



Executive Summary

Public Attitudes to R&D 2025

November 2025

Foreword

When Campaign for Science and Engineering first began exploring public attitudes to research and development (R&D) in 2019, we didn't know exactly where we would end up. We hoped the work would provoke discussion, spark ideas and spur people to think differently about R&D advocacy. And indeed, it has been heartening to see the engagement, interest and discussions the work has driven.

Six years on, the world has changed significantly. Our latest study - Public Attitudes to R&D 2025 - demonstrates the continued need to make R&D matter to more people.

Many of the findings are positive. Most people support investment in R&D and see it as a tool to solve problems; they want to hear more, and support local R&D projects.

But the overriding message is one of caution. Because underneath these positives is another story; one where many people struggle to think of ways R&D benefits them or their families, or to connect it with the issues that matter most to them now. Such weak connections won't create the public champions our sector needs.

Across successive governments, UK R&D has benefitted from a broad political consensus. The fundamental need for R&D hasn't really been in question, the debate was how and when to support it. But if this political support fractures, we will need more than shallow public support to see our sector through.

We can't predict the future, but we can prepare for it. We must not be complacent; instead, we must act now to strengthen the foundations of public support.

We know this is possible: many across the R&D community are expert in building connections with the public. And our research provides evidence to steer this work, emphasising the need to focus on purpose, place and people.

We hope you will join CaSE in taking action to make R&D more human and more local.



Dr Rebecca Hill
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Dr Ben Bleasdale
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The results of this study provide a fascinating and comprehensive insight into the UK public's views on R&D. The research reveals support for public investment in R&D and an enthusiasm rooted in an appreciation of the need for society to grow and adapt to the demands of an ever-changing world.

Yet the findings also point to challenges. Awareness of R&D and the benefits it brings varies greatly. Some know what R&D is and can feel the benefits. Others, particularly those who feel the nation is in decline or that their communities are being left behind, feel largely disconnected.

R&D can feel distant, intangible and undertaken, in the words of one focus group participant, "in faceless buildings off the M4".

How, then, should the R&D sector respond? The research offers some clear insights.

- Firstly, R&D must become more tangible. It needs to showcase specific, real-world examples that focus on addressing a problem or priority.
- Secondly, R&D needs to get local. Few people are aware of the R&D activities taking place in their own communities, yet there is evident curiosity and appetite to learn more. The data shows a strong link between increased local awareness of R&D and greater engagement, connection, and support for enhanced funding for the sector.
- Finally, R&D must embrace storytelling. We must collectively recognise, however reluctantly, that statistics and rational argument alone are insufficient. R&D needs to connect emotionally and demonstrate public benefits - to individuals, to communities, and to society at large.

In the current zeitgeist of pessimism and gloom, R&D needs to articulate how it can be a positive part of the solution.



Philip Downing
Director, Icaro

Introduction

CaSE works to champion research and development (R&D) as a political and societal priority that can transform lives and livelihoods. R&D underpins so much of UK society; it tackles major societal challenges, helps grow our economy and creates jobs and opportunities for people of all ages.

But R&D can only deliver these impacts if policymakers continue to make supportive decisions, which in the long-term requires the public's buy-in. If we cannot demonstrate to the public the benefits of supporting R&D, especially in times of crisis, we will struggle to keep policymakers on side. The support of both is essential for the sector's ongoing success.

Our new landmark study, CaSE Public Attitudes to R&D 2025, takes in the views of more than 8,000 UK adults through nationally representative polling, focus groups and interviews. It explores how they think and feel about R&D, its benefits and its role in their lives. It is the first step to creating a large and robust data series that tracks attitudes to R&D as a political issue over time, ensuring our sector can monitor and respond to trends and risks. The insights will also identify ways we can strengthen the connection between the R&D community and the public, boosting public support and helping to bolster political support.

Since 2021, CaSE has run a major public opinion programme that aims to make R&D matter to more people. We want to help R&D advocates start from the evidence; our research helps challenge assumptions, create

compelling narratives and inform effective action. It is vital we monitor and respond to changes in those attitudes.

Supported by a grant from Wellcome, we have set up a research study that we will repeat every three years to create a long-term dataset full of useful and actionable information for the sector.

Each study will combine large-scale polling with qualitative research, with the themes, topics and questions informed by in-depth engagement with R&D advocates across disciplines and sectors. This research explores baseline awareness and instinctive attitudes to benefits and investment, along with R&D's role in solving problems and strengthening places.

The survey has 50 questions and was taken by a nationally representative sample of 8,000 UK adults. Qualitative research comprised eight focus groups across the UK and in-depth interviews with 20 individuals. This report outlines the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative research, and – wherever possible – compares these with findings from CaSE's public opinion research between 2022-24.

CaSE's public opinion research is supported by a consortium of research agencies, with questionnaire design, qualitative research and reporting led by a team from Icaro, and quantitative fieldwork delivered by Deltapoll.

Methods

The research was led by Icaro and adopted a mixed methods approach. Full methods can be found at the end of the report.

Quantitative research

A large-scale survey of 8,000 UK adults recruited through proprietary online panels. Quota targets were set on: region, age and gender (interlocked within region) and ethnicity to ensure that the sample reflects the known profile of the UK population on these demographic criteria. The survey took place online, across 11-21 July 2025.

Qualitative research

Eight in-person focus groups were carried out across the UK, with 64 participants. Supplementary research involved follow-up in-depth interviews with 12 participants with a moderator, and follow-up video interviews where 12 participants each answered six questions through a dedicated research app called Indeemo.

Socioeconomic group

Our research uses the term socioeconomic group, which describes the types of job someone does and 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

Implications and priority actions

For decades, UK R&D has benefitted from broad cross-party political buy-in, with debate largely confined to how and when to support the sector. But we know political support can easily fracture. If this happens, we will need public champions, which can only be created with widespread and deep public support.

The results of CaSE Public Attitudes to R&D 2025 suggest that public support is broad but shallow. Although there is support for R&D investment, society's connection to the people, processes and places associated with R&D is weak, and many struggle to see or feel the benefits it brings.

As a sector, we must work harder to move the public's connection with the R&D community – from a vague sense of approval, towards a stronger relationship.

Reflecting on the results of our latest study and what they might mean for the R&D sector, CaSE has identified a set of overarching themes and priority actions.

There is a sense of pessimism in the UK and the public's priorities are evolving

A majority say the UK is a country in decline, with not enough opportunities for young people to get ahead in life, and not even four in ten are optimistic things will get better. The public's three highest priorities – improving the NHS, the cost of living and growing the economy – remain consistent with previous polls. However, concerns about climate change are falling down the public's list of priorities, while crime and immigration are rising. The R&D sector must consider how to remain relevant amid these shifting priorities.

Awareness of R&D is broadly good but knowledge of the breadth and depth of the sector is weaker

Four in ten say they have heard of R&D and know what it means, rising to 82% when "research and development" is spelled out in full, and just under half (47%) say they would be confident to explain what R&D is to their friends and family. However, the people, processes and places linked to R&D – and the range of problems it tackles – seem opaque. The public initially links R&D to mainly medicines and technology, and universities are seen primarily as education institutions rather than centres of research. There is more to do to demonstrate the scale of the research workforce and champion the breadth and depth of R&D in the UK.

The public feels disconnected from R&D and its benefits on both a national and local level

Just 29% feel a connection or personal interest in R&D, almost half had done none of a list of R&D related activities, such as watching a TV programme or visiting a science museum, in the past year, and few focus group participants could name examples of local R&D. Meanwhile, less than a third can immediately think of lots of ways R&D benefits the UK (29%) or their region (22%), falling to just 18% when asked about their local area or them and their family. Qualitative research shows that these benefits feel vague and hard to articulate, especially on a personal level, and some describe R&D as making life easier but not necessarily better.

Neither do the public necessarily see R&D's role in their highest priority issues. Although 79% think R&D has an important or essential role to play in improving the NHS, only around half feel this way about tackling the cost of living or reducing crime. The disconnect between the realities of people's lives and their perceptions of R&D's role in society will be the major barrier to gaining public support.

Shallow connections weaken public support for R&D - this is a risk for political buy-in

On the face of it there are high levels of support for investment, with 88% agreeing it is important for the Government to invest in R&D. But the public's lack of connection to R&D and its benefits means this support is fragile. We cannot assume that the public will continue to back investment into something that doesn't feel tangible, and whose benefits they don't personally see or feel in their lives. Moreover, we cannot expect the public to advocate for something they don't feel an emotional connection to – especially at times of crisis or financial pressure. Political support can quickly wane and, if it does, we cannot expect an outcry from the public.

Place, purpose and involvement remain the most powerful connection points

A majority support a new R&D laboratory or science museum being built in their area and can easily identify the benefits of local R&D to the local economy and job market. And, although awareness of local R&D was low (74% said they know nothing or hardly anything about R&D being done in their area), some 70% said they would like to hear more from researchers about R&D in their area. Qualitative research consistently showed high levels of pride and interest in examples of local R&D.

The public want to understand the purpose of R&D, but the people, processes and places associated with it are opaque. The sector can, and should, tell better stories about how R&D – and the full range of people who deliver it – are solving the problems people care about; it is easier to connect with societal benefits than profit margins.

Meanwhile, there is strong support for public involvement in decision-making about R&D investment and interest in participating in research. The role that participation can play in providing the public with a base of familiarity and trust in the R&D sector's work must not be undervalued.

We cannot be complacent and need to act now – but we are not starting from scratch

Since CaSE ran its first public attitudes study, the nature of UK politics has changed. In this shifting landscape there is a risk that cross-party political support for R&D breaks down – or even that hostility towards R&D or the organisations delivering it is seen as politically advantageous. The sector cannot afford to wait.

However, we are not starting from zero. We can build on the public's broad awareness and instinctive support, and we benefit from high levels of trust in R&D sector voices to talk about both R&D and R&D investment. We know that those with stronger connections feel more positively about R&D, and so our focus must be on building those relationships. Neither should we shy away from conversations about risk, time lags or funding for discovery research; our study demonstrates these are readily accepted by the public when approached transparently.

The sector holds a wealth of expertise in building lasting connections with the public, but communication, engagement and involvement are time consuming and costly to do ethically and effectively. We must not be complacent about what is needed to create deeper and more trusted connections with the public. There is a risk that immediate pressures will hinder this work, ultimately eroding the sector's long-term financial outlook.

Implications and priority actions

Priorities for the next three years

The R&D sector must not delay action. We have identified nine priorities to collectively work towards over the next three years to position our sector for the future.

- **Act collaboratively and with urgency** to develop more coherent and compelling narratives about R&D's role in society.
- **Make R&D feel more human and more local** by opening up the processes and places associated with R&D, to help build and maintain trust.
- **Demonstrate R&D's relevance to priority issues** by showing that our sector is helping to tackle the issues that matter most to the public now.
- **Foreground the breadth and scale of the R&D workforce** to highlight their contribution not just to research itself, but also to local communities.
- **Bring a sense of pride and optimism** to the public, recognising the general sense of public pessimism and offering R&D as a route forward.
- **Ensure sustained commitments to communication, engagement and involvement** through long-term, sufficient resourcing – including funding, time and training – and strong leadership from R&D leaders and organisations.
- **Make politicians advocates not adversaries** by equipping them with the evidence, examples and confidence to talk to the public about R&D on the doorstep.
- **Trial and evaluate the impact of local engagement** through qualitative and quantitative research and the creation of evidence that maps R&D activities at a local level, seizing existing opportunities to do so.
- **Collectively map resources on public attitudes** across the sector to help identify opportunities to collaborate and evidence gaps to be filled.

We urge everyone to consider this study's findings and its implications for both their own work and that of the sector. CaSE will be doing the same.

This study will inform our future work, identifying areas that require further exploration and opportunities to collaboratively turn insights into action. Throughout, we will continue to advocate for the changes needed to build a strong R&D system that benefits the lives and livelihoods of people across society.

Results summary

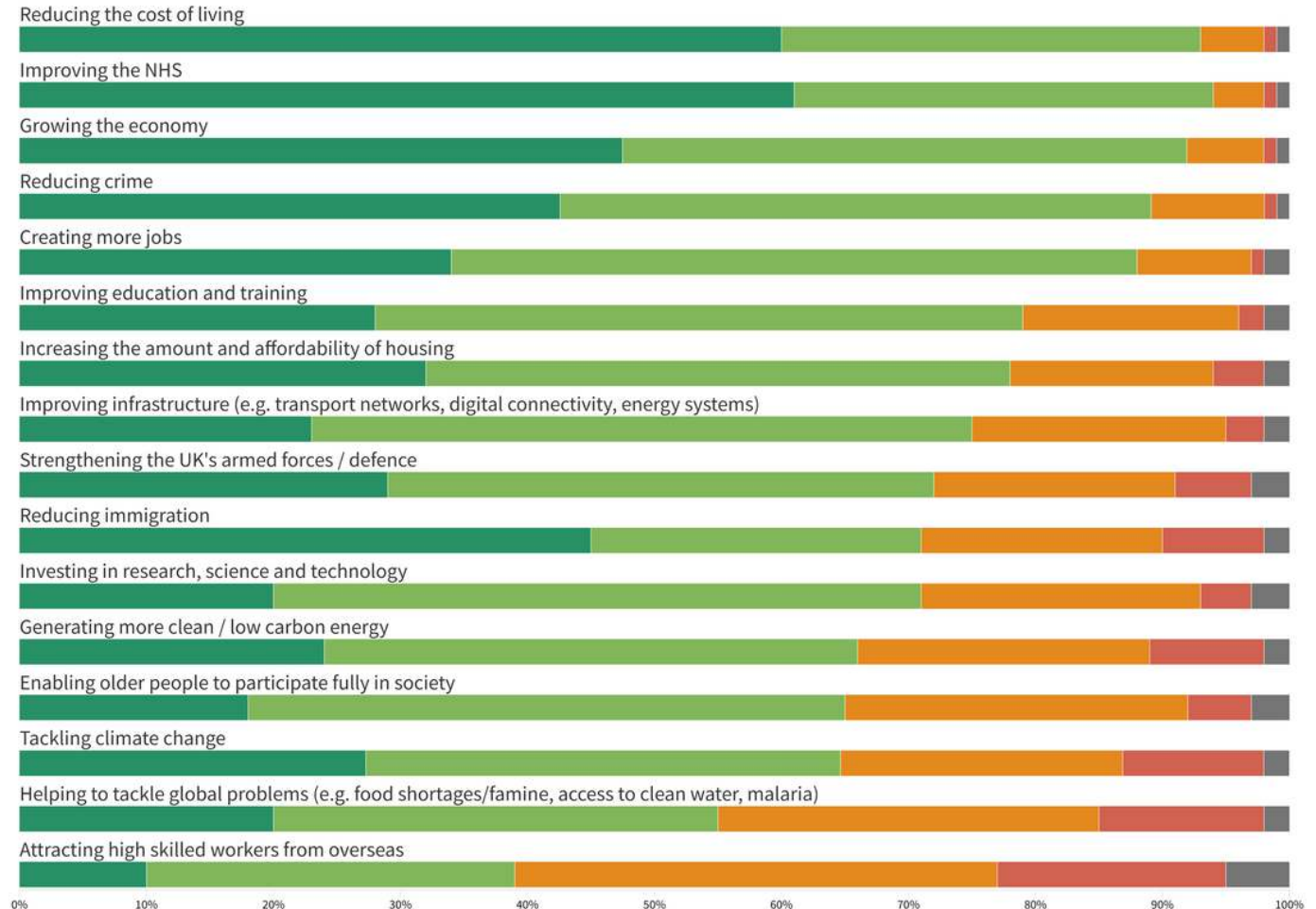
This section summarises the findings from Public Attitudes to R&D 2025 by theme, including short comparisons with CaSE's previous public opinion research findings. The section ends with a summary of notable differences within demographic groups, and by vote intention and outlooks. Further details and data visualisations can be found throughout the report and on our website.

Priorities and outlooks

- There is an overall sense of pessimism among the public, with 62% agreeing that the UK is in decline and just 39% saying they are optimistic things will get better.
- Local sentiment was more positive, with 39% saying their area was thriving or doing fairly well compared to 25% saying it is doing fairly badly or falling behind.
- The top three priorities for the UK public were improving the NHS, tackling the cost of living and growing the economy.
- Immigration was a prominent issue, ranking fourth by highest priority but falling to tenth on highest priority/priority.
- Investing in research, science and technology was seen as a priority by 71%, including 20% who identified it as a highest priority.
- Compared with CaSE research since 2022, the top three priorities remain consistent, but there appears to be more concerns about immigration.

What are the priority issues for the public?

■ Highest priority ■ Priority ■ Lower priority ■ Not a priority at all ■ Don't know / no view



Source: Deltapoll and Icaro polling for CaSE • July 2025
How much of a priority do you think the following should be for the UK? n=8,000

Results summary

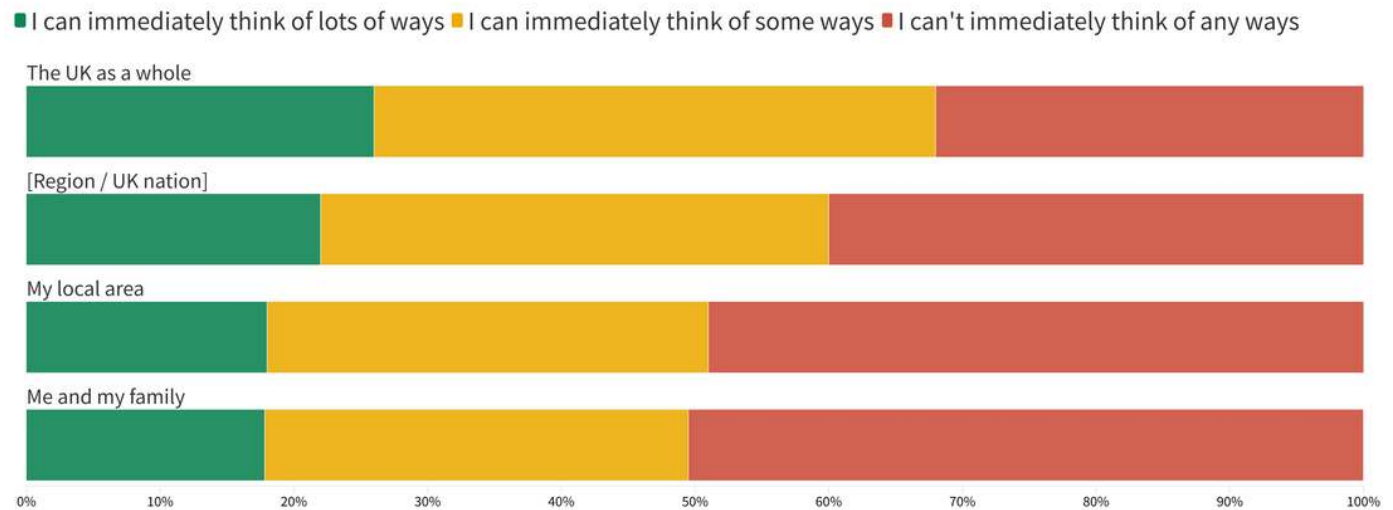
Awareness and understanding of R&D

- Some 40% said they had heard of the term “R&D” and know what it means, rising to 82% when “research and development” is spelled out in full.
- Initial associations with R&D tended to focus on consumer technologies and medical advances, rather than the arts or humanities. Prompting with a wider definition allowed the public to consider R&D’s role in delivering social benefits.
- R&D was most often associated with the private sector in focus groups, with universities rarely front of mind and seen primarily as education institutions. The role of universities is more likely to be recognised when the public are prompted.
- The public struggle to understand the scale of the R&D workforce and, although viewed favourably, most do not consider researchers to be “like them” and stereotypes persist.
- The awareness levels and associations with R&D seen in this study are very consistent with previous CaSE research.

Benefits of R&D

- Less than a third could immediately think of lots of ways R&D benefits the UK (29%) or their region (22%), falling to just 18% when asked about their local area or them and their family.
- However, 80% said that it was at least somewhat important that R&D delivers benefits for them and their family.
- Only around four in ten (41%) said that R&D was relevant to their life, and just 29% said they feel connected with R&D.
- Around half (45%) said that R&D benefits some in the UK more than others, with the main beneficiaries seen to be the wealthy or elite and the private sector.
- Some 43% said that R&D happens much more in some areas of the UK than others, and 69% think that ensuring that R&D is spread evenly across the UK should be a Government priority.
- Two in three (67%) agreed R&D should be a tool to solve society’s problems, but there was a disconnect between some of the public’s priority issues and R&D’s perceived role in addressing them.
- The intangibility of R&D’s benefits is consistent with previous CaSE research, as is the finding that the public think R&D should be used as a tool to solve problems.

To what extent can the public think of ways that R&D benefits different people and parts of the UK?



Source: Deltapoll and Icaro polling for CaSE • July 2025

To what extent can you immediately think of ways that R&D activity undertaken in the UK benefits each of the following? n=8,000

R&D and place

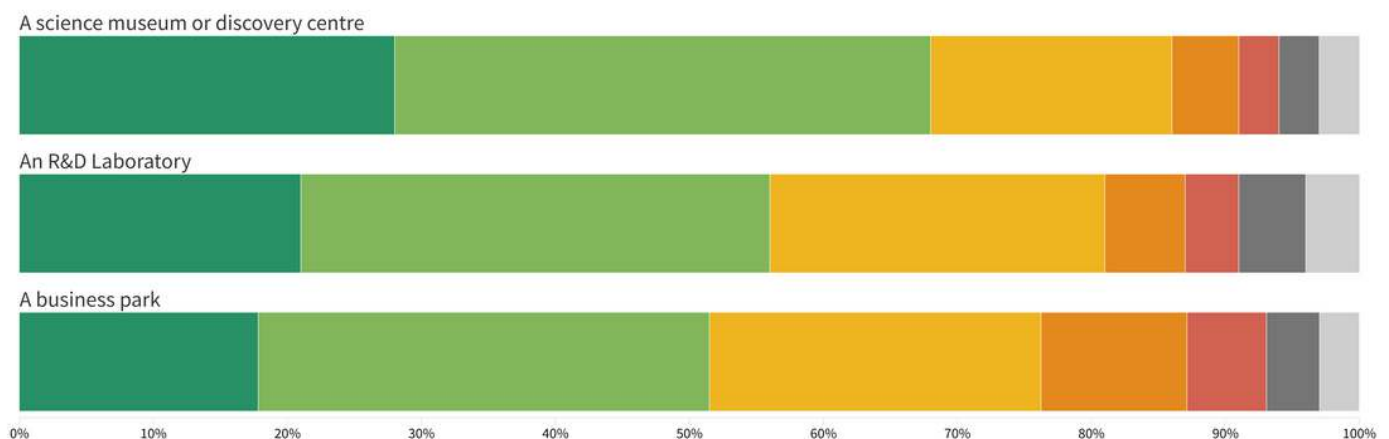
- A majority of around seven in ten said they feel a connection to each of their area, their town or city and UK region.
- Almost three quarters (74%) said they knew hardly anything or nothing about R&D in their local area, but 70% agreed they would like to hear more.
- In focus groups, few could give examples of local R&D, but when provided they were well received by a strong majority.
- More than four in five (83%) could identify potential benefits from more local R&D activity, most notably growing the local economy, creating more opportunities for young people in the area and bringing well paid jobs.
- Some 56% would support a new R&D laboratory in their local area, while 68% would support a new science museum or discovery centre. In focus groups, participants demonstrated a genuine appetite and excitement for both.
- Just 17% think that the UK is a world leader in R&D, but 46% said that this should be the UK's aim.
- These findings support previous CaSE research that place is a strong connection point. Responses on local awareness, appetite and perceived benefits of local R&D are very similar, although support for an R&D lab being built in their area has dropped slightly.

Investing in R&D

- Some 88% said it was at least somewhat important for the Government to invest money into R&D, and 71% think the Government should either increase or maintain levels of R&D investment.
- Time lags, risk and the trade-offs of investing in R&D are not an insurmountable barrier to public support, but they do concern around a quarter of the public.
- If there was extra money to invest in R&D, a majority (86%) said that new medicines and treatments should be a priority, followed by cleaner energy sources (72%).
- More than seven in ten (71%) agreed that the private sector has an important role to play in UK R&D, although focus groups demonstrated some concerns about the profit-driven motivations of business R&D.
- Half of people favoured an even mix of fundamental and applied research, after which there was a modest skew towards the latter.
- Levels of support for investment in R&D, along with attitudes to risk and time lags, and appetite for spending taxpayers' money on R&D are comparable with previous CaSE research.

How much support is there for the building of R&D facilities locally?

■ Strongly support ■ Support ■ Neither support nor oppose ■ Oppose ■ Strongly oppose ■ Not sure ■ No view



Results summary

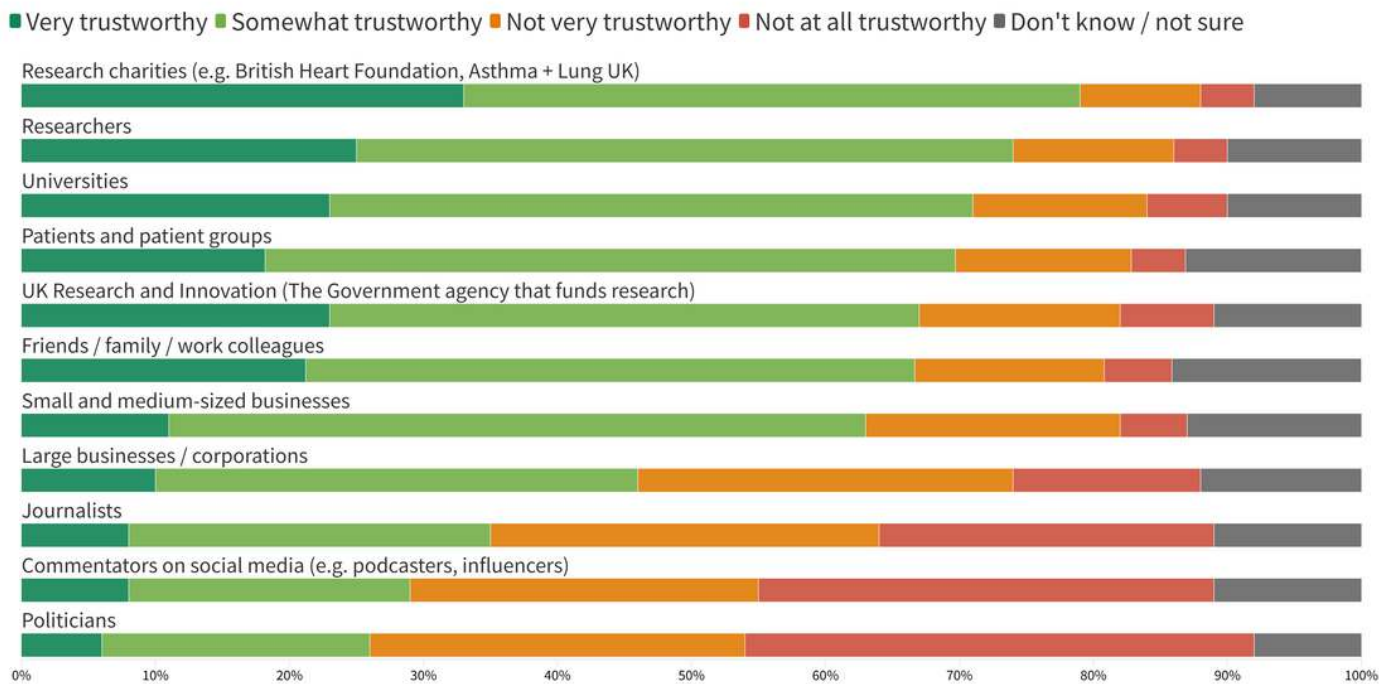
Engagement and involvement in R&D

- Just over half of the public (54%) have done at least one of a list of R&D activities in the past 12 months, but more than seven in ten (72%) would like to do at least one in the next 12 months, including 37% who would like to visit a science museum.
- There are high levels of support for greater transparency and public involvement in R&D. Some 80% agreed that the public needs to know more about how taxpayers' money is used for R&D, and 77% said that researchers should engage more with the public about the social and ethical implications of their research.
- Many stated a personal interest in participating in research studies (46%), using lived experiences and knowledge to help researchers identify research topics and design research studies (41%) and contributing to decisions about R&D funding or policies (26%).
- The qualitative research emphasised interest in R&D institutions engaging more with communities and schools, and making more use of traditional, local and social media.
- Many of the questions in this section were being asked for the first time, and so direct comparisons cannot be drawn.

Trust

- A large majority said that they would trust information about R&D from research charities (84%), researchers (81%) and universities (77%).
- There are high levels of trust in R&D voices to talk about how much money the Government should invest in R&D, at 80% for research charities, 74% for researchers and 72% for universities.
- Across both trust questions, the least trusted groups were politicians, commentators on social media and journalists.
- The qualitative research emphasised the importance of the public hearing from experts and people who reflected them or their communities.
- Compared with previous CaSE research, this study suggests higher levels of trust in R&D sector voices, but the overall ranking of messengers is comparable to previous studies.

How trusted are different groups to talk about how much the Government should invest in R&D?



Source: Deltapoll and Icaro polling for CaSE • July 2025

To what extent would you trust the following to be honest about how much money the UK Government should invest in R&D? n=8,000

Demographic differences

Alongside UK-wide results, this report highlights differences between demographic groups, regions, voting intention and the way respondents answered other questions.

The most notable demographic differentiators were socioeconomic group and level of formal education, with gender being a consistent, but less strong trend. Those in group DE, with lower levels of formal education and women tended to feel less connected and less positive towards R&D. These trends are consistent across the survey, with examples highlighted below.

- **Socioeconomic group:** Those in group AB were more likely than those in group DE to think of at least some ways R&D benefits them or their family (65% compared with 38%); to support an R&D laboratory being built locally (72% compared with 44%); and to have done at least one R&D related activity in the past 12 months (71% compared with 39%).
- **Education:** Postgraduates were more likely than those with GCSE/O levels to think of lots of ways R&D benefits them or their family (75% compared with 36%); to think the UK should aim to be a world leader in R&D (63% compared with 35%); and to have done at least one R&D related activity in the past 12 months (81% compared with 36%).
- **Gender:** Men were more likely than women to feel a connection or personal interest in R&D (35% compared with 23%); to support an R&D laboratory being built locally (65% compared with 49%); to think the UK should increase or maintain investment in R&D (78% compared with 65%); to think the UK should aim to be a world leader in R&D (55% compared with 38%).

In this study, age was a less consistent differentiator than in CaSE's previous research, with less positive correlation consistently throughout the survey. There were some notable differences for specific age groups, which are discussed in the relevant section.

There are differences on voting intention, with those intending to vote Labour and Conservative tending to be more supportive of R&D across a range of measures, compared to those intending to vote Reform. For instance, Labour or Conservative voters were more likely to think of lots of ways R&D benefits them or their family than Reform voters (66%, 55% and 39%, respectively).

Reform voters were more likely to think the UK has fallen behind on R&D (34% compared with 15% for Labour voters) and less likely to support an R&D laboratory being built in their area (50% compared with 71% for Labour voters). Levels of distrust in researchers were also higher among Reform voters (16%, compared with the UK average of 11%).

Finally, the survey consistently demonstrates that people feeling connected to their area and think it is doing well, and being aware of local R&D activity, positively influences receptivity to, and support for, R&D.

- **Connection to their community:** Those who feel connected to their local area and those who think their area is thriving were more likely to support an R&D laboratory being built in their area. Those who feel their area is not doing well are more likely to think the UK has fallen behind in R&D.
- **Knowledge of local R&D:** Those who said they knew a lot about R&D in their area were more likely to be able to think of ways R&D benefits them or their family, and to think the UK should increase or maintain investment in R&D.

About this report

This report details the results of CaSE's major research study, Public Attitudes to R&D 2025. It builds on the extensive public attitudes research CaSE has carried out since 2022, and is the first of a formal tracker survey that will be repeated every three years. This will allow the R&D sector to track and respond to changes in public attitudes over time.

CaSE thanks the many organisations and individuals who participated in workshops to shape the topics explored in the quantitative and qualitative research.

We thank Phil Downing at Icaro for leading the study, along with the teams at Deltapoll and Brook Lyndhurst, and moderators of the focus groups. Finally, we want to recognise the contributions of the survey respondents and focus group participants who we engaged through this process.

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Explore the full report



Campaign for Science and Engineering is a non-partisan charity with a membership that cuts across R&D sectors. It takes a high-level, cross-sector view of the research and innovation environment, and gives impartial expert insight on the whole R&D system to decision-makers.

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