcomes to identify activities that address existing gaps in culture change.

Phase 2 of the project used successive prioritisation rounds and ranking exercises with stakeholders to establish and stress-test the combination of activities they envisaged across peer learning, evidence synthesis, sharing of good standards and capacity building. We would encourage any future GPEx delivery consortium to further validate the ToC through an R&I community engagement exercise to ensure that the final portfolio of activities continues to meet the evolving needs of the sector.

The R&I community's views on activities for GPEx:

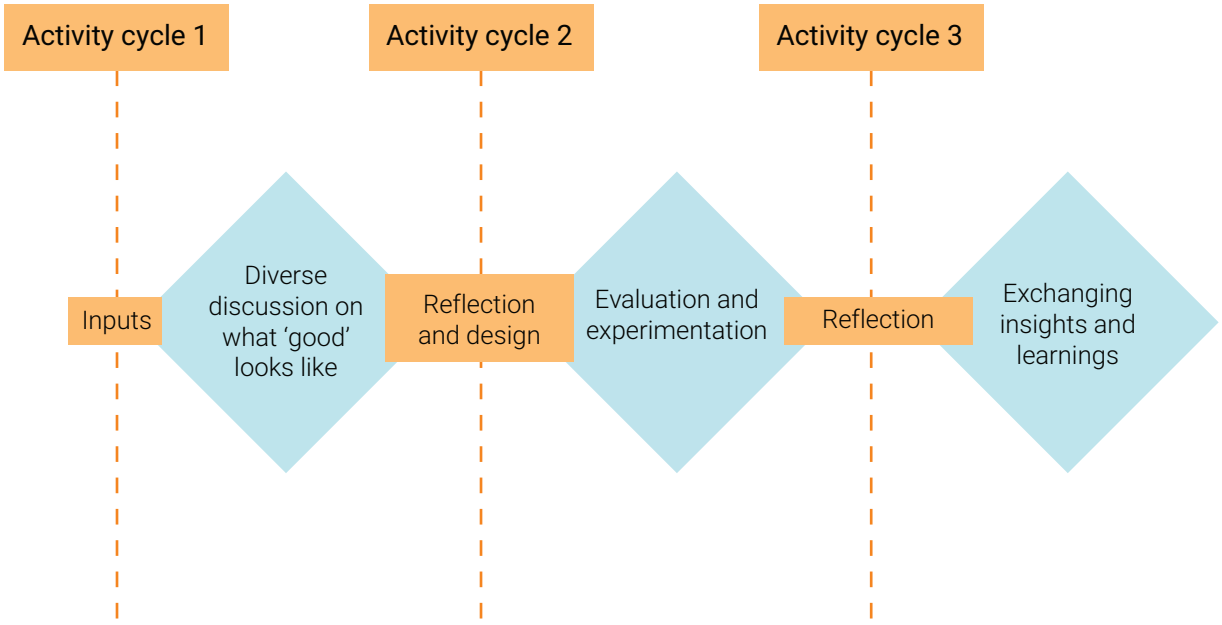
- Stakeholders agreed that GPEx should be designed with equity at its core (targeted access/support) with opportunities for underrepresented groups to participate meaningfully, including dedicated funding to support equitable access.
- Stakeholders commented that for GPEx to be useful, it should explicitly define its goals and tailor them to cross-sector needs. There was substantial stakeholder consensus on the principles that should underpin the design of GPEx, as well as a desire for a common understanding of the community's vision for research culture, underpinned by a phased approach that starts by identifying research culture priorities.
- As a large volume of culture change work is currently underway, stakeholders saw activities to curate and synthesise existing evidence on culture change as a priority to reduce the evidence gap and the risk of duplication in the sector. The most popular option was GPEx as an 'Evidence and Standards Centre'. Stakeholders particularly valued access to and sharing of evidence, as well as practical support or tools to improve the research culture, as key motivating factors for participating in GPEx.
- Mixed views about evidence repositories emerged from the survey's open-text responses: some respondents saw such platforms as an important factor for a successful GPEx, while others noted the previous platforms' lack of usability and the dependence on ongoing resources to stay updated. Focus group participants noted that, for a centrally curated evidence base to be effective, it would need to be actively maintained, clearly sourced and integrated with existing standards and centres of expertise.
- Implementation focus group participants agreed that GPEx should deliver resources for practical evaluation, such as templates, protocols and exemplars, enabling organisations to generate comparable, decision-useful evidence.
- Literature review evidence shows that capacity-building activities that include modular and participant-led formats, such as short missions, rotational hosting and alumni mentoring, can lower barriers and democratise ownership – two priority areas for the stakeholders consulted throughout this project. Survey respondents and implementation focus group participants agreed that peer learning was central to GPEx, as prioritised by survey respondents from Northern Ireland and Wales and by SMEs.
- Stakeholders from the vision and implementation focus groups valued targeted exchanges (e.g. shadowing, secondments, challenge labs) as learning activities, allowing GPEx participants to benefit from first-hand knowledge exchange and enabling them to transfer practice and accelerate the finding of solutions.
- Formats such as immersive exchanges and secondments were praised for their potential to foster deep learning and cross-institutional insight. However, participants noted that these would require careful planning, including funding for backfilling and accessibility considerations. They also saw theme-based challenge labs as a novel and constructive way to address specific issues in research culture.

What this means for GPEx:

We have captured the activities prioritised through stakeholder engagement and alignment with envisioned outcomes and impacts into two sets, based on their purpose and delivery: 1) core activities, and 2) learning activities. Core activities constitute fundamental actions underpinning GPEx's potential success and impact, including co-developing principles for positive culture change, evidence synthesis, developing and providing practical evaluation support tools, and delivering thematic sandpits. Learning activities leverage the foundation laid by these core activities and are particularly important for individual capacity building, disseminating exemplar practices and implementing co-developed resources. Learning activities also provide opportunities for distributed leadership, enhancing the inclusion of diverse and non-traditional actors as cultural leaders.

While core and learning activities are described as two distinct options for GPEx, continuous interplay between both is essential. Figure 2 adapts the Design Council's Double Diamond approach (2025) to describe how cyclical exchange activities and reflection periods can connect individual learning with organisational capacity-building and system change.

Figure 2. Diamond approach for continuous learning and reflection in GPEx



Core activities in the first activity cycle would help GPEx co-develop priorities, resources and collaborations for culture change. Modular evidence exchange and learning activities that would support participants in exploring ideas in smaller groups, building capacity and deepening collaboration on topics of shared systemic relevance are embedded within other cycles. Reflection and synthesis exercises at the end of each cycle would help stakeholders capture the lessons learned from their experiences, directly informing the processes and activities implemented in the next cycle. These activities would also allow stakeholders to update GPEx's research culture standards and priorities in response to the evolving R&I landscape in the UK and internationally. Such an approach can help identify relevant research culture challenges across organisations and sectors, ensuring broader alignment between sector-wide priorities and capacity-building at the individual participant level. In practice, this approach would also enable GPEx to expand on exemplar activities depending on the availability of additional resources. A description of proposed GPEx activities based on stakeholder feedback and the costing exercise (see section 5 for further information on GPEx resourcing) is presented below.

3.5.1. Core activities

Based on analysis of desk research, stakeholder feedback, and cost modelling, we propose the core activities outlined below.

Core activity 1: Co-development of the principles of positive culture change:

- GPEx works with the R&I community to prioritise culture change focus areas.
- Using insights from diverse stakeholder groups within its project team and from participants more generally, GPEx establishes and updates a clear culture-change vision and develops practical standards of good research.
- Where relevant, project team members (see section 4.2 for further information on GPEx governance) integrate any principles of a positive research culture change captured through analysis of REF statements (where available).
- GPEx can make small grant allocations (scaled to resource availability) to foster targeted co-development across sectors.

Core activity 2: Curation and synthesis of existing evidence on culture change:

- GPEx members develop and regularly update a centrally curated evidence base that collates examples of 'what works' in culture change across different methods, contexts and outcomes.
- The lead delivery partner actively maintains the evidence base as a digital resource library, clearly sourced and integrated with co-developed standards to address the R&I community's previous negative experiences with outdated or rarely used digital resources.

Core activity 3: Co-development of resources for practical evaluation and support to participating organisations:

- Practical evaluation tools are designed to be easy to use, providing recommended methods for applying them in different contexts to encourage their uptake.
- Practical evaluation templates, toolkits and exemplars help participants generate and access comparable evidence useful for decision making.
- Resources developed by GPEx are open to contributions from across the sector, making this core activity particularly useful for newcomers or those in smaller or lower-resource settings.

- Evaluation project teams guide the development of resources with support from evaluation staff in the Executive Team (see section 4.2 for further information on GPEx governance).
- Evaluation support grants offer small-scale funding for participants to develop toolkits that address targeted gaps with guidance from the Executive and Evaluation Teams.

Core activity 4: Thematic sandpits on different aspects of research culture change:

- GPEx implements thematic sandpits to facilitate knowledge exchange on research culture among smaller cohorts of the UK's R&I community. Sandpits are intensive, highly interactive discussion forums that convene experts to generate innovative solutions to specific themes or challenges.
- Building on culture change themes co-developed with the community, these cohorts mobilise stakeholders from across organisation types, roles, career stages and disciplines to collaborate on mutually relevant topics.
- Sandpits enable peer networks to be built and strengthened and are used to refine the learning activities within GPEx.
- The model proposes four to six sandpits each year that enable members to explore ideas, share knowledge and build connections. Sandpit participants have access to programmes that facilitate knowledge sharing and cross-grant learning, supported by the Executive Team.
- Knowledge Exchange (KE) grants provide funding and flexibility to each sandpit to conduct activities of interest and mutual relevance to its members.
- Evaluation grants enable sandpit members to assess the impacts of existing research culture initiatives, generating evidence on the effectiveness of culture change approaches and the extent to which these can be transferred across contexts.

3.5.2. Learning activities

Learning activity 1: Modular learning opportunities delivered through multiple mechanisms:

- GPEx provides tiered learning opportunities, such as drop-in sessions, cohort programmes and mentoring, to build evaluation and culture-change skills across roles and career stages. Other examples of learning modules include short missions and mentorship networks connecting alumni of GPEx cohort programmes, enabling participants to continue sharing insights and supporting new entrants to research culture work.
- Evaluation workshops or training sessions are led by participants, with small funding support. The Executive Team and Programme Board ensure that proposed workshops align with other programmes within and beyond GPEx to avoid duplication and maintain overall coherence.
- Evaluation drop-in sessions are hosted by members of the Evaluation project and Executive Team on a rotational basis, guiding participants in assessing existing research culture initiatives.
- Online training is offered to participants each year, with the frequency adjusted based on resource availability.
- In-person training is offered annually to participants and hosted by an organisation within the delivery consortium.

Learning activity 2: Targeted exchanges:

- Exchanges are short-term placements where people work or learn in another organisation, sector or role. These can be virtual or in-person, and can adopt a structured or informal format for

capacity-building. Examples include shadowing, secondments and challenge labs that transfer practice and accelerate solution finding. Exchanges would enable peer learning and challenge, relationship building and opportunities to explore how to adapt and scale initiatives.

- Theme-based challenge labs bring sandpit members together on a single research culture issue. To support this activity, the model suggests a Pilot Fund to support the development or dissemination of novel culture change ideas.
- Skill exchange programmes, such as cross-sector staff exchanges or secondments, foster deep learning and cross-institutional insight. Skill exchanges are funding-intensive and scaled in the model based on resource availability.

3.6. Inputs – what resources and infrastructures will enable GPEx?

Inputs comprise the financial investments, human and institutional capacities, technical expertise and infrastructure required for GPEx to deliver on its objectives, as outlined in the ToC. This section outlines the inputs (i.e. resources) required to deliver GPEx.

Five main inputs are required to deliver GPEx:

- **Funding** refers to the financial resources that underpin GPEx's operations and activities. In the first instance, funding for GPEx is expected to come from UKRI. While our model has assumed initial funding for five years, this is still to be confirmed, and could take the form of a grant or contracted services. While a grant provides greater flexibility than a contract, grant funding may exclude certain organisations from participating or taking the lead. The funding level will be crucial for delivering activities that enable GPEx to achieve its intended outcomes and impacts.
- Appropriate **governance arrangements** for GPEx will be key to delivering on its objectives and maintaining alignment among resources, activities, and the desired outcomes. Governance arrangements will set the strategic direction and provide strategic coordination for GPEx to deliver activities that contribute to achieving the programme's objectives (see section 4.2 for further information on GPEx governance). As a programme that seeks active involvement from the research community within and beyond the higher education sector, transparency and accountability in its delivery are important. Stakeholder engagement and desk research showed that distributed leadership supports transparency and accountability by distributing decision-making power across various organisations that represent the wider sector. Some stakeholders saw limited-term, rotational approaches as an effective way to avoid participant fatigue and enable different groups to contribute expertise at relevant moments. In contrast, others raised concerns about the risk to coherence. For our recommended GPEx governance arrangements, see section 4.2 for further information on GPEx governance.
- **Human resources** refers to the personnel and expertise needed to deliver GPEx, contributing not only to GPEx activities but also to its technical, managerial and administrative capacities. For GPEx, human resources refer to staff from across the delivery consortium, with the lead organisation providing professional services staff responsible for programme management and coordination. As outlined in sections 4.1 and 4.2, the delivery consortium would provide representatives

for the Programme Board, Thematic Project Teams and the Executive Team to support day-to-day GPEx operations.

- **Knowledge inputs** refer to existing knowledge on research culture and models of good-practice exchange, as well as on the principles of a positive research culture, etc. In particular, knowledge inputs from the delivery partner and governance arrangements will be needed to understand current gaps, expectations and opportunities for research culture change. A consortium approach, as outlined in section 4.1, will ensure that those who deliver GPEx can contribute a wide range of experience and expertise in research culture, programme management/delivery, exchange programmes, community-building and stakeholder management that will be essential to its proper running.
- **Infrastructure and technical support** comprise the physical and digital facilities and platforms that enable GPEx delivery, including office space, digital systems, and activity/event sites. Within the ToC, infrastructure and technical support are enablers that connect resources to action, supporting accessibility, scalability, and the integration of activities across GPEx stakeholders. Infrastructure and technical support would be provided by delivery partners as outlined in section 4.1.

Chapter 4. GPEx ownership, governance and evaluation requirements

This chapter outlines our recommendations for structuring ownership, governance and evaluation to ensure effective GPEx delivery and accountability, building on the stakeholder input gathered throughout the project:

- **Ownership** defines who is responsible for delivering the programme, i.e. the organisations, teams or partnerships that will design, manage and implement GPEx activities. Clear ownership establishes accountability for outcomes and helps align resources, decision making and delivery capacity with the programme's strategic objectives. We recommend that GPEx be led by a consortium of organisations with cross-sector representation.
- **Governance** refers to the mechanisms and bodies responsible for providing oversight, strategic direction and operational coordination throughout the duration of GPEx. Establishing robust governance ensures transparency, informed decision making and adaptability to emerging challenges. We recommend that GPEx be governed by a Programme Board tasked with strategic coordination and oversight, alongside thematic project teams that lead the design and delivery of core activities, and an Executive Team that provides administrative and technical support. The governance structure should include representation from the wider R&I community beyond the delivery partners, spanning sectors, roles and career stages.
- **Evaluation requirements** describe how we recommend measuring GPEx's progress and impact against the programme's objectives. We recommend a developmental evaluation to support continuous learning throughout the funding duration, and a theory-based evaluation at the end of the initial five-year funding period to assess whether and how GPEx has delivered against its objectives.

4.1. Ownership – who should be responsible for GPEx?

Strong ownership fosters accountability, as stakeholders view the programme's achievements and challenges as shared responsibilities. In the context of GPEx, there was broad agreement among stakeholders on the need for collective programme ownership, with the opportunity to share learning beyond its immediate participants. The stakeholders we consulted saw this principle as essential to ensuring that the exchange is inclusive, transparent and representative of the diverse stakeholders involved in research culture work. Therefore, the delivery team should aim to develop a sense of shared ownership across the sector for GPEx, ensuring that governance arrangements and activities represent its component geographies, institutions and career stages.

4.1.1. A consortium approach to delivering GPEx

To support cross-sector ownership of GPEx, the programme should be delivered by a consortium of partners that can establish shared responsibility across all those involved. To achieve this, the delivery consortium should ensure cross-sector representation

and a distributed leadership model. The delivery consortium should comprise a variety of institutions throughout the UK, with complementary expertise in delivering culture change initiatives, convening stakeholders, and curating, synthesising and evaluating evidence, as well as representing different geographies, disciplines and institutional size and income. It should also demonstrate clear organisational commitments to implementing its evidence base and good practices.

The delivery consortium will comprise a lead organisation and delivery partners. The lead organisation will hold contractual responsibility with UKRI, be responsible for overall programme delivery, and manage reporting, coordination, and compliance. It will also provide the executive staff for GPEx. Delivery partners will be responsible for delivering specific activities and mobilising stakeholders within their region and discipline, providing infrastructure for in-person activities and events, and acting as regional convenors. Delivery partners will also deliver the core GPEx activities and provide representatives for the Programme Board (see section 4.2 for further information on GPEx governance).

Among stakeholders who participated in implementation focus groups, there was strong agreement that the lead organisation for the consortium should be independent (i.e. not a higher education institution) and have the capability and credibility to engage with and mobilise the R&I community on culture-change matters. An independent organisation (e.g. learned societies and not-for-profit research organisations) would ensure the delivery consortium's neutrality and reduce conflicts of interest if GPEx were to assume a funding-distributing function.

4.2. Governance – who should steer GPEx?

Effective governance arrangements are fundamental to ensuring that a programme is well managed, accountable and aligned with its strategic objectives. Governance provides the overall framework for decision making, oversight and coordination, defining the distribution of leadership, responsibility, and accountability among stakeholders. Depending on a programme's scale, complexity and context (e.g. steering committees, advisory groups or partnership boards), different governance models can be implemented.

Governance arrangements can also influence programme delivery, with different structures offering distinct advantages in terms of ownership, participation and flexibility. Designing GPEx governance arrangements that are responsive to and representative of the programme's objectives, context and stakeholders is therefore a key factor in successful delivery.

4.2.1. Governance to support distributed leadership in GPEx

The proposed model seeks to support accountability, distributed leadership, capability building, equitable access and diverse actors' participation. The recommended governance model is designed to promote shared ownership, agility and co-creation among participating institutions, emphasising collaboration, transparency and continuous learning across participants, and recognising that effective knowledge exchange depends on open partnerships and mutual trust. We recommend that GPEx be governed as follows:

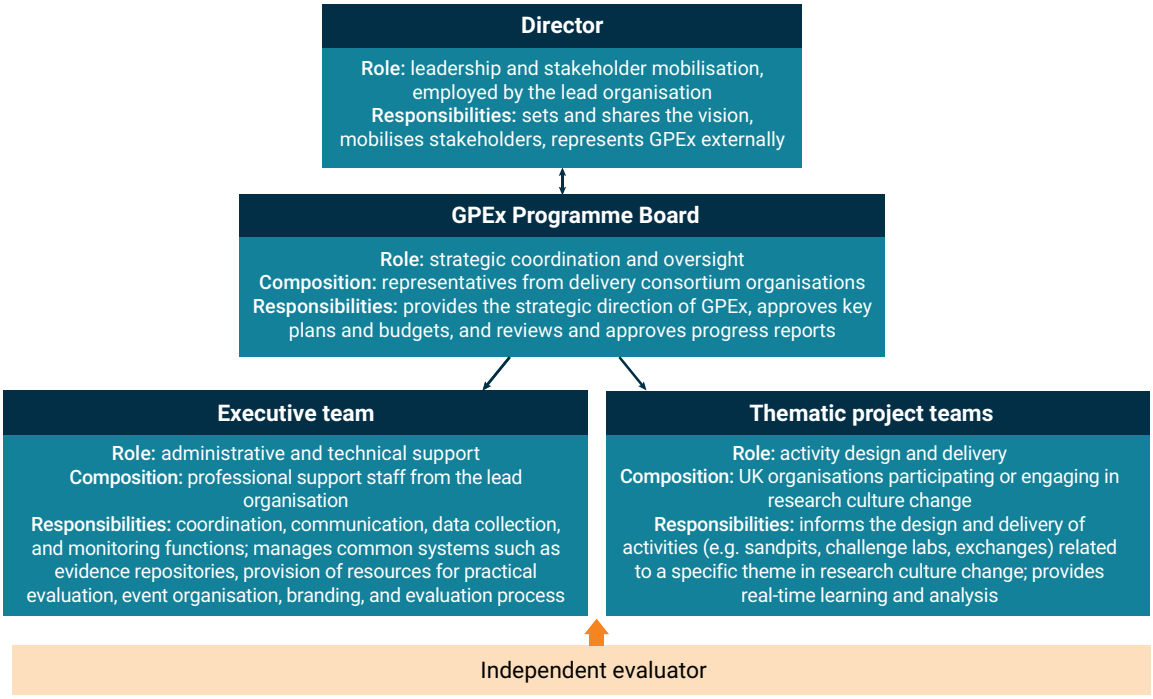
- **GPEx Director (leadership and stakeholder mobilisation):** Employed by the lead organisation, the Director sets

the vision for GPEx and promotes the vision externally, mobilising stakeholders to engage and participate in GPEx. The Director will represent GPEx at external forums, including with policymakers and the wider R&I community, and will report to the GPEx Programme Board.

- **GPEx Programme Board (strategic coordination and oversight):** The Programme Board provides overall governance and accountability to funders and partners, setting the strategic direction, approving key plans and budgets, and reviewing and approving progress reports. The Board would comprise representatives of organisations within the delivery consortium, reflecting various career stages, roles, sectors and geographies. It would also ensure coherence among GPEx's multiple components and facilitate cross-cutting decisions on resource allocation, risk management and communications. Partner organisations would elect the Chair of the Programme Board, which should rotate biannually. The GPEx Director would also sit on the Programme Board.
- **GPEx Executive Team (administrative and technical support):** The Executive Team supports the Programme Board and thematic project teams by managing coordination, communication, data collection and monitoring. Reporting to the Programme Board, it prepares documentation for Board meetings, consolidates project team reports and ensures lessons and insights are shared across GPEx. The Executive Team would also manage common systems, including evidence repositories, resource provision for practical evaluation, event organisation, branding and evaluation processes. The lead organisation would provide the Executive Team, composed of professional support staff (e.g. project management, finance, IT, and communications).
- **Thematic Project Teams (activity design and delivery):** Built around the different core activities, project teams would inform the design and delivery of activities (e.g. co-development of principles, evaluation and sandpits) related to a specific research culture theme and provide real-time learning and analysis feedback to the Programme Board. Rather than being limited to consortium partners, participation in project teams would be open to all UK organisations, ensuring cross-sector representation. Each team will ensure meaningful representation from currently less visible organisations in research culture work and from early-career employees across a range of roles, with dedicated funds available to encourage participation. A light oversight mechanism (via the Programme Board) should confirm that participation remains inclusive and aligned with GPEx governance principles.
- **Independent Evaluator:** An Independent Evaluator should be appointed at the start of GPEx to support a developmental evaluation of the programme (see section 4.3 for further information on GPEx evaluation requirements) embedded within GPEx but not directly involved in GPEx delivery. If GPEx resource allocation does not allow for a developmental evaluation, an independent evaluator should be appointed to conduct a theory-based evaluation at the end of the first funding cycle. Evaluation is key to GPEx's accountability.

The diagram in Figure 3 illustrates the proposed governance arrangements.

Figure 3. Proposed GPEx governance structure



4.3. Evaluation requirements – how will we know whether GPEx delivers?

Evaluating GPEx is essential to assess whether it is achieving its intended objectives and to inform decisions about its future direction. A well-designed evaluation provides evidence on the programme's relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability, enabling stakeholders to understand what works, what does not and why, ensuring accountability for resource use and helping justify investments to funders and the public. Moreover, evaluation supports learning and continuous improvement by identifying best practices and areas for improvement, ultimately enhancing the programme's overall impact and value.

We recommend two different approaches to evaluating GPEx: 1) a developmental evaluation to support continuous adaptation throughout the funding duration, and 2) a theory-based evaluation at the end of the funding period to assess whether and how GPEx has delivered on its objectives.

4.3.1. Developmental GPEx evaluation

Developmental evaluation is a structured yet flexible process that supports learning and adaptation as a programme evolves, aiming for 'learning in action' and helping a programme navigate uncertainty, test innovation and refine its approach in real time. GPEx is well-suited to a developmental evaluation, given that the cultural change it seeks to achieve is incremental and diffuse:

- A developmental evaluation fosters a strong culture of learning and reflection by integrating evaluation directly into programme design and delivery, with the evaluator embedded into the programme.
- Real-time data collection and analysis required for developmental evaluations

enable programme leadership to respond quickly to emerging issues and opportunities, allowing new ideas to be tested and refined before being scaled up.

- The collaborative nature of developmental evaluation enhances stakeholder engagement, as programme teams, participants and funders collaborate to interpret findings and guide adaptations.
- A developmental approach can support the evolution of a more relevant and sustainable programme by using ongoing progress to inform continuous improvement, making GPEx more resilient to change and better equipped to achieve its goals in the longer term.

However, certain challenges in development evaluation must be considered in the context of GPEx. Firstly, its emphasis on flexibility and iterative learning can make planning and budgeting more complex, as the extensive data collection required by a developmental evaluation can make data harmonisation challenging if not well planned. In addition, as the evaluator is to some extent embedded in the programme, their role requires clarity around boundaries, responsibilities and communication to maintain objectivity. Lastly, reporting is time consuming and can be more complex than traditional approaches, as it focuses on regularly reporting learnings (e.g. 2–3-page learning briefs as soon as new insights emerge) and intangible outcomes, such as the development of trust and learning capacity. These challenges must be considered, and clear plans outlined, if a developmental evaluation is included in GPEx delivery.

4.3.2. Theory-based evaluation

A theory-based evaluation seeks to understand how and why a programme works based on an underlying theory about how its activities will generate the desired outcomes. While a developmental GPEx evaluation would provide insight into GPEx delivery, a theory-based evaluation would assess what the programme achieved and how it did so. The ToC developed in this report provides a good foundation for a theory-based evaluation of GPEx.

We propose that a theory-based impact evaluation be commissioned externally at two time points: 1) at the end of the initial five-year funding period, and 2) five years after completion of the initial funding round. An impact evaluation at the end of the funding period would allow the evaluators to assess whether the short-term outcomes outlined in the ToC have been achieved and how, and progress towards achieving longer-term outcomes and impacts. Resources are allocated in each budget scenario for an evaluation at the end of the funding period. An evaluation at five years post-completion would allow evaluators to assess whether the longer-term outcomes of GPEx have been achieved and to examine the programme's emerging impacts.

The theory-based evaluation should be guided by the six evaluation criteria outlined by the OECD: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. Table 3 outlines our indicative questions for a theory-based evaluation of GPEx.

Table 2. Indicative evaluation questions for the theory-based evaluation

OECD evaluation criteria	Indicative evaluation questions for the theory-based evaluation
1) Relevance: Is the intervention doing the right things?	EQ1: To what extent do the design and objectives of GPEx address the needs and priorities of the sector? EQ2: To what extent is GPEx aligned with national policies, strategies and priorities? EQ3: To what extent do stakeholders and partners understand and support GPEx's purpose and approach?
2) Coherence: how well does the intervention fit?	EQ4: To what extent are GPEx activities aligned to achieve the intended outcomes? EQ5: How well does GPEx complement or coordinate with other UK research culture initiatives? EQ6: What mechanisms exist to enable coordination and information sharing between GPEx delivery partners and other organisations?
3) Effectiveness: Is the intervention achieving its objectives?	EQ7: To what extent has GPEx achieved its intended outcomes, and what factors have helped or hindered progress? EQ8: How have the different aspects of GPEx delivered against its objectives? EQ9: What mechanisms are in place to support continuous learning and improvement during GPEx implementation? EQ10: How well has GPEx adapted to changing circumstances to maintain effectiveness?
4) Efficiency: How well are resources being used?	EQ11: To what extent are GPEx resources (time, funds and human capacity) used efficiently to deliver the intended outcomes? EQ12: How efficient are GPEx's management and operational systems (e.g. coordination and reporting)? EQ13: Could similar results have been achieved using fewer resources or alternative delivery approaches?
5) Impact: What difference does the intervention make?	EQ14: What measurable changes – intended or unintended, positive or negative – has GPEx generated, and what has its contribution been? EQ15: To what extent has GPEx contributed to broader change in research culture in the UK and beyond? EQ16: How have different stakeholder groups experienced the effects of GPEx (e.g. equitable distribution of benefits or burdens)?
6) Sustainability: Will the benefits last?	EQ17: To what extent has GPEx built lasting ownership, capacity or behavioural changes that could sustain impact over time? EQ18: What factors may affect the sustainability of GPEx?

One challenge for many impact evaluations is limited or low-quality data. Therefore, we recommend developing a monitoring framework at the start of GPEx to ensure that data collection activities support a theory-based evaluation. This includes collecting stakeholder feedback, establishing clear reporting mechanisms, and developing policies and procedures to support coherent GPEx delivery.

4.3.3. Value-for-money (VfM) assessment

Supporting a theory-based evaluation, a VfM assessment upon completion of the initial five-year GPEx funding cycle would provide insight into how resources are used to deliver the best possible outcomes, taking into account quality, cost, inclusivity and long-term impacts. As GPEx's expected impacts are non-monetisable, any VfM assessment would need to use non-standard methods, such as Willingness To Pay (WTP) or a rubric-based assessment (e.g. the 4E framework). For example, the WTP method would help assess GPEx's value to its users by measuring how much they would be willing to pay to subscribe to it. Alternatively, the 4E framework would assess how well GPEx delivered against its value proposition and how much it embedded equity in its design and delivery, including how appropriately resources were allocated, how efficiently they were used, how far they led to the desired outcomes, and how fairly or equitably they were distributed.

Chapter 5. **GPEx budget scenarios**

To better understand the resources required to deliver GPEx and achieve the expected outcomes and impacts, we developed a bespoke cost model for three budget scenarios: £0.5m (low), £2.5m (medium) and £5m (high). For each budget scenario, we present a combination of possible activities to achieve the desired outcomes and impacts as per the GPEx ToC (Table 4).

The costing exercise shows that a minimum budget of £2.5m is required to achieve the desired GPEx outcomes and impacts. With a lower budget, GPEx could not deliver on its three objectives and leverage the added inclusiveness and coherence it offered, providing limited access to GPEx activities and resources. The highest budget would enable GPEx to increase participation in research culture change across UK organisations more effectively and to develop activities that ensure its sustainability beyond the initial funding round. This aligns with stakeholders' views, since they have cautioned against a low-budget approach for GPEx on multiple occasions.

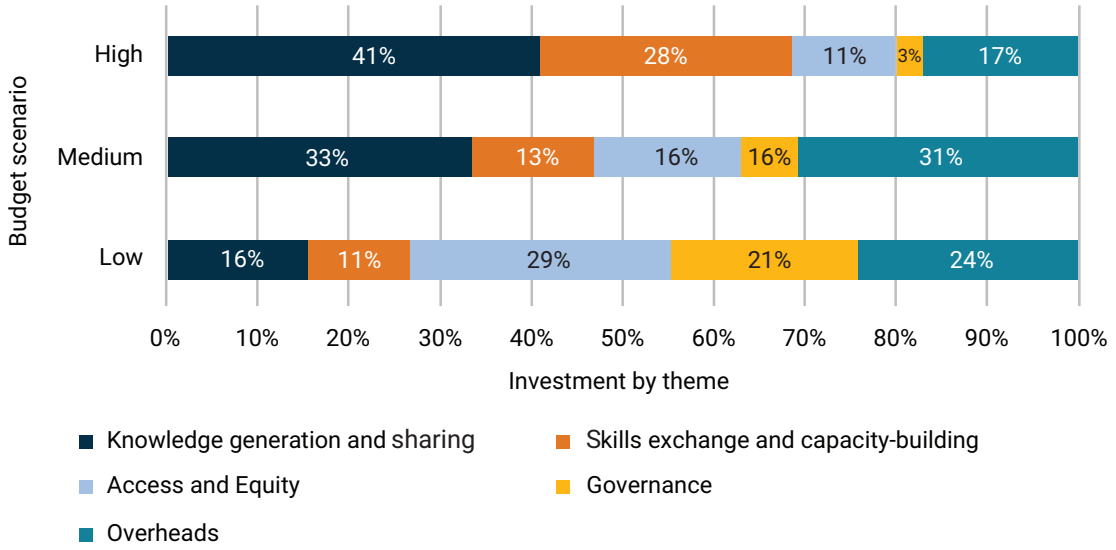
Costs are allocated to five investment themes, of which three relate to cross-sector activities for delivery under GPEx: 1) knowledge generation and sharing, 2) skills exchange and 3) capacity building, access and equity. The remaining two themes – governance and overheads – represent resources required for indirect and management costs. Table 3 shows the different tasks requiring resource allocation and briefly describes each. Further information on resource allocation for the different tasks and in-kind support considered is available in section 5.

Table 3. Proposed GPEx resource distribution by investment theme

Task	Description
Knowledge generation and sharing	Budget allocation to support activities that generate new evidence, enable access to existing evidence and foster knowledge sharing among members. Examples of activities included in the model are evidence synthesis, sandpits, knowledge exchange grants and pilot funds. It also includes the budget allocated to external evaluators for a developmental evaluation of GPEx. See section 4.3 for further information on GPEx evaluation requirements.
Skill exchange and capacity building	Budget allocation to support skill development and mentorship to encourage peer learning and greater access to capacity-building resources in the R&I community. Examples of activities included in the model are evaluation drop-in sessions, practical resources for evaluation support, evaluation workshops and support grants, training, a skills exchange programme and challenge labs.
Access and equity	Budget allocation to enable participants' engagement in GPEx activities and ensure their access to resources and support offered. Examples of activities included in the model are the co-development of principles, wider stakeholder engagement and a financial support fund. The financial support fund would provide support to 10–40% of each thematic project team (see section 4.2 for further information on GPEx governance), supporting members who could not meaningfully participate in activities voluntarily.

Task	Description
Governance	Budget allocation for coordination, communication and management of GPEx. For further information on the proposed governance structure for GPEx, please refer to section 4.2.
Overheads	Budget allocation to cover indirect costs for the delivery consortium. Examples of costs considered in the model include rent and utilities, IT subscriptions, website development and maintenance and fees for annual audits.

Figure 4. Proposed resource distribution in each budget level by investment theme



Note: Proportions are calculated as a percentage of the maximum budget at each level (£0.5m for the low-budget scenario, £2.5m for the medium-budget scenario and £5m for the high-budget scenario).

Due to tighter resource constraints in the low-budget scenario, costs covering governance arrangements and overheads have been substantially reduced, leading to higher in-kind contributions expected from the delivery consortium to fill the gap. Figure 4 illustrates the main differences across budget scenarios, focusing on investment.

Table 4. Core and learning activities by budget scenario – grants expressed as £m allocated across five years (% of total budget)

Theme	Low-budget scenario (£0.5m)	Medium-budget scenario (£2.5m)	High-budget scenario (£5m-)
Knowledge generation and sharing	**Access to evidence:** A total of 0.48 Full-Time-Equivalent (FTE) staff are assigned to curation, synthesis, and updates to the evidence base, resulting in reduced coverage over the four years. **Thematic sandpits:** Four sandpits are constituted from years two to five, but in-person engagement for sandpit members is not covered. KE Grants are only awarded in year four: • KE Grants: £20,000 (4%). **Evaluation grants:** No. **Developmental evaluation:** No. **Pilot Fund for Challenge Labs:** No.	**Access to evidence:** 1.025 FTE are assigned to curation, synthesis, and updates to the evidence base, which are seen as the essential level of input to sustain this activity. **Thematic sandpits:** Four sandpits are constituted from years two to five, with financial and administrative support for in-person engagement. KE grants are awarded in years three and four: • KE Grants: £240,000 (9.6%) • Cross-sandpit learning facilitated by the Executive Team. **Evaluation grants:** £72,000 (2.9%) for two years. **Developmental evaluation:** From years two to four. **Pilot Fund for Challenge Labs:** No.	**Access to evidence:** 1.055 FTE are assigned over four years to curation, synthesis and updates to the evidence base. **Thematic sandpits:** Six sandpits are constituted from years two to five, with financial and managerial support for in-person engagement. KE grants are awarded from years three to five: • KE grants: £540,000 (11%) • Cross-sandpit learning facilitated by the Executive Team. **Evaluation grants:** £360,000 (7.2%) for two years. **Developmental evaluation:** Across all five years. **Pilot Fund for Challenge labs:** £240,000 (4.8%) for two years.
Skill exchange and capacity building	**Practical evaluation support:** 0.42 FTE in total from the Executive Team. **Evaluation workshops:** One member-led workshop annually in years two and four. **Challenge labs:** Four challenge labs only in year three. **Training (online):** One session per year from year two. **Training (in person):** No. **Skills exchange:** No. **Evaluation drop-ins:** No.	**Practical evaluation support:** 0.74 FTE from the Executive Team: • The Evaluation Team meets in person from years two to five • Evaluation support grants: £22,500 (0.9%) in years two and four. **Evaluation workshops:** Six member-led workshops annually from years two to four. **Challenge labs:** Four challenge labs in years three and five. **Training (online):** Four sessions per year from year two. **Training (in person):** Annual session for 15 people. **Skills exchange:** 0.26 FTE admin support only in year five. **Evaluation drop-ins:** No.	**Practical evaluation support:** 0.77 FTE from the Executive Team: • The Evaluation Team meets in person from years two to five. • Evaluation support grants: £35,000 (0.7%) in years two and four. **Evaluation workshops:** Six member-led workshops annually from years two to four. **Challenge labs:** Six challenge labs in years three and five. **Training (online):** Six sessions per year from year two. **Training (in person):** Annual session for 15 people. **Skills exchange:** £900,000 (18%) with 1.4 FTE admin support for three years. **Evaluation drop-ins:** £13,788 (0.2%) for the Evaluation Team; 0.08 FTE from the Executive Team across four years.

Theme	Low-budget scenario (£0.5m)	Medium-budget scenario (£2.5m)	High-budget scenario (£5m-)
Access and equity	**Total comms support:** 0.32 FTE. **Travel expenses covered per activity:** 15% **Participation Grants:** £134,935 (27%): • 10% of participants' time covered. **Co-development exercise:** £8,436 (0.18%) with 0.11 FTE support. **Co-development grants:** No. **External stakeholder engagement:** No.	**Total comms support:** 1.05 FTE. **Travel expenses covered per activity:** 100% **Participation Grants:** £350,797 (14%): • 30-40% of participants' time covered. **Co-development exercise:** £12,483 (0.5%) with 0.125 FTE support. **Co-development grants:** £12,500 (0.5%). **External stakeholder engagement:** 0.185 FTE.	**Total comms support:** 1.62 FTE. **Travel expenses covered per activity:** 100%. **Participation Grants:** £444,283 (8.9%): • 30-40% of participants' time covered. **Co-development exercise (x2):** £28,445 (0.06%) with 0.49 FTE support. **Co-development grants:** £25,000 (0.5%). **External stakeholder engagement:** 0.59 FTE for senior leadership.

5.1. Knowledge generation and sharing

The knowledge generation theme includes activities related to evidence synthesis, sandpits, KE grants, the pilot fund and developmental evaluation. Table 5 summarises the trade-offs between the low- and high-budget scenarios and the medium-budget scenario.

Table 5. Budgetary trade-offs for knowledge generation and sharing activities

Low versus medium-budget scenario	High versus medium-budget scenario
The low-budget scenario offers the same activities as the medium-budget scenario, but with much lower FTE, resulting in a scaled-down module for each activity. Compared with the medium scenario, the lower budget yields: • 46% lower support for evidence synthesis. • 75% lower support for knowledge sharing within sandpits. • 91% lower allocations to KE grants. • Due to budget constraints, GPEx relies on informal feedback loops and lacks developmental evaluation.	The high-budget scenario offers more grants and a developmental evaluation over the five years of the initial GPEx funding cycle, compared with the three-year developmental evaluation in the medium-budget scenario. Compared with the medium-budget scenario, the highest budget yields: • 3% more support for evidence synthesis. • Equal practical evaluation support. • 34% more support for knowledge sharing in sandpits. • 144% more allocations to KE Grants. • 340% more allocations to evaluation grants, along with costs allocated for mentorship from the Executive Team.

5.2. Skills exchange and capacity building

The theme of skills exchange and capacity building includes activities such as evaluation drop-in sessions, practical evaluation support, evaluation workshops, evaluation support grants, and training and skills exchange. Table 6 summarises the trade-offs between the low- and high-budget scenarios and the medium-budget scenario.

Table 6. Budgetary trade-offs for skills exchange and capacity building

Low versus medium-budget scenario:	High versus medium-budget scenario:
• Co-development of practical evaluation support is scaled down due to 51% lower allocations. • The frequency of evaluation workshops is vastly reduced within and across years, resulting in 88% lower support for them. • In the low-budget scenario, GPEx is unable to offer evaluation support grants, i.e. small grants for members addressing a targeted gap by developing a toolkit. • Online training is scaled back as the frequency is reduced each year (76% lower support), and there is no in-person training. • There are 89% lower allocations to Challenge Labs, as they receive lower facilitation activities from the Executive Team.	• Facilitation activities for challenge labs increase by 33%. • Pilot Fund constituted for challenge lab members to further develop or disseminate novel ideas. • Allocations to skill-exchange programmes increase a hundred times as GPEx provides funded fellowships for cross-sector learning. • The budget allocated for evaluation workshops remains the same. • There is 48% more support for online training as the frequency increases within each year.

5.3. Access and equity

The access and equity theme includes resourcing activities that target inclusiveness, such as co-development, participation grants, and stakeholder engagement. In this theme, the low-budget scenario fails to meet central GPEx values, such as access, coherence and equity. The lower budget also means limited resources for participation grants, requiring voluntary participation from most participants and impacting the ability of underrepresented and under-resourced organisations to participate. In addition, several overhead costs, such as infrastructure, website development and theory-based evaluation after the first funding cycle, are absent from the low-budget scenario. Table 7 summarises the trade-offs between the low- and high-budget scenarios compared with the medium-budget scenario.

Table 7. Budgetary trade-offs for activities targeting access and equity

Low versus medium-budget scenario:	High versus medium-budget scenario:
• Coverage of 10% of participants' time. • 68% lower comms support and no support for external engagement. • 62% lower allocation to the participation grants.	• 62% greater comms support. • 180% increase in budget allocated for external engagement. • 27% more allocations to the participation grants.

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