

# CaSE Public Opinion: February 2023 Trends Report



Campaign for Science and Engineering

# Introduction



This report reflects the findings of a major study of public opinion conducted as part of the Campaign for Science and Engineering's (CaSE) Discovery Decade programme. This study spans 14 focus groups and four nationally-representative polls spread across almost a year in 2022-2023, anchored by a landmark 8,000-person poll in July 2022.

The full dataset can be explored on CaSE's website and is designed as a reference resource for advocates across the R&D sector. We have made all of the data open access and invite others to help us analyse the findings and debate the implications.

Here, we highlight the eight trends that we see emerging from the data, and collate the key findings and headline statistics from the study.

## The Discovery Decade Team

We hope that this dataset, and the trends we've identified, can support the work of advocates across the R&D sector. If you have any queries about the data, or would like to be involved in the next steps of this project, please do contact us.



**Ben Bleasdale**

*Director, Discovery Decade*  
*ben@sciencecampaign.org.uk*



**Rebecca Hill**

*Advocacy & Engagement Officer*  
*rebecca@sciencecampaign.org.uk*

## Government investment in R&D is supported by a large majority of the public



In our polling, 70% of people felt it was important for the Government to invest in R&D, with stronger support among the over 65s and the AB socioeconomic group (those working in intermediate and higher managerial professions). This support means R&D advocates start from an enviable position as we seek to make our case for investment.

There's even appetite for further political ambition in this area, with over half of people saying they would like politicians to pay more attention to science and innovation. Crucially, this view is held equally by Conservative and Labour voters, while almost three-quarters (73%) say the UK needs to be better at science and innovation. These are some of several demonstrations across the data that there is cross-party support for an ambitious stance on R&D.

In addition, the public are keen for the UK to use new and creative ways to overcome the problems we face as a nation, and when we asked people why investing in R&D was important to them, they told us that it could benefit future generations, keep people healthy and keep the UK safe and secure.

## Our efforts to build the R&D sector's public image aren't cutting through



The language we use as advocates isn't always reaching our audiences, and more than half (52%) of people either haven't heard of the acronym "R&D" or have but don't know what it means. The same proportion say they know nothing or not very much about R&D.

*"I've heard of it [R&D]. But I don't actually know what it is"*

**Nursery Worker, Female, 56, Dundee**

For many people in our focus groups, the term "R&D" primarily evokes consumer tech, large businesses, and medical treatments – leaving large parts of the R&D system unseen. The contribution to R&D made by our universities and charities received little to no recognition without prompting, and there was a strong bias towards STEM-related subjects over wider examples of R&D, further narrowing the sector's image.

Efforts to give R&D a clear 'brand identity' are struggling. The Government's "Science Superpower" tagline hasn't cut through; only 12% of people say they've heard of it and know what it means. But, the more tangible messaging used by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has potential, with people responding favourably to the idea of R&D delivering "stronger growth, better jobs and bold new discoveries".

## People struggle to see the benefits R&D, which risks it being labelled a 'luxury'



Just over 60% of people either agree that “R&D doesn’t benefit people like them” or feel neutral or unsure about R&D’s impacts; peaking at 72% for those aged 35-44. This is a precarious position for a sector that receives substantial public investment.

“Wealthy people” and “big businesses” are cited as the major beneficiaries of R&D, and people view R&D activity as being clustered in London and South East England. Without clearer messaging about R&D’s benefits and its UK-wide footprint, it could be seen as something that’s primarily for the benefit of wealthier people, and happening in the UK’s wealthier regions.

*[Discussing the affordability of new heat pump technology]: “None of the working class people actually get that. You can put all the R&D and money into it you want, but you’ve got to make it accessible to everybody.”*

**Hairdresser, Female, 36, Mansfield**

*“It’d be nice to see some returns, or some evidence that the investment that we’re putting in has created something. At the end of the day, it’s taxpayers’ money. It’s our money. And we never see detail.”*

**Mechanical Engineer, Male, 60, Greater Manchester**

Unsurprisingly, given its intangibility to many people, R&D risks being labelled a ‘luxury’ rather than a necessity, especially amid a cost-of-living crisis. When presented with a hypothetical Government proposal to immediately halve the R&D budget, a third of people are supportive and this increases to an outright majority when the cut is framed around tangible alternative priorities such as lowering energy bills. Given the choice, 46% of people would only invest more in R&D when “the economy is in better shape”, and in our focus groups people spoke about innovation just making everyday life more expensive.

*“If there wasn’t as much of a crisis today - with the gas, electric, diesel, and the NHS - I could be more content with investing in more research for the future. Research helps and is needed, but right now we need to focus on what is happening here and now.”*

**Scientist, Female, 28, Greater Manchester**

*“It’s almost a luxury to fund R&D at this moment. It would be nice to put other areas that the government oversees in order before we start spending money on possible, probable, maybes and maybe nots.”*

**Therapist, Female, 63, Mansfield**

*“I think we, the consumer, pay for it, because the [older] phone probably costs £20, and the average iPhone costs £800 or £900. Advances in technology often shove up the price.”*

**Waiter, Male, 26, Mansfield**

## R&D's poor connection with younger people is a major, and growing, risk



Age was one of the strongest differentiators of opinion across our polling. Older people were among the strongest supporters of R&D investment, but younger age groups are less likely to feel R&D benefits them or that R&D can create local jobs in their area, and more likely to say that we cannot afford to invest in R&D at the moment. They're also more likely to say that the UK doesn't need to invest in R&D because it will benefit from R&D done abroad.

However, there are promising avenues that could help us make R&D more relevant to younger people. We can focus on the outputs that matter more to them; younger people are more excited by new products and technologies. We can also lean into cooperation-centred arguments linked to national pride, as we see stronger support for the idea of the UK being "known worldwide for its science and innovation" versus more adversarial framings about the UK "falling behind" similar countries.

## Linking R&D to the problem it's solving helps it feel relevant to more people



People are concerned about the cost of living, the sustainability of the NHS and the impacts of climate change. In general, arguments that linked R&D to a tangible problem – even if this solution is a long way off – help win people over. There is huge scope to strengthen this link between R&D and the key issues facing people to make our advocacy more relevant and compelling.

Promisingly, people see R&D as a relevant tool for solving lots of different problems in society, including tackling climate change and improving the quality of the NHS. And more than half of people felt that R&D was either essential or important for addressing the cost of living.

On the flip side, some of the sector's typical arguments aren't proving effective. Rationales that centre around the UK "falling behind" in R&D investment compared to other nations don't motivate support among most people, with one focus group describing these rationales as "blackmail". Similarly, arguments framed around the economic spillover benefits of R&D tend to be less effective than those focussed on the problem that the R&D was directly intended to fix.

## Giving R&D a sense of location can help it connect with people



There is scope to talk more about where R&D happens. About a third of people associate R&D with their own region – citing tangible examples such as nearby universities, NHS institutions and businesses – and many want their region to carry out lots of R&D.

Despite this, the local visibility of R&D is low. About two-thirds of people say they don't know much about R&D happening in their area, and a similar proportion would like to hear more about it. Strengthening R&D's local roots could also yield powerful new spokespeople, as people say they would trust those working in R&D in their area to talk about its benefits.

*"I had never heard of [graphene being discovered in Manchester]. Is that because we're supposed to take the time and find out? That's the type of thing I'd like to see put on social media... let's be proud!"*

**Buyer for a Hotel Chain, Female, 34, Greater Manchester**

As the footprint of R&D expands, we should consider what benefits people are expecting to see from developments appearing in their area. About as many people would support a new research lab being built in their local area as would support a new school or wind farm, which is more than would support a new train station, factory or shopping centre. When asked why, 62% of those who would support a new research lab being built say it would benefit the local economy, 60% say it would bring more well-paid jobs to their area.

## The sector can, and should, find its voice



When it comes to talking about how much public money should be invested into R&D, people trust R&D experts despite being conscious of their potential self-interest. Researchers, research charities and universities strongly outperform politicians as messengers on investment, with businesses falling somewhere in between.

After seeing scientific experts in action during the coronavirus pandemic, many people hold them in high regard and consider them well-placed to speak about R&D. In focus groups, participants referred to those involved – often by name – and praised their expertise, evidence and honesty.

*“So those two guys that used to stand either side of whoever gave us the Covid news became popular. They told us how many people had died, all the boring, horrible stuff, but what was good about them was that they did what it said on the tin. They're the real deal. They're not someone trying to be something, they are it. They breathed it, they did it. It's refreshing to hear people speak about things they know about.”*

**Retired Dance Studio Owner, Female, 66, Wimbledon**

Politicians, of all stripes, perform poorly as ambassadors for R&D. They were seen by focus group participants as inherently untrustworthy and unlikely to keep promises, further emphasising the need for the R&D sector to agree and articulate its own rationale for investment.

**Our sector's messaging should aim to deliver honest, achievable optimism**



Throughout the study, we sensed a lack of optimism in many people. Although people feel they are “better off now than 50 years ago”, they also believe that things are “changing for the worse” and that the future is scary rather than exciting.

Many people feel motivated by a desire to improve things for the next generation. Personal benefit still matters, but we also saw strong support for altruistic motivations for investing in R&D such as building a better future for others. There is an opportunity to frame R&D as an essential tool in achieving a better future – whatever people may want that to be.

*“It should also be the first tick that has to be put against any [R&D] project: will this contribute to making the world a better place for the next generation?”*

**IT Manager, Male, 54, Blackpool**

The data offers hope to advocates too – people can be emotionally engaged with the idea of R&D when it feels relevant to their lives and passions. Building that personal connection will rely on more personalised advocacy – this data is a reminder to avoid messages that lump the public together as one big audience, and instead see and respond to the differences in society. We see these different mindsets even within demographic groups, so this study has focused on capturing the data we need to find the things that unite people – whether that's their passions, hopes or attitudes.

Nurturing a more personal connection with R&D is no easy task, but the better we understand our different audiences and their opinions, the easier it will be to get started.

# Key Findings

This section collates the key findings and headline statistics across six core areas of our research. These areas replicate the structure of the online dataset on CaSE's website.

The first sections explore our understanding of public opinion around R&D. These sections consider the public's existing knowledge of R&D, their opinions on its benefits and beneficiaries, and attitudes specifically towards investment into R&D.

The latter sections then explore how R&D advocates can best engage with public audiences. These sections consider the language associated with R&D and the efficacy of different messages, followed by attitudes towards different messengers. Finally, we consider where R&D slots into people's wider concerns and hopes regarding society.

The full data tables behind these key findings are available from the CaSE website.

## **Socioeconomic groupings**

**Throughout this research, we refer to different socioeconomic groups, which describe the types of job someone does. This is based on the main income earner in the household.**

**AB – Intermediate and higher managerial professions**

**C1 – Junior managerial professions**

**C2 – Skilled manual workers**

**DE – Semi- or non-skilled manual workers and non-working people**



## Knowledge of R&D

- **Awareness of the term “R&D” is concentrated in certain groups in society, and most people say they know nothing or not very much about what R&D is**
- **News sources, the workplace and people’s education are the primary drivers for awareness of R&D as a term**

More than half (52%) of 4,005 respondents in our February 2023 polling said that they either haven’t heard of the acronym “R&D” or have but don’t know what it means. This is compared to 44% who said that they both heard of the acronym “R&D” and knew what it meant.

Reported awareness is lower on average for female respondents and those in socioeconomic groups DE.

When asked how much they knew about R&D, more than half (57%) of 8,474 respondents to our July 2022 poll felt they knew “nothing” or “not very much” about R&D, with female respondents and people in socioeconomic group DE more likely to choose these responses than average

People are more likely to label certain types of research activity as “R&D” compared to others examples. When provided with a diverse list of potential examples of R&D, medical research and product development were far more likely to be selected as being “R&D” compared to examples of humanities research.

- **For many people, the term ‘R&D’ primarily evokes consumer tech and large businesses**
- **When prompted in focus groups, people readily slot universities into this picture of the R&D process, but the scale of the university R&D workforce is largely invisible**

People identify universities, large businesses and the national government as the organisations that carry out the most R&D.

In contrast, during our focus groups, businesses were front of mind when people were asked both who conducts and funds R&D. Although universities performed strongly in our prompted survey question, they were rarely cited in focus groups as a place where R&D happens, until a prompt was offered by a facilitator.

- **The majority of people in every UK region think that London carries out more R&D than other parts of the country, but we see a familiarity effect where people tend to say their own region carries out R&D**
- **About a third of people associate R&D with their own region, citing tangible examples such as nearby universities, NHS institutions and businesses**

In our May 2022 poll we asked people to identify the top three regions of the UK where they thought R&D was carried out. London was by far the strongest response and was chosen by 69% of 2,037 respondents, followed by South East England which was chosen by 29% of people.

However, half of people picked their own region out of the list. In our July 2022 poll, we asked those who associated R&D with their region what drive this, and nearby universities, NHS institutions and business were cited as the most common drivers of this connection.

- **Almost half of people have watched a TV show or film about research in the last six months, but almost a fifth haven't engaged in any of a list of 14 typical R&D-related activities during that time period, rising to a quarter of those in socioeconomic group DE**
- **The 18-24 age bracket is a high point for engaging with many of the activities on our list, particularly the more active examples**

Our February 2023 polling asked respondents if they talked about new discoveries and inventions with their friends and families, and more than half agreed that they did. In contrast to broader trends showing that younger people are less engaged with R&D, net agreement with the statement was highest among 25-34 year olds (47%); this is in contrast with groups 55-64 and over 65%, where net agreement was just 5%.

## Benefits of R&D

- In focus groups, people gravitate towards consumer tech as a primary example of R&D's benefits, but are divided on the net benefit these products bring to their lives
- R&D's spillover benefits to the economy, job creation or education were rarely mentioned unprompted. They were well-received when highlighted, but people also felt these types of benefits were less important than the main aim of the research
- However, those who support R&D investment are motivated by the idea that it can create a better world for future generations, and people see R&D as a route towards improved healthcare, a stronger economy, a safer society and being better prepared for the future
- Many people feel like they don't benefit from R&D, especially younger people and those in socioeconomic group DE
- A majority of people feel that R&D benefits some more than others; of those only 24% think that "people on middle incomes" benefit and instead see wealthy people and big businesses as the major winners
- Fears that innovation makes everyday life more expensive, and the benefits it generates are simply unaffordable to many, were expressed in focus groups

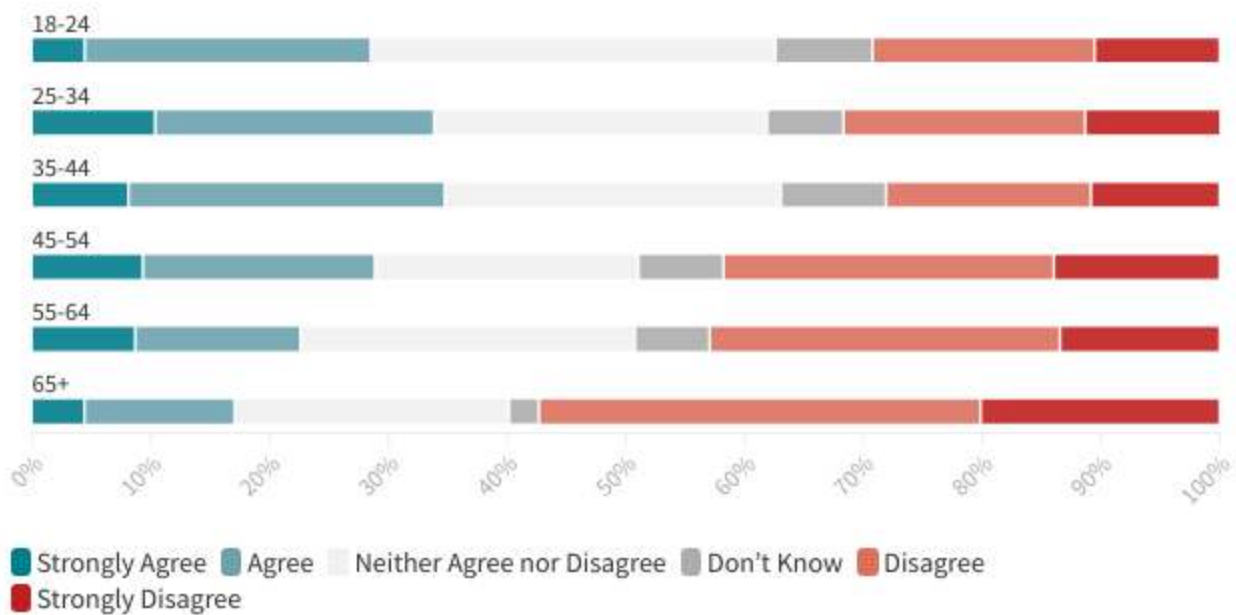
In our May 2022 polling, only 39% of 2,037 respondents felt that R&D benefitted "people like them". This left 61% of people either believing that R&D doesn't benefit people like them, or feeling neutral or unsure about R&D's impacts; this proportion peaked at 72% for those aged 35-44, compared with 43% for those aged 65+..

We found that all groups aged under 44 were less likely to see the benefits of R&D, along with those on lower incomes and those in socioeconomic groups C2 and DE.

More than a third of people in our February 2023 poll said they could think of very few or no ways that investment in R&D improves their lives. Just 9% said they could think of many ways.

In our focus group discussions, participants rarely linked R&D investment to wider spillover benefits to the economy, job creation, or education. These types of benefits were generally well-received once they were highlighted by a facilitator, but participants generally felt these less tangible benefits were less important than the main aim of the research.

## Agreement: "R&D doesn't benefit people like me"



Source: Public First polling for CaSE

Do you agree or disagree with the following: R&D does not benefit people like me. n=2,037

In our July 2022 poll, the sense that R&D benefits some more than others was generally consistent between groups. It tended to be higher for younger respondents (64% for 18-34 year olds) and those in socioeconomic group DE.

Of those who said that R&D benefits some more than others, people cited "big businesses", "wealthy people" and "the national government" as the top beneficiaries. Almost twice as many people (44%) identified "wealthy people" as beneficiaries compared to "people on middle incomes" (24%).

- **Many people want their region to be home to lots of R&D activity, and believe this will generate local jobs, draw inward investment, and also benefit the UK as a whole. Notably, younger people are less likely to say that local R&D activity would generate local jobs or draw inward investment**
- **As many people would support a new research lab being built in their local area as would support a new school or wind farm. This support spans different demographic groups, although it was higher among those in socioeconomic group AB and those with higher levels of formal education attainment**
- **People are divided on where the benefits of R&D should be felt first. Many focus group participants viewed R&D as a collaborative endeavour to fix global problems, while other wanted to focus on tangible impacts that are closer to home, citing the local pride this generates and the personal benefits they could gain**

Some 79% of respondents in North East England, and around three-quarters of people in Northern Ireland and London (76% and 72%, respectively), said it was at least somewhat important for their region to carry out a lot of R&D.

Of these respondents, 71% said they were motivated by the local jobs that R&D could generate, followed by inwards investment in the area (64%) and benefits to the UK as a whole (53%).

Notably, 18-24s were less likely than those aged 65+ to say that R&D would generate new local jobs (60% vs 79%) or that it would bring investment to their area (47% vs 76%). They were equally likely to say it would open up educational opportunities locally (56%).

Almost two-thirds (62%) of those who would support a new local research lab being built said they felt it would benefit the local economy, 60% said it would bring more well-paid jobs to their area. More than half (57%) said they just supported more research being carried out in general, while 56% thought it would bring educational opportunities for local young people.

## Investing in R&D

- In focus group conversations, R&D is primarily viewed as being funded by businesses and public funding for R&D has a low profile
- Where people do identify examples of publicly-funded R&D, they picture R&D studies that are tied very tightly to public services
- Profit-driven R&D elicits a mixed response - some worry about profit as a motivator, but others feel it might accelerate impact or alleviate pressure on public finances
- Overall, the majority of people are neutral about whether private-funding or public-funding for R&D yields better results
- Where R&D is receiving public investment, many people wanted to see clearer evidence of the return on investment taxpayers were getting

In our July 2022 polling, most people (53%) felt that R&D was no better or worse when funded by private companies for profit versus by Government and charities not for profit, with the remaining responses leaning slightly towards the non-profit side. Conservative voters and younger age groups were some of the most likely to prefer private companies conducting the R&D, peaking among 18-24 year olds.

- A majority of the public support the idea of Government investment into R&D, though our data suggests that younger people and those in C2 and DE groups are more sceptical
- Most people (56% of 4,005) want to see politicians pay more attention to science and innovation than they currently do, a view held broadly across different groups
- However, people express concerns about investing public money into R&D rather than prioritising other pressing issues, such as the cost-of-living crisis or the NHS
- R&D is at risk of being labelled a "luxury" in the current economic climate; more than half of people think this is a strong argument for delaying investment

A large majority of the public support Government investment into R&D. In our May 2022 poll, 70% of 2,037 respondents said it was at least somewhat important for the Government to invest in R&D, with the 65+ age group and those in the AB group more likely to support public investment.

A majority of people (56% of 4,005) wanted to see politicians pay more attention to science and innovation than they currently do, while 20% said they were paying the topics the right amount of attention and 7% said they were paying too much attention.

In our July 2022 poll, 24% of people felt that “R&D should not be funded by taxpayers”, compared with 41% of 8,474 respondents who disagreed with that statement. However, with almost a third of people taking a neutral stance, there is a clear risk of net support swinging against the principle of taxpayer funding for R&D. We found similar results in our February 2023 polling, with 25% of 4,005 respondents agreeing with the statement “R&D should not be funded by taxpayers”.

Many focus group participants were concerned about prioritising R&D over other urgent priorities for public money. People spoke about the pressing need to tackle the rising cost of living, or support the struggling NHS, and they felt that it was reasonable for the nation to get its "house in order" first, before investing in R&D.

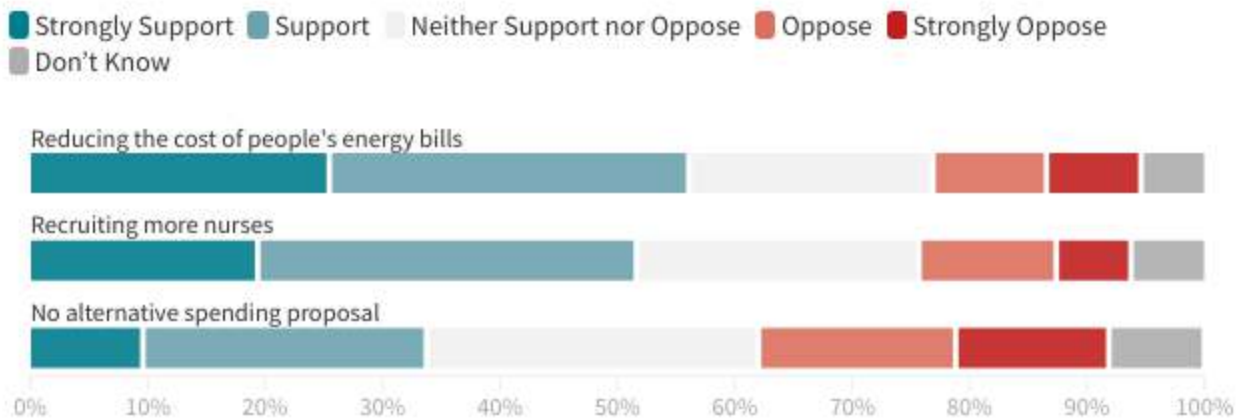
R&D risks being labelled a “luxury” and in our May 2022 polling, 55% of people felt that “Other issues are more pressing at the moment, with people struggling to pay their bills and the economy in a bad way. Funding for luxuries like R&D can wait for another day, when money is less tight” was a strong argument against R&D investment.

- **R&D is not a politically partisan issue and enjoys support across the UK’s political spectrum**
- **But public support for R&D investment is fragile and opinions readily shift when R&D is framed in competition with other pressing priorities**
- **In focus groups, the cost of living crisis loomed large in everyone's minds and some people told us that halving the R&D budget felt like a good choice right now**
- **There are strong indications that support for R&D investment can be boosted by framing it around a highly motivating issue**

Given the option to cut R&D investment in favour of other competing priorities, many people choose to cut the funding. Our May 2022 poll presented a hypothetical Government proposal to immediately halve the R&D budget, with a third of respondents saying they supported this choice. When this cut was framed as freeing up money for hiring nurses or lowering energy bills, an outright majority supported halving the R&D budget.

## Support for halving the R&D budget

Support for cutting the R&D budget increased when tangible alternative priorities were given



Source: Public First polling for CaSE

The Government has pledged to invest £22bn in Research & Development each year. Imagine that the Government proposed halving the amount it was investing in R&D (to £11bn each year), and spending that half of the money on [no issue (n=658)/recruiting more nurses (n=695)/reducing the cost of people's energy bills (n=684)]

- **People's attitudes towards R&D investment can change and in some cases we see a positive shift in people's views towards R&D investment**
- **Exposing people to arguments - both for and against - R&D appeared to improve support for investing in R&D, and an honest and robust discussion about the trade-offs of R&D was well-received in our focus groups**
- **This is an area for greater exploration, for instance through a piece of public dialogue research, but it indicates receptivity to messages and rationales in favour of R&D, if these are delivered in a targeted way**

At the end of the July 2022 survey, 22% of those who initially agreed that R&D should not be funded by taxpayers now said that the Government should increase the amount of public money invested on R&D. A further 43% felt it should be kept at £22bn, which represents a firmly positive outcome for the R&D sector.



## Language and Messages

- **There is no 'silver bullet' term for describing R&D activities that immediately cuts through with all groups, but several of the terms commonly used by the R&D sector feel familiar to people and do not impede support for investment**
- **More informal terms, such as "New Discoveries", were poorly received by most people**
- **Terms including "Science" and "Research and Development" generated positive connotations in the minds of many people, being described as "smart" and "reassuring"**
- **R&D advocates could consider adopting more consistent language when describing what the R&D sector does, to reduce 'terminology clutter' for public audiences**

After using "Research & Development" throughout our May 2022 survey, we asked people how they felt about the use of that term. Some 87% of respondents felt that the term R&D was "very" or "somewhat" clear, and only 10% felt it was unclear. We tested a range of alternative terms, including typical and less commonly used options. Opinions were split, but "innovation" performed strongest among these alternatives.

- **Many people welcomed the chance to discuss R&D when information was provided in a specific, relevant and jargon-free way**
- **Accountability is crucial, and people want to be reassured that money was being invested rather than disappearing into a "black hole"**
- **Pro-R&D arguments tend to feel more compelling to people, and those framed around jobs, education, future generations and life-saving projects are especially compelling**
- **Among anti-R&D messages, the most compelling frame was when R&D was set against other "more pressing issues"**
- **Some abstract messages were effective, but people welcomed the idea of combining abstract benefits with more tangible examples**

Our May 2022 poll asked people to rate the strength of individual arguments. The arguments in favour of R&D performed better than those against R&D, with those focused on healthcare, personal benefit and future generations rated as the strongest forms of argument for investing in R&D. In contrast, framing R&D in terms of “keeping up” with other countries, or arguing that the UK needed to take “calculated risks” proved less compelling.

Among the anti-R&D arguments, the most powerful framing was the idea that R&D is a luxury and “other issues are more pressing at the moment”.

In our February 2023 polling, we posed a series of statements seeking to understand people's appetite for R&D as a national focus. These questions were posed after respondents were told that the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, had declared that he wanted the UK to be the country where “the next great discoveries are made” and where ambitious scientists want to work.

We found that R&D had broad appeal as a national focus, with a majority saying the UK needed to be better at science and innovation (73%), that the UK needed to train more scientists and innovators (79%) and that being good at science and innovation was important for the UK's future (83%). This appeal stretched across the political spectrum, with three-quarters of both Conservative and Labour voters agreeing with all of these statements.

- **Pro-R&D arguments framed around international competition do not resonate strongly with most people**
- **Men, and people in group AB, are more likely to be motivated by aspects of international competition on R&D**
- **Young people are more likely to agree that the UK doesn't need to invest in R&D because it can benefit from the R&D done by other nations instead**
- **Many people in focus groups viewed R&D as an inherently collaborative endeavour, with some labelling competition-based arguments for R&D as “blackmail”**
- **We saw some expressions of national or local pride for R&D that could be built on, but R&D ranked fairly low in people's view of the UK's national strengths**

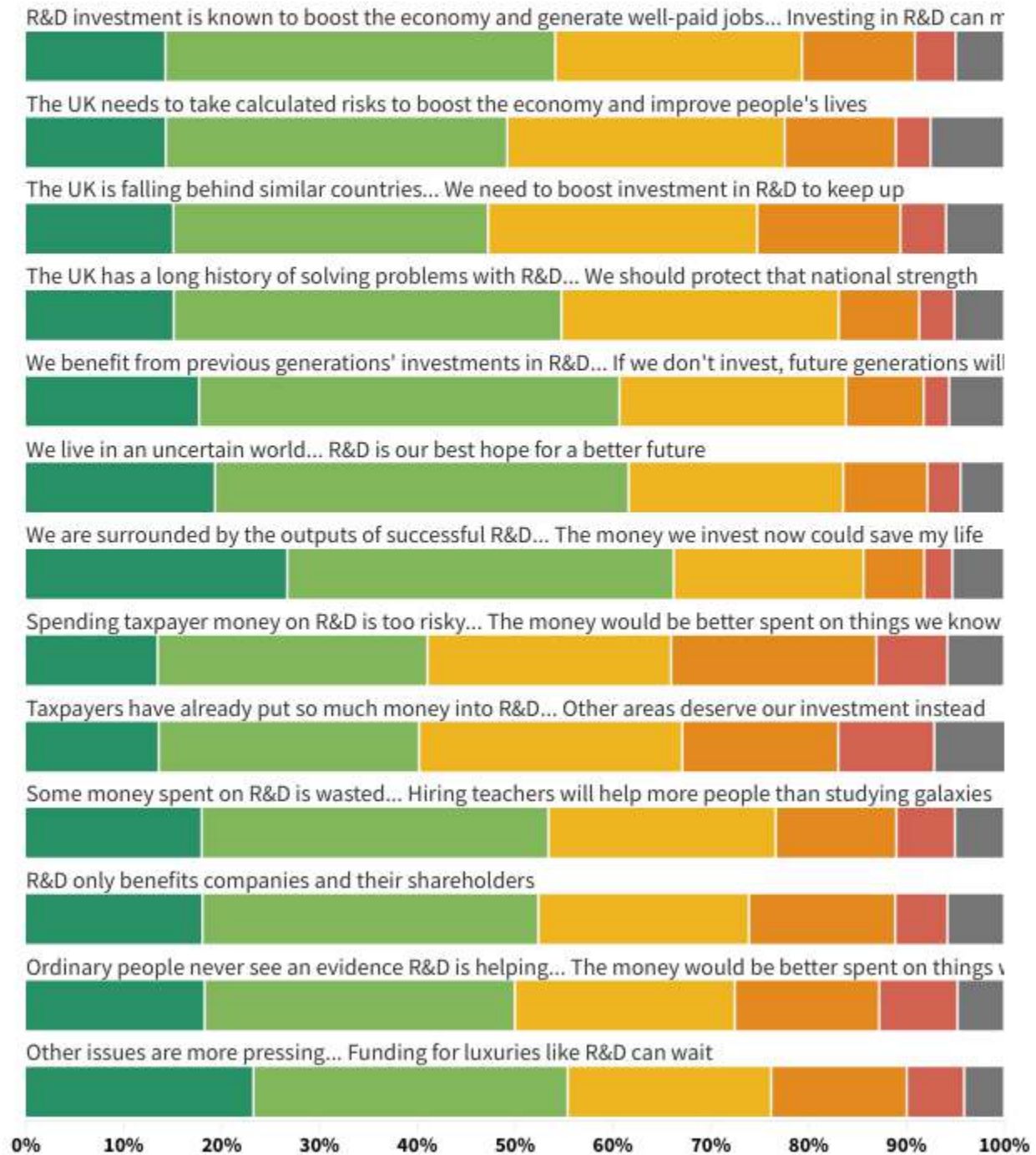
Our May 2022 poll tested the strength of different arguments in favour of R&D investment, including one framed around international comparisons: “The UK is falling behind similar countries such as France and Germany in the amount invested in R&D. We need to boost our investment into R&D so we can keep up.” Some 47% of people felt this was a strong argument, compared with 19% who viewed it as weak. This gave a net score which ranked it as the weakest pro-R&D argument among the broad range we tested.

# Reactions to pro- and anti- R&D arguments

Pro-R&D arguments tended to outperform those against R&D investment

How strong are these arguments? Click bars to show full statement shown

■ A very strong argument 
 ■ A strong argument 
 ■ Neither a strong nor weak argument 
 ■ A weak argument 
 ■ A very weak argument 
 ■ Don't Know



Source: Public First polling for CaSE

How strong are each of the following arguments? Each statement seen by ~1,000 respondents

The majority of respondents did not feel R&D was a competition between countries. There was disinterest – or even active dislike – for arguments framed around international competition in our December 2022 focus groups, with some participants describing such arguments as “blackmail” or “a threat”.

- **The Government’s ‘Science Superpower’ brand has not cut through with the public**

The majority of respondents to our February 2023 polling (65% of 4,005 respondents) said they had never heard the phrase “Science Superpower” before. In contrast, just 12% had heard of it and knew what it meant, while a further 18% had heard of it but didn’t know what it meant.

The new Department for Science, Innovation and technology has said it wants to use R&D to deliver “stronger growth, better jobs and bold new discoveries”. In our February 2023 polling, we used a split sample to gauge people’s support for boosting R&D investment in order to “encourage stronger growth, better jobs or bold new discoveries in Britain” or “make Britain a science superpower”. Respective total support for these statements was 77% and 65%.

When asked what investment in R&D could achieve, only 38% said “making Britain a science superpower”, behind “stronger growth” (60%), “better jobs” (58%), “attracting businesses” (57%) and “bold new discoveries” (52%).

## Messengers

- **The public are conscious of the potential for bias, but still consider voices from within the R&D sector to be well-placed and honest about the level of funding needed from taxpayers for R&D**
- **Research charities, researchers and universities performed especially well as messengers, while business performed less strongly but did cut through with men, those aged 25-34, those in group AB, and among those in the highest income brackets**
- **After seeing several scientific experts in action during the coronavirus pandemic, many people held them in high regard and consider them well-placed to speak about R&D**
- **Politicians, of all stripes, perform poorly as ambassadors for R&D**

Looking at broad groups of potential spokespeople for messages about investing public money into R&D, our polling found more trust in researchers, research charities and universities than politicians, while the picture was mixed for businesses.

Just over half of all respondents trusted each of research charities (54%), researchers (54%) and universities (51%) to be honest about how much Government should invest in R&D. In contrast, just 19% trusted politicians in this context, and 29% trusted business voices.

The coronavirus pandemic came up in multiple focus groups, but was raised consistently in conversations about messengers, with multiple references to the UK Government's televised press conferences. Participants referred to the scientific messengers involved – often by name – and praised their expertise, evidence and perceived honesty, even in challenging context.

Business spokespeople were often mentioned in discussions, and while opinions were mixed – with some people seeing a potential for bias – there was a generally positive attitude towards businesses that were seen to have expertise in R&D.

Political leaders, meanwhile, were described by focus participants as being inherently untrustworthy and unlikely to keep R&D-related promises, with some being sceptical that politicians would support long-term investments given their careers might be over by the time the benefits were seen. This emphasises the need for the sector to establish a vision for R&D that can persist beyond individual governments.

- **About two-thirds of people don't feel well informed about R&D happening in their local area, and a similar proportion would like to hear more about it**
- **People in group AB, and those under 45, were most interested in hearing more about nearby R&D**
- **The public tended to trust people working in R&D in their area to talk about its benefits**

A majority (65% of 8,474) agreed with the statement "I know hardly anything about the research being done in my area", with only 12% disagreeing. Agreement was higher among female respondents (70% agree) and those in group DE (69% agree). Agreement was considerably lower among those who had completed a postgraduate degree.

We also found that a similar proportion (64%) of people wanted to hear more about R&D being done in their area; compared to 10% who didn't. Interest in hearing more was higher among those under 45, and those in group AB.

Our July 2022 poll asked respondents whether they would be interested in seeing or taking part in a variety of activities to find out more about the R&D happening in their area. Seeing articles in local newspapers was the most popular option (47% of respondents), followed by participating in a local research study (32%), and going to open days at local research institutions (32%) or universities (29%).

# Issues

- **People are concerned about the cost of living, the sustainability of the NHS and the impacts of climate change**
- **For lots of people, the rising cost of living is the preeminent issue, and when asked to describe their vision of a stronger economy people focussed on very tangible impacts such as higher wages, stable electricity bills and food availability**

Our May 2022 poll asked which issues respondents felt were most immediately important; 74% said cost of living, followed by the state of the economy (42%) and the quality of the NHS (37%). When asked which issues they felt would become more important over the next decade, cost of living was again the main concern (selected by 55%), followed by the quality of the NHS (37%), state of the economy (34%) and threat of climate change (33%).

- **The public tends to feel that quality of life is better now than 50 years ago, but that things are currently changing for the worse**
- **People are evenly split on whether the UK should focus on solving problems now, or invest for the future**
- **People are divided on their attitudes towards risk-taking, but most believed the UK should use new and creative ways to solve its problems**

There was a fairly even split in attitudes towards risk-taking among respondents to our July 2022 poll, with 56% believing that to make things better in the UK "we need to take risks", and 44% believing that "we cannot afford to take risks". We also saw appetite for the UK to use new and creative ways to solve its problem (73%), rather than "sticking to existing solutions we know work" (27%). We repeated this question in our February 2023 polls and found very similar results.

- **R&D is seen as a useful tool for tackling society's problems, but there's scope to strengthen that link**
- **Relating R&D to tangible issues can be a powerful motivator of support , especially among audiences under the age of 45**
- **The power of different issues to motivate people differs across demographic groups, meaning that linkages must be carefully targeted**

- **Opinions on R&D's inherent time-lag differed - many focus group participants wanted to see outcomes sooner, but some said that complex problems cannot be solved overnight**
- **There's appetite to hear about R&D's long-term benefits and the value to future generations, if this still acknowledges the pressing urgency of current problems**

At least a third of respondents across both our May 2022 and February 2023 polling felt that R&D had an essential role in tackling climate change and improving the quality of the NHS, and more than half of respondents felt that R&D was either essential or important for addressing the cost of living.

In our May 2022 poll, we asked participants whether they saw a role for R&D in addressing various issues. More than a third of respondents felt R&D had an essential role in tackling climate change and improving the quality of the NHS, and more than half of respondents felt that R&D was either essential or important for addressing the state of the economy, the cost of living, the state of Britain's armed forces, the quality and cost of public transport, the threat of terrorism, supporting people in old age, and the quality of and access to schools, colleges and universities.



On Twitter @sciencecampaign #DiscoveryDecade  
[www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/public-opinion](http://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/public-opinion)

Contact: [info@sciencecampaign.org.uk](mailto:info@sciencecampaign.org.uk)

This work was supported by the Wellcome Trust [222853/Z/21/Z]