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Factors Affecting Public Engagement by UK Researchers 2025

Final Report

Version 2

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List of acronyms

AHSS	Arts, Humanities, and Social Science
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GLAM	Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums
HESA	Higher Education Statistic Agency (HESA)
NCCPE	National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement
NIHR	National Institute for Health and Care Research
NGO	Non-government Organisation
PE	Public Engagement
PPI	Patient and Public Involvement
REF	Research Excellence Framework
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
UKRI	UK Research & Innovation
UKRI SEE-PER	UK Research and Innovation Strategic Support to Expedite Embedding Public Engagement with Research

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of study

Public engagement has become an established part of the UK research landscape over the past several decades, as attested by similar studies carried out in 2006 and 2015. The nature and role of public engagement has evolved significantly over this period and has been shaped by changes within research communities, research policy, funding structures, and wider society.

This report presents the results of the study commissioned by the Royal Society and carried out by Technopolis in 2025. The purpose of the study was to explore the current nature, extent, and enablers of public engagement activity among UK-based academic researchers and public engagement professionals.

1.2 Approach

The study scope and methods were developed in close collaboration with the Royal Society.

1.2.1 Definition of public engagement

A shared understanding of what constitutes public engagement was essential for the design and interpretation of this study. Early in the project, the study team worked with the Royal Society and its network of Public Engagement contacts, to develop a working definition of public engagement, building on relevant literature and the earlier studies in 2006 and 2015. This definition served as a structuring principle for the research and shaped the design of the survey questionnaires for both researchers and public engagement professionals ("enablers") and was embedded into the interview guides. In doing so, we ensured that the data collected across all methods would be conceptually aligned and directly comparable.

- Following the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement's (NCCPE) definition of public engagement that: Public engagement describes the many ways organisations seek to involve the public in their work. For universities this covers a range of types of engagement, for instance 'civic' or 'community' engagement, which are part of the same family.

This has led to the development of a range of techniques, such as public dialogues and consultation (which provide opportunities for university staff and students to listen and take account of public views and values) or collaborative and participatory practices (which actively involve people in discovery and learning).

The framework shown in Figure 1 organises public engagement activities into three main categories: Informing, Consulting, and Collaborating, reflecting a continuum from one-way communication to co-creation.

By using this structured framework, the study captures not only the extent to which researchers engage with the public, but also how they do so and at what level of intensity. This enabled the study to better capture the balance between more traditional one-way communication (informing) and more interactive forms of engagement and capture motivations and challenges inherent to each type. Overall, this provides a richer and more nuanced picture of engagement across the UK research landscape.

While the framework contains elements of continuity from the 2015 and 2006 studies, it does not mirror the previous studies exactly with respect to the conceptual framework, survey

questionnaire, and sampling strategy (see section 1.2.2 below). In this report, comparisons across the studies are used to highlight trends over time, but these findings should be read with these caveats in mind.

Figure 1 Definition of types of public engagement

Informing	Consulting	Collaborating
This involves sharing information to inspire, educate, change, or build capacity, and influence decisions.	**This focuses on using the views, skills, experience, and knowledge of others to inform, change, educate, or build capacity or decisions.**	**This involves working together to consider, create, or decide something jointly.**
Examples include: • Public Outreach Events (museums / galleries / science centres / festivals and other cultural venues) • Posting content to social media • Traditional media (radio, TV, print, journalism) • Lectures, talks or workshops with adults or schools/children	**Examples include:** • Surveys • Focus groups • User-testing • Public dialogue • Citizens assemblies • Gathering patient sentiment or opinion • Participatory research	**Examples include:** • Consensus building • Co-production, such as Creating opportunities for the public or patients to inform the research questions • Citizen science, such as. involving the public in gathering or processing research data • Working with the private sector / industry • Working with government/ policymakers to develop policy

1.2.2 Data collection

The central part of the study is a survey of the research community supplemented by a programme of follow-up interviews. Specifically:

- An online survey of research staff in HEIs and research institutes
- An online survey of public engagement professionals working with UK researchers
- A programme of interviews with researchers and public engagement professionals to provide qualitative context and depth to the survey findings

This conceptual framework formed the basis for the development of the data collection tools, including key surveys questions concerning public engagement activities undertaken in the past 12 months.

Overall, we collected 1,327 completed survey responses and conducted 51 interviews, as shown in It is noteworthy that since the previous edition of the survey, changes to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has changed the way in which individuals can be approached for data collection. In addition, challenging operating environments across HEIs who face budget constraints, plus reported "survey fatigue" resulted in lower response rates than initially aimed for. However, the corpus of data collected is still significant enough to draw robust conclusions on the trends within the sector.

Table 1 below. It is noteworthy that since the previous edition of the survey, changes to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has changed the way in which individuals can be approached for data collection. In addition, challenging operating environments across HEIs who face budget constraints, plus reported "survey fatigue" resulted in lower response rates than initially aimed for. However, the corpus of data collected is still significant enough to draw robust conclusions on the trends within the sector.

Table 1 Overview of survey responses and interviews, by respondent group

	Researchers	**PE professionals**	**Total**
Survey	1,149	178	1,327
Interviews	41	10	51

1.3 Overview of report

The remainder of this report sets out the study findings in several thematic sections and concludes with a reflection on the state of public engagement in 2025 and how it has changed since the previous study was published in 2015:

- **Section 3** explores the **extent and nature of public engagement in 2025**, offering a descriptive analysis of the types and frequency of engagement activities undertaken by researchers and PE professionals
- **Section 4** examines **attitudes towards public engagement**, including perceptions of its value, purpose, and relevance among different respondent groups
- **Section 5** investigates the **perceived capacity to undertake public engagement**, focusing on respondents' self-assessed skills, experience, and confidence in engaging with the public
- **Section 6** reviews the **institutional support and training** available to researchers, highlighting variations across organisations and identifying areas of good practice or unmet need
- **Section 7** identifies the **barriers to public engagement**, including challenges that may limit participation or effectiveness
- **Section 8** provides a synthesis of the findings and the authors' overall reflections on the current state and future direction of public engagement in the UK research landscape
- Two **methodological appendices** provide additional detail on the approaches used in the study, including the survey (Appendix A) and interviews (Appendix B) respectively

2 Context

2.1 Public engagement in the UK

Public engagement with research in the UK has undergone substantial development since the late 20th century, emerging from early efforts in science communication to become a formalised element of national research policy. A pivotal moment came with the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee's 2000 report, which criticised the "deficit model" of science communication, where the public was viewed as passive recipients of expert knowledge, and advocated for more dialogic, participatory approaches to science-society relations[1].

In the years that followed, a series of strategic initiatives embedded public engagement within the structures of higher education and research. The Beacons for Public Engagement programme (2008–2011), funded by UK higher education bodies and the Wellcome Trust, catalysed institutional capacity-building by supporting university consortia to develop models of embedded engagement practice[2]. This was followed by the Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research (2010), which articulated sector-wide commitments around institutional support, researcher recognition, enabling infrastructure, and accountability[3].

Parallel developments occurred in health and social research. The National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), established in 2006, has consistently mandated patient and public involvement (PPI) in its funded work, making it a key dimension of health research design and delivery[4]. The organisation INVOLVE, integrated into the NIHR in 2020, played a critical role in establishing frameworks, training, and principles for meaningful public involvement.

This emphasis on public engagement was accompanied by important conceptual shifts. Earlier emphasis on dissemination and outreach has given way to more inclusive paradigms that foreground co-production, collaboration, and mutual learning[5] [6]. The emphasis now lies not simply in improving public understanding of science, but in recognising the public's role as active participants in shaping research agendas, methodologies, and impacts.

This changing landscape is underpinned by a growing commitment to equity, trust, and inclusion, driven by concerns about public legitimacy, research integrity, and the need for research to reflect societal priorities. Public engagement in the UK is now aims to be positioned not as a peripheral activity, but as a defining feature of responsible, impactful research.

2.2 Evolution of public engagement concepts and practice

Over the past two decades, the conceptualisation of public engagement in UK research has undergone a marked transformation. Initially dominated by outreach and communication models aimed at raising public awareness, engagement is now increasingly framed in terms of participation, co-production, and dialogue. This evolution reflects a broader "relational turn"

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[1] House of Lords Science and Technology Committee. (2000). *Science and Society: Third Report*.

[2] UK Higher Education Funding Councils, the Wellcome Trust, and partners. (2008). *Beacons for Public Engagement Programme*.

[3] UKRI. (2011). *Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research*.

[4] Department of Health. (2006). *Best Research for Best Health: A New National Health Research Strategy*

[5] NIHR. (2020). *Centre for Engagement and Dissemination: Legacy of INVOLVE.*

[6] Stilgoe, J., Lock, S. J., & Wilsdon, J. (2014). *Why should we promote public engagement with science? Public Understanding of Science*, 23(1), 4–15

in engagement thinking, emphasising mutual learning, trust-building, and the need to share power between researchers and communities[7].

A significant body of academic work has explored this shift. Stilgoe et al. (2014) and Weingart et al. (2021) argue that engagement must move beyond promotional or instrumental modes to become embedded in the epistemic and ethical dimensions of research itself[8] [9]. The emphasis is now placed on understanding publics not as passive recipients but as active contributors with valuable experiential knowledge. This reframing has implications for the kinds of engagement practices considered meaningful, favouring deliberative methods, community-led research, and iterative involvement across the research lifecycle.

This conceptual refinement has also highlighted the diversity of publics involved in research. Douglas et al. (2024), for example, propose a typology distinguishing between stakeholder, volunteer, sample, and community publics, arguing that targeted engagement strategies must reflect the distinct roles these groups play[10]. Similarly, Cohen (2022) offers a framework for analysing how institutional norms and policies interact to shape the success of engagement initiatives at different levels of a research system[11].

In parallel, new forms of digital and citizen-led engagement have broadened participation pathways. Projects such as the Open-Air Laboratories (OPAL) initiative have demonstrated the potential of citizen science to integrate public knowledge into environmental monitoring[12]. Likewise, national-scale deliberative exercises such as the UK Climate Assembly illustrate how structured public dialogue can influence science-informed policy agendas[13].

Overall, the literature reflects a shift from "engagement-as-event" to "engagement-as-process", one that is relational, reflexive, and sustained. This conceptual progression aligns with wider debates on research justice, inclusion, and public accountability, reinforcing the view that engagement is not merely desirable, but integral to responsible and impactful research.

2.3 Institutional Infrastructure: policies, resourcing, and skills

Since 2015, public engagement has become increasingly embedded in the UK's research infrastructure through formal policy frameworks, institutional strategies, and sector-wide support mechanisms. A key driver of this integration has been the Research Excellence Framework (REF), carried out by Research England, the Scottish Funding Council, Medr (preceded by Higher Education Funding Council for Wales), and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland in 2014 and 2021 which has required universities to demonstrate the impact of research beyond academia, including through engagement activities[14]. The REF

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[7] NCCPE. (2023). *Framing Civic and Relational Engagement: Sector Reflections*

[8] Stilgoe, J., Lock, S. J., & Wilsdon, J. (2014). *Why should we promote public engagement with science? Public Understanding of Science*, 23(1), 4–15.

[9] Weingart, P., Joubert, M., & Connoway, K. (2021). *Public engagement: Definitions and tensions. Public Understanding of Science*, 30(6), 557–573

[10] Douglas, C. et al. (2024). *Classifying publics: Towards a typology for science engagement. Journal of Science Communication*, 23(2), 112–130.

[11] Cohen, J. (2022). *Institutional structures and public engagement: A multi-level analysis. Science and Public Policy*, 49(5), 673–688.

[12] Davies, L. et al. (2016). *Environmental citizen science: Evaluation and future directions. Environmental Science & Policy*, 64, 1–9

[13] Climate Assembly UK. (2020). *Final Report*. Retrieved from https://www.climateassembly.uk/report/

[14] REF. (2021). *Guidance on submissions*. Research England.

has elevated engagement from a discretionary activity to a strategic concern for institutions, shaping planning processes, resource allocation, and staff roles.

Other major initiatives have reinforced this trajectory. These commitments have underpinned investment in dedicated engagement staff, leadership roles, and professional development programmes within universities. The NCCPE has played a central role in supporting this institutionalisation, offering tools, evaluation frameworks, and sector-wide benchmarking[15].

In the health and social care sectors, institutional infrastructure has developed with particular speed. The NIHR's UK Standards for Public Involvement, introduced in 2019, provide a structured framework for embedding public involvement in all phases of health research[16]. The consolidation of INVOLVE into the NIHR Centre for Engagement and Dissemination in 2020 further centralised expertise and resources, with a clear emphasis on inclusion and evidence-based engagement practice[17].

However, challenges remain. Evaluations consistently point to constraints in resourcing, skills development, and reward systems. Public engagement is often under-prioritised relative to research and teaching, and formal recognition in promotion criteria remains inconsistent across institutions[18]. While training opportunities have expanded, public engagement remains largely learned on the job, and significant differences persist by discipline, career stage, and contract type.

The NCCPE's "State of Play" (2023) report underscores the need for sustained investment in engagement leadership, equitable career pathways, and robust mechanisms for evaluating effectiveness[19]. Embedding engagement at scale requires not just policy commitments, but long-term cultural and structural change, including better alignment between institutional incentives and researcher motivations.

As such, while the UK has made substantial progress in formalising the role of public engagement, the consolidation of these gains will depend on addressing systemic challenges related to workforce capacity, reward structures, and sustainable funding.

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[15] NCCPE. (2023). *State of Play: Public Engagement with Research in UK Universities*. Retrieved from https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/state_of_play_final.pdf

[16] NIHR. (2019). *UK Standards for Public Involvement*.

[17] NIHR. (2020). *Centre for Engagement and Dissemination: Legacy of INVOLVE*.

[18] NCCPE. (2021). *Embedding Engagement: Strategic Drivers and Evaluation*.

[19] NCCPE. (2023). *Framing Civic and Relational Engagement*.

3 Attitudes towards public engagement

This chapter explores how researchers view public engagement (PE), its perceived importance, general attitudes, motivations, and perceived benefits.

In 2015, researchers described PE as both an obligation and an opportunity. The vast majority agreed that their work carried societal implications and that they had a duty to share this with the public.[20] At the same time, they emphasised personal benefits such as enhanced communication skills, enjoyment, and research relevance. A recurring theme was the desire to do more, but barriers included time, resources, and institutional recognition. Attitudes have remained largely positive since 2015, but with subtle shifts towards more collaborative and socially conscious forms of engagement.

The following sections examine researchers' views on the importance and purpose of public engagement, the factors that motivate participation, and the benefits they associate with engaging the public.

3.1 Understanding of public engagement

Researchers described important trends in the understanding and practice of public engagement, aligned with many of the developments described in the literature (see section 2 above). Evidence from interviews highlight several important trends:

- **Broad and evolving definitions of public engagement.** Many interviewees reflect on the shifting and diverse nature of public engagement, ranging from school talks to policy work and community collaborations. Several noted how the meaning of PE differs by discipline, audience, and intent – moving from "broadcasting" to mutual learning and co-creation
- **Inclusivity and reaching diverse audiences.** There is a strong emphasis on reaching underrepresented, marginalised, or non-traditional audiences, including patients, volunteers, ethnic minorities, and people outside academia
- **Two-way and participatory engagement.** Rather than simply informing, many contributors described models of engagement based on dialogue, feedback, co-design, and co-production. These approaches were seen as more meaningful, equitable, and impactful in shaping both research and relationships
- **Public engagement as a research method.** For some, engagement is integral to how they conduct research – from design to dissemination. Involving stakeholders in early project stages, data collection, or advisory roles was common, particularly in health, social sciences, and applied fields

In the context of the framework used here, this would suggest an increased diversity of types of engagement across the three types, increased focus on "consulting" and "collaborating" (two-way) types of engagement in addition to more traditional "informing" types of engagement and, as a consequence, an increasing value of public engagement to the research itself. This likely represents the views of the most engaged researchers, however, and the survey evidence below will provide a clearer view of how widely this is reflected throughout the sector.

Survey evidence reinforces the continued dominance of "informing" forms of public engagement, such as communicating, sharing, or educating the public about research. Only

[20] TNS BMRB and PSI (2015), Factors affecting public engagement by researchers: A study on behalf of a Consortium of UK public research funders, available at: https://cms.wellcome.org/sites/default/files/wtp060033_0.pdf

a small minority of respondents (around 7%) explicitly described public engagement in consultative terms (for example dialogue, feedback, or listening to public perspectives), and fewer than 2% referred to collaborative or co-creative forms of engagement. Most responses instead used general language such as "connecting research with society" or "engaging people outside academia," suggesting that many researchers continue to interpret engagement primarily as outreach or communication.

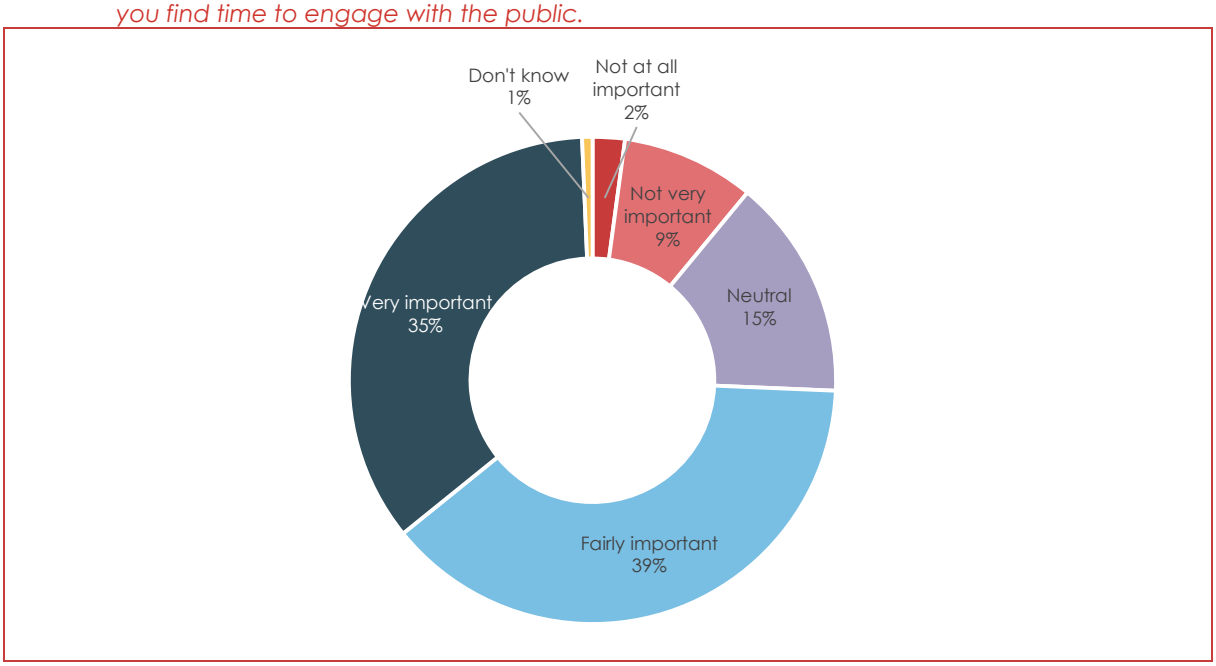
Taken together, these findings suggest that while conceptualisations of public engagement are broadening, particularly among highly active or impact-oriented researchers, practice across the research community as a whole remains predominantly focused on one-way, informational forms of interaction.

This broad yet uneven understanding of public engagement shapes how researchers perceive its importance and relevance to their work. The following section examines how widely public engagement is viewed as an integral part of the research role and the extent to which this perception varies across disciplines and institutions.

3.2 Perceived importance of public engagement

The survey reveals a high degree of consensus among researchers about the importance of public engagement. Asked how important researchers consider public engagement relative to other components of their working life, 35% of researchers saw it as is as "very important" and 39% reporting it as "fairly important", and only of 11% do not find it important (see Figure 2). This indicates a strong recognition of the value of public engagement activities among researchers.

Figure 2 In relation to the other things you have to do in your working life, how important is it to you that you find time to engage with the public.



Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey, and answered this question (n = 1,146)

Variation in attitudes by researcher characteristics is limited. Career experience, interdisciplinarity, and institutional type (Russell Group vs non-Russell Group) show little influence on whether researchers regard PE as important. Two notable exceptions are observed:

- For most disciplines, approximately 80% of respondent researchers indicated that public engagement activity was either 'very important' or fairly important' to them. The exception are the physical sciences, engineering and mathematics where the corresponding figure was only 64%. It is important to note that the act of responding to this survey is likely to show selection bias for those with an interest in public engagement.
- Of the survey respondents with public engagement in their job description, 83% said such activity was important to them compared to 72% for whom public engagement was not a formal part of their job

Compared to previous surveys, the results appear to indicate a significant increase in the importance of public engagement among researchers in the UK. This is true in both Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (AHSS) discipline areas. As discussed below "engaging with the public" can mean many things and it does not necessarily follow that this attitude leads to more public engagement overall.

Table 2 Perceived importance of public engagement in relation to other things in working life, change over time

	2006 [1] (STEM only)	**2015** [1]	**2025** [2]	**Change** (2015-2025)
STEM researchers, *(REF Main Panel A: Medicine, Health and Life Sciences and REF Main Panel B: Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics)* % share stating that PE is important	28%	37%	69%	+32%
AHSS researchers (REF Main Panel C: Social Sciences, and REF Main Panel D: Arts and Humanities) % share stating that PE is important	*n/a*	52%	81%	+29%

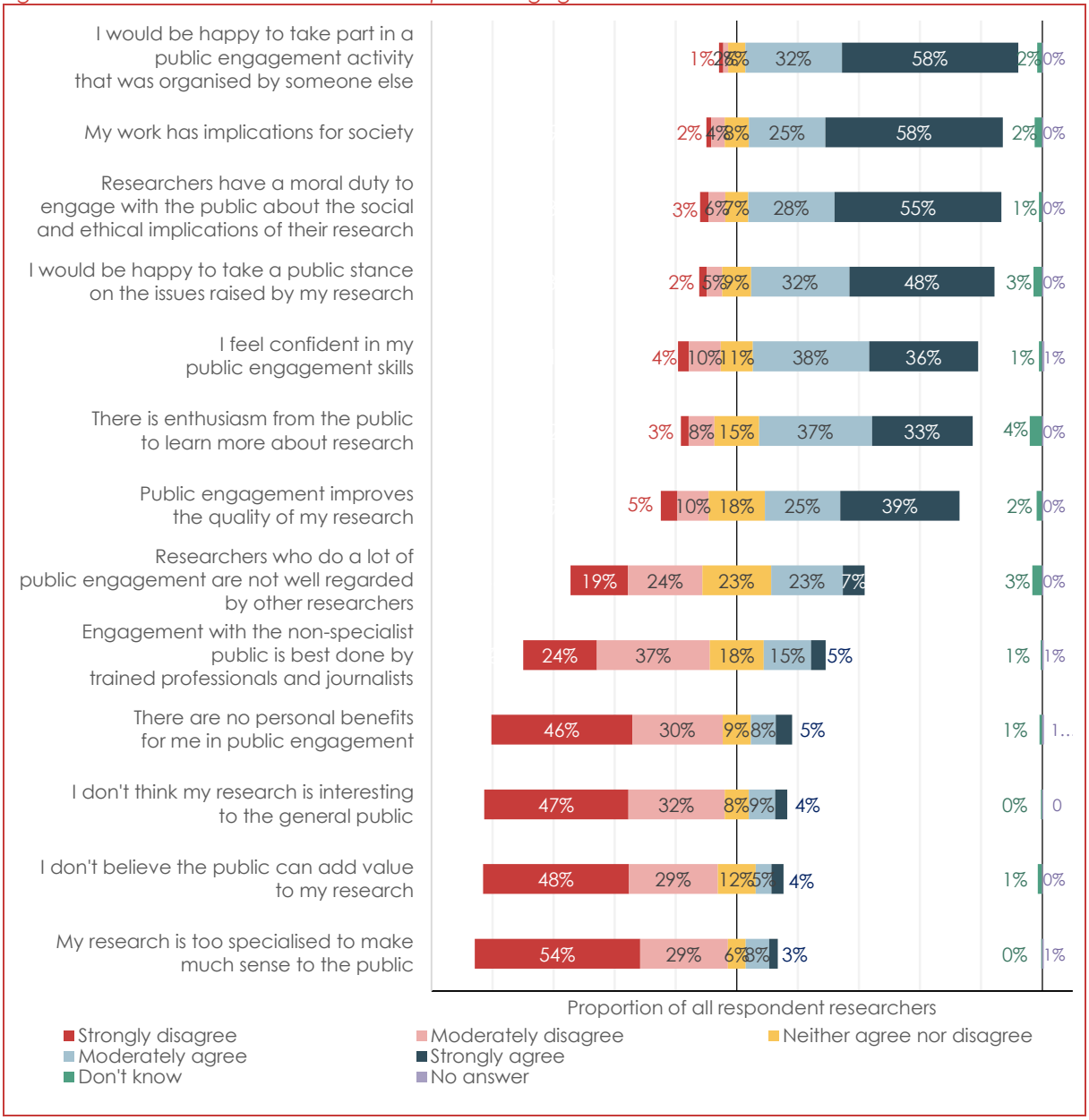
Sources: [1] Factors affecting … p. 24, STEM 2006 (n=1,481) STEM 2015 (n=1,556) AHSS 2015 (n=894);
[2] Factors affecting public engagement 2025, survey of researchers, n = 1,149.
Note: 2025 figures include sum of answer options "Very important" and "Fairly important"

3.3 General attitude towards public engagement

Figure 3 displays the levels of agreement expressed by researchers regarding several statements about public engagement. There is strong consensus among researchers in the belief that their work has implications for society, and that there is moral duty to engage with the public about the social and ethical aspects of their research. 83% "strongly" or "moderately" agreed with both of these statements. There is relatively less agreement about whether PE improves the quality of their research with 64% agreeing, albeit that this figure is still reasonably high.

The highest overall agreement, at 90%, is with the willingness of researchers to participate in PE activities organised by others. This suggests that researchers see the value of public engagement activity, but do not want to be responsible for it.

Figure 3 Researchers' attitudes towards public engagement



Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

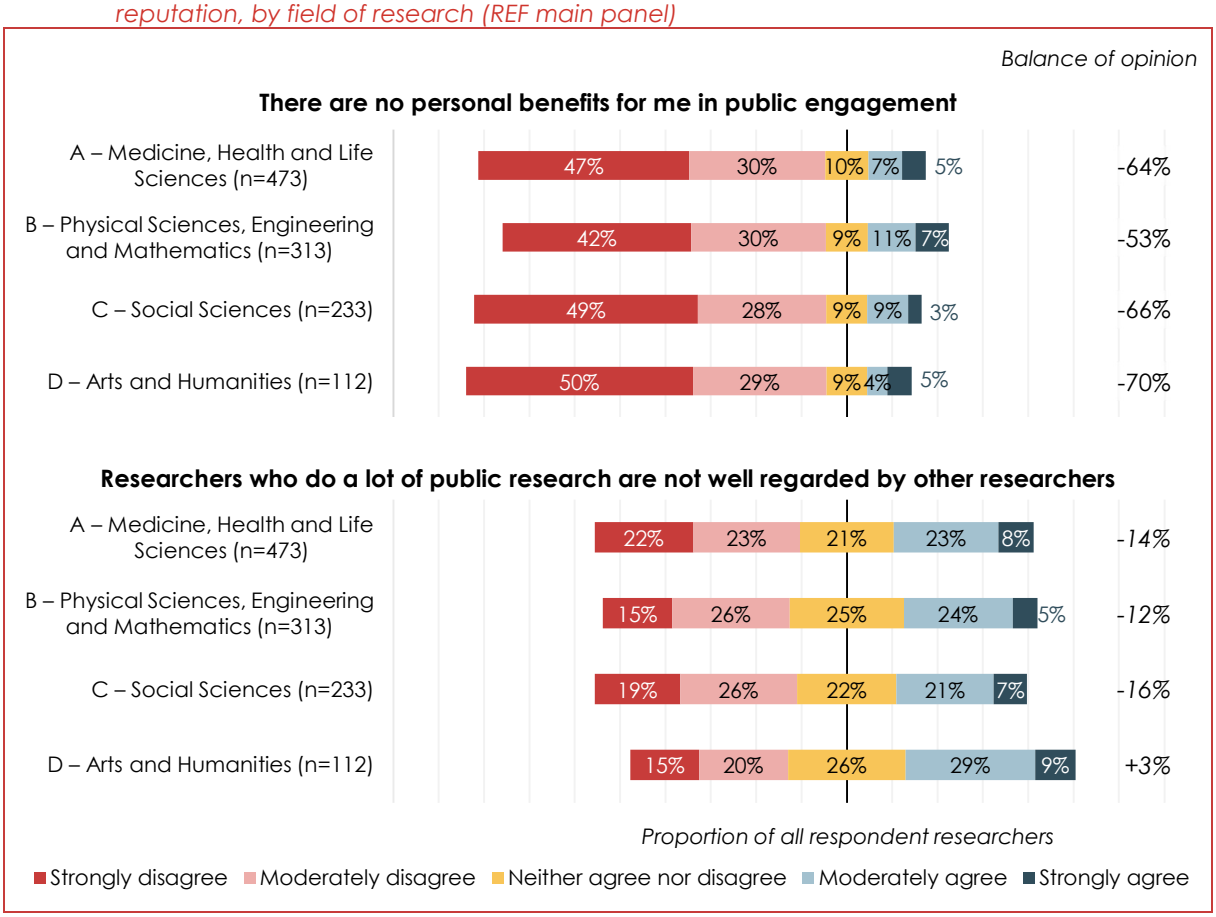
70% of researchers responding to the survey also believed that the public is enthusiastic to learn more about research. This view is echoed in interviews, with the proviso that research should be made relatable, well-packaged, and accessible. Fields like astronomy and medical research often attract more attention, while niche or complex topics require extra framing to connect with audiences.

Most researchers also agreed that the public can add value to research. Interviewees described this value in several ways: helping to shape research priorities (for example, patient-led agendas), contributing data (citizen science), providing diverse perspectives, and ensuring that research remains relevant to real-world needs. These findings align with the broader trend identified in the interviews toward recognising engagement as mutually beneficial rather than purely educational.

Most of these views are broadly similar across the sector but the balance of opinion differs on some issues according to subject area and institutional.

As shown in Figure 4, Arts and Humanities researchers (REF panel D) are less likely than researchers in other fields to agree that there are no personal benefits to them in public engagement, but more likely to state that other researchers have a negative view of those who do a lot of public engagement.

Figure 4 Researchers' attitudes towards public engagement, selected questions: Personal benefits and reputation, by field of research (REF main panel)

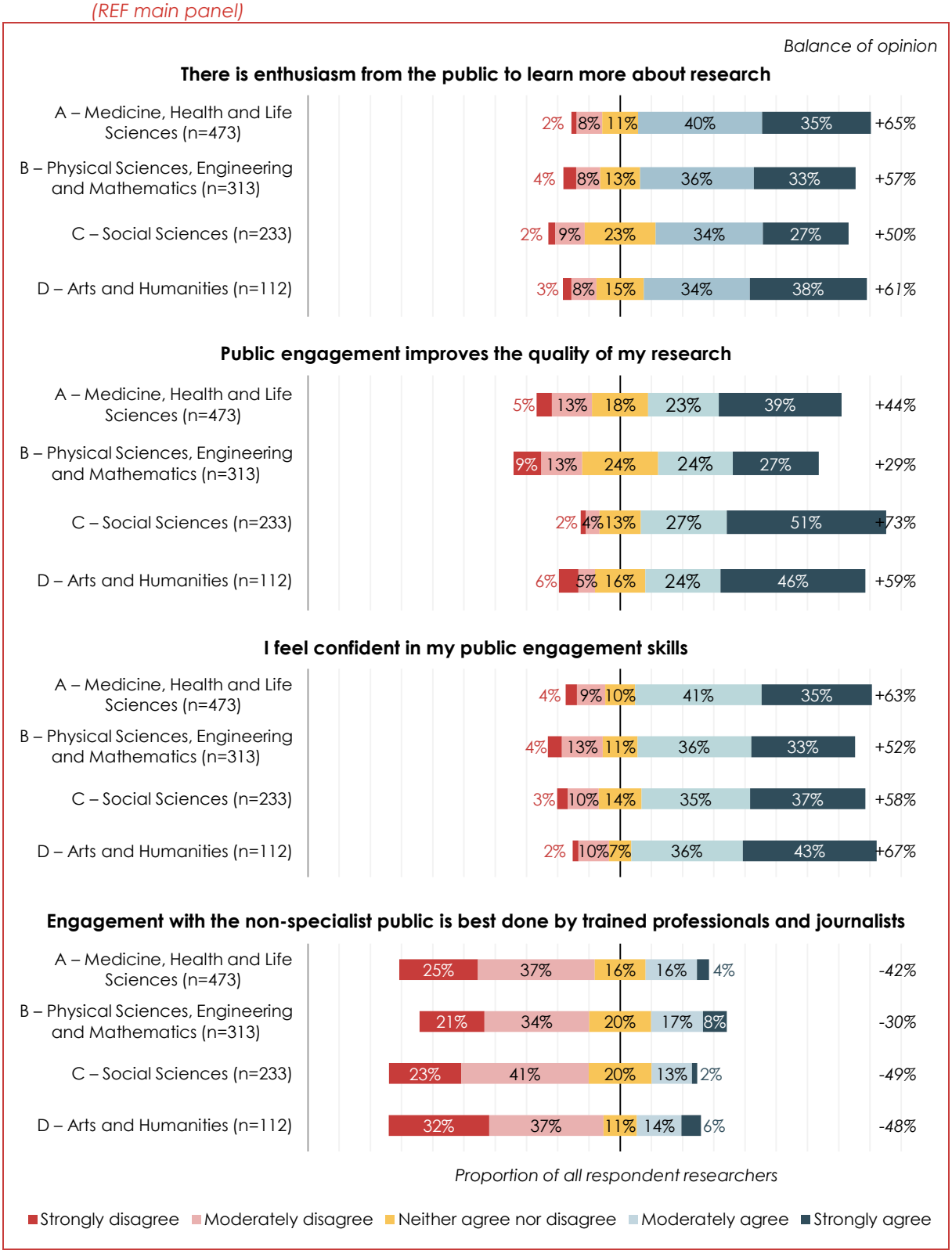


Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149),
Note: Balance of opinion calculated as the sum of "Strongly agree" and "Moderately agree" minus the sum of "Strong disagree" and "Moderately disagree". The chart does not display "don't know" and "no answer".

Figure 5 shows that Researchers in physical sciences, engineering and mathematics (REF main panel B) are just as likely as other researchers to be believe that there is *public enthusiasm* for their research but less likely to believe that engagement with the public improves their research, and more likely to believe that public engagement is best done by trained professionals.

As discussed below in section 4, this might suggest a greater preference for 'informing' types of public engagement activities in these disciplines.

Figure 5 Researchers' attitudes towards public engagement, selected questions, by field of research (REF main panel)



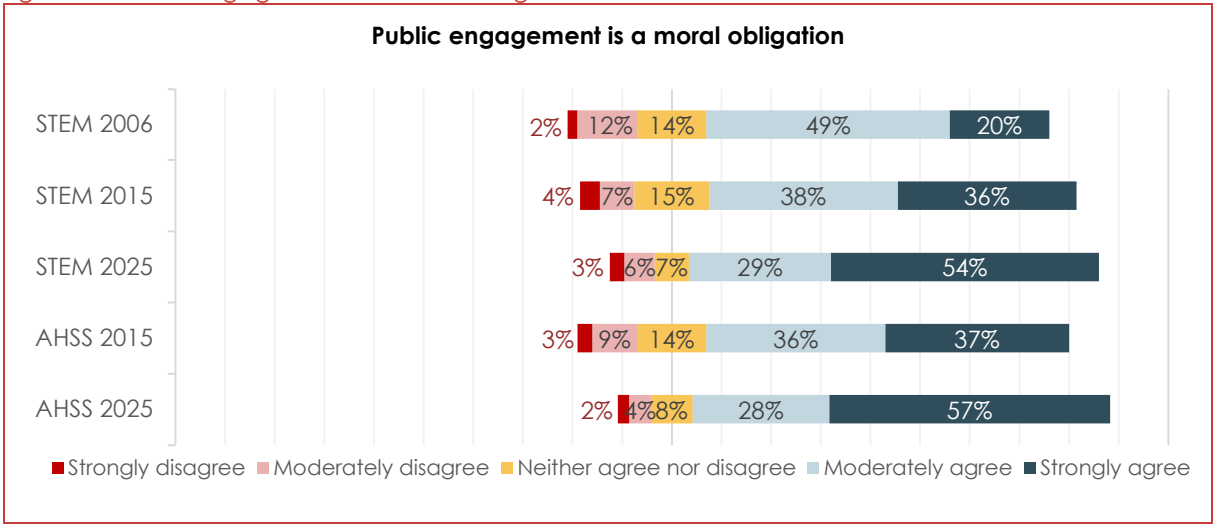
Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149).
Note: Balance of opinion calculated as the sum of "Strongly agree" and "Moderately agree" minus the sum of "Strong disagree" and "Moderately disagree". The chart does not display "don't know" and "no answer".

Large proportions of surveyed and interviewed researchers are keen to undertake more public engagement activity: 54% want to spend more time on collaboration activities, 52% on informing, and 46% on consultation. Similarly, most interviewed researchers expressed a clear enthusiasm to increase their involvement. However, while respondent researchers see public engagement as important and something that they want to do, they don't necessarily want to have overall responsibility for it. Some 90% of respondent researchers stated that '*I would be happy to take part in a public engagement research activity that was organised by someone else.*'

Similarly, 18 interviewed researchers described a sense of duty and public accountability as their main motivation for participation in public engagement activities, especially as their work is (mostly) publicly funded.

Patterns of general attitude show a high degree of continuity with the previous study. In both 2015 and 2025, researchers overwhelmingly endorse public engagement as morally important and express a strong desire to do more. What has changed is the tone and scope of this commitment. Whereas in 2015 engagement was primarily seen as a responsibility to inform, in 2025 researchers are more likely to view it as an opportunity for dialogue, relevance, and societal trust-building. At the same time, the persistent finding that researchers prefer to join others' initiatives rather than lead them points to a structural rather than cultural constraint, time, resources, and institutional systems remain the limiting factors.

Figure 6 Public engagement is a moral obligation: 2006, 2015 and 2025



Sources: Factors affecting public engagement 2015; Survey of researchers, 2025, n = 1,149.

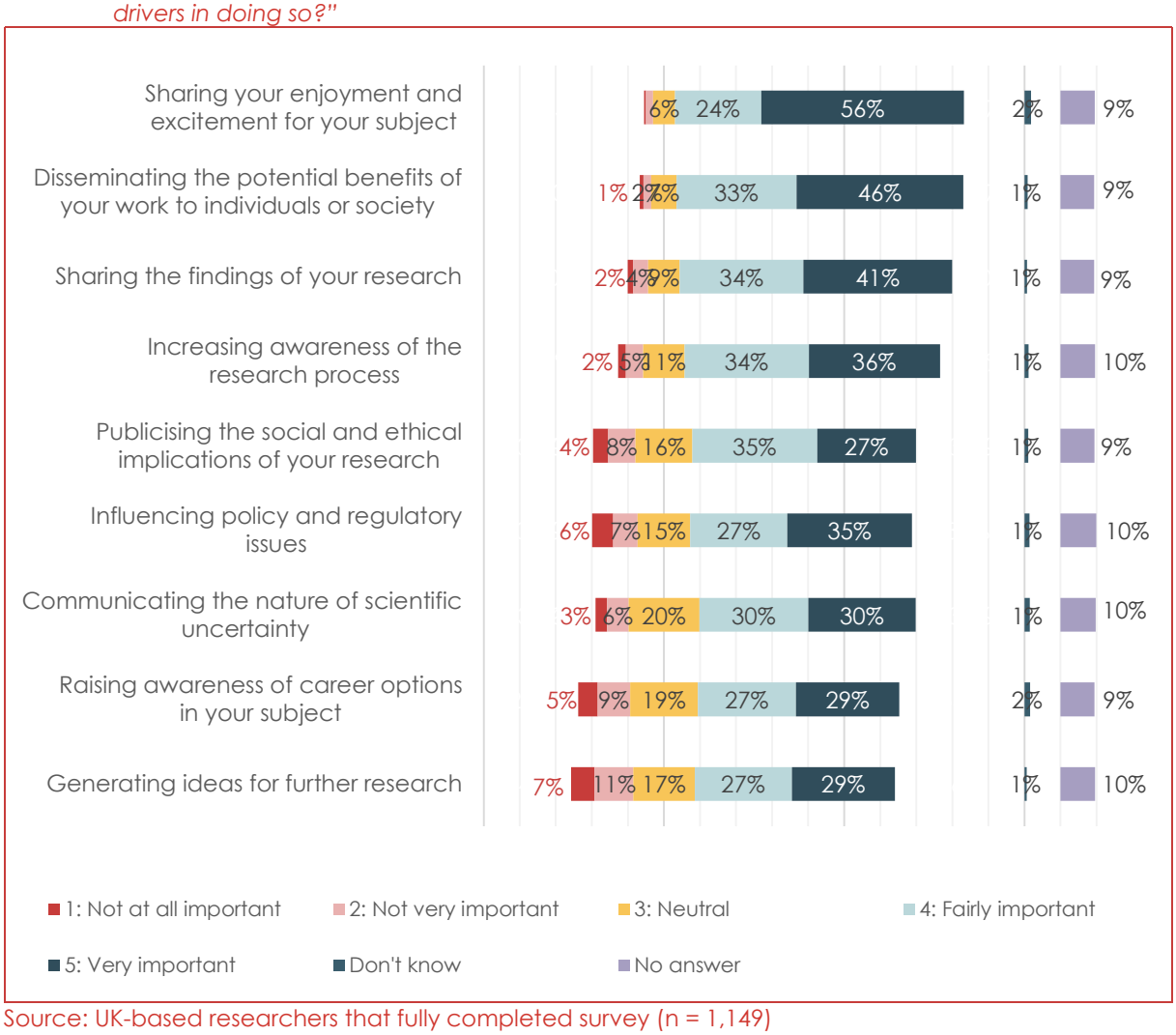
The generally positive attitudes described above help to explain why most researchers express a clear desire to engage with the public, even if practical barriers remain. Yet understanding why researchers choose to take part in public engagement requires looking beyond attitudes of support to the specific motivations that drive their participation. The next section explores these motivations, highlighting the mix of personal, professional, and societal factors that underpin researchers' engagement choices.

3.4 Motivations and benefits

3.4.1 Motivations

The survey evidence shows that researchers are motivated to engage with the public for a combination of personal, professional, and societal reasons. As Figure 7 shows, three factors stand out clearly. The most frequently cited are 'sharing enjoyment and excitement about the subject' (80%), 'disseminating potential benefits to society' (79%), and 'sharing research findings' (75%). More than three-quarters of respondents cited them as either fairly important or very important motivations.

Figure 7 Survey responses to "If you engage with the public, then how important are the following as drivers in doing so?"



Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

These patterns suggest that public engagement is primarily driven by intrinsic and altruistic factors rather than by professional incentives. Most researchers engage because they find it enjoyable, believe it benefits society, and see it as part of their responsibility as publicly funded academics. Only a small minority are motivated by the prospect of personal gain, formal recognition, or promotional credit.

Interviewed researchers shared consistent views on their motivations for undertaking public engagement. Several interviewees cited the intrinsic enjoyment of engaging with the public,

particularly in informal settings such as festivals, schools, or museums. They described public engagement as personally rewarding, fun, and energising. The interviewees also reported using engagement as a tool to promote social impact, inclusion, and equity. This included working with marginalised communities, addressing climate change, and amplifying unheard voices through research. Finally, public engagement was viewed as a way to demystify and spark interest in research. Interviewees mentioned wanting to introduce more engaging and meaningful content, especially in subjects like maths and science, which researchers feel are often underrepresented in school curricula. Many interviewees also noted the value of two-way engagement, where researchers learn from the public just as much as they inform them. Insights from patients, communities, and stakeholders were seen as enriching the research process and making it more relevant.

Compared to 2015, the overall patterns of motivations show continuity with modest evolution. Enjoyment, moral duty and public benefit remain dominant drivers. However, the framing has broadened and in 2015 most researchers spoke of informing the public and increasing understanding. This has changed in 2025 with more highlighting connection, inclusion and shared learning.

3.4.2 Benefits

Researchers view public engagement as valuable not only for society but also for research itself. Survey and interview evidence show that many see engagement as contributing to public understanding, trust, inclusion and relevance as well as enriching the quality and purpose of their own work.

Table 3 addresses the perceived societal benefits from researchers engaging with the public, with respondents choosing up to three options. The most recognised benefit is ensuring that research is relevant to society, as identified by 63% of respondents. Additionally, 48% of participants believe that public engagement helps inform public debate, while 47% suggest it helps maintain public support for research. Under 10% of respondents selected the generation of additional funds as a benefit, and only 0.2% reported that there are no benefits.

Table 3 Choosing up to three options, what are the most important benefits society gains from researchers engaging with the public?

Benefit	Responses (#)	Responses (%)	2015 (%)
To ensure that research is relevant to society	736	64%	44%
To inform public debate	561	49%	31%
To maintain public support for research	555	48%	34%
To enhance the quality of research	415	36%	21%
To justify the use of public funds	350	30%	28%
To learn from public groups	332	29%	24%
To recruit students into research careers	214	19%	n/a
To generate additional funds for universities,	101	9%	8%

colleges and research institutes			
Other	86	7%	
There are no benefits	2	0.2%	

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

Interview findings provide further insight into how researchers conceptualise these benefits. Many interviewees described public engagement as a means of building trust and demystifying research, especially in areas where misinformation or scepticism can undermine public confidence. Several noted that PE helps make research more inclusive and representative, allowing communities to contribute knowledge or raise concerns that shape the research agenda. Others emphasised benefits to education and inspiration, particularly for young people and underrepresented groups, positioning engagement as a pipeline for future researchers and an instrument for equity in participation.

At the same time, interviewees highlighted that engagement benefits the research process itself. Researchers who work closely with communities, patients, or stakeholders reported gaining deeper insights into the social dimensions of their topics, leading to more relevant questions, more ethical approaches, and better dissemination outcomes

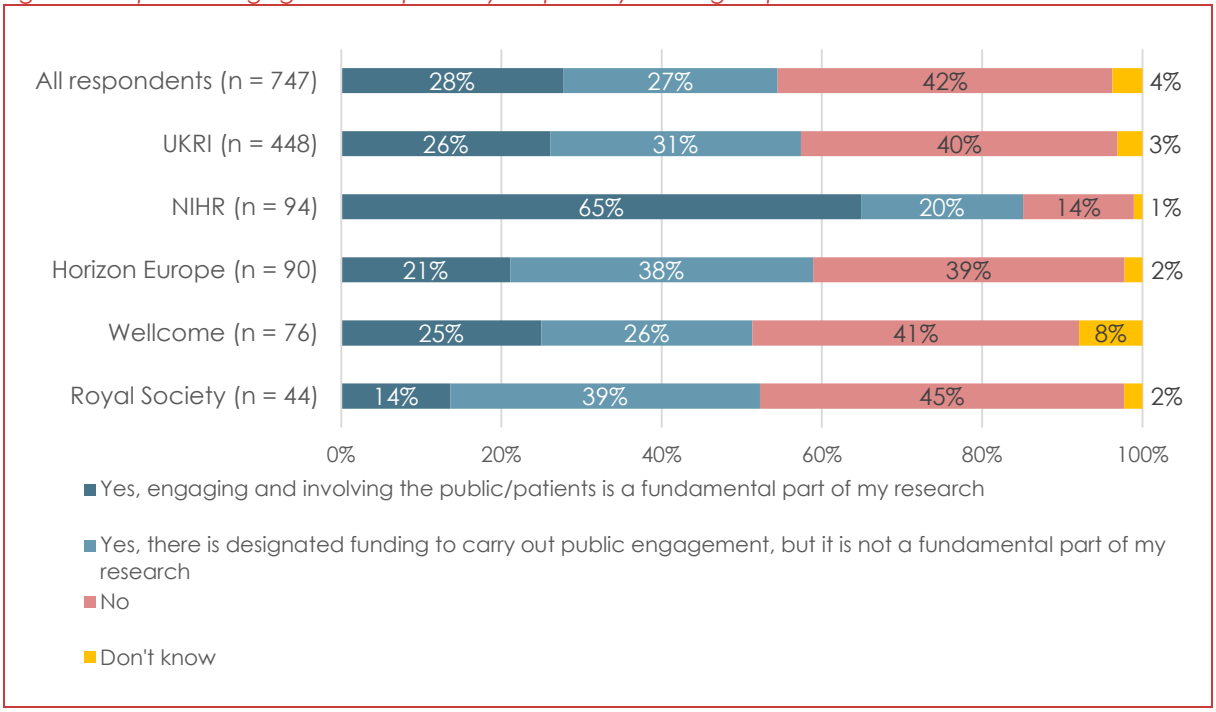
3.5 Funding requirements

In addition to the researchers' own attitudes and motivations, research funding is often awarded with the expectation or obligation that researchers undertake public engagement activities as part of the funded project.

Nearly two thirds, 65%, of researchers responding to the survey have secured external funding for theirresearch, while 35% are working without such support. Of those in receipt of external funding, 60% identify UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) as their main source of funding, with other notable sources including the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) at 13%, Horizon Europe at 12%, and the Wellcome Trust at 10%. A full breakdown of funding sources is available in the appendix.

Most researchers, 55%, who receive external funding report that public engagement is part of the funding requirements: As shown in Figure 8, 28% state that engagement is fundamental to their research and a further 27% that the grant include dedicated funding although public engagement is not seen to be fundamental. The figures are similar for most major funders are similar: between 50% and 60% of researchers state that public engagement is part of their funding requirements. Researchers funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) stand out with 85% stating that public engagement is part of their funding requirements and 65% that this is a fundamental part of their research.

Figure 8 Is public engagement a part of your primary funding requirement?



Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey, and receive external funding (n = 747)

3.6 Summary

The broad picture is one of continuity. As in 2015, most researchers believe public engagement is important, view it as both a duty and a benefit, and express a desire to do more. In both years, willingness outstrips actual participation, suggesting that time, incentives, and organisational support remain critical enablers.

There are, however, subtle shifts. In 2015, variations in attitude were more strongly patterned by career stage and institutional setting, with younger and more senior researchers most positive, and non-Russell Group researchers more engaged. By 2025, such differences appear less marked, with the exception of the lower importance attached by physical sciences, engineering and mathematics researchers. In addition, in the interviews, mid-career researchers seemed less motivated than others, as they often report having to prioritise tasks mandated by university management and/or more relevant to career progression. A further change is the clearer distinction respondents make between wanting *to engage* and wanting responsibility for engagement: the very high proportion (90%) willing to take part in others' organised activities signals that infrastructure and facilitation have become more central over the past decade.

4 Extent and nature of public engagement in 2025

This chapter provides an overview of how UK-based researchers engage with the public in 2025. We summarise the types of activity undertaken and by whom; the groups researchers most frequently engage with; and how participation varies by discipline, experience, institutional context and research approach. Where appropriate, we situate today's picture alongside the 2015 baseline, noting areas of continuity and change. In 2015, public engagement (PE) was already widespread but uneven across disciplines, with stronger activity in the arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS), and among more senior and clinical researchers. The sector was described as a "work in progress," with evolving definitions and incentives.

4.1 Types of public engagement undertaken

Using the updated definition of public engagement set out in section 1.2 above, researchers were asked to indicate the number times they had engaged in different types of public engagement activities in the past 12 months.

The survey reveals that more traditional 'informing' types of public engagement remain the most frequent among researchers. 95% reported engaging in one or more of this type of public engagement activity in the last 12 months, compared to 73% in collaborating and 63% in Consulting type activities. This confirms that some form of engagement has become a near-universal norm within the UK research system, even if levels of intensity differ widely.

Table 4 Level of engagement by type of activity

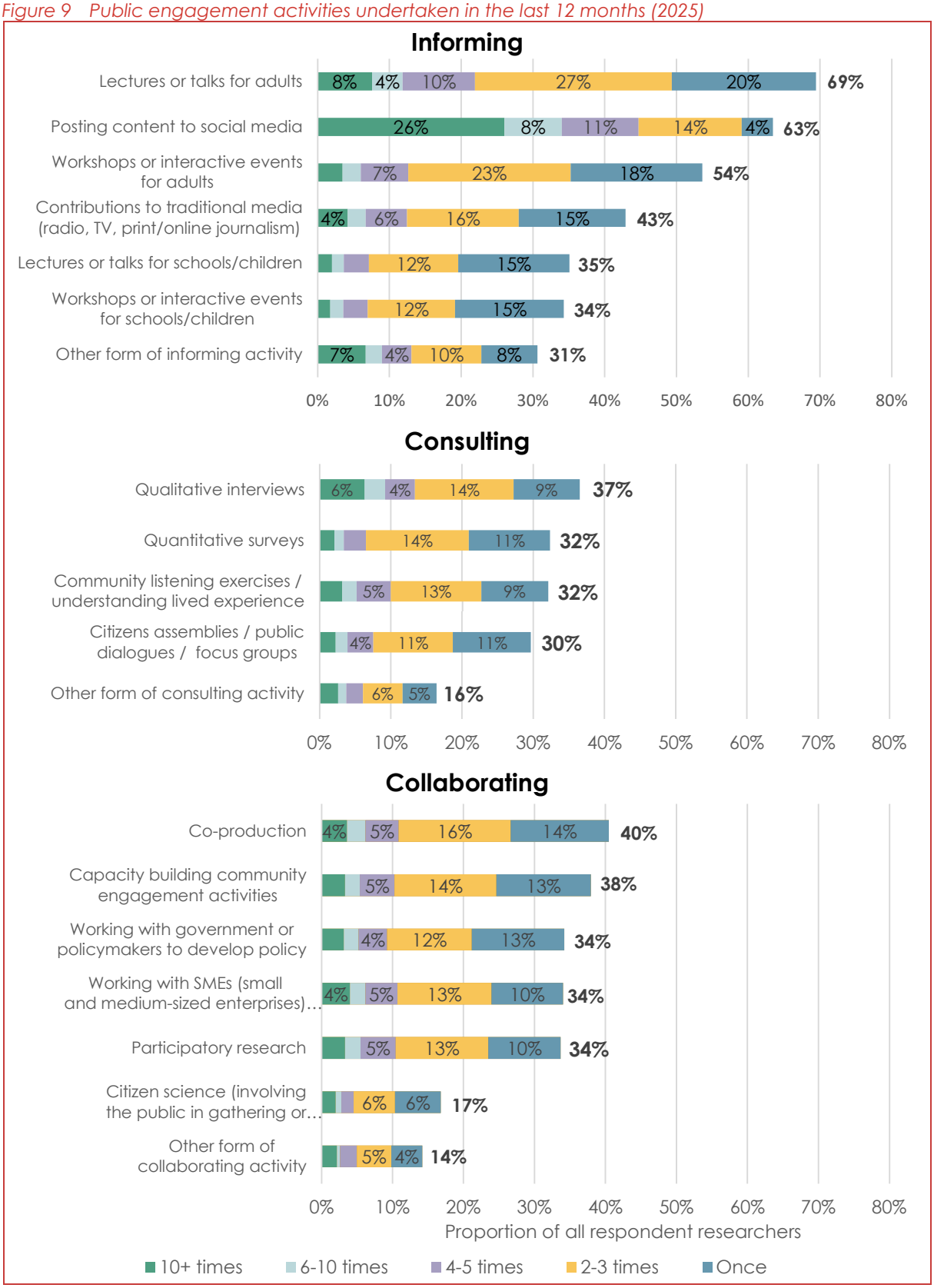
	No engagement	At least 1 activity	At least 3 activities
Informing	5%	95%	88%
Consulting	37%	63%	52%
Collaborating	27%	73%	63%
All types of engagement	4%	96%	92%
All except social media	5%	95%	88%

Source: Factor affecting public engagement 2025 survey of researchers

Figure 9 below, provides a more detailed breakdown by type of activity. The most frequently reported types of activities all belong to the "informing" category, such as Lectures or talks for adults (69%), posting content on social media (63%) and Workshops or interactive events for adults (54%).

The most frequently cited examples were co-production (40% of all respondents), and community engagement (38%). Comparatively few researcher survey respondents undertook any consulting activity – approximately 62% indicated that they had participated in some form of relevant activity. Where they participate, the most cited were quantitative surveys with the public (35% of all respondents) and community listening (34%).

Figure 9 Public engagement activities undertaken in the last 12 months (2025)



Source: Factors affecting Public Engagement 2025 survey of researchers, n = 1,149
Note: Percentages are calculated based on total number of completed responses (including "None", "don't know" and blank responses. Data labels for values below 4% are hidden for legibility but available on hover.

Compared with the 2015 survey, the 2025 results show both continuity and change. Where direct comparison is possible, several "informing" activities appear to have become more common among researchers, while more intensive collaborative forms of engagement, such as citizen science, have become less common. However, because the wording of survey questions has evolved since 2015, these comparisons should be interpreted with caution.

Table 5 Public engagement activities undertaken in the last 12 months, selected activities in 2015 and 2025

2015 survey [1]		2025 survey [2]		Change
Given a public lecture	48%	Lectures or talks for adults	70%	+22
Communicated by social media	57%	Posting content on social media	65%	+8
Public dialogue event/debate	30%	Citizen assemblies	30%	-
Projects involving public/patients as participants (for example citizen science)	27%	Citizen science	17%	-10

Sources: [1] Factors affecting Public Engagement 2025 survey of researchers, n = 1,149;[2] Factors affecting public engagement by researchers, 2015.
Note: 2025 results have been recalibrated for the purpose of the comparison to match the calculation method for 2015 survey, excluding "don't know" and non-responses.

The results could suggest that some researchers are refraining from engaging in more resource-intensive activities. The reasons are explored further in subsequent sections on motivations and barriers to public engagement.

The survey results suggest that academic researchers are least likely to participate in activities involving children and young people, citizen assemblies, and citizen science. Researchers appear increasingly inclined to leave these forms of engagement to designated public engagement (PE) professionals. As shown in Table 6, while relatively few researchers reported direct involvement in such activities, the majority of PE professionals either deliver or support them.

Although not contesting this overall pattern, several interviewees did provide examples of school-related activities, such as talks, workshops, and collaborations with teachers, indicating that some researchers remain actively engaged in educational outreach. However, evidence from the survey of PE professionals suggests that these activities are now routinely managed or facilitated by specialist staff, pointing to a potential clearer division of labour between researchers and engagement professionals than was evident in 2015.

Table 6 Variation in activity supported by researchers and public engagement professionals

	Proportion of researcher survey respondents doing the activity at least once in the last year	Proportion of PE professional survey respondents that either support or deliver the activity
Lectures or talks for schools/children	35%	69%
Workshops or interactive events for schools/children	35%	76%
Citizen assemblies	30%	64%
Citizen science	17%	54%

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149), and respondents that fully completed public engagement professionals survey (n=178)

4.2 Who is undertaking public engagement?

The aggregate figures above provide an overview of the level of engagement by UK researchers, but as found in previous iterations of the survey, the level of engagement varies significantly between different parts of the sector. In this section we look at the significance of institutional context, disciplines, and personal and professional characteristics to understand the factor affecting public engagement by researchers in 2025.

4.2.1 By type of institution

96% of all researchers surveyed undertook some form of public engagement in the past year. Like in 2015, there is no significant difference between researchers in HEIs and those in research institutes and within the group of HEI researchers, there is no great difference as nearly all have participated in at least one PE activity. However, as shown in table 8 below, researchers from non-Russell group universities are more likely to be involved in "consulting" and "collaborating" type of PE activities than are researchers from the Russell group universities. Cross tabulation further shows that non-Russell group researchers included in the survey were more likely than their Russell group colleagues to have engaged in every single type of PE activity included in the framework.

Table 7 Participation in public engagement in the last 12 months, by type of institution , % reporting at least one activity.

	HEI – Russell group	HEIs – non-Russell group	Non-HEI	All researchers
Informing	94%	95%	92%	94%
Consulting	58%	67%	54%	59%
Collaborating	69%	75%	71%	71%
All activities	97%	96%	94%	96%
All excl. social media	94%	96%	94%	95%

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149),

In subsequent chapters, we will examine the degree to which institutional structures, resources, and reward systems enable or constrain researchers' ability to engage with the public.

4.2.2 By discipline

Our survey evidence indicates that researchers in the social sciences and arts and humanities are more likely to take part in public engagement activities than those in STEM fields. Respondents were asked to report their level of involvement across 16 activity types; in 14 of these, the combined proportion of social science and arts and humanities researchers who took part[21] exceeded that of their STEM counterparts[22]. Consistent with the 2015 findings, social sciences and arts and humanities researchers remain, overall, more active across most forms of engagement, while STEM researchers are comparatively more involved in school-based

[21] At least once in the last 12 months

[22] Categorised as 'Medicine, Health and Life Sciences' and 'Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics

activities. These patterns are also supported by the views of public engagement experts interviewed for this study, who noted that disciplinary norms continue to shape both the scope and audience focus of engagement activity.

The difference between the two groups was greatest in "collaborating" activities, such as co-production, community engagement activities, and participatory research. STEM researchers were, however, more likely to engage with schools and children, either through lectures and talks, or workshops and interactive events.

Table 8 Public engagement activities undertaken in the last 12 months (2025), by REF main panel

	REF Main Panel A: Medicine, Health and Life Sciences	REF Main Panel B: Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics	REF Main Panel C: Social Sciences	REF Main Panel D: Arts and Humanities
Informing				
Lectures or talks for adults	66%	63%	78%	86%
Posting content to social media	63%	54%	73%	77%
Workshops or interactive events for adults	53%	44%	61%	67%
Contributions to traditional media (radio, TV, print/online journalism)	39%	35%	51%	62%
Lectures or talks for schools/children	37%	43%	21%	27%
Workshops or interactive events for schools/children	33%	43%	28%	38%
Consulting				
Qualitative interviews	35%	21%	58%	44%
Citizens assemblies / public dialogues / focus groups	32%	18%	43%	29%
Community listening exercises / understanding lived experience	37%	17%	40%	45%
Quantitative surveys	34%	24%	38%	34%
Collaborating				
Co-production	40%	25%	57%	53%
Capacity building community engagement activities	36%	27%	52%	51%
Working with government or policymakers to develop policy	28%	30%	53%	30%
Participatory research	32%	21%	49%	46%
Working with SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and/or major corporations	30%	37%	37%	36%
Citizen science (involving the public in gathering or processing research data)	16%	12%	23%	19%

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

Furthermore, the proportion of interdisciplinary researchers engaged in each type of activity was higher than the proportion of mono-disciplinary ones. The difference between the two groups was greatest for "consulting" and "collaborating" activities, whereas the level of involvement in some types of "informing" activities, such as lectures and workshops for schools and children, was only marginally different.

4.2.3 By career stage

The survey results suggest that more established researchers (more than six years' experience) are more likely to engage in public engagement than young researchers. This is particularly true for "Contributions to traditional media (radio, TV, print/online journalism)" (15 percentage points difference), working with government (11) or businesses (9)

This does not mean, however, that younger researchers avoid public engagement. For example, researchers with less than six years' experience are slightly more likely to take part in citizen science activities than their more senior colleagues, and they are just as likely to state that PE is important. In fact, the most junior researchers (less than two years' experience) appear to be the most like to find PE important of any age group. Instead, it seems that those at the start of their career, and those that are most experienced are the most likely to participate in PE activities. Of the 16 activities we asked respondents about, there were six where researchers with 1-2 years' experience had the highest proportion of respondents engaged, and four where researchers with 15+ years' experience provided the same characteristic.

This complex picture is confirmed by the interviews:

- Most earlier career researchers described a high volume of competing priorities. Simultaneously, however, early career researchers voiced relatively more interest in participating in public engagement opportunities. Many of the interviewed younger researchers also referenced the role of their supervisors in their opportunities participate in PE. If the supervisors themselves are interested in public engagement, there would likely be more opportunities for the early career researchers to participate too.
- Many (although not all) more established researchers, in turn, described more freedom to participate in public engagement. A handful of recently retired academics made up the most PE-active cohort among the interviewees.

If more junior researchers are less likely to engage with the public, it seems more likely to be related to external pressures than any lack of desire. This will be explored further in the section on barriers to public engagement below.

4.3 Who do researchers engage with?

As Table 9 shows, respondent researchers engage with a diverse stakeholder set through their public engagement activity. Nevertheless, they are most likely to engage with three types of stakeholders: charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), prospective students, and policymakers.

Table 9 Which of the following groups, if any, have you directly engaged with in the last twelve months?

Group	Responses (#)	Responses (%)
Charities/NGOs/Other non-profit organisations	456	40%
Prospective students	414	36%

Group	Responses (#)	Responses (%)
Policymakers, politicians and/or local government	411	36%
Local community groups	382	33%
General journalist (for instance, in press, TV, radio) including local and national	378	33%
School teachers	348	30%
Young people in schools	341	30%
Industry/Businesses	317	28%
Young people outside of schools	307	27%
Underrepresented audiences	301	26%
Others in the media such as writers, documentary and other programme makers	263	23%
Patients/Patient groups	235	20%
Community leaders	219	19%
Galleries, libraries, archives or museums (GLAM) sector	205	18%
Popular magazine journalists (for example, New Scientist)	182	16%
Citizen scientists	94	8%
Influencers	80	7%
Nature parks or gardens	75	7%
Other	67	6%

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

In addition to specific stakeholder groups, most researchers reported engaging with the general public, through open events, like exhibits and science fairs.

4.3.1 Types of engagement and audiences

Distinct patterns emerge between the type of engagement undertaken and the audiences involved. Engagement with the general public is most often informing in nature, aimed at raising awareness or improving understanding of research or the institution. Similarly, activities involving schools are typically informational, focusing on education and outreach. By contrast, engagement with patients and underrepresented groups tends to be more collaborative, reflecting a stronger emphasis on dialogue and co-production. Interviewees highlighted the importance of treating patient groups as partners in research, rather than passive recipients of information.

Stakeholder engagement also varies significantly by discipline, reflecting the differing publics and application contexts of each field. For example, as Table 10 shows researchers in medicine, health, and life sciences are far more likely than others to work with patient groups, while those in the arts and humanities most frequently engage with galleries, libraries, archives,

and museums (GLAM). Interview data reinforce these patterns: for example, biomedical researchers often framed their engagement in terms of patient involvement, whereas arts and humanities researchers emphasised collaboration with cultural institutions.

Table 10 Summary per discipline, of the five stakeholder groups that researcher survey respondents most frequently engaged with

Discipline	Five most frequently cited groups
Medicine, Health and Life Sciences	• Charities/NGOs/Other non-profit organisations – 45% • Patients/patient groups – 44% • Local community groups – 38% • Prospective students – 37% • General journalists, including local and national – 33%
Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics	• Prospective students – 52% • School teachers – 47% • Young people in schools – 45% • Industry/businesses – 41% • Young people outside of schools – 36%
Social Sciences	• Policymakers, politicians and/or local government – 65% • Charities and NGOs – 59% • Local community groups – 48% • General journalists, including local and national – 45% • Community leaders – 36%
Arts and Humanities	• Galleries, libraries, archies or museums – 58% • Charities and NGOs – 56% • Others in the media such as writers, documentary and other programme makers – 52% • General journalists, including local and national – 49% • Local community groups – 45%
Other	• Charities and NGOs – 47% • Others in the media such as writers, documentary and other programme makers – 41% • Prospective students – 41% • Policymakers, politicians and/or local government – 41% • Industry/businesses – 41%

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

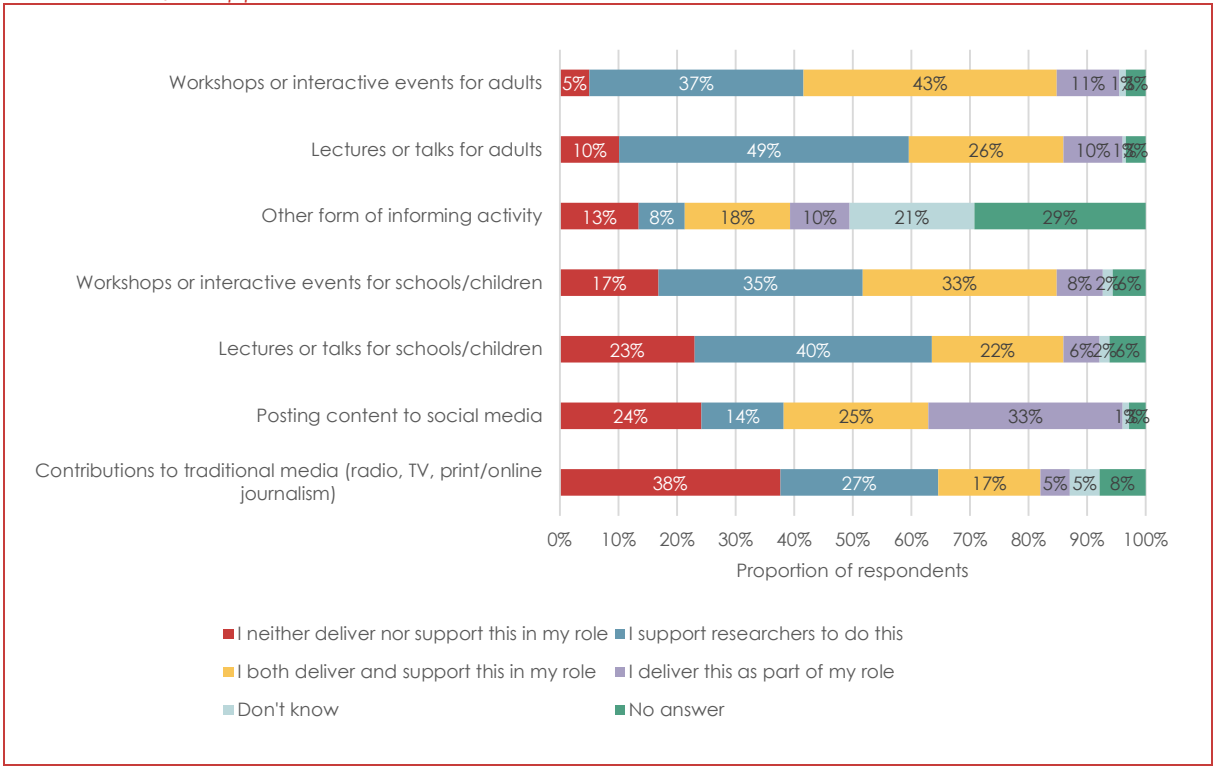
5 Involvement in public engagement activity by public engagement professionals

This section explores the extent and nature of public engagement professionals' involvement in different types of public engagement activity. It particularly examines the balance between directly delivering engagement activity and supporting it. Across informing, collaborating and consulting activities, public engagement professionals report being more frequently involved in supporting researchers than delivering the activities themselves. This reflects the advisory, facilitative, and enabling nature of their roles. However, the level of involvement and type of support vary by activity as summarised below. Like with researchers, respondent public engagement professionals seem to focus their time on informing activity, especially lectures for adults and posting on social media. Also, like researchers, public engagement professionals appear to dedicate the least amount of time to consulting activity.

Relative to researchers, it does seem like public engagement professionals are more likely to spend time either delivering supporting lectures to children and contributing to traditional media (informing activity), community listening exercises (consulting activity), citizen science and co-production activities (collaboration activity).

As Figure 10 shows, respondents have supported or delivered a range of different informing activities. As shown, workshops and lectures for adults are the activities that respondents have been most significantly engaged with. Respectively, 91% and 85% of the respondent group have delivered or supported these activities. Respondent public engagement professionals have supported contribution to traditional media the least.

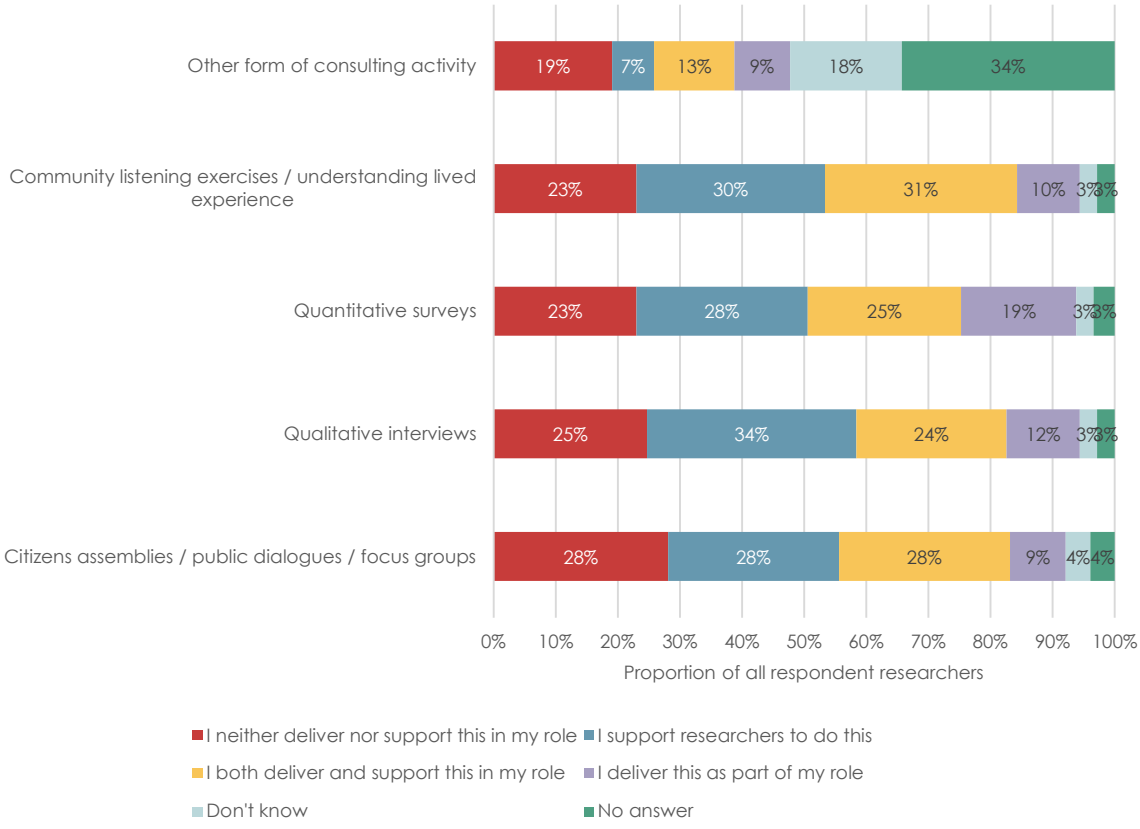
Figure 10 Thinking about informing activities, please indicate which of the following activities you deliver and/or support



Source: UK-based PE professionals fully completing survey (n = 178)

Figure 11 depicts the percentages of various consulting activities that public engagement professionals deliver and support. Quantitative surveys are the most supported activities, indicated by 72% of respondents delivering and/or supporting researchers in conducting these. This is followed closely by community listening exercises at 71% supporting/delivering, and qualitative interviews at 70%.

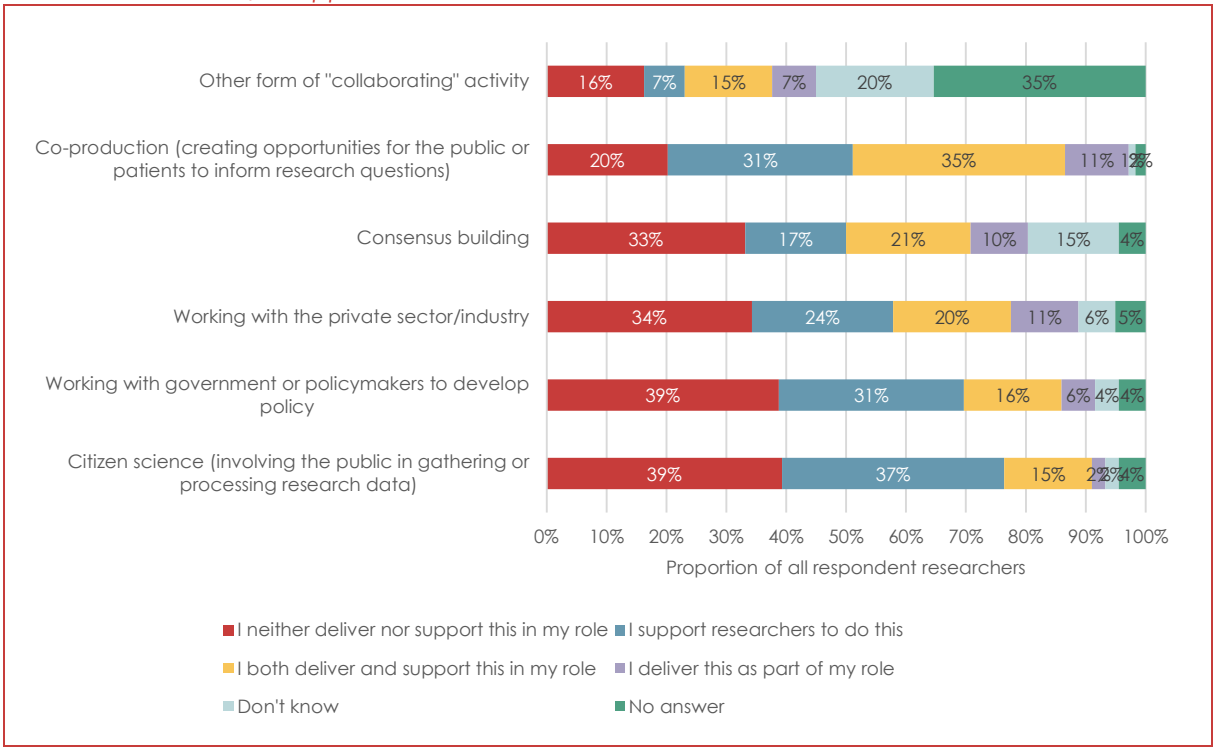
Figure 11 Thinking about consulting activities, please indicate which of the following activities you deliver and/or support



Source: UK-based PE professionals fully completing survey (n = 178)

Figure 12 focuses on the collaborating activities that public engagement professionals deliver and support. Co-production activities, are the most prominent, with 77% of professionals supporting and/or delivering in this activity. 55% are in some way engaged in working with the private sector, and 54% conduct or help conduct citizen science. Consensus building is slightly less frequent, with 48% of PE professionals delivering or supporting this.

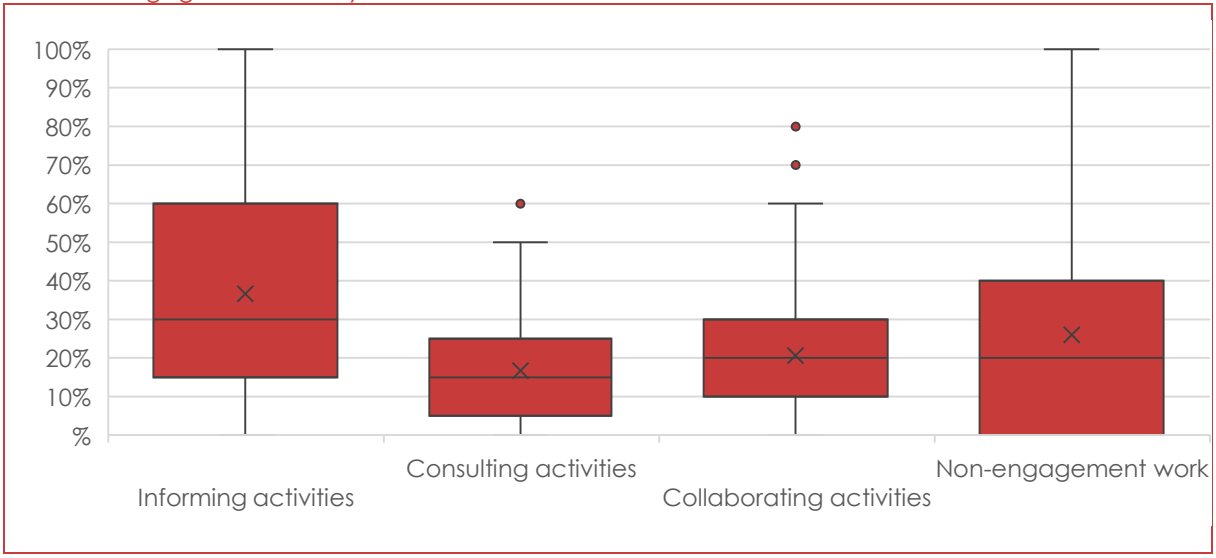
Figure 12 Thinking about collaborating activities, please indicate which of the following activities you deliver and/or support



Source: UK-based PE professionals fully completing survey (n = 178)

Figure 13 reports the proportion of time public engagement professionals spend on different engagement activity categories. The table reveals that the largest average portion of time, 37%, is devoted to informing activities. Consulting activities, which involve gathering opinions and feedback, account for an average of 19% of professionals' time. Collaborating activities are the least time-consuming, at an average of 16% of their time.

Figure 13 Thinking about the projects you indirectly support or directly deliver, approximately what proportion of your time (in percent) would you say you spend on the categories of engagement activity?



Source: UK-based PE professionals fully completing survey (n = 178)

5.1 Summary

With respect to each of the main type of PE activity, we see the following patterns:

Informing activity: On average, informing activity is the type of public engagement that respondents spent the most amount of their time planning and delivering. Respondents have tended to support others with informing activity rather than undertaking them themselves. They are most likely to deliver or support workshops and lectures for adults.

Consulting activity: PE professionals are equally involved in supporting other researchers with such activity as they are delivering it themselves. Respondents are most likely to deliver or support quantitative surveys, community listening exercises, and qualitative interviews. On average, respondents spend the least amount of time planning and delivering consulting activity.

Collaboration activity: Respondents tend more to support others with collaboration activity rather than delivering it themselves. Respondents are most likely to deliver or support co-production activity, industry collaboration, and citizen science.

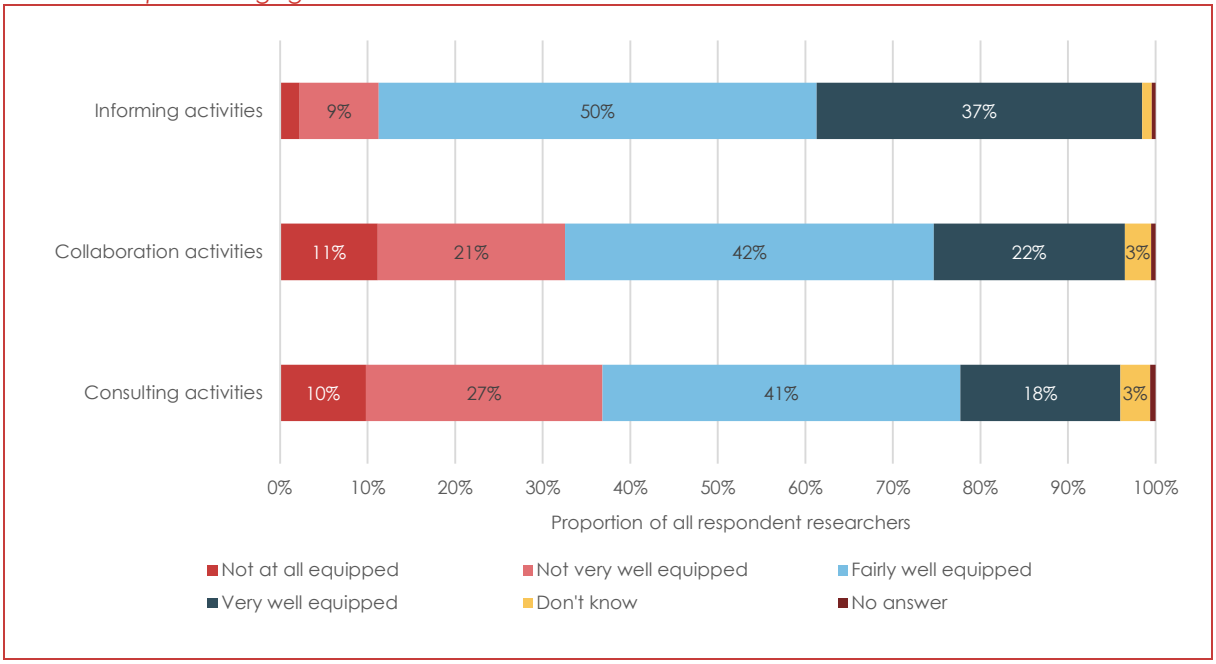
6 Perceived capability and barriers to undertaking public engagement

This chapter explores how confident researchers feel in undertaking different types of public engagement (PE), and the barriers that limit their capacity to do so. This includes their capability – whether researchers feel well equipped with the skills and confidence required – and capacity – whether they have the time, resources, and institutional support to apply those skills in practice.

6.1 Perceived capability to undertake public engagement

The researchers surveyed for the study were generally confident about their capability to undertake public engagement activities. This is particularly true for "informing" types of public engagement activities, whereas many feel less able to undertake more interactive "collaborating" and "consulting" activities. As shown in Figure 14, 87% of respondents feel very well or fairly well equipped to participate in "informing" public engagement activities, whereas the equivalent number for "collaborating" and "consulting" is 64% and 59%.

Figure 14 How well equipped do you personally feel you are to engage with the public in different types of public engagement activities?



Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

The survey results show a clear divide between AHSS researchers and STEM researchers. Compared to results from the 2015 study (see Table 11), researchers in arts and humanities (Panel A) feel better equipped to undertake PE than STEM researchers (Panel A and B), but in 2025 researchers in the social sciences (Panel C) appear to be as confident in their ability to undertake closer to their colleagues in the arts and humanities, unlike in 2015.

Importantly, researchers in all disciplines feel equally well equipped to undertake "informing" activities. The difference is found in relation to more interactive forms of PE: AHSS researchers generally feel better equipped than STEM researchers to engage in "consulting" and "collaborating" activities. Specifically, social science researchers are most likely of any group

to express confidence in their ability to conduct "consulting" activities, and arts and humanities researchers score highest in "collaborating". Inversely, researchers in the natural sciences and mathematics (REF Main panel B) now score lower than Panel A researchers across all types of PE.

As in 2015, participation in PE-related training also appears to be associated with a higher degree of feeling well equipped to engage with the public. This is observed within each of the three types of PE activity. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

Table 11 How well equipped do you personally feel you are to engage with the public? By year and discipline.

	% equipped				
	2006[1]	2015 [1]	2025 [2]		
	(all, STEM only)	(all)	"Informing"	"Consulting"	"Collaborating"
REF Main Panel A	51%	62%	88%	58%	60%
REF Main Panel B		63%	87%	47%	56%
REF Main Panel C		69%	86%	73%	74%
REF Main Panel D		80%	89%	67%	79%
Any training		79%	91%	64%	68%
No training		61%	80%	50%	55%

Sources: [1] Factors Affecting Public Engagement by Researchers (2015), [2] UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

6.2 Barriers to public engagement

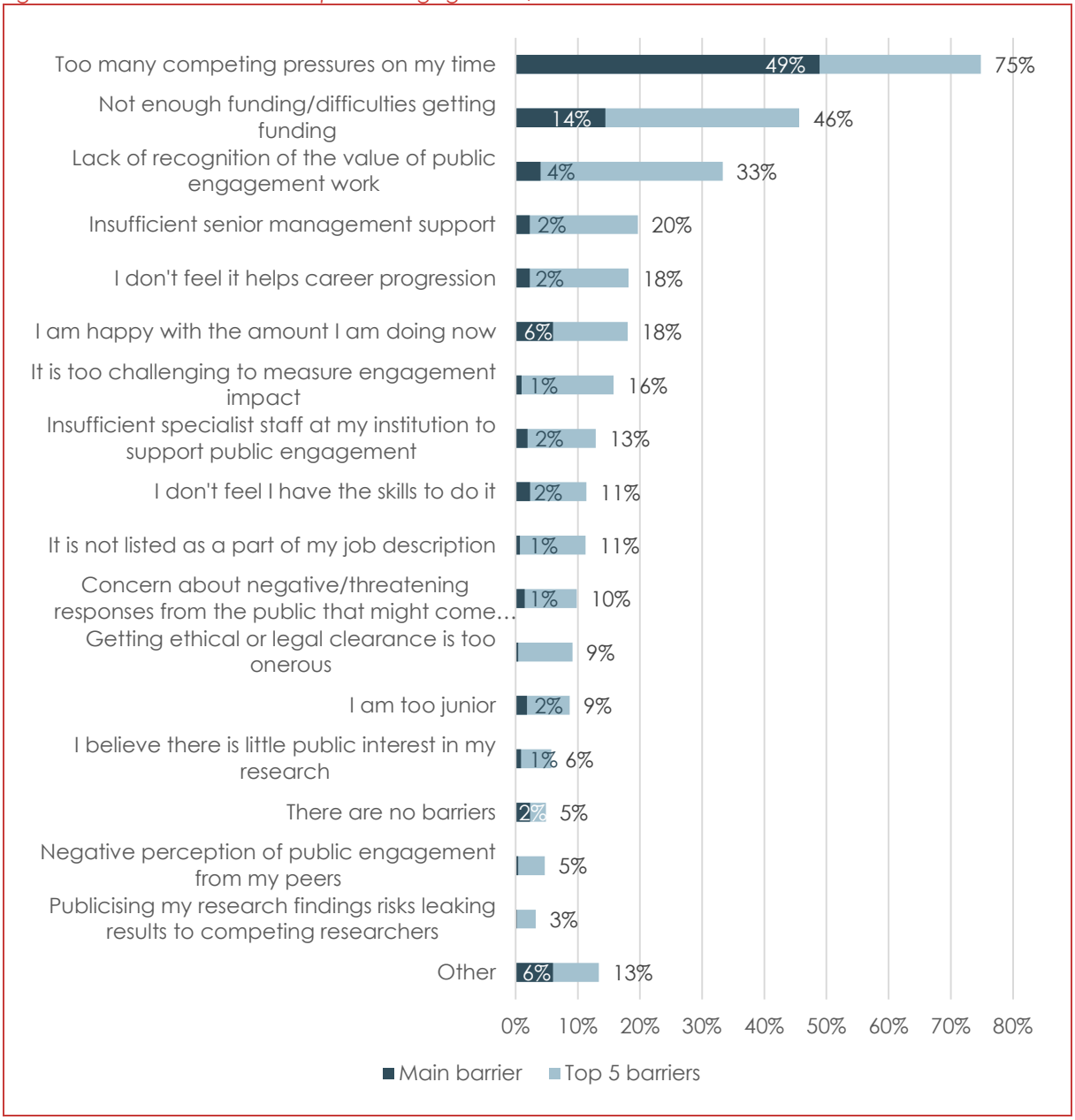
While attitudes towards public engagement remain overwhelmingly positive (see section 3.1 above), and most researchers are confident they have the necessary capability to undertake public engagement (see section 6.1), many face significant personal and institutional barriers that constrain their involvement.

A lack of time was by far the most cited barrier to public engagement. Of all the respondents to the researcher survey, 75% indicated that too many competing pressures on their time was a factor preventing them from being more involved in public engagement activity, and 49% identified this as the single most important barriers (see Figure 15). Public engagement professionals also confirmed this to be the case for researchers that they supported. This perception was consistent with those among interviewed researchers and professionals too.

Other barriers often selected include a lack of funding (46%) or recognition (33%), lack of support from management (20%), or lack of career prospects (18%).

Many of the responses described under "other", included in 13% of respondents, still spoke of barriers in terms of time constraints and a lack of funding and resources. However, other commonly reported issues included a lack of skills and confidence, with several respondents mentioned public speaking anxiety, and feeling too junior to engage effectively. Others talked about personal factors such as illness and family commitments as limiting engagement opportunities.

Figure 15 Perceived barriers to public engagement, 2025.



Source: Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149), Question: "Choosing up to five options, what do you think are the main challenges for the researchers you support at your institution?" Note: Labels for values below 1% (rounded) are not displayed.

Time does appear to be more of a barrier for some researchers than others: Those that did not have public engagement as part of their job description and/or workload allocation were more than twice as likely to cite time as a barrier than those for whom public engagement was a formal part of their job.[23]

[23] A total of 858 respondents indicated that time was a barrier, and also proved details on their job description. Some 23% of those with public engagement in their job description claimed that time was a barrier compared to 50% for those did that did not have public engagement in their job description.

The perceived barriers to public engagement did not otherwise vary considerably according to gender, ethnicity, career experience, or the discipline of researchers. We did find, however, a small amount variation in the barriers between those that were very active in public engagement activity already, and those that were not. Those active[24] in public engagement ("high engagers") were much more likely to cite a lack of funding as a barrier than those that were not,[25] while low engagers were more likely to cite a lack of skills as barrier than active engagers.[26] This tends to suggest that ability rather than desire may well be shaping lack of participation from researchers in public engagement activity.

Table 12 Perceived barriers to public engagement, 2025,

	High engagers (% agree)	**No/low engagers** (% agree)
Too many competing pressures on my time	74%	81%
Not enough funding/difficulties getting funding	47%	31%
I don't feel I have the skills to do it	10%	36%
N =	1043	67

Source: Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)
Note: Coloured boxes emphasise key differences in perceptions between the two groups.

Further insights derived from the researcher survey include the following:

- Negative or threatening reactions from the public appear to be a particularly salient issue for researchers who are active on social media. Of 113 researchers identifying this as a barrier to PE, 74% have engaged with social media for public engagement at least once in the last 12 months (as compared to 63% of all researchers responding to the survey), and 32% have done so 10 times or more (compared to 26% of all respondents).
- Not surprisingly, researchers early in their career are more likely to identify being "too junior" as an obstacle to public engagement. Of 100 researchers citing this as a barrier, 50% have been in their career for less than six years (compared to 16% in the survey sample) and 25 for less than 3 (as compared to 5% in the sample).
- In line with the attitudes discussed above, researchers from 'Physical Sciences, Engineering and Maths' (REF main panel B) are more likely to believe the public to have "Little public interest in my research". 41% of researchers citing this barrier belong to this group, which makes up 27% of the survey sample.

Like public researchers, public engagement professionals also appear to be overstretched and overcommitted in their own functions, when it comes to meaningfully delivering greater public engagement activity. Key barriers they cited to their own work included lack of resources or staff capacity (52% of respondents), and PE not being rewarded or recognised internally (39%).

The 2015 study also identified time, funding and recognition as the three dominant barriers to public engagement. Researchers in 2015 reported that PE was often "squeezed out" by teaching and research priorities, and that engagement work was undervalued compared with

[24] We have defined this any researchers who has either undertaken four different engagement types once during the last months or has undertaken a single activity type at least 2-3 times over the same period. Low engages include all respondents not falling within this definition.

[25] 47% of the 1,043 active engagers identified this as a barrier compared to 31% of the 67 low engagers.

[26] 36% of low engagers compared to 10% of high engagers.

research outputs. Lack of dedicated funding streams was also noted as a limiting factor. The 2025 survey confirms the persistence of these barriers, with little evidence of significant progress in overcoming them.

What is new is the clearer identification of differences between active and low-engaging researchers: in 2015 the emphasis was largely on institutional barriers; in 2025 the data suggest that capability and skills gaps may also be holding back those with less engagement experience, although this groups is a small minority in the sample obtain for the present study.

6.3 Expectations and enablers for future public engagement

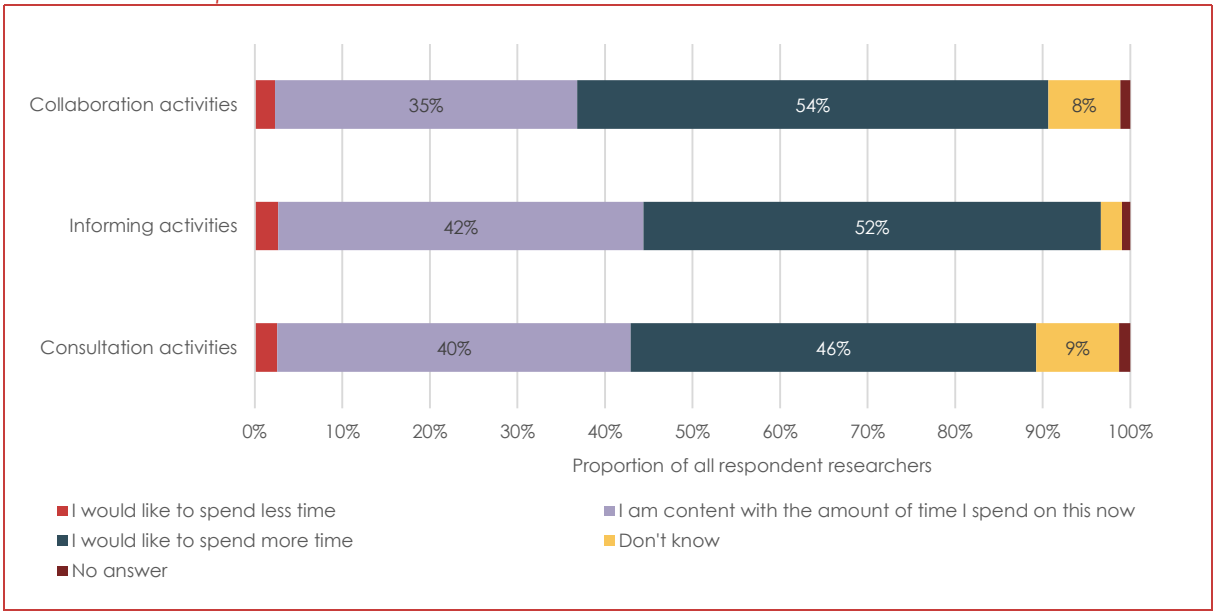
This section explores researchers' aspirations for future engagement and the factors that would most encourage them to increase their involvement.

Most researchers are interested in expanding their public engagement activities, particularly, in informing and consulting activities, but face constraints in doing so. These findings reinforce earlier themes, particularly the influence of structural conditions such as time and funding availability, while also highlighting that many researchers are willing to do more if better supported.

6.3.1 Findings

Figure 16 highlights researchers' varied aspirations for public engagement across different types of activities. For consulting activities, 54% express a desire to increase their involvement. Informing activities also draw significant attention, with 52% of researchers eager to invest more effort into these, though a majority are content with their current level of involvement. Collaborating activities demonstrate slightly less interest in expanding participation, with 46% wishing to dedicate more resources.

Figure 16 Would you like to spend more time, less time, or about the same amount of time engaging with the public?



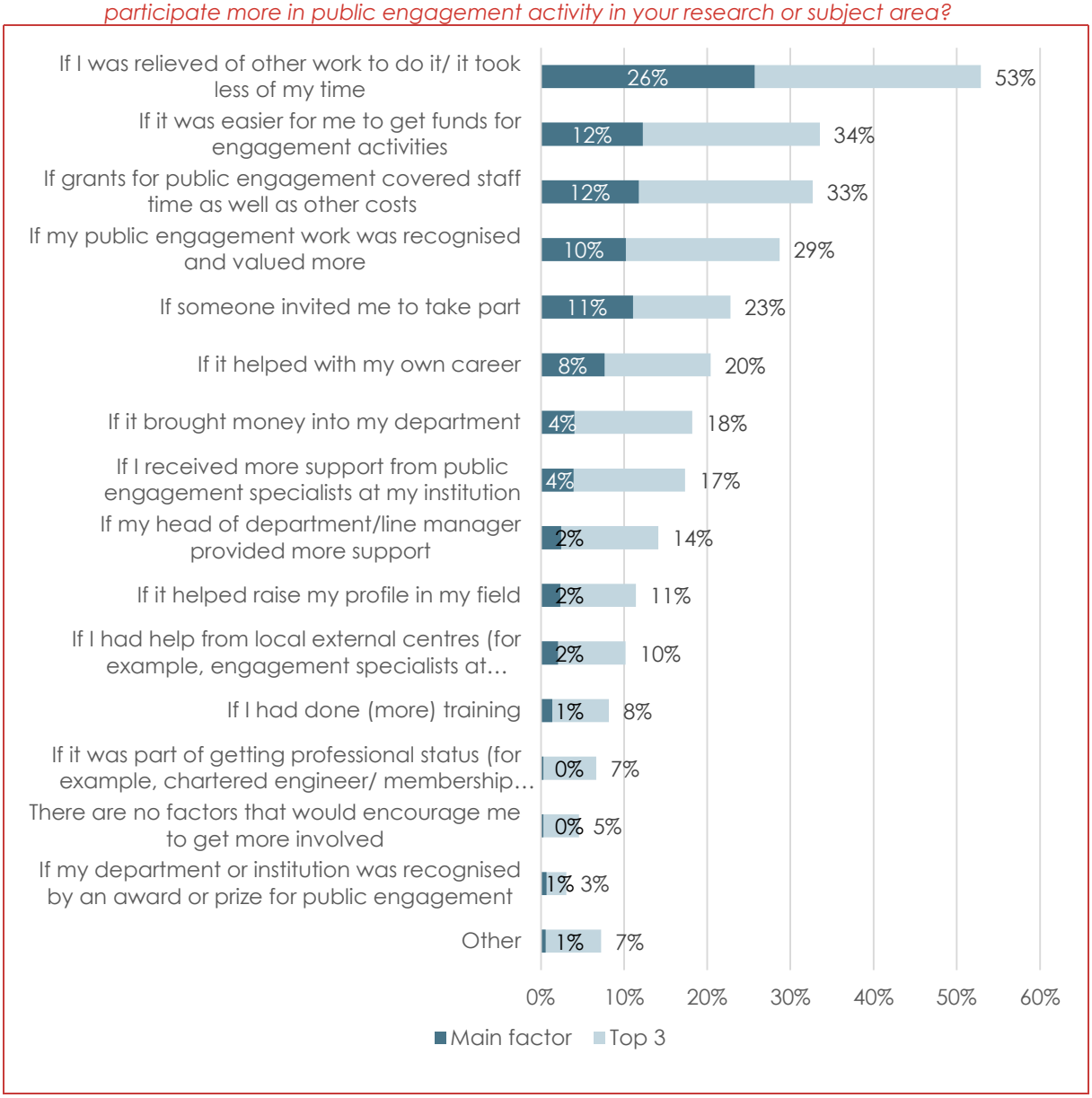
Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

Figure 17 shows the factors that would most encourage researchers to engage more in public engagement activities. The leading incentive is "If I was relieved of other work to do it/ it took less of my time," endorsed by 47% of respondents. Other motivating factors include the ease of

obtaining funds for engagement activities (30%) and the provision for grants to cover staff time as well as other costs (29%). Conversely, the least popular options include PE being a part of getting professional status (6%) and recognition of PE activities through prizes or awards, with just 3% seeing this as a motivator. 4% of respondents indicated that there are no factors that would encourage them to get more involved in public engagement.

Some researchers who selected "other" factors, still mentioned issues associated with time constraints and funding issues, confirming the main finding from the section. However, other cited issues included public engagement being recognised more as a fundamental academic function, having more of this kind of work built into permanent contracts, and having greater energy to undertake public engagement activity.

Figure 17 Choosing up to three options, which of the following, if any, would most encourage you to participate more in public engagement activity in your research or subject area?



Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

Compared to results from the 2015 survey (see Table 13), the most important potential enablers remain the same, notably being relieved of work to mitigate the most commonly felt barrier to public engagement: a lack of time. Further down the list, however, we see several shifts: researchers are more likely to see factors related to funding and grants as potential enablers, whereas being invited or additional training is seen as less important than in 2015. This shift may reflect the increased financial pressures experienced throughout the sector.

Table 13 Choosing up to three options, which of the following, if any, would most encourage you to participate more in public engagement activity in your research or subject area?

Enabler	2015	2025	Change
If I was relieved of other work to do it/ it took less of my time	48%	47%	-1%
If it was easier for me to get funds for engagement activities	19%	30%	+11%
If grants for public engagement covered staff time as well as other costs	23%	29%	+6%
If my public engagement work was recognised and valued more	19%	26%	+7%
If someone invited me to take part	38%	20%	-18%
If it helped with my own career	19%	18%	-1%
If it brought money into my department	16%	16%	-
If I received more support from public engagement specialists at my institution	11%	16%	+5%
If my head of department/line manager provided more support	19%	13%	-6%
If it helped raise my profile in my field	19%	10%	-9%
If I had help from local external centres (for example, engagement specialists at museums/science/art centres)	9%	9%	-
If I had done (more) training	21%	7%	-14%

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

6.4 Summary

- It is clear that respondent researchers would like to spend more time undertaking public engagement activity, particularly collaborating activity.
- Respondents indicated that the best way to incentivise greater public engagement activity is through being relieved of our duties (such as to free up time), and through additional funding.

7 Institutional support and training

This chapter explores the role of institutions in enabling public engagement (PE). We consider how far researchers and public engagement professionals feel supported by their organisations, what forms this support takes, and the extent and nature of training provision. We also examine variation by organisation type (Russell Group, non-Russell Group, and non-HEI).

Institutional context is a major determinant of whether and how researchers engage with the public. In both 2015 and 2025, the majority of researchers and public engagement (PE) professionals report feeling that their institutions are supportive in principle of PE. In 2025, around three-quarters of respondents said their institution or department was supportive. In interviews, researchers generally confirmed that they could access some form of institutional support, but described PE as secondary to core academic outputs such as research publications and grant income. Nevertheless, many interviewees noted that recognition of PE is slowly increasing, with some evidence of greater strategic positioning in recent years.

7.1 Institutional support for public engagement activity

Institutional support can take several forms:

- **Cultural endorsement.** Three-quarters of researchers and PE professionals said their institution was supportive. However, in interviews, perceptions varied widely between departments, faculties, and even individual line managers. Several experts noted that changes in senior leadership (for example deputy vice chancellors) could dramatically shift the strategic weight given to PE
- **Recognition and incentives.** Only a minority of researchers (24%) reported that PE featured in their job description. Similarly, few respondents felt that PE achievements contributed to promotion or pay progression. Even where included in promotion criteria, PE is often optional, lightly weighted, or treated as peripheral. This mirrors 2015 findings, when researchers described PE as "optional" unless linked to REF impact. Interviewees confirmed this picture. Even where PE was included in appraisal or promotion frameworks, it was typically optional, lightly weighted, or treated as peripheral compared with publications and income generation. This mirrors findings from 2015, when researchers described PE as undervalued in career progression and often excluded from formal workload models.
- **Funding.** Around 55% of PE professionals said their institution offered dedicated funding for engagement. While this provides some practical support, provision remains uneven across the sector
- **Training.** Training is a visible form of institutional support and is discussed in Section 7.2

Levels of support vary little by institutional type (Russell Group, non-Russell Group, or non-HEI). Instead, the most striking differences are found within institutions. In interviews, researchers reported that perceptions of sufficiency often differed between faculties, departments, or even individual line managers. Several PE experts also described how the appointment of a single senior leader (such as a deputy vice chancellor) could decisively shift the strategic positioning of PE. These accounts suggest that executive-level attitudes can divide opinion within institutions, producing uneven support that filters down to departments and researchers.

> *"Line managers are also a big factor, if they're not supportive, you have to negotiate and justify doing PE" (Researcher)*

Survey cross-tabs suggest that whether researchers feel well equipped or not well equipped to undertake PE has little effect on whether they perceive their environment as supportive.

However, well-equipped researchers are more likely to describe the environment as "*very supportive*" rather than merely "*fairly supportive*". The more striking differences appear in training take-up: researchers who do not feel well equipped are consistently less likely to have participated in training, particularly in areas such as designing and delivering engagement (-11 percentage points), policy engagement (-10), evaluation and impact (-15), and ethics and inclusion (-14).

In both 2015 and 2025, researchers report that their institutions are supportive in principle, but formal incentives, contractual recognition, and promotion pathways remain weak. PE continues to be perceived as secondary to traditional outputs. Support is now more visible, with survey data showing a stable three-quarters of researchers reporting institutional endorsement. Interviewees also sensed that recognition is slowly increasing, though unevenly across institutions and leadership contexts. The integration of PE into career structures has improved only marginally since 2015.

The wider literature reinforces these findings. The Vitae Researcher Development Framework (Public Engagement Lens) has long stressed the importance of embedding PE in career development, but uptake across universities has been inconsistent. NCCPE studies show that leadership buy-in is critical: when senior leaders actively champion PE, institutional culture shifts; without it, support remains symbolic. UKRI guidance also highlights the need to treat PE as a core academic contribution, not an optional extra. Evaluations of institutional initiatives, such as UKRI's Support to Expedite Embedding Public Engagement with Research (UKRI SEE-PER) programme, further demonstrate that without formal recognition in contracts and promotions, even well-designed training and funding schemes fail to change behaviour at scale.[27]

7.2 Training provision

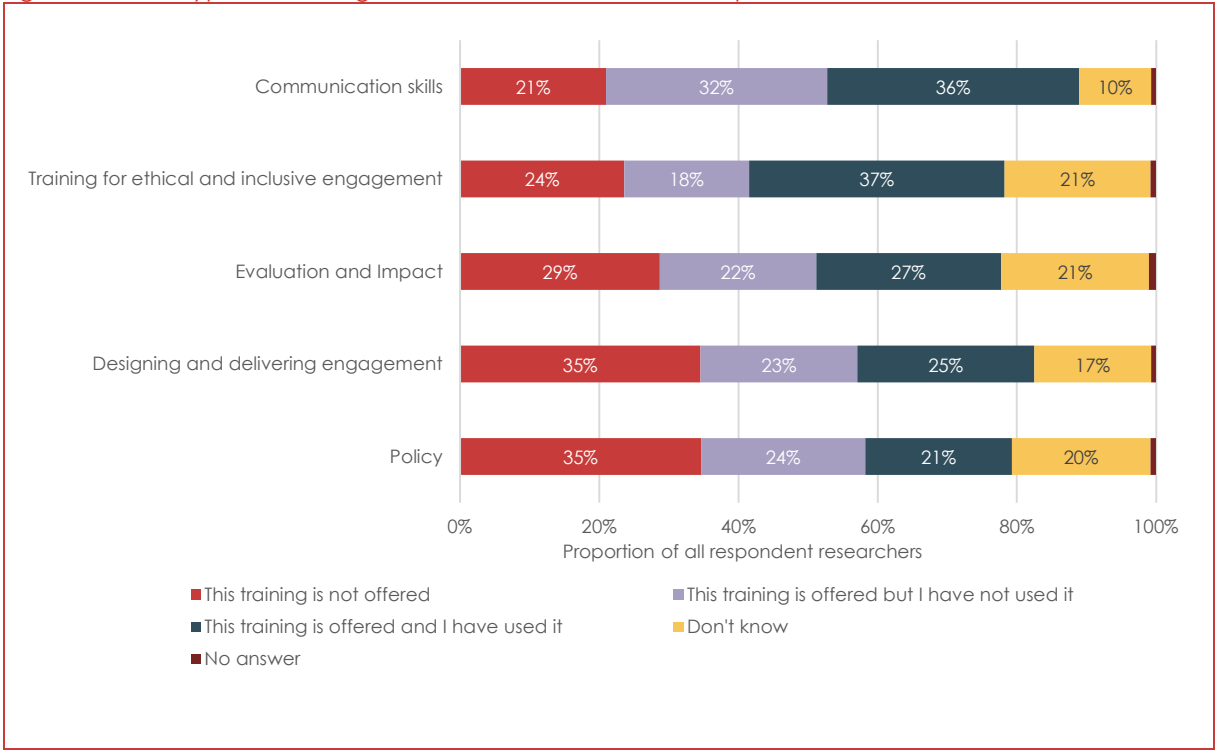
Training is the most visible and widely offered form of institutional support for public engagement (PE). Our survey suggests that both researchers and public engagement (PE) professionals report broadly similar levels of training opportunity, with one main exception: training in designing and delivering engagement is much more prevalent for PE professionals than for researchers.

As Figure 18 and Figure 19 below show, for both groups, communication skills training dominates. Around 68% of researchers and 63% of professionals report having been offered or taken part in training in this area. By contrast, provision is far more limited for more complex forms of engagement. For example, training in engaging with policymakers is available to fewer than half of both researchers (45%) and professionals (45%).

The pattern of training availability in 2025 strongly echoes that observed in 2015. Then, as now, communication skills training was the most common offer, while opportunities for researchers to learn more advanced forms of engagement, such as evaluation methods, co-production with communities, or influencing policy, were limited and unevenly distributed. In 2015, much of the provision was described as "ad hoc" and often dependent on external funders such as Research Councils UK (now UKRI) or Wellcome, rather than systematically embedded in university provision. The 2025 data suggest some improvement in consistency of access across institutions, and researchers and PE professionals now report broadly similar levels of training. However, the overall imbalance remains: basic communication training is widespread, but training in deeper, dialogic skills is still the exception rather than the rule.

[27] See NCCPE (2020), Change Makers: Lessons learned from the UKRI SEE-PER programme, December 2020, available at: https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/change_makers_-_lessons_from_see-per.pdf

Figure 18 What types of training are offered and level of take-up

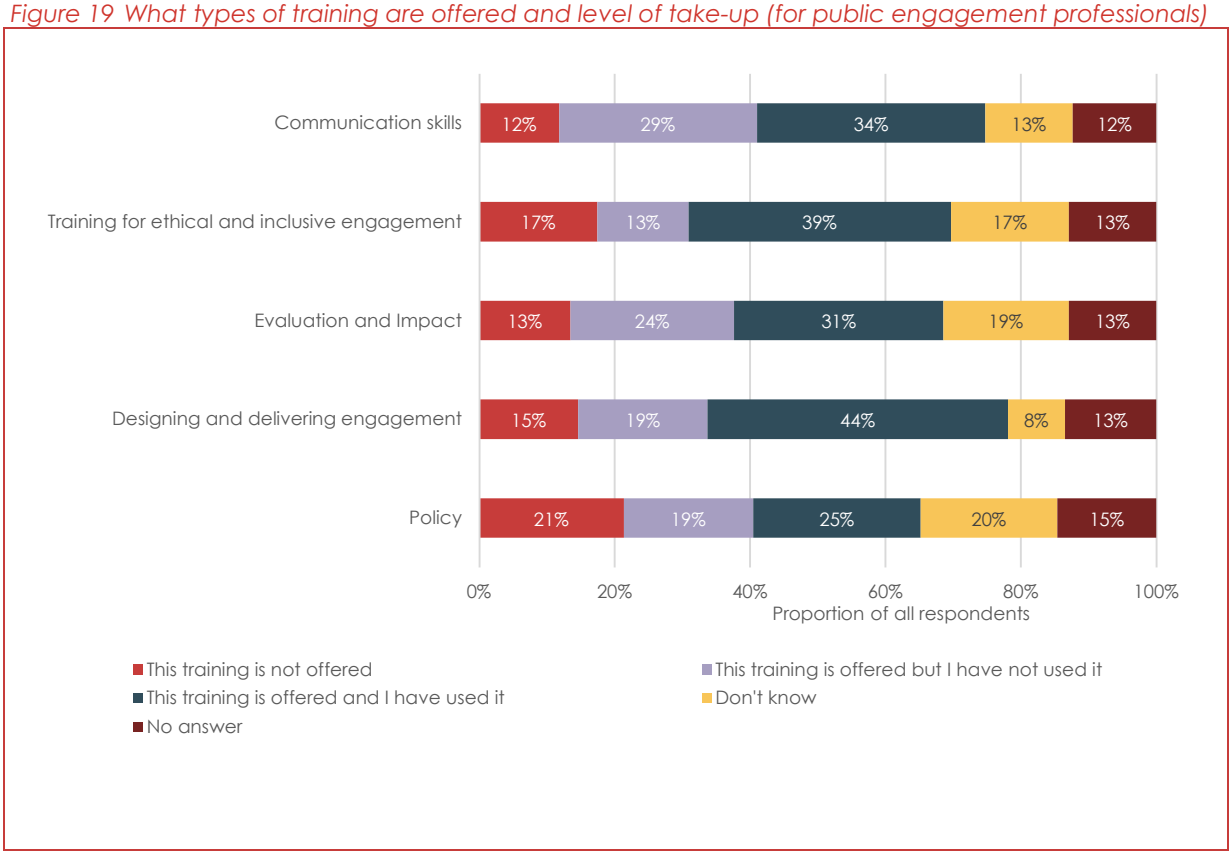


Surce: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey (n = 1,149)

Training provision is broadly comparable across Russell Group and non-Russell Group institutions, with one notable exception: evaluation and impact training is more available in non-Russell Group institutions (65%) than in Russell Group ones (47%). A further difference is that Russell Group respondents were more likely to answer "don't know" when asked about training availability and were slightly less likely to report having actually taken up training opportunities.

Respondents from non-HEIs (such as independent research institutes or learned societies) consistently reported lower levels of training provision across all types, suggesting these organisations face additional challenges in building PE capacity. This echoes 2015 findings that training access was highly uneven and strongest in institutions with dedicated PE staff or units.

Figure 19 What types of training are offered and level of take-up (for public engagement professionals)



Source: UK-based public engagement professionals that fully completed survey (n = 178)

Evidence from the wider literature reinforces this picture and helps explain why progress has been incremental rather than transformative. Guidance such as the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)[28] and its Public Engagement Lens has long emphasised that engagement skills should be treated as core to professional development, yet many universities have struggled to integrate these frameworks into their training pathways. Evaluations of institutional initiatives, including UKRI's SEE-PER programme[29] and the Cambridge Engaged Researcher programme,[30] suggest that standalone communication workshops rarely shift practice on their own. Instead, the most effective approaches are those that combine structured training with peer learning, mentoring, micro-grants, and recognition within career progression frameworks.

A persistent weakness in the training landscape is in evaluation and policy engagement. Both the NCCPE[31] and UKRI stress that the ability to assess quality and impact should be a standard part of researcher development. Where evaluation training has been embedded, institutions report that it not only improves the quality of engagement activities but also strengthens

[28] https://vitae.ac.uk/vitae-researcher-development-framework/

[29] https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/change_makers_-_lessons_from_see-per.pdf

[30] https://www.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.cam.ac.uk/files/filefield_paths/uoc_engaged_researcher_evaluation_report_2020.pdf

[31] National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) (n.d.) *How to evaluate public engagement projects and programmes.* Available at: https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/resources/guide/how-evaluate-public-engagement-projects-and-programmes

strategic planning and cultural buy-in. Likewise, researchers often report a lack of confidence in engaging with policymakers. Specialist programmes such as Fast Track Impact[32] show that when targeted training is offered, it can significantly improve both researcher confidence and the quality of policy-facing engagement.

Finally, there are lessons from related fields such as public and patient involvement (PPI) in health research, which highlight the importance of training in facilitation, power dynamics, and feedback. These approaches move beyond one-way communication towards more equitable forms of collaboration and co-production, and the skills developed here are directly transferable to wider public engagement contexts.

[32] https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/

8 Conclusions

A decade after the previous study, the 2025 evidence presents a picture of both continuity and change in the state of public engagement (PE) across the UK research system. The commitment to engaging with society is more widespread and embedded in professional norms, but the practice remains uneven and constrained by ongoing structural barriers.

Public engagement has matured from more peripheral activity into an expected element of research culture, supported by a growing professional infrastructure. Yet, despite this cultural shift, the enabling conditions that would make engagement routine, equitable, and sustainable are still incomplete. In addition, the survey was conducted against a challenging institutional backdrop, with many university departments confronting severe funding pressures and growing demands on academics and support staff to deliver an expanding portfolio of services.

Continuity and change

Researchers' belief in the importance of public engagement remains remarkably consistent with 2015. The vast majority consider it morally important, socially valuable, and personally rewarding. Engagement continues to be seen as both a duty and a privilege, a way to share knowledge, enhance public understanding, and connect research with societal needs.

At the same time, the scope and understanding of engagement have broadened. Whereas the 2015 landscape was dominated by dissemination and outreach, the 2025 findings highlight mutual learning, co-production, and inclusion, albeit still in pockets. Researchers increasingly describe engagement as a process of exchange rather than transmission.

This conceptual evolution reflects broader developments in the research ecosystem, such as the rise of participatory methods, the Impact agenda, and greater awareness of diversity and equity. Engagement is no longer primarily about "explaining research" but about sharing authority, recognising different forms of knowledge, and addressing societal challenges collaboratively.

Cultural change versus system change

A significant theme emerging from this study is the disconnect between cultural and structural change. Over the past decade, there has been signficant cultural progress and public engagement is now part of the mainstream discourse of UK research. Most institutions have formal strategies, professional staff, and visible leadership support.

However, the systems that govern researchers' time, reward, and resources have not evolved at the same pace. Engagement remains heavily dependent on individual initiatives, often undertaken in the margins of academic work. The same barriers identified in 2015 (time pressures, lack of recognition, and uneven support) continue to constrain practice in 2025.

This points to a paradox of maturity: engagement is more normalised and professionalised than ever before, yet still structurally peripheral.

Who engages and how?

Participation in public engagement remains broad but shallow. Nearly all researchers report some form of engagement, but intensity and type vary by discipline, institution, and career stage. Disciplinary differences persist, with social sciences and arts and humanities researchers more likely to engage overall, while STEM researchers remain more active in outreach to schools and youth audiences. Career-stage differences have narrowed since 2015, though mid-career researchers remain least active due to workload and recognition pressures. Those

at the start of their career, and those that are most experienced are the most likely to participate in PE activities. Institutional disparities are also significant. Researchers at Russell Group universities and those with established PE offices are more likely to engage frequently and report higher confidence and support.

Changing motivations and values

Researchers' motivations for engagement have evolved. In 2015, the dominant drivers were communication and accountability, sharing research and demonstrating public value. By 2025, there are clear signals of a wider set of motivations including inclusivity, social justice, and the societal impact.

Interview evidence underscores this shift. Many researchers described engagement as a means to work with underrepresented groups, address climate and health challenges, or amplify marginalised voices. This signals an important ethical broadening of engagement, moving beyond dissemination toward contribution and participation, in spite of this still emerging.

Public engagement is also increasingly seen as beneficial to research itself. Researchers now see that engagement improves research quality, relevance, or creativity. This recognition of two-way value, between research and society, is a departure from the largely one-way communication model a decade ago.

The institutional environment

The institutional infrastructure for public engagement is more developed than in 2015. Dedicated PE offices, communications teams, and internal funding schemes are more evident, particularly in research-intensive universities. Yet, visibility and accessibility of support remain uneven. Institutions that have made the most progress tend to share several characteristics including dedicated staff, senior leadership advocacy, training and recognition and reward. However, for many institutions, engagement remains structurally marginal and is encouraged in principle but rarely resourced in practice. The gap between commitment and reality continues to shape researchers' experience of engagement.

Barriers and structural constraints

Across both time periods, as highlighted, the same three barriers dominate: time, recognition, and funding. While the 2025 results show improvements in infrastructure and training, they also reveal that most researchers still conduct engagement on discretionary time and limited resources. This continuity suggests that barriers are systemic rather than attitudinal. The culture of engagement is stronger but what lags behind are the mechanisms of reward and resourcing that would make it sustainable. The persistence of mid-career disengagement is symptomatic of this imbalance. The enthusiasm exists, but institutional systems do not accommodate it to the degree necessary.

Evolving role of public engagement professionals

One significant shift since 2015 is the professionalisation of public engagement. PE professionals are now central to the design, delivery, and coordination of engagement activities.

However, it risks formalising a division of labour that creates distance between researchers and engagement practice. To ensure that engagement remains intellectually and socially integrated into research, institutions need to balance professional facilitation with academic participation, creating shared ownership.

The future of public engagement

Public engagement in 2025 stands at a point of consolidation rather than transformation. Its cultural legitimacy is secure, but its structural foundations remain uneven. The next phase is likely to be defined not by expanding awareness, but by embedding engagement in systems of research governance, funding, and assessment.

Key areas for development may include:

- Integrating engagement into workload models and promotion frameworks, to recognise it as core academic work
- Expanding long-term funding mechanisms for engagement and participation
- Strengthening training and reflective practice, particularly in collaborative and co-produced approaches
- Ensuring inclusivity and equity, so engagement opportunities are accessible across career stages, institutions, and disciplines
- Supporting researcher wellbeing and safety in an era of digital and polarised public discourse

Concluding reflection

The 2025 study confirms that public engagement is a clear feature of UK research culture. It has evolved from a peripheral activity to a shared expectation, underpinned by professional expertise and growing public interest. Yet, the full potential of engagement, to enrich research, strengthen trust, and foster shared understanding, will only be realised when the systems that shape academic work evolve to support it. The challenge is not to persuade researchers that engagement matters but to create the structures and incentives that make meaningful engagement possible.

Appendix A Methodological appendix: Survey

A.1 Researchers Survey

A.1.1 Personal characteristics

Table 14 Breakdown of interview sample by university type, UK region, REF main panel subject area, age, gender, disability status & ethnicity

	Survey response (#)	Survey response (%)	HESA 2023/24
Age			
25 and under	28	2%	7%
26 - 30	102	9%	12%
31-35	144	13%	14%
36-40	171	15%	14%
41-45	176	15%	14%
46-50	143	12%	11%
51-55	124	11%	10%
56-60	96	8%	9%
61-65	74	6%	6%
66 and over	63	5%	4%
Prefer not to say	25	2%	N/A
Gender			
Male	613	54%	50%
Female	462	41%	49%
Other	13	1%	0%
Prefer not to say	48	4%	1%
Ethnicity			
Asian	78	7%	13%
Black	24	2%	3%
White	924	81%	64%
Mixed	37	3%	3%
Other	32	3%	3%
Not known / Prefer not to say	48	4%	14%
English as a first language			
Yes	851	75%	n/a
No	284	25%	n/a

	Survey response (#)	Survey response (%)	HESA 2023/24
Disability status			
Considers themselves as disabled	154	13%	7%
Does not consider themselves as disabled	936	82%	93%
Prefer not to say / unknown	52	5%	-
Accessibility requirements			
Yes	59	5%	n/a
No	1037	91%	n/a
Prefer not to say	46	4%	n/a

Source: Technopolis & HESA data of academic staff 2023/24.

A.1.2 Professional profile

Table 15 Breakdown of interview sample by University type, UK region, REF main panel subject area, age, gender, disability status & ethnicity

	Survey response (#)	Survey response (%)	HESA 2023/24
University grouping			
Russell Group	641	56%	44%
Non-Russell Group	283	25%	56%
Other (non-university)	122	11%	n/a
Not stated	103	9%	n/a
Subject area (REF main panel)			
Medicine, Health and Life Sciences	473	41.2%	24%
Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics	313	27.2%	24%
Social Sciences	233	20.3%	38%
Arts and Humanities	112	9.8%	14%
Other	18	1.6%	-

Source: Technopolis & HESA data of academic staff 2023/24..

A.1.3 External funding

Table 16 shows whether researchers currently have external funding. The majority, 65%, have secured external funding for their work, while 35% are working without such support.

Table 16 Do you currently have external funding?

	Responses (#)	Responses (%)
Yes	752	65%
No	397	35%

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey, and answered this question (n = 1,149)

Table 17 highlights the principal sources of external funding for researchers. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funds the majority, accounting for 60% of respondents. Charities are another common source of funding, including the Welcome (10% of respondents), the Leverhulme Trust (8%) and other charities (16%). Other notable sources include the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) at 13%, and Horizon Europe at 12%. Various other organisations and industries contribute smaller proportions.

Of the 65 providing details of their 'other' principal source of fundings, the most common answer were foreign governments or research funders (cited by 14) such the European Space Agency, the Canadian Government, the National Research foundation Singapore, and the Educational Studies Association of Ireland.

Table 17 What are the main sources of external funding to support your research? Please select all that apply.

Source	Responses (#)	Responses (%)
UK Research and Innovation	453	60%
Another charity	120	16%
National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)	94	13%
Horizon Europe	91	12%
Wellcome Trust	76	10%
Other principal source of funding	65	9%
Industry/Business/Private Enterprise (Please specify)	52	7%
Leverhulme Trust	50	7%
Non-UKRI research grant	45	6%
British Academy	44	6%
Royal Society	44	6%
A Government Department (excluding Welsh/Scottish Government)	40	5%
Scottish Government	18	2%
Royal Academy of Engineering (RAEng)	16	2%
Academy of Medical Sciences	11	1%
Scottish Funding Council	8	1%
Welsh Government	7	1%
Health and Care Research Wales	2	0.3%
Medr Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (formerly HEFCW)	0	0%
Department for the Economy (NI)	0	0%

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey, and receive external funding (n = 752)

Table 18 summarises the principal research councils funding researchers among the respondents who are funded by UKRI. It reveals that the EPSRC is the leading funder, providing support to almost a quarter of these respondents. Other significant funders include MRC at 14%, and NERC at 13%.

Table 18 Which research council is the principal funder of your research?

Research Council	Responses (#)	Responses (%)
Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)	105	24%
Medical Research Council (MRC)	63	14%
Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)	59	13%
Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC)	55	12%
Science & Technology Facilities Council (STFC)	45	10%
Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)	38	9%
Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC)	37	8%
UKRI cross-council funding (for example, Cross Research Council Responsive Mode, CRCRM)	28	6%
Innovate UK	16	4%

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey, and funded by UKRI (n = 446)

Table 19 summarises the response to the researcher survey to the question whether public engagement is a part of the primary funding requirement for researchers with external funding. It shows that equal proportions (27%) of the respondents consider engaging and involving the public or patients as a fundamental part of their research, and have designated funding for public engagement, although it is not integral to their research. Meanwhile, 41% indicated that public engagement is not a primary requirement.

Table 19 Is public engagement a part of your primary funding requirement?

Research Council	Responses (#)	Responses (%)
Yes, engaging and involving the public/patients is a fundamental part of my research	207	28%
Yes, there is designated funding to carry out public engagement, but it is not a fundamental part of my research	200	27%
No	312	42%
Don't know	28	4%
Total	**747**	**100%**

Source: UK-based researchers that fully completed survey, and receive external funding (n = 747)

Appendix B Methodological appendix: Interview

8.1 Timeline

The interviews towards the Public Engagement (PE) landscape study ran from the 14th of May until the 6th of August 2025. Overall, 42 researchers and 12 PE experts were interviewed in this timespan.

8.2 Recruitment

The recruitment for a majority of the interviewees was conducted in connection to an open survey and elaborated on below. However, prior to this, three individuals (two researchers and one PE expert) were interviewed as pilot participants to refine the interview topic guides. These individuals were referred to the study team through the Royal Society.

The remainder of the interview participant population was recruited through a two-stage process. First, both, researchers and PE experts took part in the open survey at the end of which they could indicate whether they were open to being interviewed. From this self-selected population, the study team invited researchers and PE experts based on a sampling frame. For researchers, the sampling frame guided selection for representativeness of the broader UK researcher population (using data from the Higher Education Statistic Agency (HESA) on academic staff from 2023/24). In regards to PE experts, invites were sent to those volunteers who could be identified to be working at a HEI or an RI with the aim of a broad selection of different institutes.

All invited and interviewed researchers and PE experts were approached by email explaining the nature of the study and involved confidentiality terms. The invites welcomed questions which resulted in four instances of follow-up questions.

8.3 Researchers

The researcher sampling frame was based on the following characteristics

- University grouping (Russell Group / non-Russell Group / non-HEI)
- UK region
- REF main panel subject area
- Age
- Gender
- Disability status
- Ethnicity

The original sample of invitees accounted for the target of 40 researchers. No researcher was approached more than three times if no response was received. The study team selected more researchers to be invited in regular intervals based on further survey submissions and the sampling frame status. Overall, 63 researchers were approached, 42 of whom agreed to be interviewed.

Table 20 Invited and interviewed researchers in numbers

Invited	Interviewed	Declined	Target
63	42	5	40

Comparing the self-identified profiles among the interviewee pool to the most recent available HESA data, we find that the interview sample of researchers has a fair degree of representativeness. In terms of Institute type and region, the characteristics in the interview pool are mostly comparable to HESA data with less than 5% variation with a few exceptions.[33]

However, in terms of disciplines, the interviewed pool emphasised researchers in Medicine, Health and Life Sciences, rendering the other REF main panels underrepresented. By a gender breakdown, men were somewhat less represented compared to the broader UK researcher population. This discrepancy was mostly accounted for by researchers who did not wish to disclose their gender or identified outside of the gender binary. Comparatively more of the interviewed population also considered themselves as disabled relative to HESA data. Finally, relatively fewer interviewees were of Asian ethnicity and relatively more of White ethnicity compared to the UK researcher population. The full summary of researcher characteristics is listed below, in Table 21.

Table 21 Breakdown of interview sample by university type, UK region, REF main panel subject area, age, gender, disability status & ethnicity

	Interviewed	**HESA 2023/24**
University grouping		
Russell Group	43%	44%
Non-Russell Group	45%	56%
Other (non-university)	12%	0%
UK region		
East of England	19%	6%
East Midlands	2%	6%
London	12%	20%
North East	5%	4%
Northern Ireland	0%	2%
North West	10%	10%
Scotland	14%	11%
South East	7%	13%
South West	10%	7%
Wales	5%	4%
West Midlands	5%	8%

[33] Nb: namely, relatively more of interviewed researchers were based in East of England and relatively fewer in London and South East.

	Interviewed	HESA 2023/24
Yorkshire and Humber	7%	8%
Prefer not to say/unknown	5%	N/A
Subject area (REF main panel)		
Medicine, Health and Life Sciences	43%	24%
Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics	19%	24%
Social Sciences	21%	38%
Arts and Humanities	14%	14%
PE active*		
PE-active	95%	N/A
Not PE-active	5%	N/A
Gender		
Male	36%	50%
Female	55%	49%
Other	5%	0%
Prefer not to say	5%	1%
Disability status		
Considers themselves as disabled	14%	7%
Does not consider themselves as disabled	79%	93%
Prefer not to say / unknown	7%	
Ethnicity		
Asian	2%	13%
Black	5%	3%
White	74%	64%
Mixed	5%	3%
Other	7%	3%
Not known / Prefer not to say	7%	14%

Source: Technopolis & HESA data of academic staff 2023/24. *Nb: PE-active was devised to encompass researchers who had taken part in at least three different types of PE at least once, or who had participated in any type of PE more than five times in the past 12 months.

Researcher interviews were guided by an interview topic guide based on that from the 2015 study, with updates to ensure that the conversations were timely. At high level, the interviews considered the following topics:

- The interviewee role, field and tenure
- The interviewee's conception of Public Engagement (what Public Engagement means to them)

- The volume of Public Engagement which the interviewee had undertaken in the past 12 months, and whether the interviewee was satisfied with this volume
  - Types of activities undertaken and audiences engaged
- Other professional priorities with which to balance Public Engagement activities
- Support available for the interviewee to conduct Public Engagement
- Challenges and risks to Public Engagement for the interviewee
- Perceptions of how Public Engagement had changed over time and views on how it may change in the future

8.4 PE experts

Compared to researchers, the PE expert sampling frame was more flexible, and generally based on availability of information and avoidance of institutional clustering.

As with researchers, potential interviewees were invited based first on survey responses indicating readiness to participate in an interview. Provided contact information was then used to verify the person and their status as a PE expert. Ten PE experts were invited in the first instance, based on the participation target. Following the recruitment strategy for researchers, more volunteering PE experts were invited periodically during the interview stage.

Table 22 Invited and interviewed PE experts in numbers

Invited	Interviewed	Declined	Target
23	12	0	10

The PE expert recruitment strategy was based on invitees' location in the UK and the institute type on which they were based.

Table 23 Breakdown of interview sample by university type and UK region

	Interviewed	Target
University grouping		
Russell Group	7	5
Non-Russell Group	3	4
Non-HEI	2	1
Prefer not to say / Other	0	0
UK region		
East of England	0	1
East Midlands	0	0
London	1	2
North East	0	0
Northern Ireland	0	0
North West	1	1

	Interviewed	Target
Scotland	1	1
South East	2	1
South West	1	1
Wales	1	1
West Midlands	1	0
Yorkshire and Humber	3	1
Multiple	0	1
Prefer not to say / unknown	0	0

PE expert interviews were guided by an interview topic guide based on that from the 2015 study, with updates to ensure that the conversations were timely. At high level, the interviews considered the following topics:

- The interviewee role, field and tenure
- The interviewee's conception of Public Engagement (what Public Engagement means to them)
- Usual kinds of PE which the interviewee facilitates and usual kinds of audience which the interviewee facilitates for
- Interviewee views on the perceptions of PE among researchers, reasons for it and perceived need for these attitudes to shift
- Benefits, drawbacks and risks in PE for the interviewee and researchers
- Changes in the interviewee's (PE-related) role in the past 5-10 years
- Support and resources available to the interviewee to facilitate PE
  - The effectiveness of those resources
- Best practices in PE
- The status and importance of PE-oriented funding, institutional recognition and REF

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