

# FACTORS AFFECTING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT BY RESEARCHERS

REFLECTIONS ON THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT BY RESEARCHERS IN THE UK

## WHY IS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND WHY DO YOU?

What are the reasons for public engagement?  
What are the reasons for public engagement?  
What are the reasons for public engagement?



## WHAT ARE THE MAIN BENEFITS OF RESEARCHERS ENGAGING WITH THE PUBLIC? (SELECTED KEY FINDINGS)



*A national survey in 2015 into the factors that affect public engagement by researchers across the UK shows that there has been a positive shift in researchers' understanding and attitudes to public engagement over the last 10 years.*

*This shift represents an important milestone on a longer journey of culture change for the research and higher education sectors, which remains a 'work in progress'. The survey finds that researchers are now considerably more personally motivated in this area yet challenges remain. The findings also suggest that more needs to be done to support, reward and recognise researchers so as to embed public engagement as an integral part of a research career.*

*This Discussion Document summarises the emerging views of a Consortium of UK public funders of research<sup>1</sup>, who commissioned this survey to investigate further researchers' understanding of, participation in and attitudes to public engagement. Key findings of the research are included in this document and the full results can be accessed at [www.wellcome.ac.uk/PERsurvey](http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/PERsurvey)*

*The Consortium is keen to share its reflections to help encourage a wider discussion both within the community of practitioners and supporters of public engagement and with those involved in leading universities and research institutes. To this end, the Consortium poses a series of questions for broader discussion in the coming months (see Appendix A), which it hopes will inform ongoing development of the roadmap for the future of public engagement by researchers.*

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1. Funders are Wellcome Trust; Royal Society; British Academy; Royal Academy of Engineering; Academy of Medical Sciences; Royal Society of Chemistry; Research Councils UK; UK Funding Bodies (HEFCE, HEFCW, Scottish Funding Council and Department for Employment and Learning - Northern Ireland); Department for Business, Innovation and Skills; Department for Health (National Institute for Health Research); Health and Care Research Wales, Welsh Government; and the Scottish Government. The project is also supported by Universities UK.

# THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT BY RESEARCHERS

Investment in public engagement across the higher education and research sectors has been sustained over the last 10 years, despite the challenging context of austerity. Support for public engagement by researchers from all disciplines has moved forward significantly.

Research funders have supported interventions to address the barriers researchers faced in engaging with the public, highlighted in a previous survey of scientists and engineers, published nearly 10 years earlier by the Royal Society in 2006. These include the *Beacons for Public*

*Engagement*<sup>2</sup>, the *Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research*<sup>3</sup>, the *National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement*<sup>4</sup>, *RCUK Public Engagement with Research Catalysts*<sup>5</sup> and the *RCUK School-University Partnerships Scheme*<sup>6</sup>. These initiatives have also helped increase the numbers of university staff who support and facilitate researchers in their public engagement activities (described as PE Enablers in the Survey).

The Research Councils and UK Funding Bodies have ensured that public engagement is considered within research design, and

as a route to impact within the Research Excellence Framework<sup>7</sup>.

The Wellcome Trust has also introduced dedicated funding for public engagement within its research grants<sup>8</sup>. These activities are set against a larger context of developing culture change in the higher education/research sectors and fall within a wider programme of investment by Consortium members and others in the broader ecosystem of public engagement in the UK.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEY

The Consortium wanted to update its understanding gained from a survey of scientists and engineers, published by the Royal Society in 2006 and conducted with the support of Research Councils UK and the Wellcome Trust - *Factors Affecting Science Communication by Scientists and Engineers*.

TNS-BMRB, an independent social research organisation, was commissioned to undertake the survey research in 2015 to:

- understand what academics and researchers in higher education institutions, research institutes or clinical settings understand by the term public engagement<sup>9</sup>;
- establish the relative importance of both communication and public engagement to UK researchers;
- examine the amount and type of communication and public engagement activities undertaken by UK researchers;

- explore factors that may facilitate or inhibit public engagement and the extent to which researchers may wish to undertake it;
- consider – for the first time - the views of enablers of public engagement on factors affecting researchers engaging in public engagement activities and;
- provide evidence and consider how universities, other research institutions and funders can support effective public engagement.

The survey research covered all four nations of the United Kingdom and was carried out between May and July 2015. It comprised a literature review to set the context for public engagement by researchers; a web survey of research staff of all disciplines working in universities, research institutes and clinical settings (2,454 responses and a response rate overall of 22 per cent); a separate web

survey of public engagement enablers (staff who support and facilitate researchers in their PE activities) (269 responses and a response rate of 33 per cent) and qualitative research with 50 researchers and enablers to explore emerging issues in greater depth. The researcher survey covered *all* disciplines (science and engineering; medicine; the arts, humanities and social sciences).

Key findings of the research are available in an infographic (included in this discussion document). The full research reports (main report; technical report and literature review) have been published on the Wellcome Trust website at: [www.wellcome.ac.uk/PERSurvey](http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/PERSurvey)

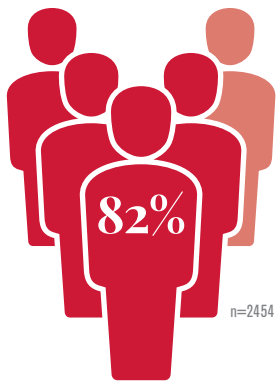
2. Funded by Research Councils UK, UK Funding Bodies, Wellcome Trust 3. 52 research funder signatories; by setting out clear expectations for research organisations, researcher managers and supporters and researchers themselves, the Concordat aims to strengthen existing good practice in public engagement by ensuring it is valued, recognised and supported. 4. Funded by UK Higher Education Funding Councils, Research Councils UK and the Wellcome Trust. 5. Funded by Research Councils UK. 6. Ibid. 7. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK Higher Education Institutions. The Research Councils and UK Funding Councils are committed to supporting excellent research. To realise the importance of impact, Research Councils require academics to consider the future impact of research at the point of applying for funding. UK HE Funding Bodies, in the context of the REF, assess the historic evidence of impact, with a common understanding of the importance of societal and economic as well as academic impact. RCUK introduced Pathways to Impact to encourage researchers to think about what can be done to ensure their research makes a difference. 8. See [www.wellcome.ac.uk/ppe](http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/ppe) 9. The Consortium agreed to define public engagement with research as has been outlined in the *Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research*. Public engagement with research describes a diversity of activities including: Participating in festivals; Working with museums/galleries/science centres and other cultural venues; Creating opportunities for the public to inform the research questions being tackled; Researchers and public working together to inform policy; Presenting to the public (e.g. public lectures or talks); Involving the public as researchers (e.g. web based experiments); Engaging with young people to inspire them about research (e.g. workshops in schools); and Contributing to new media enabled discussion forums.

# KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH

Full reports published on [www.wellcome.ac.uk/PERSurvey](http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/PERSurvey)

Percentages may add to 99% or 101% due to the effects of rounding. Where multiple responses were allowed at a question, percentages will sum to more than 100%.

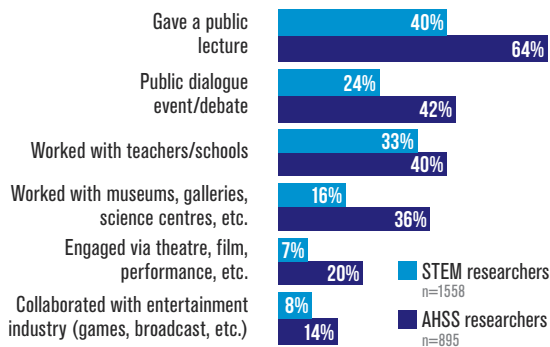
## EXTENT AND NATURE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN 2015



Most researchers have done at least one form of public engagement in the past 12 months<sup>10</sup>, though activity is often infrequent.

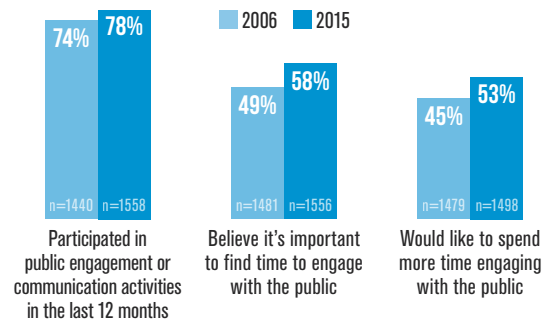
AHSS (Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences) researchers are more active than STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) researchers in communication and public engagement about their research.

### PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS (2015)



Between 2006 and 2015, there has been a significant shift in attitudes; public engagement is valued more. Yet there has only been a small rise in the proportion of STEM researchers who undertake public engagement or communication.

### STEM RESEARCHERS AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

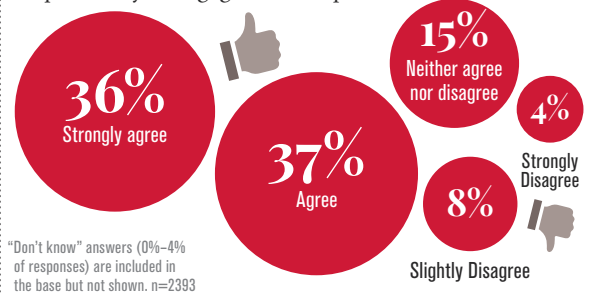


## WHAT IS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND WHY DO IT?

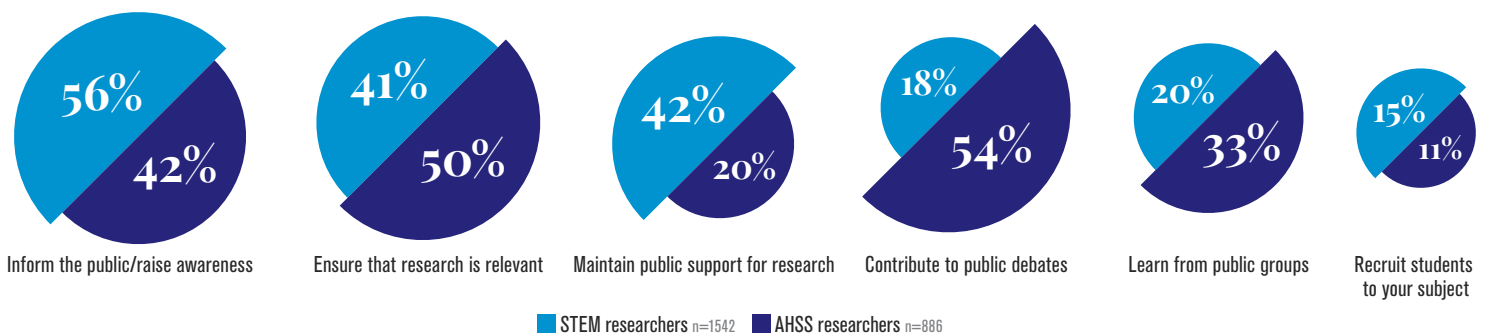
A high proportion of Researchers (AHSS and STEM) understand public engagement as a two-way dialogue, rather than a one-way communication.



Most researchers agreed that they had a moral responsibility to engage with the public.



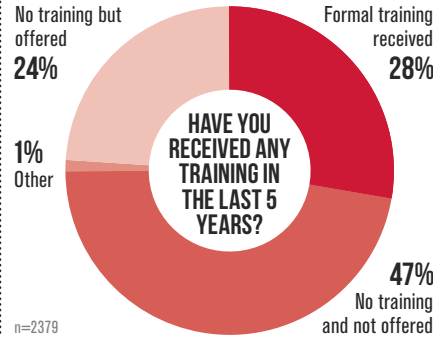
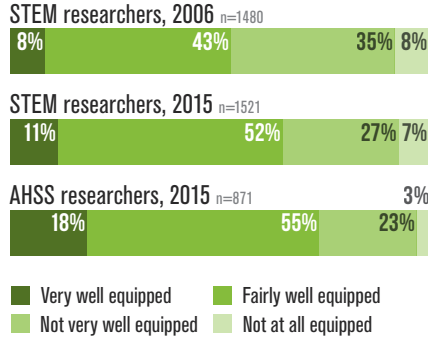
## WHAT ARE THE MAIN BENEFITS OF RESEARCHERS ENGAGING WITH THE PUBLIC? (SELECTED KEY FINDINGS)



10. Public engagement activities as defined by the Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research.

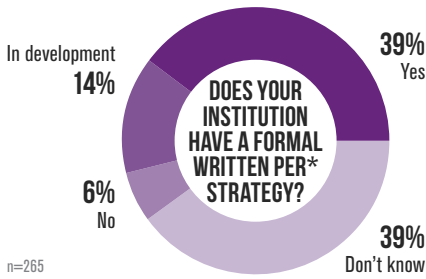
# HOW WELL EQUIPPED ARE RESEARCHERS IN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT?

STEM researchers in 2015 feel better equipped to do public engagement than in 2006 although only a minority feel "very" well equipped. Arts and humanities researchers were more confident in their public engagement skills.



Just over a quarter of all researchers in 2015 had received formal training in either communications or public engagement in the previous five years. Informal "on-the-job" learning was more common.

## INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND POLICY

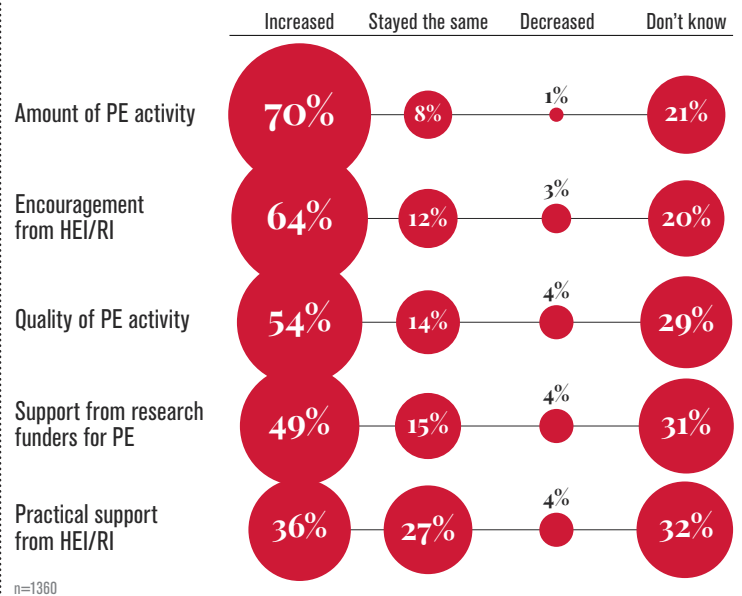


Developing and implementing a formal institutional strategy or policy seems a work in progress across the sector, according to public engagement enablers.

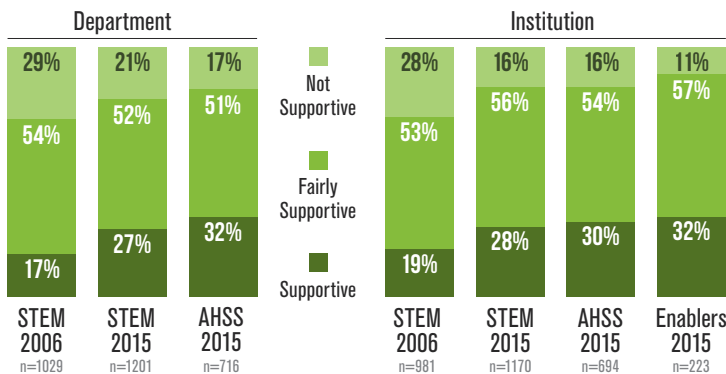
\*Public Engagement for Research  
\*Don't know" answers (2%–4% of responses) are included in the base but not shown.

The results indicate a perception of culture change over the past decade. Researchers (and also enablers) perceive an increase in public engagement volume, quality and support over the longer-term.

### PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE IN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY AND SUPPORT IN THE PAST DECADE (ALL RESEARCHERS WHO HAVE BEEN IN RESEARCH FOR 10 YEARS OR MORE)



### ARE YOUR INSTITUTION AND DEPARTMENT GENERALLY SUPPORTIVE TOWARDS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT? (ALL RESEARCHERS)

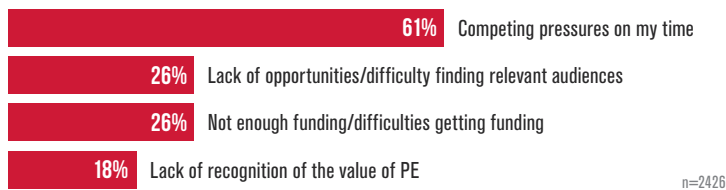


"Don't know" or "It varies" answers (18% to around 30% of responses) have been removed from the base and are not shown.

## BARRIERS AND INCENTIVES FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

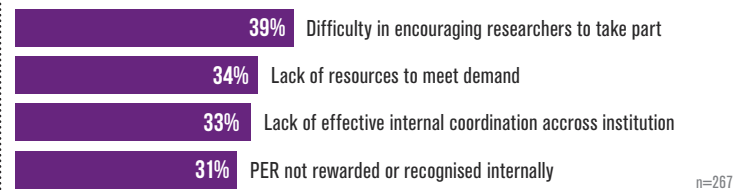
Competing pressures on time emerged as the most prominent barrier for researchers undertaking public engagement in 2015.

### WHAT ARE THE MAIN FACTORS STOPPING YOU PERSONALLY FROM GETTING MORE INVOLVED IN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT? (ALL RESEARCHERS, TOP 4 RESULTS)



Enablers cited challenges related to persuading researchers to participate, suggesting researchers are not always aware of the opportunities on offer.

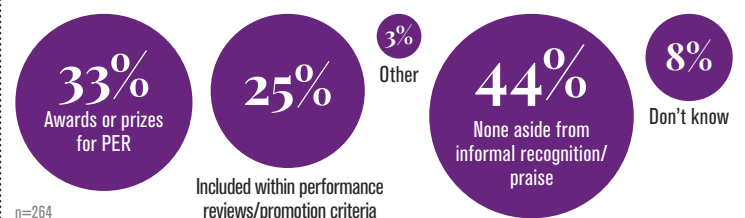
### KEY CHALLENGES AFFECTING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ENABLERS (TOP 4 RESULTS)



### WHAT ARE THE MAIN FACTORS THAT WOULD ENCOURAGE YOU TO GET MORE INVOLVED IN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT? (ALL RESEARCHERS, TOP 4 RESULTS)



### REWARD AND RECOGNITION STRUCTURES IN PLACE (ALL ENABLERS)



# THE CONSORTIUM'S EMERGING VIEWS

The following reflections are based on a first-stage review of the survey research results by the Consortium of UK research funders who commissioned this work. They represent a range of observations relating to the complex issues, which have been raised by the research, and are intended to promote broader discussion. They were designed in the first instance for use as workshop discussion material for an audience of researchers and public engagement enablers and practitioners.

## ***Understandings and importance of public engagement***

- This survey indicates that there has been a positive – and welcome - shift in attitudes to public engagement. The rise by 9 percent points to 37 percent of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) researchers stating that public engagement is important relative to other aspects of their role, as well as the increase in appetite for public engagement among STEM researchers suggests that public engagement is better valued than seen previously.
- The indicated movement towards STEM researchers recognising public engagement as a “two-way dialogue” and all researchers being more likely to self-define public engagement as an interactive process is encouraging. This reflects efforts made to clarify and articulate the objectives of public engagement by funders and the wider public engagement community.
- The findings reveal an active interest from across the UK research community, who are clearly articulating both a desire and an ethical obligation to do more public engagement. This is also encouraging.

## ***Extent and nature of communication and public engagement by researchers***

- The survey results highlight the diversity of communication and public engagement activities undertaken by all researchers – from face-to-face interactions with the public to collaborative and consultative roles, such as working with museums and galleries or the entertainment industry. The wide variety of options for researchers wanting to engage the

public perhaps makes it difficult to grasp public engagement as a concept and to fix it in place in terms of understanding and practice.

- The survey documents the shift into the digital age over the last 10 years, which has seen many younger researchers becoming involved in communicating using social media. This is a welcome development and more needs to be done to explore the potential of social media and technology for public engagement as well as communications, and the impact it has on researchers, public engagement and audiences in the future.
- It seems disappointing that while there is more active involvement of researchers overall across the UK undertaking communications and public engagement activities, there has not been a marked increase of public engagement activity of STEM researchers since 2006. This perhaps raises questions about what a ‘steady state’ of researcher involvement in public engagement might look like.
- Whilst it has never seemed desirable to require all researchers to engage with the public, the survey research demonstrates a pool of ‘unengaged’ researchers who may benefit from specific support. It is of course difficult to assess this pool of ‘unengaged researchers’, as few respondents were in this category. More work however needs to be done to find ways of understanding better the needs of this group.
- AHSS researchers are significantly more active in public engagement than those in the STEM disciplines. The differences in the participation in and attitudes towards public engagement by researchers in the AHSS and the STEM disciplines reflect the picture emerging from a recent analysis of case studies submitted by universities to demonstrate the impact of their research in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF)<sup>11</sup>. This certainly warrants further exploration and suggests that there may be opportunities to share learning across disciplinary areas.

## ***How well equipped are researchers to engage with the public?***

- The last 10 years have seen a substantial increase in provision of training,

opportunities and support for public engagement. The impact of this investment is reflected in the survey findings - researchers feeling more equipped and in the views of longer-service researchers (10+ years) from all disciplines who cite increases in extent, support and quality of public engagement over the past decade.

## ***Institutional support and policy***

- Departmental- and institutional-level support for public engagement by STEM researchers has increased and AHSS researchers also reported high levels of support. This is welcome. However, the evidence suggests that there is more to be done if the trajectory and positive picture shown in this report are to be sustained. Leaders of research organisations should continue to articulate and implement their commitment to public engagement at all levels, and find new ways to support the system strategically and where it is most needed.
- Universities and research institutes are of course only part of the research sector. Wider culture change in the entire system seems required to ensure public engagement is appropriately rewarded and an integral part of a research career.
- An interesting theme to emerge is the discrepancy between researchers stating that either they are not finding or are not offered opportunities to undertake public engagement and PE enablers who say that they receive little uptake from researchers when offering opportunities to engage with the public. There may be a range of reasons for this. For example: it may be a communication issue; respondent bias; a mis-match between researchers’ needs and what is offered or a natural waypoint on a path to culture change and embedding of PE. But it may also suggest some reticence amongst researchers who will not proactively look for training or other opportunities. This creates a significant challenge for institutions with relatively small support teams and many thousands of research staff.

## ***Barriers and incentives***

- There is concern from the survey findings that significant barriers remain – the most significant being

<sup>11</sup>. Analysis of over 1,000 case studies submitted by universities by discipline found that public engagement was a topic in significantly more case studies submitted by Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences researchers than by those in the Sciences. *The Nature, Scale and Beneficiaries of Research Impact*. The Policy Institute at King's and Digital Science. Presentation on 14 April 2015 to the Consortium Steering Group.

time for public engagement. While this might simply be inferred to be a prioritisation of other activities over public engagement, it is important to be realistic in what is asked of researchers. Continuing to understand the appropriate balance of time required for different public engagement approaches is required by those providing public engagement opportunities, so that it

is easier for researchers to position public engagement in the context of priorities overall.

- The biggest incentive cited was being relieved of other work. This is an issue that may not always have been central to many of the key interventions made so could be an important key to translating the positive attitudes now being seen into activity.

- It is clear from the survey findings that researchers see the value of public engagement to society but not always to their own careers as researchers. A lack of recognition was raised in the qualitative research although interestingly only 18 percent of survey respondents cited this as a barrier.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

The Consortium will continue to reflect on the findings of this survey, individually and collectively in order better to support public engagement by researchers in the future. Consortium members call for wider discussion across the research and teaching communities in higher education in the coming months to inform their thinking and to prompt action by universities, research institutes, the public engagement community and researchers themselves.

The Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research already lays down the principles and commitments of many of the organisations in the Consortium to work together on this agenda. The foundations are strong but the sector, partners and funders now need to work together to identify effective solutions to address the barriers that still remain.

If you would like further information about the survey, or would like to contribute to the discussion going forward, please contact:

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To view the full findings, technical report and literature review, please go to [www.wellcome.ac.uk/PERSurvey](http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/PERSurvey)

## APPENDIX A

# DEBATING THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT BY RESEARCHERS

Reflecting on the findings of the research, the Consortium now encourages debate and deliberation amongst those with an interest in driving forward a successful public engagement agenda in higher education and research. The following questions have emerged during the research and we invite the public engagement community to consider and discuss them with colleagues, partners and their audiences.

### ***What are we trying to achieve?***

- What does 'good look like' for public engagement by researchers?
- What would we want the sector to look like in 10 years' time?
- How do we get there? What might be a 'quick win' and how should we define our short/medium-term goals?
- How important is a definition of public engagement? Does it impact on communication with researchers?
- What activities should be defined as public engagement?

### ***How can we better support individuals?***

- 'Where am I' relative to the findings of the survey?
- Do the barriers and incentives highlighted by the Consortium resonate with researchers and the PE community?
- Should 'unengaged' researchers who are not currently involved in public engagement activities be targeted for support? If so, what would they need?
- How can we convert positive attitudes to greater participation? Do we need to provide more or different training? More opportunities?
- Is there a reticence amongst researchers not to look proactively for training or other opportunities? And if so, what does this mean in terms of how best to support them?

### ***What is needed to continue to change institutional and research cultures?***

- What is the role of the institution and of the funder?
- What could happen in 'my institution' to remove barriers to engagement/make things easier for me?
- What needs to be done so that institutions move to action and implementation at all levels?
- Where are the bottle-necks and how can these be tackled?
- What can we learn from the research culture in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences to better support those in the STEM disciplines?
- What else needs to change to ensure public engagement is appropriately rewarded and an integral part of a research career?

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December 2015

