

R&D in Net Zero Conversations

Participants

- Cambridge Zero
- Edinburgh Science Festival
- Glasgow Science Centre
- Johnson Matthey
- Open University
- Zero Waste Scotland

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 R&D has been used to engage the public on Net Zero, and explore how climate advocates have grown public awareness of, and support for, the transition to Net Zero.

What's working?

The transition to Net Zero is an example of a political and societal vision that has emerged over decades, with public awareness broadening substantially in recent years.

Young people are at the heart of this movement. Workshop participants reflected that younger generations have been exposed to more messages on climate change, generating a stronger demand for action. **Johnson Matthey** commented that, from visiting schools, primary age children were particularly engaged. Net Zero advocates recognise the importance of maintaining this interest as they grow up.

Adults were often seen as "playing catch up" to younger people and – as noted by **Cambridge Zero** – information about climate change is often passed from child to parent. This emphasises the role of educators as a connection point to R&D, not just for the young people they work with, but also their families.

"It's an exciting atmosphere to create an emotional link; to encourage young people to go further in science education and learning."

In 2021, Glasgow hosted COP26 and this high-profile moment created the opportunity to engage audiences across the city, including the communities around the event itself. **Glasgow Science Centre** was at the heart of such engagement, and found that bringing together researchers and people with lived experience of climate change, such as Inuit communities, was effective at engaging different audiences. Other success factors included speaking with honesty and balancing lighter touch content with in-depth science.

Working in partnership with the public is crucial to topics like Net Zero. **The Open University** noted the need to build R&D around the concerns of the public from the outset, while **Zero Waste Scotland** emphasised that communities taking part in research need to feel ownership and have their contributions recognised. The power of conversations that bring together businesses, scientists and policymakers was also highlighted – including organisations that understand the need for change, such as major investors and pension funds.

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What's challenging?

Engaging with climate change was likened to a journey, and advocates were advised to accept that different audiences will be at different points in the process. Messages need to be tailored to the outcomes people are specifically seeking from their engagement – from information to ideas for action. **Glasgow Science Centre** said that during COP26 communities engaged with the Centre because they felt the team listened to them and built relationships accordingly.

A further consideration is how to maintain hope and agency among audiences, especially when the scale and urgency of action needed could provoke despondency, rather than a desire to engage. Participants agreed that R&D needed to offer a hopeful and inspiring narrative, rather than reinforce “doom and gloom” around this topic.

“Changing perceptions isn’t about finding a silver bullet. It’s graft, and it’s day in, day out.”

Terminology has also evolved. ‘Net Zero’ emerged as a vision that could unite different supporter groups and provide clarity for the wider public, but participants acknowledged that the term might feel complicated or abstract. As public awareness has evolved, language must too. The **Edinburgh Science Festival** noted ideas that focused on smaller, practical messages or actions, such as “we want to remove petrol in cars” or “eat less meat; it’s healthier”.

Participants wanted to strengthen their engagement with underserved audiences, including refugee communities and BAME audiences. Organisations were tackling this by removing cost barriers for communities to engage with R&D and working with local facilitators and ensuring genuine co-design opportunities. It is vital that communities feel part of R&D, rather than that R&D is being applied to them.

What's next?

- **Evolve terminology to keep pace with changing public perceptions.** Advocates must respond to changing public attitudes and needs, and adapt the language of their engagement to remain relevant to their audiences.
- **Provide opportunities for genuine dialogue and co-creation.** Advocates must listen to their audiences and provide meaningful opportunities for communities to decide on, and shape, the engagement they want.
- **Work together to capitalise on high-profile moments in public life.** Major events like COP26 offer a chance to champion R&D’s role, and to establish long-term partnerships with advocates across different sectors. ‘Unlikely coalitions’ of advocates can help convey the breadth of support for an issue such as R&D.
- **Empower younger generations to reach adults.** Young people can help channel messages into families and are vocal, passionate advocates. Organisations should engage directly with younger people, in partnership with educators and youth leaders.