

R&D in Local Communities

Participants

- Anglia Ruskin University Peterborough
- Francis Crick Institute
- Imperial College London
- MSD
- Wellcome Connecting Science, Wellcome Genome Campus

Introduction

CaSE's Discovery Decade project aims to create a more outward-facing vision for R&D in the UK. By helping R&D organisations and advocates to connect with a broader base of public supporters, we can ensure that R&D investment remains a political priority.

We're working closely with organisations across the R&D sector, including through a series of targeted workshops, to collate and share what's already known about reaching public audiences.

Workshop aim

To understand how new R&D campuses, institutes and developments can connect with the residents and communities on their doorstep.

What's working?

Public R&D investment is on track to roughly double, and we can expect a comparable expansion in R&D's physical footprint across the UK. New R&D campuses and developments can bring benefits like employment to their immediate local community and provide a fresh opportunity to engage different public audiences.

Engagement works best when institutions work with the local community from the outset. **Anglia Ruskin University's new campus in Peterborough**, which opened in 2022, has involved local employers and community groups from the start. **The Francis Crick Institute**, built in a residential area in London and opened in 2016, identified the local community as a priority audience from the start. It found that working with community advocates and local ambassadors was key to building strong relationships.

Focusing on the challenges facing local residents or issues that unite a community can be highly effective at building engagement. **Imperial College London's** campus in the White City Innovation District, has found that research projects on air quality have been a powerful way to connect with residents.

"The coding programme has been a huge success. Parents instantly recognised the potential it could have for their kids to get better opportunities."

Skills, education and careers were common points of connection, with activities to highlight mutual benefit to the local community, including via schools. **The Francis Crick Institute** aims to engage every state school student in its local borough each year. Organisations should also consider how to prioritise engagement, especially in areas with 'high science capital', where people are more likely to be aware of and engage with R&D. Recognising the high science capital among its immediate neighbours, the **Wellcome Connecting Science** team at the Wellcome Genome Campus near Cambridge chose to focus their public engagement on schools further afield.

What's challenging?

Public support is a major challenge for R&D institutes establishing a new footprint in a community. Large, expensive-looking buildings can be physically intimidating and organisations have a responsibility to demonstrate how they fit into and enrich their local area. Similarly, organisations benefit when they show how the R&D happening in a community connects with research activities across the UK and the world.

There are also differences between private and public sector investment. MSD, which is building a new Discovery Centre in King's Cross, London, pointed out that pharmaceutical companies operate from a very different baseline of public perception compared to public sector institutes. Engagement activities need to recognise this, and focus on the benefits that private investment specifically can bring to local areas.

Despite progress in recent years, there needs to be greater awareness of the value of outreach among research staff, with more incentives, resourcing and recognition for this work. Public engagement should be seen as a core part of the research process by individual researchers, and something that's vital to the future of public support and investment in R&D.

Another challenge recognised by participants was the persistent, often unhelpful, stereotypes of who works in research. There is also a risk of the sector getting trapped in a cycle where the public expects to hear from lab-coated scientists, which means the media and other partners request them as spokespeople. This can limit the ability of R&D organisations to fully represent the diversity of roles and routes into research.

"There's far more interest in us using "traditional" scientists as spokespeople... But to inspire people in local communities, you have to show the breadth of opportunities."

What's next?

- **New and expanding R&D institutions should focus on the career opportunities they are creating, including any industry relationships and apprenticeship pathways.** Our workshop reinforced that tangible and accessible job opportunities are a powerful motivator of support, especially when communicated to parents and young people via local schools.
- **Institutions should increase their use of messages and messengers that are relevant to their audiences.** Relating the institution's work back to the local area and local issues, recognising the experience of residents and understanding what language resonates will help keep messaging relatable. Broadening the pool of messengers will demonstrate the diversity of research careers available.
- **Conversations with local communities should be ongoing, upfront and honest.** Accommodating a new or expanded institute in an area requires patience and willingness on both sides. The institute needs to recognise any preconceptions the public may have and address these head-on; being overly positive can unintentionally harden scepticism.