



# Wellcome Research Culture Townhalls Report

*Developed by Hill+Knowlton Strategies  
for Wellcome  
December 2020*



## Foreword



Wellcome embarked on a series of Townhalls as a community consultation. We wanted to understand people's individual experiences of research culture in the UK and how they would like to see it change. We hoped this would expand the evidence base on what people think, and feel, will generate lasting change in their workplaces.

This report seeks to play back what we heard at the Townhalls as accurately as possible. We have therefore avoided any filtering, prioritisation or judgement. This is about the voice of the research community, not Wellcome or the institutions who kindly hosted the events.

We heard a great deal of agreement on the frustrations and injustices of the current research environment, and the links between them. From these, three challenges have emerged:

1. We need to **create** structures and systems that reward the activities and behaviours that we all see as valuable contributions. Being a great manager takes time and energy. That investment needs to be properly incentivised.
2. We need to **communicate** in a clearer, more targeted way to ensure that everyone knows where to seek support or raise grievances. Tellingly, many of the ideas raised through the Townhalls already exist in one form or another, reminding us that creating new initiatives is only part of the solution.
3. We need to rebuild people's **confidence** in institutions and approaches. Many conversations revealed a lack of trust in areas such as the handling of complaints, and a belief that the system isn't built on fairness. This will be a hard challenge to solve, but the whole community must consider how to better hold itself to account in an open and honest way.

In the 11 months it took to complete these events, we saw a shift in the tone of each Townhall conversation. Perhaps this was partly driven by the pandemic, which has exposed some of the community's strengths and weaknesses. But there was also a tangible feeling that culture change was gathering momentum. Where people had initially spoken to us about the futility of trying to fix such a complex problem, in later events we heard a bolder belief that this was a turning point for research culture.

This report is another step towards our shared goal, but the end of the Townhall events is not the end of the conversation. We will continue to work closely with the rest of the community, drawing inspiration from the findings presented here. Thank you to everyone who made these events possible and fruitful – we hope you will continue to champion this cause in the months and years ahead.

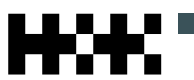
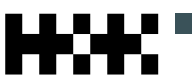
**Beth Thompson**

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Research Culture Advocacy & Engagement Lead, Wellcome Trust





## OVERVIEW

This Townhall series formed part of Wellcome's wider Reimagine Research initiative to examine and improve research culture in the UK. Wellcome recognises that, while its funding has helped improve the health and lives of millions of people, it has also unintentionally perpetuated a culture which delivers those impacts at the expense of the research community themselves.

From January – November 2020, the Reimagine Research Townhall series travelled across the UK:

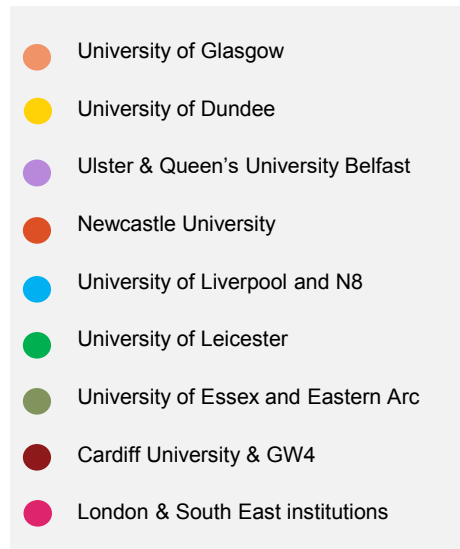
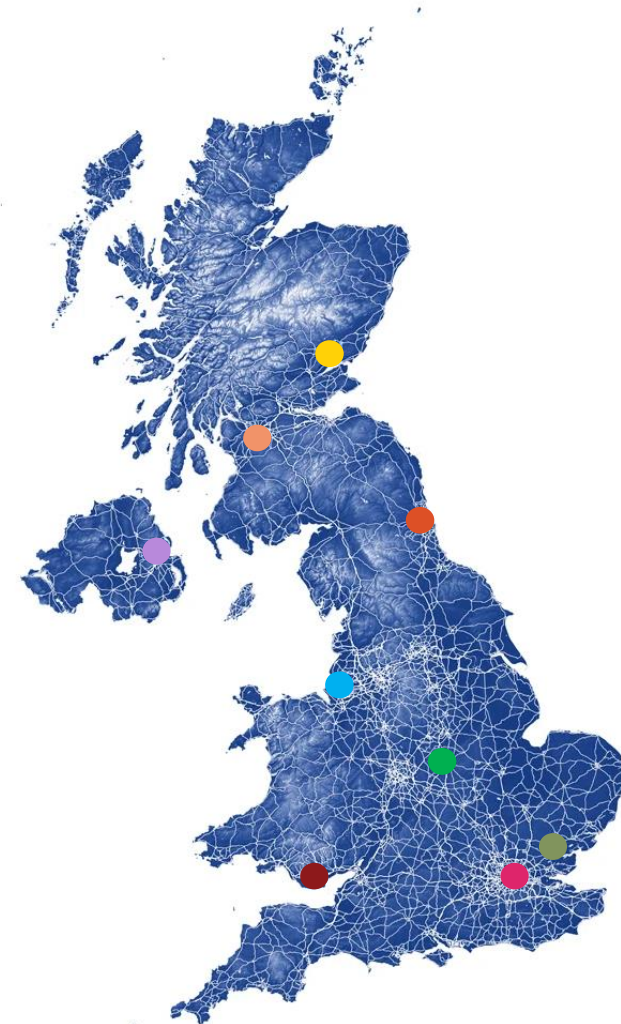


The aim of the Townhalls was to create a space for the research community to come together and digest the Reimagine Research survey's findings, reflect on what a better culture could look like, and share ideas for how to get there. The ideas that have emerged from the Townhalls will inform the changes Wellcome intends to implement, and will contribute to a set of clear goals for the whole community.

The Covid-19 pandemic meant that the final four Townhalls were delivered virtually, these included: Cardiff University & GW4, London & South East institutions, Ulster & Queen's University Belfast and University of Liverpool and N8. This transition was done out of necessity but proved how successful online conversations can be, if facilitated carefully.

## TOWNHALL OBJECTIVES

- Digest research:** Discuss the outcomes of Wellcome's culture survey and whether the results ring true for personal experiences
- Define what better looks like:** Share examples of good practice and hear about what's worked for others
- Ideas for the future:** Discuss potential changes that could be made across the research system



## METHOD

To help participants digest Wellcome's [research culture survey](#), the content was divided into four key themes:



Security



Wellbeing & equality of opportunity



Teamwork



Research quality & accountability

The *Designated Listener* role was created specifically for the Townhalls and included representatives from the host institution and Wellcome employees. Each interactive group session was facilitated by a designated listener who listened to input and coordinated the discussion.

*Panel members* were organised by university hosts and represented a diverse mix of voices from across the research community. The panel always included a Wellcome representative.

## RESULTS

The Townhalls surfaced 12 key themes, which were mentioned at all of the events:

- Unstable contracts & careers
- Bullying & harassment
- Unhealthy competition
- Poor management
- Deteriorating mental health
- Long hours culture
- Inaction on diversity & inclusion
- Mistrust of complaints procedures
- Early career challenges
- Pressure to publish
- Lack of recognition & promotion
- Gender inequality & personal sacrifices

Participants also shared their ideas to improve research culture and address the challenges above. Many of these ideas were repeated and expanded across the Townhalls, for example: implementing 360° feedback opportunities, clarifying the skills required to become a supervisor, reviewing the timing of submission deadlines, publishing negative results, and sharing more guidance on promotion criteria. The proposed ideas call on all parts of the system to change, but identified institutions, funders and publishers as 'gatekeepers' within the community.

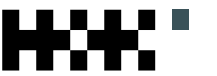
Among the challenges, we also heard many positive stories and initiatives, which confirmed that change is within the grasp of the research community.



# 12 Key Themes



## 12 Key Themes from the Townhalls



1.

Unstable  
contracts &  
careers

2.

Bullying &  
harassment

3.

Unhealthy  
Competition

4.

Poor  
management

5.

Deteriorating  
mental  
health

6.

Long hours  
culture

7.

Inaction on  
diversity &  
inclusion

8.

Mistrust of  
complaints  
procedures

9.

Early career  
challenges

10.

Pressure to  
publish

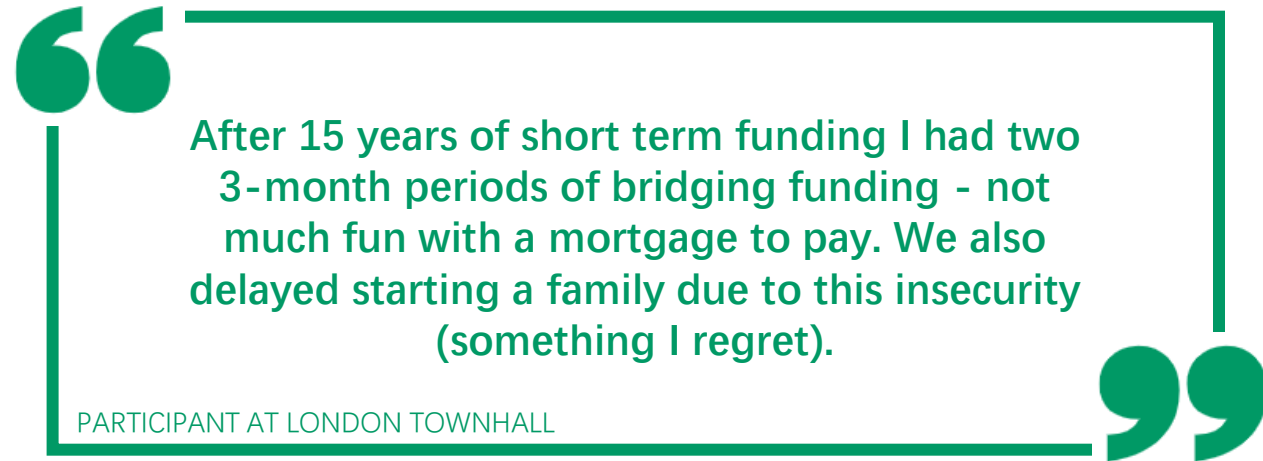
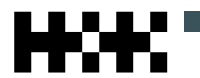
11.

Lack of  
recognition  
& promotion

12.

Gender  
inequality &  
personal  
sacrifices





## WHAT PEOPLE SAID

Career guidance and support for career transitions is limited, and access to it unequal.

The short-term funding model used across the research community does not support job security. This impacts long-term creative thinking and the retainment of talented staff.

People on short-term contracts spoke about receiving reminder emails each Monday, counting down the remaining time on their contract.

In contrast, careers outside academia are not sufficiently valued. Research leaders are not well-equipped to support their teams to think about these careers.

Many participants highlighted the use of 10-month contracts in some institutions, which dropped staff when the summer break arrived and teaching duties ended. This was seen as an exploitative approach to early-career staff, placing the risk and instability on the shoulders of the most vulnerable. It was suggested that these short-term contracts should be banned.

## THE EFFECT

Across the board, job insecurity is a major issue which leads to high levels of stress due to people making personal sacrifices. This can lead to:

- Loss of talented staff
- Mental health issues
- Stifling creative thinking



## WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



### Institutions

- Share the risk of an academic career by offering bridging funds to those applying for grants, or awaiting a funding decision.
- With the exception of bridging funds, remove contracts which are shorter than 2 years, to allow researchers to focus on the research rather than the next funding call.
- Create contracts for senior postdocs who are not yet ready to make the “leap to research lead”.
- Be inspired by the Dutch ‘Veni, Vidi, Vici’ funding scheme that specifically helps build career paths.
- Create alternative career paths for technical specialists, potentially by introducing a vacancy portal across institutions.
- Introduce open ended contracts depending on research needs.



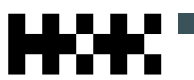
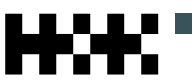
### Research Leads

- Remove the stigma associated with careers outside academia and be open with team members about how they can use their skills in other sectors.



### Funders

- Provide different models of funding - longer (10+ year) grants to help ideas develop, smaller grants as contingency and bridging funding, and more fellowships.
- Separate research and staff costs on grant applications to help research leads avoid compromising staff salaries.
- Fund an institution rather than an individual. To cope with high-demand, applications could be assessed as ‘eligible for funding’ with a lottery-style system used to decide awards.
- Implement apprenticeship-style funding for researchers to explore career options outside of academia.



“

Bad behaviour, including bullying, is often ‘accepted’ from senior research stars - I have witnessed colleagues in tears over this.

”

PARTICIPANT AT LIVERPOOL TOWNHALL

## WHAT PEOPLE SAID

Bullying and harassment in research is endemic and was mentioned at every Townhall. Attendees drew on their own experiences of being bullied or witnessing a colleague being bullied. Some Townhall participants believed that the hierarchical culture of research institutionalises bad behaviour. This conduct is perceived as normal by some senior staff, who have the power to create a culture where "oppression" and "intimidation" are considered a rite of passage that reflects their own early-career experience.

With bullying often originating from management teams or senior staff members, it is hard for junior staff to know where to go and who to trust with a complaint.

Gender harassment was also discussed and many women participants recounted moments in their career where they had been treated unfairly, such as being constantly interrupted by male colleagues in meetings, use of sexist language and jokes.

Examples of bullying discussed included: unfair criticism, stealing credit, intense pressure to work long hours, as well as subtle types of bullying such as microaggressions. Some participants called for a clearer distinction between constructive criticism and bullying, noting that tone was critical

## THE EFFECT

Bullying and harassment has a major impact on researchers who have experienced it but also on the people who witness it. This disrupts the work environment and impacts morale, leading to:

- Poor mental health (depression, anxiety and stress)
- High levels of absenteeism and team turnover
- Lower productivity
- Development of a hostile research environment
- Stifling creative thinking

## WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



### Institutions

- Introduce and publicise a code of conduct that is easy to understand and mandated across all research teams.
- Make a clear warning that bullying will not be tolerated and, if reported, serious consequences will follow.
- Offer rewards for those who promote good working culture practices.
- Encourage reverse mentoring to change the top-down culture.



### Publishers

- Provide training for peer reviewers, to enable feedback to be constructive rather than negative.
- Intervene when there have been inappropriate or aggressive comments. Editors should send inappropriate reviews back to the reviewer to be revised or be able to tell the research leads that the review will be disregarded.



### Researchers

- Support colleagues, especially early-career researchers, to speak up if they are not getting the supervision that they need.
- Report instances of bullying when witnessed.



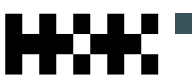
### Funders

- Offer more opportunities for technicians and PhDs working on grants to provide feedback to funders about their working environment and supervision. This feedback could then form part of their 360° reviews.
- When research leads are applying for grants, make it a requirement that junior staff supply references.
- Carry out exit interviews with team members leaving projects.



### Research Leads

- Take complaints and individual issues seriously.
- Create a space where colleagues can speak freely.
- Undergo training on how to provide constructive feedback.



“ Too much competition gets in the way of trying to discover and interpret the world. This means that a subject cannot evolve over the longer term. ”

PARTICIPANT AT ESSEX + EASTERN ARC TOWNHALL

## WHAT PEOPLE SAID

Townhall participants described a culture of fierce competition within research, both between and within teams, leading to a pervasive sink-or-swim mentality.

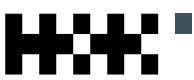
Many believe that healthy competition is conducive to success in research, but it can easily and unknowingly cross the line to aggressive hyper-competition.

Competition is exacerbated by many parts of the system, including funding and publishing, operating on a winner-takes-all basis. Participants said that limited funding means high stakes for all, especially those early in their careers. Others reflected that collaboration tended to flourish best away from these competitive forces, which encouraged individuals to keep their “cards close to their chest”.

A sustainable research culture means striking the right balance, where constructive competition drives great ideas without compromising fairness or good practice.

## THE EFFECT

- Increased anxiety
- Lack of cooperation
- Create a sense of fear and alienation
- Heighten conflict between and within teams
- Political manoeuvring for self-protection
- Increased need to cut corners



## WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



### Institutions

- Develop an internal reward system not built around grant income, but one that recognises the multitude of other contributions individuals can make to a thriving working environment.
- Reward and recognise high-performing teams, rather than rewarding individual members or leaders.
- Take inspiration from workplaces with a strong sense of collective endeavour, with a number of participants raising the NHS as a good example of a system with a shared goal.



### Publishers

- Automatically randomise the order of authorship to prevent disagreements and discrimination within research teams.



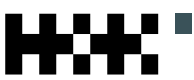
### Funders

- Consider a radical change to the funding model by allowing researchers to hold only one grant at a time.
- Assess applications and individuals in the context of the development of their colleagues and teams, and the opportunities they create for others to develop their careers.



### Research Leads

- Research teams should agree on a mutual code of conduct; clear expectations are essential to combat unhealthy competition.
- Allow more time for collaboration.
- Share best practise examples of collaborative working and promote in-person team collaboration.



“

The best researchers don't make the best leaders.

”

PARTICIPANT AT LONDON TOWNHALL

WHAT PEOPLE SAID

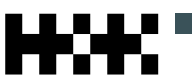
Participants reported that, within research, management responsibilities often result from career progression rather than a desire to become a manager. For those that aren't natural leaders, participants wanted stronger incentives for them to undertake training, with more and better support being offered by institutions and funders.

There was some recognition that managing a team requires a different set of skills versus doing the research itself. Some people felt that they had been promoted to managerial positions too quickly, when they weren't ready. However, when training is offered, those who need it most may lack access or motivation to make use of it.

Management issues discussed included: a lack of regular meetings with supervisors, cultivating a sink-or-swim culture, and a lack of empathy with individual team members.

THE EFFECT

- Poor management can result in:
- Lack of productivity
  - Impact on individual career progression by not being put forward for opportunities or promotions
  - People moving jobs because they don't feel supported
  - Perpetuating bad management practices in the next generation
  - Unnecessarily exclusive environments



WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



Institutions

- Provide mandatory management training for all supervisors, perhaps through an accreditation process.
- Develop a more flexible model for leadership within research teams, allowing the division or layering of responsibilities to generate a nurturing environment, while relieving some management pressures from research leads.
- Ensure appropriate resource is allocated to professional services within the institution, offering research leads greater relief on administrative tasks.
- Start an open review process to ensure senior staff receive 360° reviews from all levels as the norm.



Professional Bodies

- Create a training module which recognises the needs of management in their discipline.



Researchers

- Pursue career development activities and mentorship, in addition to direct supervision.



Funders

- Introduce a section on grant applications that requires examples of inclusive management and attendance to management training.
- Provide researchers with a fixed sum to be put towards career development and networking opportunities, such as conferences. Staff would be in charge of creating their own career development plan and choosing how to deploy their allocated budget. This would signal the value attached to career planning and ensure that career development wasn't left solely as a research lead's responsibility.



Research Leads

- Become a mentor to early career researchers and understand the contemporary pressures they face.
- Encourage career progression and support mental wellbeing by having regular catch up sessions.

“

Universities need to fund mental health support better and advertise its availability. It needs to be easy to access when needed.

PARTICIPANT AT CARDIFF + GW4 TOWNHALL

Having mental health issues seems to be the norm in the job.

PARTICIPANT AT NEWCASTLE TOWNHALL

”

### WHAT PEOPLE SAID

Townhall participants said that research careers could be extremely isolating and lonely and that mental health issues exist at all career stages. They also disclosed that high numbers of their colleagues take medication to help with stress and anxiety.

Some people said that mental health support was not accessible at their institution, and that senior researchers often have the fewest sources of support. When raised, issues about mental health hadn't been taken seriously in the past. This is compounded by systemic problems, such as students not being entitled to sick days, and only six NHS counselling sessions being awarded to each university.

There is a pressure to keep research going which contributes to the long hours culture, bullying and subpar management – all factors that can contribute to mental health issues.

These issues have been normalised in some teams and junior staff therefore find it hard to speak out about their mental health and communicate this to their managers.

### THE EFFECT

Work-related stress is a major cause of occupational ill health, poor productivity and human error. Ultimately, this can lead to:

- Increased absenteeism
- Negative impact on productivity and poor performance
- Negative impact on employee morale
- High staff turnover
- Individuals feeling burnt out

### WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



#### Institutions

- Make mental health services available for all team members – and publicise them.
- Create an environment where people feel comfortable openly discussing mental health.
- Encourage and allocate dedicated time for people to regularly conduct mental health self-assessments.
- Provide mental health first aid training for staff members, tracking availability and capacity.



#### Researchers

- Hold regular mental health check-ins with peers and the management team to help build relationships and normalise conversations about mental health.
- Introduce more group and team activities, such as a virtual coffee morning, or book club.



#### Funders

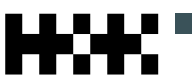
- Enable researchers to protect personal time on a bi-weekly basis, allowing them to explore their own research ideas or have time for personal duties.
- Build a closer relationship with grant holders during the lifetime of a grant, to offer support and advice that will improve mental wellbeing.



#### Research Leads

- Attend training on recognising and speaking about mental health with team members.





“

I'm horrified and not the slightest bit surprised about some of the comments!  
Personally, I don't enjoy working 80+ hour weeks!

”

PARTICIPANT AT LIVERPOOL TOWNHALL

WHAT PEOPLE SAID

Many Townhall participants agreed that there is an expectation to work long hours that has been set by senior academics. It is seen as a “badge of honour”, but ultimately people feel as though junior staff are being “exploited”.

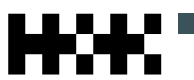
Those new to research are inheriting a long hours mindset because of the standard set by those around them, and are likely to work above and beyond their contracted hours.

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have only served to further drive the sacrifice of personal life in favour of work life.

THE EFFECT

The long hours culture can have a detrimental effect on individuals, this includes:

- Struggling to obtain a healthy work-life balance
- Contributing to poor mental health and inducing work-related anxiety



WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



Institutions

- Introduce a sophisticated model that quantifies how people are using their time.
- Offer sabbaticals which could offer dedicated time for reading or preparing a grant.
- Ensure that technical support is written into research grants, providing the staff needed to get research done.
- Define expectations for sustainable workloads and working hours, which should be no higher than an average working week of around 40 hours.



Publishers

- Agree a policy on out-of-hours emailing and the expectations of a reply to eradicate the current 24/7 email culture.



Professional Bodies

- Share case studies and evidence that work-life balance can be combined with professional success.



Funders

- Offer a long-term, core research budget to reduce the time spent pursuing grants and to provide greater stability for long-term staff.
- Schedule submission deadlines to avoid school and public holidays.
- Offer funding with longer durations, to allow space for bigger ideas and life events to happen.



Researchers

- Set and communicate a personal policy on out-of-hours working, for example, the Department for International Development used to send an automatic response that says emails will be deleted if received during annual leave, and please re-send when back in the office.



Research Leads

- Set an example and encourage healthy conversations with their peers about work-life balance.



### WHAT PEOPLE SAID

A lack of diversity within the research community, and factors creating exclusive environments, played a major role in the discussions - particularly during the virtual Townhalls following the global Black Lives Matter movement. Participants often discussed how the research environment fails groups underrepresented in research including women, LGBTQ+ researchers, Black and minority ethnic researchers, researchers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, disabled researchers, and researchers living with chronic health conditions.

In light of institutional efforts, discrimination was still a major issue for disabled researchers - for example, one attendee with a hearing impairment explained that most calls with funders and publishers aren't captioned. We also heard that researchers who cannot, or are not willing to, relocate are discriminated against.

Many people wanted research leadership to better reflect the communities they serve - which must include more LGBTQ+ researchers, women, Black and minority ethnic researchers, disabled researchers, and researchers living with chronic health conditions.

### THE EFFECT

Research environments that are systematically biased against certain groups:

- Contribute to a hostile environment
- Lead to an unnecessary loss of talent
- Lack the varied perspectives necessary for high-quality research
- Worsen the effects of the other themes for particular groups

### WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



#### Institutions

- Inclusion training should be offered at all institutions and be mandatory for all researchers.
- Reform recruitment processes to ensure research careers are accessible and based on merit - anonymise job applications and avoid relying on narrow proxies of success such as grant income or number of publications.
- To retain a more diverse set of individuals, promotion criteria should value teamwork and collaborative contributions.
- Actively pursue more diverse representation of researchers at a senior level.
- Invest in measures to address inequalities and support for mental health concerns.



#### Funders

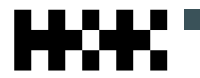
- Firmly encourage institutions to make binding commitments to building more inclusive research environments, as well as collecting data to demonstrate progress and improve approaches.
- Ensure that all training materials, events, information and services are widely promoted and accessible to everyone. Care should be taken to automatically accommodate differences such as neurodiversity, or those accessing materials in a second language.
- Develop an “Athena SWAN” equivalent to ensure that people from certain socioeconomic backgrounds are better represented.



#### Publishers

- Publish an equality and diversity statement on the front page of all journals and report on progress against any targets set.
- Publish a commitment statement to evaluating only the quality of the science, not where the scientist submitting the paper is from or the name of the corresponding author.

## 8. Mistrust of complaints procedures



### WHAT PEOPLE SAID

It was revealed at the Townhalls that people are hesitant to report bullying out of concern that it won't be taken seriously or acted upon. Attendees had witnessed colleagues acting inappropriately without being reprimanded.

Identified examples of poor behaviour included bullying, racist and sexist remarks, plagiarism, and irresponsible conduct of research. This conduct has been unchallenged, unrecorded and dismissed in the past. Many blame the power imbalance, where complaints against highly-valued researchers - who attract money and prestige for institutions - are "brushed aside".

Whistle blowers are therefore discouraged to speak out, not knowing whether they will be protected – the community is a "very small world" and complaining could harm an individual's career in the future.

Other reasons for not making complaints include: it being unclear where or who to raise issues with, and the immensely stressful and time-consuming nature of the process.

### THE EFFECT

- If complaints are dismissed, individuals can experience a drop in self-worth and productivity
- Poor mental health (depression, anxiety and stress)
- Development of a hostile research environment



### WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



#### Institutions

- Implement clear policies about complaint management and make these publicly available.
- Enable safe routes for researchers to report the misuse and plagiarism of data.



#### Publishers

- Take a stronger lead on promoting the highest standards of research ethics, including clearer guidance on the management of complaints within the peer review process.



#### Funders

- Encourage institutions to disclose when complaints are made.



#### Researchers

- Make use of current reporting systems and educate themselves about how to raise concerns.
- Be open to feedback from colleagues when they themselves may have crossed a line.



#### Research Leads

- Ensure there is a clear process within their team for reporting the misuse or plagiarism of data.
- Complete training on how to build a nurturing environment that encourages team members to be accountable and produce robust research.
- Cultivate an environment where people aren't afraid to say when others are wrong.
- Hold regular lab meetings to provide updates on recent data collection and to analyse any mistakes or errors as a team.
- Publicly acknowledge team contributions when presenting work, recognising specific individuals to promote a supportive positive culture.





### WHAT PEOPLE SAID

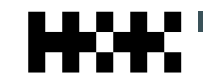
Early career researchers (ECRs), were highlighted as a group that struggle with the current culture. They do not feel secure in their roles as they battle with short-term contracts prior to obtaining a longer-term position.

Currently, ECRs juggle multiple roles and commitments. Their relationships with supervisors can often be strained, resulting in limited opportunities and sense of career options.

ECRs told us that they feel pressured to “put up” with a lot at an early stage of their career including long hours, bullying, lack of mentorship and lack of support. This results in too many talented ECRs leaving research for good.

### THE EFFECT

- Loss of talented staff
- Workplace bullying
- Mental health issues
- Declining sense of collegiality



### WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



#### Institutions

- Give greater prominence to ECR skills development activities in reporting and dialogue with funders.
- Have ECRs as Co-Chairs on boards and committees, such as interview panels, to help develop their skills and also bring a different perspective to the table.



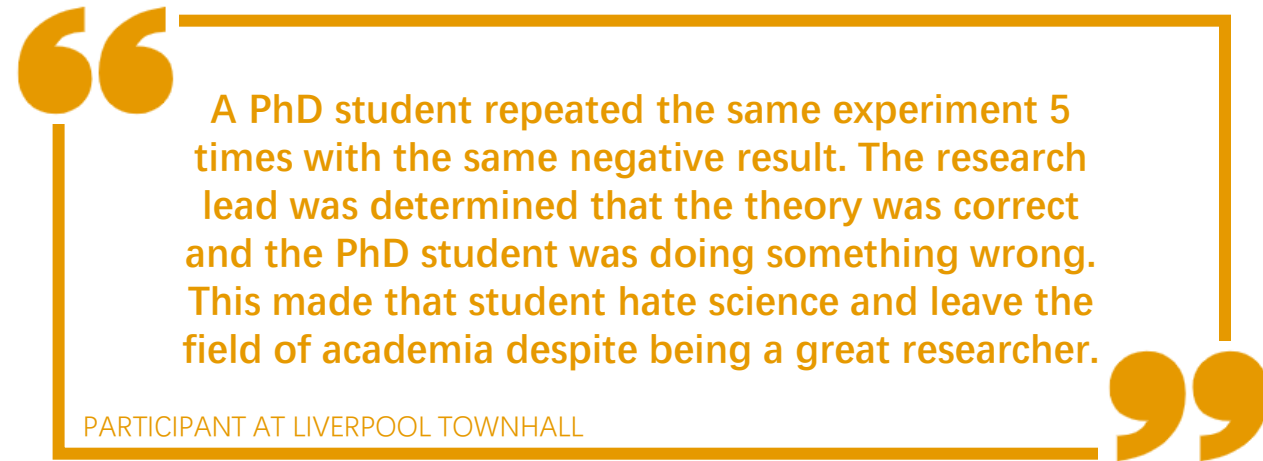
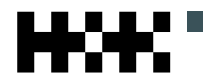
#### Research Leads

- Mentor ECRs, both to support their career ambitions but also to extend the mentor's understanding of contemporary pressures on early-career roles. This can be achieved by implementing catch up sessions to help with career progression and mental wellbeing.



#### Funders

- Limit the number of grants that a research lead can have to reduce pressure and spread out opportunities.
- Offer 1-2 month mini-fellowships for ECRs to turn an independent idea they have into a fellowship application, providing time and funds to engage with potential collaborators, carry out preliminary experiments and draft a high-quality proposal.
- If a research lead has a long-term grant from a particular funder, the funder should allow ECRs named on the grant to apply for an additional small award (e.g. £5-10k) to develop their own ideas towards an independent proposal.



A PhD student repeated the same experiment 5 times with the same negative result. The research lead was determined that the theory was correct and the PhD student was doing something wrong. This made that student hate science and leave the field of academia despite being a great researcher.

PARTICIPANT AT LIVERPOOL TOWNHALL

### WHAT PEOPLE SAID

The “publish or perish” culture across research was a common thread of Townhall conversations. In a system that only views positive results as the ‘interesting story’, participants told us that negative data was often overlooked despite its value.

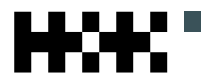
Many participants wanted to see more efforts to record and share negative or otherwise unpublished data, perhaps through repositories.

It was noted that the pervasive pressure to publish was a major factor in driving quantity over quality in research. Rather than tackle the hardest or most useful questions, the current system encouraged researchers to focus on topics and methodologies that would generate the longest publication list.

These pressures can lead to researchers having limited time to check if results are valid and of good quality.

### THE EFFECT

- Biased research and incorrect data
- Increased instances of plagiarism
- Lack of recognition
- Frustration and loss of talented individuals



### WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



#### Institutions

- Introduce a ‘Share my rejection’ initiative that shares good and bad examples of grants so that others can learn from these experiences and start to normalise rejection and show support.
- Encourage the use of data repositories for data sharing and value the availability of open data, guided by the FAIR Principles for data management.



#### Publishers

- Provide clearer guidance on publication ethics and guidelines for peer review.
- Flip the reporting of studies around, rather than looking at the results, assess whether the scientific question is interesting and if it will appeal to the scientific community.
- Publish negative data – many journals are already starting to do this, e.g. Computer Sciences.



#### Research Leads

- Ban ‘blame culture’ policies and instead be open, accept and celebrate learning from failure.



#### Funders

- Offer more ‘blue skies’ funding to allow bolder, high-risk ideas to flourish.
- Support the publication of negative results and reward hard work that yields robust and reproducible data, regardless of whether it is a ‘positive’ result.
- Ensure grants allow for the costs of making research open access, including the cost of a data manager if required.
- Introduce blind reviews of proposal from someone outside the field.
- Publish all research results – the NIHR has a journals library so all research programmes can share their results publicly.

# 11. Lack of recognition & promotion



“Technicians play a vital role in team science and their role should be more widely recognised. Pathways are well established for academic and now research staff but no such roles exist for technicians or academic support staff. Promotions for these groups have been solely based on vacancy opportunities.”

PARTICIPANT AT NORTHERN IRELAND TOWNHALL

## WHAT PEOPLE SAID

Townhall participants mentioned that technicians and individuals who don't lead research projects are often under-recognised. However, technicians were commended at the Townhalls with many saying that they couldn't do their research without them.

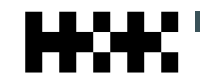
Many agreed that teamwork is expected when working in research, but rewards are focussed on the individual. This leads to issues within research teams when deciding authorship and people believe that publishers are likely to favour the 'big' names – usually the research lead.

Many agreed that the path to promotions in most institutions is not clear. This is partly due to managers not providing counsel on the promotion processes to their staff.

Promotion processes were also felt to be outdated, with outputs being the measure of success rather than how you have supported other people's success through good management.

## THE EFFECT

- Individuals don't feel valued, impacting their performance
- Mental health issues
- Loss of talented staff



## WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



### Institutions

- Introduce clear promotion criteria for all levels at all institutions, with individual goals and objectives to create a clearer career path.
- Progression criteria should focus on quality not quantity.
- Many PhD candidates find the "student" label undermines their perceived value, and institutions could refer to 'PhD researchers' instead.



### Professional Bodies

- Explicitly appoint fellows based on their broader contributions to a positive research culture.



### Research Leads

- Provide more clarity on roles within a team, with clear goals for each member in the team.



### Funders

- Review grant funding processes to ensure positive behaviours and actions are incentivised.

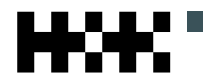


### Publishers

- Embrace a richer approach to attribution on publications, which explains everyone's role in the research, allowing broader recognition.
- Recognise junior members of staff when they assist in peer reviewing papers, as well as technical staff who were involved.
- Allow for first-authorship to be a whole research team, rather than an individual.



## 12. Gender inequality & personal sacrifices



“When I was a new female research fellow, a senior colleague at lunch went on a tirade saying that he 'wished women wouldn't bother coming back after maternity leave as their brains had all turned to mush and they were a waste of space'. This stayed with me for a long time and I actually waited till I had tenure before starting a family.”

PARTICIPANT AT CARDIFF + GW4 TOWNHALL

### WHAT PEOPLE SAID

Both gender inequality and personal sacrifices were prominent discussion topics at the Townhalls.

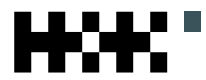
Many women revealed having to wait until the time was right in their research career before having children. They explained how maternity leave can set them back against male colleagues.

When returning to work, parents who have taken long parental leave felt as if they had to go above and beyond in order to justify themselves. Parents in research also believed that they were looked down upon if they had to log off or leave earlier for child-care related activities.

It was clear from the Townhall discussions that a career in research meant that people made personal sacrifices. Commonly discussed issues included: people spending less time with their family and friends which hindered relationships, and short-term contracts effecting people's chances of gaining a mortgage.

### THE EFFECT

- Anxiety and guilt about starting a family
- Unfulfilled with their personal life
- Unbalanced priorities



### WHAT PEOPLE SUGGESTED



#### Institutions

- Increase options for part-time or supporting roles and ensure time is dedicated to career progression.
- Hire PhD candidates on proper work contracts, not scholarships, to formalise their contribution to research – with access to pensions and potentially unemployment benefits at the end of their PhD.
- Implement better guidelines on parental leave, with case studies on how people have taken career breaks and returned.
- Ensure time for personal and career development activities is written into contracts.



#### Researchers

- Support and be considerate to team members who have returned from career breaks and help them to adapt to new ways of working.



#### Funders

- Introduce funding programmes that support individuals to re-integrate after careers breaks or unemployment, taking inspiration from programmes such as the Royal Society's Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowships.
- Fund part-time roles and don't fund 'back to work' schemes that require you to apply during maternity leave.
- Offer longer funding periods to allow time for life events to happen.



# Townhall Snapshots

*The Townhalls were made possible by the generous support of host institutions across the UK.*

*Each event drew together participants from nearby institutions and research organisations. These Snapshots offer a sense of each conversation, but should not be interpreted as specific to the named host.*



16<sup>th</sup> January 2020  
100 participants

Key themes reflected at the Newcastle Townhall included: a lack of recognition, pressure to publish and the long hours culture. Participants also mentioned structural issues around socioeconomic status, gender, race and ethnicity. In the future, participants would like to see institutions invest in measures to address inequalities, introducing new mentorship programmes to support mental wellbeing and a clearer process for reporting the misuse and plagiarism of data.

## KEY QUOTES

*“Bullying and harassment needs to be resolved but at the same time it’s not clear what constitutes bullying.”*

*“Having mental health issues seems to be the norm in the job.”*

*“Being a good researcher does not mean you are a good manager.”*

## FEEDBACK

**Participant:** *“Research quality must not suffer – to achieve this a goal should include: attract and obtain the best people.”*

**Designated Listener:** *“People did become emotional during the wellbeing section, especially mentioning personal experiences.”*

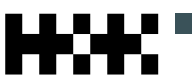
## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed towards the delivery and success of the Newcastle University Townhall, with special thanks to:

- Hilary Noone







12<sup>th</sup> February 2020  
60 participants

The Dundee Townhall sparked the following key themes: short-term contracts, management structures and inadequate rewards for research quality. To combat these, participants suggested creating alternative career paths and a vacancy portal for technical specialists, and introducing more 'blue-skies' funding schemes for researchers.

KEY QUOTES

*“You are asking people to be superhuman.”*  
*“This industry is driven by insecurity. Job insecurity produces good work.”*



FEEDBACK

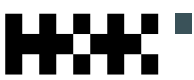
**Participant:** *“Thank you for undertaking this research and implementing these events. It gives me hope for our research culture and the work I strive to do as a research developer.”*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed towards the delivery and success of the University of Dundee Townhall, with special thanks to:

- Inke Nathke



18<sup>th</sup> February 2020  
90 participants

Job insecurity, rigid career paths and fierce competition were some of the key themes discussed at the Glasgow Townhall. Solutions to help included greater focus on career development support for PhDs and PostDocs, and more transparency on the promotions process and associated criteria.

KEY QUOTES

*“A PI told me there's no room for kindness, that I needed to be competitive.”*  
*“It is nice to see universities rewarding positive behaviour, but we are incredibly bad in academia to punish bad behaviour.”*



FEEDBACK

**Participant:** *“We need the courage to allow anonymous 360° feedback to be solicited for all managers at all management levels up to the highest institutional level.”*

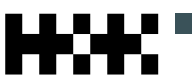


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed towards the delivery and success of the University of Glasgow Townhall, with special thanks to:

- Tanita Casci





19<sup>th</sup> February 2020  
90 participants

Personal sacrifices, bullying and lack of teamwork were key themes that emerged during the Leicester Townhall. Solutions included the introduction of team building exercises and providing further training on how to share constructive feedback.

KEY QUOTES

*“Early career researchers are very vulnerable; senior high-flyers are seen as untouchable.”*  
*“Well-being projects often teach you to cope with unrealistic workloads.”*

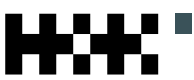
FEEDBACK

**Participant:** *“Great to discuss these topics with likeminded people. Working out how to disseminate this to the wider community will be more of a challenge!”*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed towards the delivery and success of the University of Leicester Townhall, with special thanks to:

- Danni Benyon-Payne



27<sup>th</sup> February 2020  
80 participants

Key themes which derived from the Essex Townhall included: the prevalence of bullying, reporting of research misconduct and the long hours culture. Suggested solutions were: increasing informal 'check ins' between colleagues, and pre-registration of research plans to boost transparency.

KEY QUOTES

*“I've witnessed harassment, not bullying, within a university structure and more pressure on more junior staff.”*  
*“What is expected of you can become a force of bullying and anxiety.”*

FEEDBACK

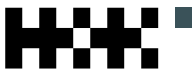
**Participant:** *“I really appreciate Wellcome talking on these issues and trying to change the culture.”*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed towards the delivery and success of the University of Essex and Eastern Arc Townhall, with special thanks to:

- Phil Ward





18<sup>th</sup> September 2020  
95 participants

The pressures on ECRs, deteriorating mental health and the demise of good management, were key themes originating from the Cardiff University and GW4 Townhall. Suggested solutions to overcome these challenges included introducing regular check-ins with team members as well as funding stronger mental health support services.

KEY QUOTES

*“Universities need to fund mental health support better and advertise its availability. It needs to be easy to access when needed.”*

*“Job security is a major issue, and career progression. It is one of the reasons I left research due to the uncertainty of when the next contract would be funded.”*

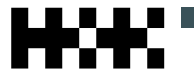
FEEDBACK

**Participant:** *“It’s been great to see that some of the concerns I have are also shared by others! Thank you for a great discussion.”*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed towards the delivery and success of the Cardiff University and GW4 Townhall, with special thanks to:

- Mari Nowell
- Phillip Harris



4<sup>th</sup> November 2020  
60 participants

According to London Townhall participants, effective management training is either unavailable or under-advertised in some institutions. Participants also felt that they didn’t have a healthy work-life balance and that there is a reluctance to investigate research and behaviour misconduct. Many also recognised a lack of diversity in research with little BAME representation in senior positions. In response to these challenges, participants wanted to eradicate 24/7 emailing and would like funders to create more opportunities for centralised skilled roles that can support multiple teams. They would also like institutions to pursue more diverse representation.

KEY QUOTES

*“I was told as an undergraduate that research was not a “career” option as there was no clear career progression.”*

*“The hesitation to speak out about bullying or harassment is frightening, but I can understand - if you don’t feel anything is going to be done and you may potentially face backlash, why report it?”*

FEEDBACK

**Designated Listener:** *“Thank you for the open and insightful conversations. Great solutions proposed for improving wellbeing, keep those ideas coming!”*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed towards the delivery and success of the London & South East Townhall, with special thanks to:

- Alice Barney
- Julia Heckenast





11<sup>th</sup> November 2020  
70 participants

The Northern Ireland Townhall saw discussions focus on short-term contracts, pressure on early career researchers and the correct reporting procedures. Suggested solutions included clearer communication about career opportunities outside of research, as well as creating safer routes for whistle blowing.

## KEY QUOTES

*“Researchers are often less willing to raise issues, there is a degree of collegiality which can influence such decisions.”*

*“Having a system whereby all raw data is shared to the lab and between the research lead and researcher is key.”*

## FEEDBACK

**Participant:** *“This was great discussion! Thank you!”*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed towards the delivery and success of the Ulster and Queen’s University Belfast Townhall, with special thanks to:

- Chris Browne, Queen’s University Belfast
- Shauna McKeown, Ulster University



12<sup>th</sup> November 2020  
120 participants

Key themes that emerged from the Liverpool Townhall included: bullying, the loss of talented researchers, lack of training and a competitive culture. To help with these challenges, those who attended the Townhall suggested better training for peer reviewers on providing constructive feedback, and greater provision of bridging funding to help researchers cope with periods of instability.

## KEY QUOTES

*“I have reported sexual harassment (from a senior academic at a different institute) to that person’s head of department and I tried to do it anonymously. I was told that the Head of Department needed me to identify myself and recount the events in detail. This was embarrassing and traumatic and left me open to further communications by the offender. Nothing changed for that individual but it was upsetting for me to have to make the situation known to other senior researchers.”*

*“As a clinician, I did my PhD in my late 20s and by the time I got my permanent position as a senior lecturer, my kids had been to 8 schools in 5 cities in 2 countries.”*

## FEEDBACK

**Participant:** *“Excellent conversation and great excitement to change research culture!”*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed towards the delivery and success of the University of Liverpool Townhall, with special thanks to:

- Angela Midgley
- Saneeya Qureshi







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