

# Public Engagement with Environmental Science

## 2016-2018 Strategy

### Purpose

As environmental science will continue to be at the heart of some of our society's biggest challenges, NERC has both an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure we find innovative and relevant ways for members of the public to engage with this important research. Through this strategy we signal a renewed commitment to public engagement and our Royal Charter duty.

In our role as the leading commissioner of UK environmental science, NERC emphasises the value of public engagement with research to benefit environmental science, researchers and society as a whole. NERC has a Royal Charter<sup>1</sup> responsibility to 'encourage public engagement and dialogue', 'communicate research outcomes' and 'generate public awareness'.

Research Councils UK has adopted the following definition for Public Engagement, based on that of the National Co-ordinating Centre:

*"Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit."*

### Objectives

NERC is committed to a strategic and effective approach to excellent public engagement with research. Our activities and those we commission will be guided by three objectives:

- 1) To **convene informed public debate** about contemporary issues in environmental science, including the ethical and social implications.
- 2) To **inform, interest and inspire** members of the public and future researchers in environmental science and the processes of research, in a way that is accessible and relevant.
- 3) To **carry out public dialogue**<sup>2</sup> on complex and controversial issues. Actively listening to members of the public allows NERC to make decisions that are relevant to society.

### Audience

We wish to engage members of the public with contemporary environmental science through a mix of activities, with attention to diversity and groups that are under-represented in environmental sciences, for example, people based in areas that are geographically remote from STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) activity<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, we hope to encourage relationship building between researchers and community groups, so that all partners can usefully contribute to collaborative research projects. A key part of this will be to build on the existing capability of our scientific community to increase our impact over time.

### Implementation

To support delivery of this strategy, NERC will commission public engagement activities through a dedicated funding line, in much the same way that scientific research is commissioned. Funding will be allocated to excellent public engagement initiatives against our objectives, and by executive decision subject to advice from the Innovation Advisory Board (IAB)<sup>4</sup>. Part of the function of the funding line will be to increase the capacity of the environmental science sector to do public engagement with research, as well as to support sustained public engagement activity.

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<sup>1</sup> [NERC Royal Charter](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Sciencewise definition of public dialogue](#)

<sup>3</sup> [National Forum for Public Engagement in STEM](#)

<sup>4</sup> The [Innovation Advisory Board \(IAB\)](#) advises NERC on its strategy for strengthening the delivery of economic growth and other societal benefits (impact) from its research and innovation investments

To maximise resources, it is essential to nurture effective cross-disciplinary partnerships with the research community within universities and research centres; with public engagement professionals, including our fellow research councils; and with community groups. As one of the seven UK research councils, we collectively lead the national debate in public engagement with research. We aim to change the culture of research, so that public engagement is embedded within it and valued as an important part of the research cycle.

## Background

Public engagement is a condition of all NERC grants and fellowships<sup>5</sup> and we will continue to capture activities and evidence through existing reporting mechanisms<sup>6</sup>. Public engagement in research centres is supported through NERC National Capability<sup>7</sup> funding. NERC's research community will continue to be able to apply for support through Pathways to Impact<sup>8</sup>, to carry out public engagement specific to their research grant, as highlighted in NERC's commitment the RCUK *Concordat for Public Engagement with Research*<sup>9</sup>.

Public engagement was highlighted as an area of opportunity for NERC by the March 2015 *Cabinet Office Communications Capability Review*<sup>10</sup>. In addition, research on barriers to public engagement<sup>11</sup> found that 26% of researcher staff reported that funding issues were a main factor preventing them from becoming involved in public engagement, and 18% reported that lack of recognition was a main factor. Similarly, the Nurse Review<sup>12</sup> of the Research Councils suggested effective dialogue and understanding between scientists, politicians and the public is needed for successful research. This opportunity in public engagement is supported by the increasingly positive attitude of the UK public to science, as highlighted by the 2014 *Public attitudes to science survey*<sup>13</sup>.

## Evaluation

This strategy represents a renewed strategic commitment to public engagement from NERC, and to recognising excellence in planning, delivering and assessing public engagement activities. Evaluation activity will be planned into NERC's commissioning of public engagement activity.

Evaluation is essential to achieve the best possible outputs, outcomes and impact, as well as to inform future work. It will be essential for projects to be evaluated both during the course of the project (formative) and against objectives (summative). We also highlight the importance of sharing and disseminating best practice and learnings.

The effectiveness of this strategy will be reviewed and assessed annually during its lifecycle to assess progress towards delivering the ambitions set out here.

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<sup>5</sup> [NERC grants terms and conditions](#) include 'GC 20 Public Engagement: It is the responsibility of the Research Organisation and the Grant Holder and Co-Investigators to communicate the research to the public at both local and national level, and to raise awareness of the role of science and research in any related issues of public interest...':

<sup>6</sup> Relevant reporting and evidence mechanisms include: research outputs reporting to Research Councils (using ResearchFish); Research Excellence Framework (REF, administered by HEFCE); NERC evaluation of research centres (using REF-like methodology); NERC Impact Awards competition.

<sup>7</sup> [National capability](#) comprises the large research infrastructure, services and facilities, data, national-good services and long-term science provided by research centres and universities

<sup>8</sup> [RCUK Pathways to Impact policy](#)

<sup>9</sup> NERC is a signatory of the [Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Communication Capability Review](#), March 2015

<sup>11</sup> [Factors affecting public engagement by researchers](#), December 2015

<sup>12</sup> [A Review of the UK Research Councils](#), Paul Nurse

<sup>13</sup> [Public attitudes to science survey](#), 2014