Earning trust

A briefing for research leaders on communication and engagement in a lower trust environment

SENSE about SCIENCE
THE POLICY INSTITUTE
KING'S College LONDON
wellcome

Introduction

Amid signs that society is becoming more polarised and that scientific misinformation is spreading,[1] many are finding it hard to understand if public trust is changing. UK researchers and institutions are concerned that their efforts to communicate and engage aren't meeting people where they are.

These are well-founded concerns. Voting trends indicate growing support for movements hostile to institutions of democratic governance, and we have seen this translate into attacks on scientific institutions around the world. A 2025 Ipsos survey[2] found that in Britain, climate change is now seen as more divisive than Brexit, and in recent political events science has sometimes itself appeared partisan.[3] Furthermore, media experiences are diverse and fragmented, so people are often not even in the same discussions, never mind in agreement, about scientific evidence.

In this context, some researchers worry that science will be seen as being on one side of a polarised society. This is likely when challenges to science, or defences of it, are connected to a political or cultural identity. It requires a lot more attention to the question of how we cultivate a society where everybody feels able to benefit from scientific inquiry and from the applications of research.

With the support of Wellcome, the UK research community has worked with Sense about Science to identify effective approaches to communication and engagement. We have looked afresh at these from the perspective of what we know about trustworthiness and in the light of a new survey, conducted with the Policy Institute at King's College London, of what factors drive the public's trust in scientists. Research leaders have helped us to develop insights, tools and resources that take account of these patterns of trust in the UK population. They are set out in the following pages for you to use and adapt.

The survey insights also point to an important challenge. Trust is a relationship where there is confidence in another's intention and standards, even if there is disagreement. In a lower trust environment, where some people have a sense of betrayal by institutions and of being on different cultural or political 'sides', earning trust will be tougher, but it is a prerequisite for sharing, debating and supporting ideas. Public trust in science enables researchers to investigate difficult questions about how the natural and social worlds work, and it enables everyone – the public, decision-makers and other researchers – to engage with those investigations and use them to build a view of the world that they can act on.

Our survey shows that, despite signs of polarisation and disaffection, there is a lot to play for in building positive relationships between the public and scientific research, by listening, engaging, and communicating high-quality research that is worthy of trust. We invite research leaders to use these insights and resources to seize that opportunity.

Tracey Brown OBE, Sense about Science

[1] Academy of Medical Sciences, 'New Poll: Health Misinformation Difficult to Spot, Dangerous and a Risk Mainly to Others', 3 August 2026, https://acmedsci.ac.uk/news-and-insights/news/new-poll-health-misinformation-difficult-spot-dangerous-and-risk-mainly.

[2] The Policy Institute at King's College London, 'UK's Sense of Division Reaches New High as Culture War Tensions Grow, Study Finds', 7 November 2025, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/uks-sense-of-division-reaches-new-high-as-culture-war-tensions-grow-study-finds.

[3] In the most recent two US elections, for example, major scientific journals such as *Nature* and *Scientific American* endorsed candidates. A later study found this did not change voting behaviour, but it did reduce trust in science (https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302261425955).

Executive summary and contents

1. What drives people's trust in scientists?

The Trust in Scientists survey – a unique investigation of the drivers of trust – has revealed signs of polarisation and **five distinct trust segments in the UK population: Science Critics, Disengaged Trusters, Betrayed Trusters, Contented Trusters and Science Advocates.**

- **It found that one of the strongest drivers of trust is whether people feel scientists are 'on the side of people like them'.** Only 7% of people who have low trust in scientists in general think scientists are on their side, and only 22% of those in the middle – compared with 68% of those with high trust.
- **73% of high-trust individuals view scientists as open and transparent,** compared with just 10% of low-trust individuals.
- Across all socio-economic bands, people who **have someone they trust to ask about science are more likely to report high trust** in scientists in general, and less likely to have low trust.

In response to the data, we identified **clear opportunities for research leaders to build more trusting connections between the public and scientists, and principles and tested approaches** that apply strongly to maintaining trust. These are presented, alongside resources, in Section 2 'The Approaches'.

Consultations with research leaders identified some gaps, including assessing who is reached by communications, how to indicate trustworthiness and how to sustain relationships beyond funded projects. These are explored in Section 3 'The Challenges'.

2. The approaches that support all science communication and engagement

The approaches below have been components of success in communication and engagement. In this section we connect them to what we have learned about the different trust segments, public attitudes to science and indicators of trustworthiness, and match them with resources to support research leaders.

i. **Listening:** find out what people really want to know or say before responding
ii. **Self-awareness:** recognise the cultural, economic and political lens through which you view the world, and how it might differ from that of others
iii. **Context:** communicate why research is needed, how it was done, and the status of its findings
iv. **Honesty and clarity of purpose:** be open about how public input can and cannot affect research
v. **Scaffolding:** make sure that everyone involved in engagement activities has what they need to contribute well.

3. Taking account of trust segments: the trust challenges

The five trust segments of the UK have different views of institutions, scientists' behaviour, and whether science really makes a difference to themselves and to society. With this lens we need to look anew at the assumptions we make in activities. We identified nine **trust challenges for different types of communication and engagement and the resources and approaches that will help research leaders to address them.**

Some of the challenges invite action by organisations. The companion publication to this briefing, **Putting trust at the heart of your strategy**, is a workbook presentation of the Trust in Scientists survey findings to help senior leaders assess their opportunities to build trustworthy communication and engagement.

The challenges:

i. **'On my side' is a significant consideration.** Respond to the public's search for signifiers of trustworthiness and public benefit.

ii. **Signifiers of trustworthiness are diverse.** Demonstrating trustworthiness: expertise, benevolence, integrity, transparency and responsiveness, to respond to the different concerns of the different trust segments.

iii. **Uncertainty must be communicated in a more polarised context.** Ensuring uncertainties are not 'outed' by others, addressing the gap between social and scientific meanings of uncertainty, and using tested methods to communicate numbers.

iv. **Use doesn't indicate trust in the new media ecosystem.** Planning and reviewing communications with Science Critics, Betrayed Trusters, Disengaged Trusters, Contented Trusters and Science Advocates, using the **TrustLens** tool for insights on the sources that they use and trust.

v. **Communication of science needs public engagement.** Involving the public in thinking about how findings and their context could be shared 'for people like me'.

vi. **Inclusion of all trust segments in public engagement.** Thinking about how different trust segments might respond and engage differently in activities from planning to dissemination: using the **TrustMapper** (four questions for participants) to assess which segments you are engaging with.

vii. **Communicating the benefits of research.** Build on findings on how the public views the benefits of research from Trust in Scientists[4], Britain Talks Trust in Science[5] and the Public Attitudes to Science[6] surveys to find likely points of connection.

viii. **Maintaining relationships.** Towards the end of an engagement activity, provide a way for participants to stay genuinely connected, and press your institution to support continuity in relationships.

ix. **Finding common ground for different views.** Ensure that people still have access to evidence even when debates are polarised or hostile; be honest about points of disagreement but empathetic about different perspectives. Use our **Figuring out the question** workbook to have challenging conversations about research constructively and respectfully.

You can read the full results of the Trust in Scientists survey here.

You can find case reviews, consultations and thinking that shaped this guidance and the survey here.

Throughout this publication there are discussions and links to tested communication and engagement resources that connect well to the changing trust context, along with some new ones that consolidate recent experiences.

There are also four resources published alongside this briefing, to help with implementing it in organisations and practices:

Putting trust at the heart of your strategy
A workbook for senior leadership to consider how strategies and organisational plans might respond to the changing picture of trust

TrustMapper
A tool to help you understand who you are engaging with, based on the factors we've shown to be key in driving trust in scientists

TrustLens
A tool to help research communicators identify the best channels to reach their audiences

Figuring out the question
A workbook for researchers having challenging conversations about research to respond in constructive and respectful ways.

[4] The Policy Institute at King's College London and Sense about Science, *Trust in Scientists: The role of values and moral and political identities in the UK* (2026), https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/trust-in-scientists-the-role-of-values-and-moral-and-political-identities-in-the-uk.
[5] Archie Herrick et al., *Britain Talks Trust in Science* (More in Common and Wellcome, 2026), 36–37, https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/final_bttis_1504.pdf.
[6] Ipsos, British Science Association, and UK Research and Innovation, *Public Attitudes to Science 2025: Main Report* (2026), 54–55, https://pas.ipsos.com.

1. What drives people's trust in scientists?

Where are we now?

Trust in science appeared stable in the UK: around two-thirds of the public have trusted science and scientists for a long time. However, recent polls have indicated that trust has weakened,[7] and a 2026 study by the Policy Institute at King's College London and Sense about Science,[8] funded by Wellcome, has shown that trust is highly related to a range of drivers that are not so stable. The survey looked at trust in scientists, which is more focused than trust in science, so that it could compare a full range of drivers such as political identity, trust in all types of institutions and perceptions of others' motives. Two key findings:

- Alongside signs of increased political polarisation, one of the strongest drivers of trust today is whether people feel scientists are **'on the side of people like them'.** Only 7% of people who have low trust in scientists think scientists are on their side, and only 22% of those in the middle – compared with 68% of those with high trust. This question of shared identity outweighs all other factors in perceived trustworthiness, such as expertise.
- There is also suspicion that scientists have a different values system:

'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'	**Low trusters**	**Middle trusters**	**High trusters**
Scientists care more about social and political causes than about scientific progress	**40%**	**25%**	**10%**
Scientists have the same values as me	**2%**	**8%**	**34%**
Scientists are too 'woke'	**38%**	**23%**	**8%**

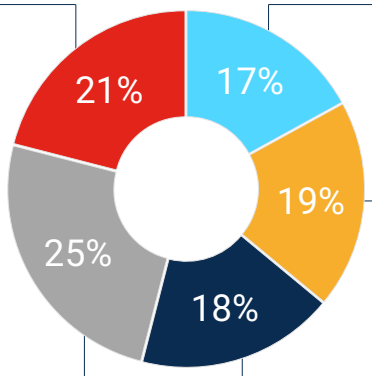
The study covered all likely drivers of trust in scientists – political and cultural identities, values, and other attitudes to society and institutions. By taking lots of different measures and identifying what most distinguishes groups (using a technique called latent class analysis), it was possible to identify five distinct segments, and explore how they differ on key questions, including what scientists can do to increase trust.

[7] Ipsos et al., *Public Attitudes to Science 2025: Main Report*; Herrick et al., *Britain Talks Trust in Science*.
[8] Trust in scientists: the role of values and moral and political identities in the UK. *Question: % of those who agree with the statements. Base: 2,817 UK adults (18+) with 'high trust' (7–10) in scientists in general, 206 with 'low trust' (0–3) and 1,107 'in the middle' (4–6), 8–11 May 2026.*

The five trust groups that make up the UK

Science Critics (21%)
Lowest trust in every type of scientist measured, and most likely to believe scientists are dishonest or self-serving. Skew right-leaning and Reform-voting

Science Advocates (17%)
Trust scientists almost universally and act on it – most likely to challenge misinformation, back science funding, and see scientists as sharing their values. Majority left-leaning

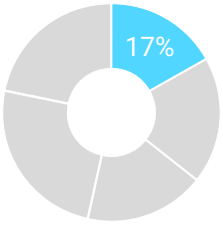


Contented Trusters (19%)
Trust scientists generally, but less convinced on climate science specifically – the least likely group to feel let down by leaders or institutions

Disengaged Trusters (25%)
Moderate trust in scientists, but the lowest engagement of any group – most likely to have paid no attention to science news and least likely to act on it

Betrayed Trusters (18%)
Trust scientists almost as much as advocates do, but feel deeply let down by leaders and institutions, with distrust more about betrayal, rather than scepticism about science itself

Science Advocates



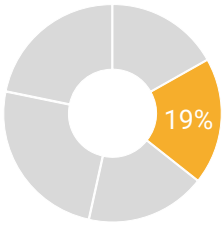
Key characteristics

- Highest trust across every type of scientist measured: 94% trust scientists in general; 93% trust vaccine scientists; 75% trust government scientists, compared with only 42% of the overall public.
- Most likely to act on scientific information: 79% see themselves as science advocates, 86% would challenge someone who said something scientifically inaccurate and 65% want government investment in science increased.
- Almost entirely reject the idea that scientists behave badly – only 1% think scientists ignore evidence that contradicts their work, and just 3–5% agree scientists protect each other when wrong or are secretive about their research.
- 57% identify as politically left-leaning – the only segment with a majority who identify clearly as either right- or left-leaning.

Key demographics

- Most male of the groups (57%)
- Majority aged 25 to 49 (52%)
- 83% white vs 17% ethnic minority
- Highest proportion of Green supporters (28%) and most Remain-voting group (57%)
- Group with the highest levels of Higher Education (HE) qualifications (55% vs 34% average)
- By far most likely to know someone who works in science (73%)

Contented Trusters



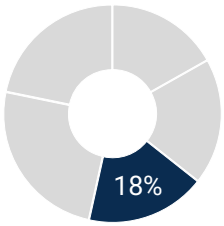
Key characteristics

- Moderately high-trust group – 79% have high trust in scientists generally, but a noticeable dip for climate scientists specifically (62%).
- Most likely of all five groups to say most people in general can be trusted (42%) and to report having a good life (61%).
- Least likely to feel let down by leaders (44%) or betrayed by institutions (18%) – the most settled, least aggrieved segment of the five.
- High action and engagement with science, without the more vocal edge of Science Advocates. About half as likely as that group to say they see themselves as a science advocate.

Key demographics

- Most gender-equal group (51% male vs 49% female)
- Older than Science Advocates (51% vs 33% aged 50+)
- 86% white vs 14% ethnic minority
- Evenly split between Labour (18%), Conservative (16%), Reform (16%) and Lib Dem (15%) supporters
- 40% have HE qualification
- Second most likely to know someone working in science (47%), along with Betrayed Trusters (45%)

Betrayed Trusters



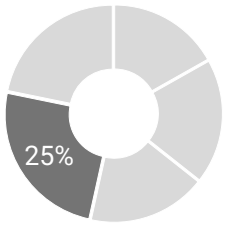
Key characteristics

- Moderate trust in scientists generally (78%) but a sharp gap for scientists working in private companies (27%) and government (41%).
- Defined by grievance, not science scepticism: highest of all segments on feeling let down by people in leadership roles (94%), feeling betrayed by institutions like the police, church, schools or government (82%), and feeling betrayed by friends or family (51%).
- Also stand out on specific reasons to distrust scientists – highest agreement that scientists intentionally keep their work secret (49%), don't care if ordinary people understand their work (61%) and won't publish results their funders don't like (68%).
- Despite all this, still take actions informed by science – 65% would challenge a scientific inaccuracy, and 75% would get a recommended vaccine, so the sense of betrayal sits alongside continued engagement, not withdrawal, from science.

Key demographics

- Group with largest ethnic minority share (20%)
- Second-largest proportion of under-50s (61%)
- Majority female (53%)
- Second-highest share of Green supporters (26%)
- 39% have HE qualification – virtually the same as Contented Trusters (40%)
- Second most likely to know someone working in science (45%), along with Science Advocates (47%)

Disengaged Trusters



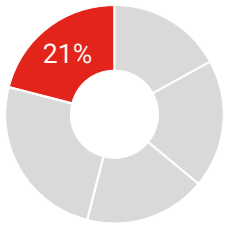
Key characteristics

- Moderate trust in scientists generally (72%) but it doesn't translate into action – lowest of all segments on identifying as a science advocate (5%), willingness to challenge scientific inaccuracies (16%) or joining a march to protest science funding cuts (3%).
- Most disengaged from science: 67% haven't paid attention to any science information in the past 30 days, and have the lowest score of any segment when it comes to rating their own knowledge of science (18%).
- Largest 'don't know' group politically too – 32% don't know their political leaning and 14% don't know who they'd vote for, suggesting a broader pattern of disengagement rather than something specific to science.
- Best described as trusting but checked-out, rather than actively sceptical.

Key demographics

- Oldest of the groups (58% aged 50+)
- Most female group (57%)
- Highest share of white people (90%) across groups
- Second-most Reform-supporting (22%) and second most likely to say they would not vote (11%)
- Virtually joint-lowest proportion of people with HE qualifications (20%).
- Lowest likelihood of knowing someone working in science (19%)

Science Critics



Key characteristics

- Lowest trust on every single type of scientist measured – only 7% have high trust in scientists in general, falling to just 1% for scientists working in government.
- Most likely to believe scientists are dishonest or self-serving: 52% think scientists work in cahoots with politicians and businesses, 47% think scientists ignore evidence that contradicts their work and 43% think scientists are only interested in their own advantage.
- Right-leaning skew (36%) and most likely to say they'd vote Reform (37%) or to use GB News as their main news source (17%).
- Despite the cynicism, not entirely closed off – around a third (36%) would still get a vaccine recommended to them by the NHS or a doctor, so there is still some willingness to act on scientific advice, although significantly lower than average.

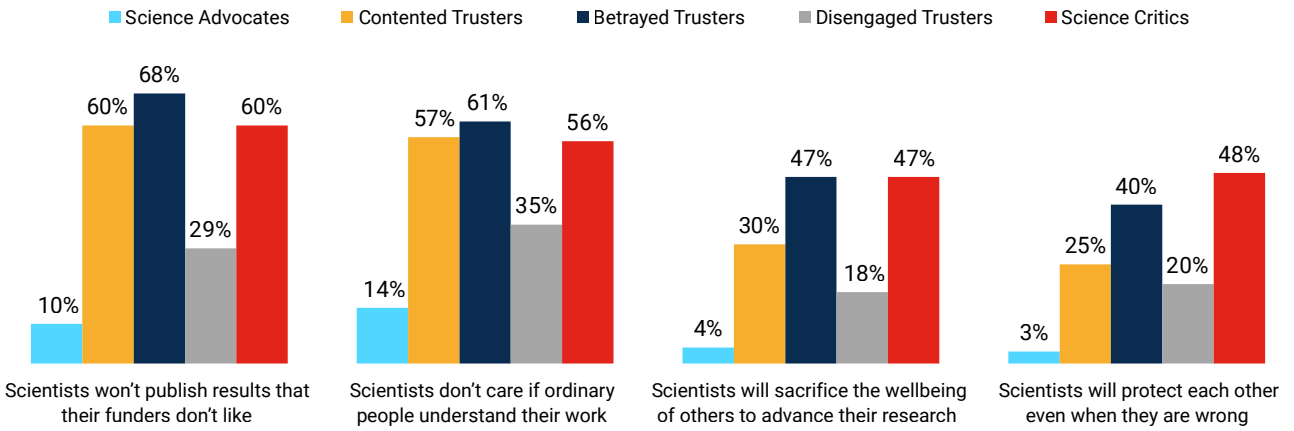
Key demographics

- Most Reform UK-supporting (37% vs 22% among Disengaged Trusters) and most likely to say they wouldn't vote (14%)
- Most Leave-voting group (50%)
- More female (53%) than male (47%)
- Second-oldest of the groups (54% aged 50+)
- 21% have an HE qualification – virtually joint lowest with Disengaged Trusters (20%)
- Few personally know someone working in science (22%)

Analysis of the five trust groups that make up the UK shows that some key features of the mistrustful Science Critics are shared by other groups and that a large group of people who trust scientists are actually disengaged. The analysis also shows strong polarisation in the UK population's beliefs about how scientists behave, such as whether they publish results their funders don't like and whether they care if ordinary people understand their work.

Figure 1: A suspicion that scientists put their own interests ahead of ordinary people unites the Contented and Betrayed Trusters with the Science Critics.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about scientists in general?
% who strongly/tend to agree



Base: 795 'Science Advocates', 811 'Contented Trusters', 788 'Betrayed Trusters', 996 'Disengaged Trusters' and 872 'Science Critics', 8–11 May 2026.

This portrays a society where research findings and decisions based on them won't feel legitimate to all. These divisions have practical implications for science too, with big differences in:

- **Attitudes to science funding:** a third of low-trusters (34%) want public science funding cut, compared with just 2% of high-trusters and 12% of those in the middle
- **Beliefs about whether information from scientists is trustworthy:** 42% of low-trusters say they ignore anything scientists in general have to say, 56% ignore vaccine scientists and 69% ignore climate scientists
- **Willingness to follow scientific advice:** 88% of those with high trust in vaccine scientists say they would always get a vaccine that was recommended to them by the NHS, compared with 55% of those in the middle and 16% of low-trusters.

To be effective, communication and engagement have to respond to this diversity in people's assumptions and receptiveness. Where appeals to independence might otherwise have been persuasive, Science Critics remain unconvinced. Efforts to increase the volume of engagement with research may rest on an assumption of a level of civic participation that is now only true of a minority of people.

Science engagement is taking place in a context where several groups are on their guard about how they're treated and some feel science as a pressure rather than an aid.

Perhaps more importantly, the survey provides insights about what could **improve** the public's relationship with science. The good news is that these include some straightforward activities that many already do, possibly without fully realising their value to the public.

RAND Europe's 2026 review, *Public Trust in Science and Scientific Trustworthiness*,[9] had identified five important indicators of trustworthiness:

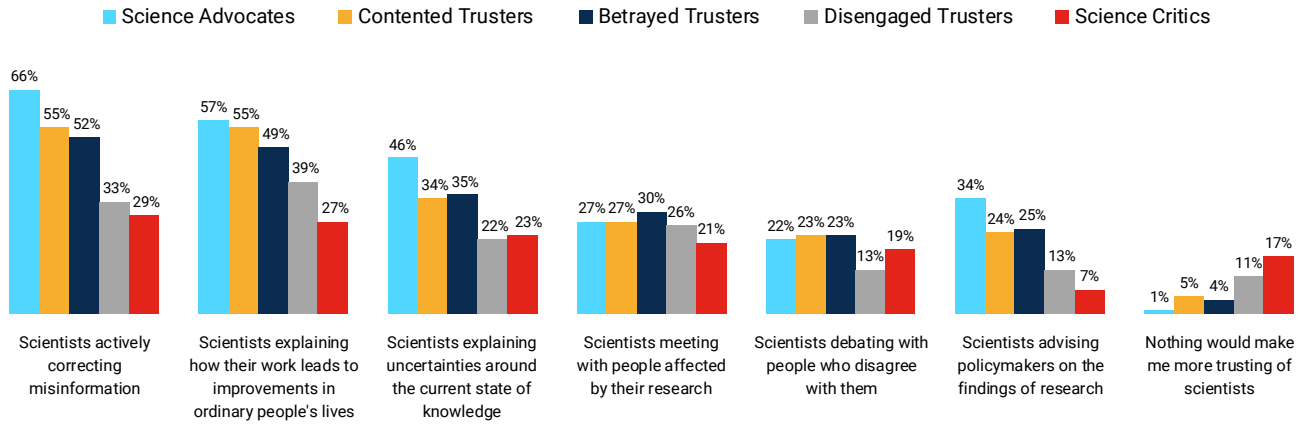
- **Expertise**
- **Integrity**
- **Benevolence**
- **Transparency**
- **Responsiveness**

So, we asked people what could increase trust in scientists.

The good news is that it includes some straightforward activities that many already do, possibly without fully realising their value to people.

Figure 2: The top actions to increase trust vary significantly by segment, but relatively few of any segment, even Critics, say nothing would make them more trusting.

Scientists need to decide how to spend their time between doing their scientific research and engaging with the public and other groups to explain their research or its implications, so that people understand and trust their work. Which of the following, if any, is most likely to make you more trusting of scientists? Please select up to four.



Base: 795 'Science Advocates', 811 'Contented Trusters', 788 'Betrayed Trusters', 996 'Disengaged Trusters' and 872 'Science Critics', 8–11 May 2026.

[9] R. Milne et al., *Public Trust in Science and Scientific Trustworthiness* (RAND Europe, 2026), https://cms.wellcome.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/Wellcome_Rand_Public_Trust_in_science_Report_1_Summary.pdf.

Social capital: knowing a scientist and having 'someone you can ask'

A startlingly simple point that emerged is the importance of having a relationship with individuals in science.

When asked, **'Do you have anyone you know and trust that you could ask for advice or an explanation around a scientific issue you were interested in, or not?'** respondents to the survey revealed that this was highly correlated with trust:

- Across all socio-economic bands, people who have someone they trust to ask about science are more **likely to report high trust** in scientists in general, and **less likely to have low trust**
- **For the lowest socio-economic bands,** having someone to ask is associated with an 18-point increase in high trust; for the higher bands it is associated with a **14–15-point increase**[10]
- **Around half of those in high-trust groups say they personally know a scientist, whereas only 16% of low-trusters do.**

This is a finding that is within reach of many to act on. Researchers – and research organisations – connect with people in lots of ways. With a fresh look and relatively modest adjustments, rather than expensive programmes, researchers might transform more connections into relationships where people would consider themselves to know a scientist or have someone they could ask for advice on a scientific issue.

[10] The lowest socio-economic bands (L12–14) include semi-routine and routine occupations, as well as the never-worked and long-term unemployed, while higher bands (L1–6) span both higher and lower managerial and professional occupations, as well as administrative and supervisory roles.

Emphasis from research leaders

Science communication and engagement cover a wide spectrum of activities:

- **Public-initiated,** such as responding to social media trends about scientific issues
- **Structured activities,** such as citizen dialogues about research governance
- **Scientist-initiated,** such as promoting findings

In conversations about trust, research and engagement leaders identified the following areas as new gaps in practice:

…in public interactions

1. How to respond to statements and questions that appear to challenge sound science – how to understand the question and discern good faith interactions.
2. Addressing increased suspicion about the purpose of engagement.
3. How to explain the independence of science in a context where people are more inclined to see things in terms of taking sides.

…organisationally

4. **Sustaining people's connection to research beyond the life of a project**, to give more enduring value to project-based investments in public engagement – and opportunities for shareable and scalable engagement.

   "… not just with people who are already interested in science, like the type of people who come to summer science exhibitions … but people who really aren't interested and who are very sceptical". (Input from research leader consultations, 2026)
5. Assessing whether groups involved in activities or reached by communications are diverse in terms of drivers of trust – the extent to which people who are disengaged are routinely not consulted, for example:
   a. Which outlets, platforms and groups different trust segments use or trust.
   b. Addressing apprehension among researchers about speaking to some groups.
6. How to review organisations' communication and engagement strategies and focus resources – to make sure that activities don't contribute to division or mistrust and to focus on important opportunities.

We worked with research leaders to identify **approaches, tools and guidance** that respond to increasing polarisation and the diversity in public trust in scientists. These approaches and tools are set out in the next two sections.

2. The approaches that improve all science communication and engagement

Five approaches have been components of successful communication and engagement:

i. **Listening:** find out what people really want to know or say before responding

ii. **Self-awareness:** recognise the cultural, economic and political lens you view the world through, and how it might differ from others'

iii. **Context:** communicate why research is needed, how it was done, and the status of its findings

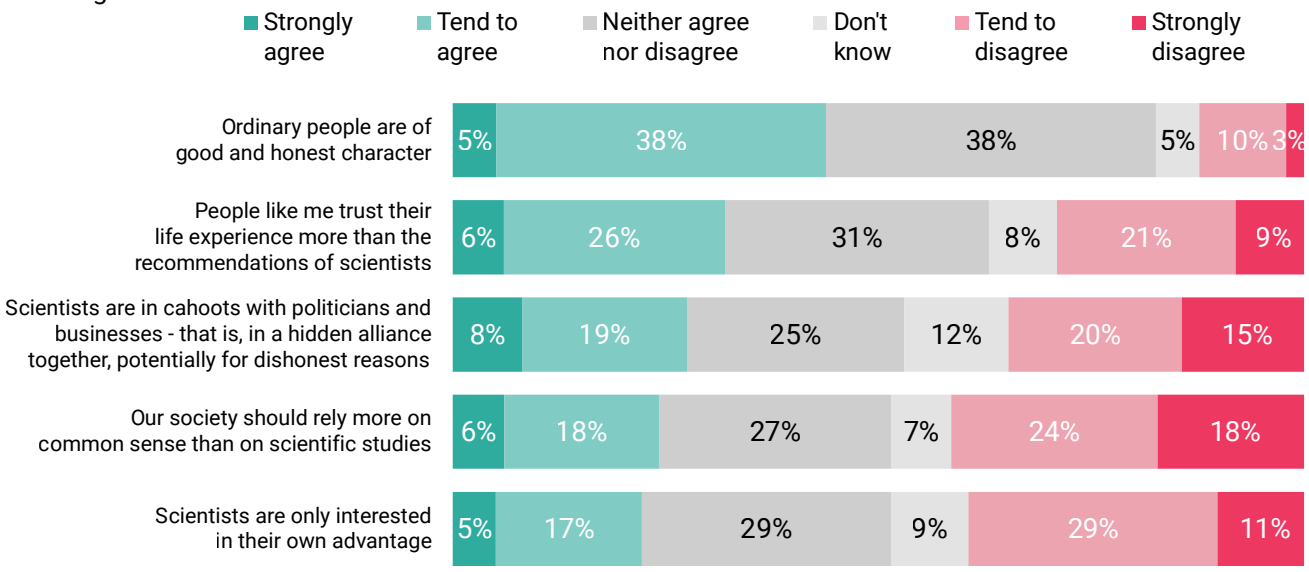
iv. **Honesty and clarity of purpose:** be open about how public input can and cannot affect research

v. **Scaffolding:** make sure everyone involved in engagement activities has what they need to contribute well.

These approaches are seen by experienced public engagement leaders as important for building trust. Asking whether we are doing them in all communication and engagement activities is likely to increase the benefits for everyone involved. These approaches matter more when people have highly divergent views about whether scientists are on their side, transparent or politically motivated.

Figure 3: Between a quarter and a third of the public say people like them trust life experience over scientists, that scientists are 'in cahoots' with politicians and businesses, and that our society should rely more on common sense than scientific studies.

The following statements are about the relationship between science and society. How much do you agree or disagree with them?



Base: 4,262 UK adults, 8–11 May 2026.

i. Listening

People do change their minds when they have misconstrued information, sometimes even on subjects that are strongly linked to their identity, but as many public engagement leads working on sensitive subjects emphasise, people change their own minds. Whether researchers can support that depends on listening and working out what is at issue.

Even when people sound similar, their assumptions, such as whether they think research is unregulated, can be quite different.

A common comment about the COVID-19 vaccines, for example, was 'Isn't this too fast?'. Many different points and questions sat behind this – from wanting assurance that pharmaceutical companies hadn't swayed the licensing, to being angry about state control or fearing unknown side effects. In each case, the same statement reflected a very different underlying concern.

> "... we have to understand where views come from and the mechanisms underlying them to be able to change or engage with them and to have a decent conversation. And I don't think it's going to be about lecturing people because that clearly doesn't work..."
>
> (Input from research leader consultations, 2026)

Listening has long been advocated in guidance on science communication and engagement. We have compiled a workbook to help research leaders develop these practices with their teams. It encourages researchers to:

- **Approach discussions with curiosity**
- **Find out whether the first question is the real question**

  Questioning 'the science' may be research-related: about the motives, scientific concepts, governance or reliability of findings
  Or something broader: a negative experience, feeling ignored, worrying about a loss of control
  Or it may be driven by something else: wanting attention, making sense of the world to fit beliefs or build a sense of belonging to a particular identity
- **Find out what, if anything, would help to answer it**
- **Work out whether you can play a role in that.**

"People working within higher education and research think they're the only people who struggle with these things. They come up with their own solutions in their own space and they don't benefit from looking outside to think about how others have had to address the fundamental dynamics of this problem. Because this is not a research and science problem per se. It's a broader kind of social phenomenon really."

(Input from research leader consultations, 2026)



Isn't this too fast? COVID-19 vaccine rapidity

Case review:

How UK science institutions communicated about the speed of COVID-19 vaccine development and approval in 2020–21, when public concern that vaccines had been 'rushed' became a proxy for wider anxieties about safety, political pressure and institutional honesty. This case reviewed the experience and outputs of the Science Media Centre, the British Society for Immunology, the Vaccine Confidence Project, Sense about Science and UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), and the voluntary and community-facing organisations that used their materials.

Reassurance was strongest when it was process-based rather than simply asserted. Claims that 'no corners were cut' only carried weight when paired with a clear explanation of trial phases, rolling review, prior research and post-authorisation monitoring. Institutions that kept scientific advice visibly separate from political decision-making, and that continued to explain what was changing and why as concerns evolved (side effects, boosters, childhood vaccination), were judged more credible.

ii. Self-awareness

Research published in 2026 by More in Common showed a gap between the political leanings of the public and scientists: 65% of scientists surveyed were in left-leaning or progressive groups, compared to 33% of the British public.[11]

Opinion is divided on whether scientists should ever be policy campaigners or whether this sacrifices their impartiality – in perception and in practice. If there is a right answer, it's not an enforceable one. However, the segmentation analysis warns us that science activism is only likely to make a positive connection with Science Advocates, who are just 17% of the population. The increasingly political character of trust in scientists means researchers have to work harder to overcome a perception of being politically motivated.

Among low-trusters, 40% already believe that scientists will sacrifice scientific progress for their own views (Figure 3).

> "The danger is that it automatically creates a group of people whose side you're explicitly not on. And my approach to it is that we need to be able to engage the people that don't already agree..."
>
> (Input from research leader consultations, 2026)

> "It becomes quite dangerous when you're presenting yourself as an activist scientist, because then you potentially lose the reliability, so you might become less trusted... As a scientist, I can't be in a position where I would think, 'oh, I should cover that up' because it doesn't fit my political leanings..."
>
> (Input from research leader consultations, 2026)

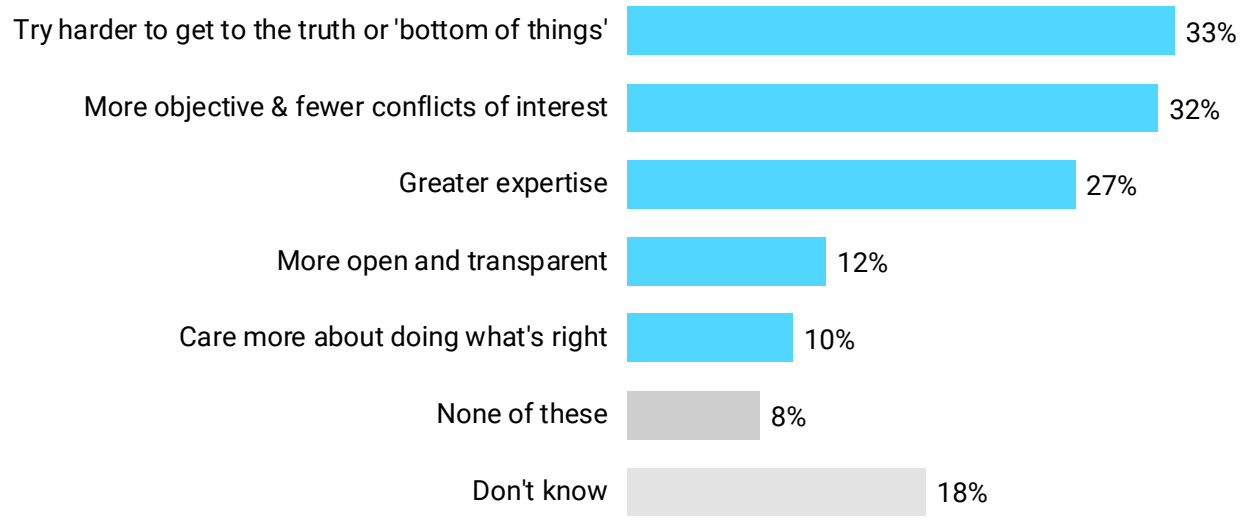
> "There are lots of people who do have values in common with climate change and health, but are currently really alienated from it because they've been pushed a message that actually it doesn't align with them. I'm very interested in engaging the groups that currently aren't on board, and I think aligning with one outlook makes that more difficult."
>
> (Input from research leader consultations, 2026)

[11] Herrick et al., *Britain Talks Trust in Science*.

The Trust in Scientists survey asked people why they thought scientists were more trusted than other professionals:

Figure 4: The most common reasons selected for why scientists are more trusted than other professions is they try harder to get to the truth (33%) and are more objective (32%), while just 10% say it's because scientists care more about doing what's right.

When asked in 2024, most Brits said they trust scientists more than they trust a range of other professionals, including teachers, judges and the police. Which of the following, if any, do you think BEST explain why most people trust scientists more than these other professionals? Please select up to two options.



Base: 4,262 UK adults, 8-11 May 2026.

Taking the results of the two surveys together, researchers' self-awareness could be improved by:

- **Familiarising themselves with the diversity of views on trust and reasons for trust in the five segments.**
- **Considering who an engagement or communication is aimed at and the legitimacy it also needs with other groups or trust segments.**
- **Acknowledging other views, experiences and insights.**
- **Reflecting on how their own views show up in their work.**
- **Explaining why they are investigating and what they think the benefits and limitations of their findings will be.**

iii. Context

In any professional context, there is a lot of information – about the institutions, practices and regulation – which we come to take for granted. This may be vital missing context for a member of the public confronted by a 'research finding'. How are they to know that this comes from a team that has a track record of high-quality, world-leading research on antibodies, that researchers had to go through an ethics review board, that the work is peer-reviewed, or that it confirms similar findings by other teams around the world? Or the importance of any of those things?

Talking about this context is a relatively easy way for researchers to show their motivations and their workings. It is among the most important things researchers can do to address mistrust, because when these processes, governance and quality judgements are unfamiliar to people, and missing from an announcement about new research, there is a lot of space for speculation to fill.

There are some resources to help. The And… But… Therefore approach pioneered in the US by Randy Olson is widely used in science communication training internationally:[12]

- Lay out the background context **(And)**
- Introduce the problem or missing piece **(But)**
- Provide the discovery as the logical step forward **(Therefore).**

In addition to this, researchers should include relevant information about governance, regulation and peer review,[13] and remind people that one study isn't the whole story.

Research is a story. It has a beginning before the findings are announced. Ideally, researchers should take people on that journey in instalments, from the inception of the research, but even at the point of announcing findings, it's important to include:

- **Why did we ask this question? What we knew and didn't know.**
- **Why would this investigation help answer it?**
- **What is the status of the findings? How fully do they answer the question?**

[12] Randy Olson, 'Science Communication', accessed 16 September 2026, http://abtframework.com/science-communication/.

[13] *I Don't Know What to Believe* by Sense about Science is a public introduction to peer review that the public, policy makers and researchers around the world have been using and updating for 20 years to talk about the status of findings. Available at: https://senseaboutscience.org/activities/i-dont-know-what-to-believe/.

Good examples of this are growing.

The Mitochondrial Research Group at Newcastle University's work on mitochondrial donation treatment, often called 'three-person IVF (in vitro fertilisation)', demonstrates how to give context to important discoveries.[14] The programme involved a clinical trial of pronuclear transfer, designed to prevent severe mitochondrial DNA mutations from being passed from mother to child. In 2025, the team reported that eight babies had been born post-treatment, showing no signs of mitochondrial DNA disease and meeting expected developmental milestones. The findings provided strong evidence that the technique could substantially reduce disease transmission, though researchers were careful to explain remaining uncertainties: the need for long-term follow-ups and the detection of minor levels of mutation-carrying mitochondrial DNA in some children. This study and their reporting give equal prominence to what has and has not yet been established, how and why the research came about, and the findings themselves.

Research into the technique began in the early 1990s

It can lead to severe disability and, in many cases, early death.

There is no cure.

The early days were frustrating because the technique used for proof of concept didn't simply translate to using normally fertilised eggs

the team were given the first licence to carry out the treatment

close and careful co-ordination between researchers, funders and regulators

working closely with families affected

co-funding the clinical trial

In the case of big breakthroughs, researchers can enlist the storytelling skills of the science media and communication experts, but it's within everyone's gift to communicate more context about all of their studies.

[14] See: https://wellcome.org/insights/articles/mitochondrial-donation-hope-born-thanks-pioneering-treatment

iv. Honesty and clarity of purpose

The Trust in Scientists survey revealed that over half of those with low trust (55%) say they have often felt betrayed by scientific institutions they are supposed to trust.

Being open about the scope and purpose of public engagement is vital for trust. Sciencewise designs dialogue on science and technology for policy decisions by the UK government and other policy-setting organisations, so their guiding principles anticipate politicised contexts well: for example, don't present one-sided information and don't make a show of consulting people when a decision has already been taken. These are likely to undermine trust at the best of times, and certainly in conditions where suspicion of institutions and motives is more acute.[15]

Most science engagement is not to inform policy decisions, but the sensitivity to politicised environments in which the Sciencewise principles for dialogues have been produced make them a valuable asset for research leaders in thinking about how wider engagement can be trustworthy.

[15] Sciencewise, *The Government's Approach to Public Dialogue on Science and Technology* (UK Research and Innovation, 2019), https://sciencewise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Guiding-Principles.pdf.

v. Scaffolding

The Trust in Scientists survey found that 56% of people overall say that they do not know very much, or know nothing at all, about science. It is a good reminder of the starting point of more than half the population. But even where people 'know a fair amount' or 'a lot', it is likely that this would not extend to many areas of research.

Scaffolding describes a process of bridging the gap between expert knowledge and public values. It recognises that we are not really including people until they have the means to process information and participate. Involve[16] and Sciencewise offer well-tested advice about how to achieve this, building up to address high-level questions on complex scientific or technical issues. Knowledge steps should build on each other:

- Baseline knowledge mapping – to ascertain starting points
- Pre-briefing – to establish context and vocabulary
- Bitesize technical presentations
- More complex questions, multiple perspectives
- Participant-driven knowledge expansion (Sense about Science uses the term 'public-led, expert-fed').

Take care not to frame information in ways that point to a predetermined outcome, such as presenting the risks and benefits of a new approach to cancer diagnosis rather than a full range of options. Sense about Science has observed that when researchers do this, participants often, once they've become familiar with a subject, want to go back and unpick the way it was initially presented. This can damage trust in engagement.

Useful examples of scaffolding in deliberations about climate and about artificial intelligence (AI) have been written up.[17] The approach could be developed from these structured settings to think about the different kinds of scaffolding that different trust segments might need more broadly to access discussions about research.

This doesn't all go one way. Researchers, for their part, benefit from a structured introduction to public views, context and history when undertaking engagement exercises, and this should include thinking about the drivers of trust.

[16] Involve, 'Knowledge Base', accessed 5 October 2026, https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/.
[17] Paul Upham et al., 'Scaffolding, Software and Scenarios: Applying Bruner's Learning Theory to Energy Scenario Development with the Public', *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 81 (January 2014): 131–42, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2013.05.001;
Reema Patel, *A Framework and Self Assessment Workbook for Including Public Voices in AI* (Elgon Social Research and ESRC Digital Good Network, 2025), https://elgonsocial.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/frameworksbooklet_v2.pdf.

3. Taking account of trust segments: the trust challenges

The five trust segments of the UK population that emerged from the Trust in Scientists survey show quite different views of institutions, scientists' behaviour, whether science is political and whether it is in the interests of 'people like me'.[18] With this lens, we need to look anew at what we do and the assumptions we make in different types of communication and engagement.

There are nine of these trust challenges:

The challenge	What research leaders should do
i. 'On my side' is a significant consideration	Respond to the public's search for signifiers of trustworthiness and public benefit, and make these accessible (and reliable) in their communications.
ii. Signifiers of trustworthiness are diverse	Check that your work demonstrates trustworthiness in ways that are readily grasped by different segments of the public.
iii. Uncertainty must be communicated in a more polarised context	Be upfront, so that uncertainties are not 'outed' by others; be mindful of the gap between scientific and social meanings of uncertainty and speak to it; and use tested methods to communicate numbers.
iv. Use doesn't indicate trust in the new media ecosystem	Use the insights on the sources used and trusted by Science Critics, Betrayed Trusters, Disengaged Trusters, Contented Trusters and Science Advocates, with the help of TrustLens, to plan and review communications. Ensure communications teams are familiar with these differences. Consider how outreach activities might be an opportunity to create sustained relationships.
v. Communication of science needs public engagement	Involve some of the people you want to communicate with in thinking about how findings and their context should be shared 'for people like me' early in research; for long-term projects or those producing findings likely to have a direct public impact, consider co-creating a public interface.
vi. Inclusion of different trust segments in public engagement	Think about how different trust segments might respond and engage differently in activities from planning to dissemination: use the TrustMapper (four questions for participants) to assess which segments you are engaging with. Use the resources in Wellcome's Engaged Research for Health to help with widening participation.

[18] In 2025 a Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) survey found that 45% thought research and development (R&D) benefits some people more than others with wealthy/elite and private companies identified as the beneficiaries (page 23). More details: Campaign for Science and Engineering, Public Attitudes to R&D (CaSE, 2025), 23, https://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/analysis-and-publications/detail/public-attitudes-to-rd-2025/.

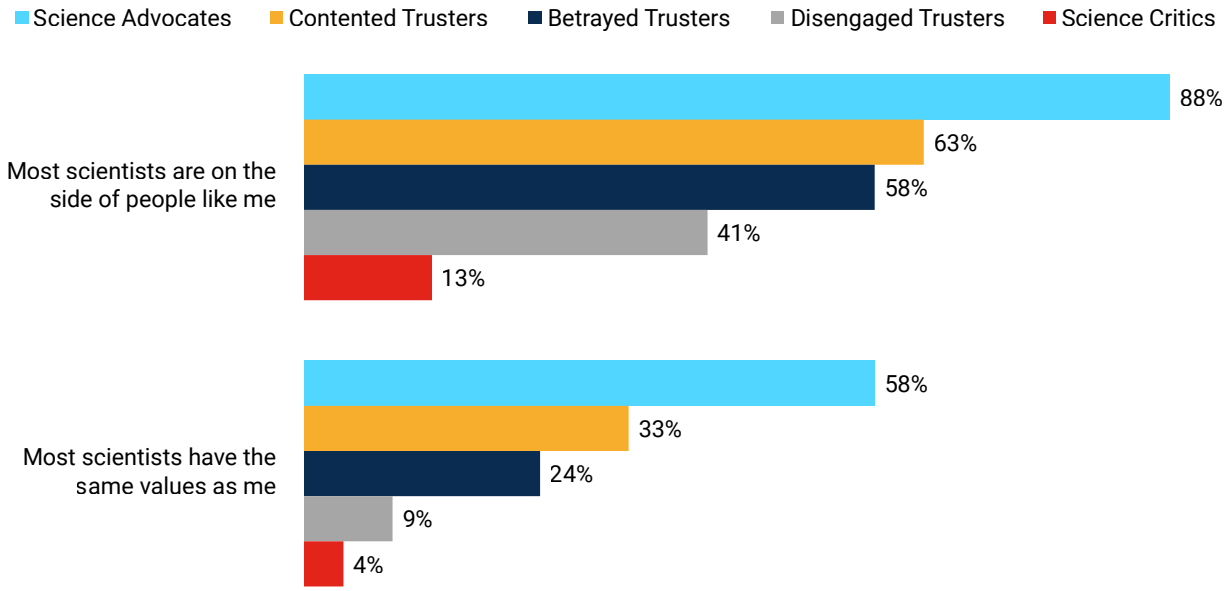
The challenge	What research leaders should do
vii. Communicating the benefits of research	Use the findings on the benefits of research from Trust in Scientists, Britain Talks Trust in Science and the Public Attitudes to Science surveys to identify likely points of connection. Evaluate experiences, to help build the nascent research base on how to do this well.
viii. Maintaining relationships	Towards the end of an engagement activity, provide participants with a way to stay genuinely connected, and prompt discussions at your institution about how to support continuity.
ix. Finding common ground for different views	Ensure that people still have access to evidence even when debates are polarised or hostile; be honest about points of disagreement but empathetic about different perspectives.

The following section looks at insights and resources that can help.

i. ‘On my side’ is a significant consideration

Figure 5: There is a clear stepwise decline from the most to least trusting and engaged groups in the proportion who feel that scientists are on the side of “people like them”.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
% who strongly/tend to agree



Base: 795 ‘Science Advocates’, 811 ’Contented Trusters’, 788 ‘Betrayed Trusters’, 996 ‘Disengaged Trusters’ and 872 ‘Science Critics’, 8–11 May 2026.

There are clear steps down from the most to least trusting and engaged groups regarding whether scientists are on the side of ‘people like them’. When viewed from the perspective of political outlook, which has a different profile among scientists than the rest of the population, and from the perspective of socio-economic status, there is some truth to it.

Self-awareness is discussed in the previous section. But this is not simply about recognising and acknowledging differences between researchers and the public. It also means ensuring that people feel able to engage with, use and trust science.

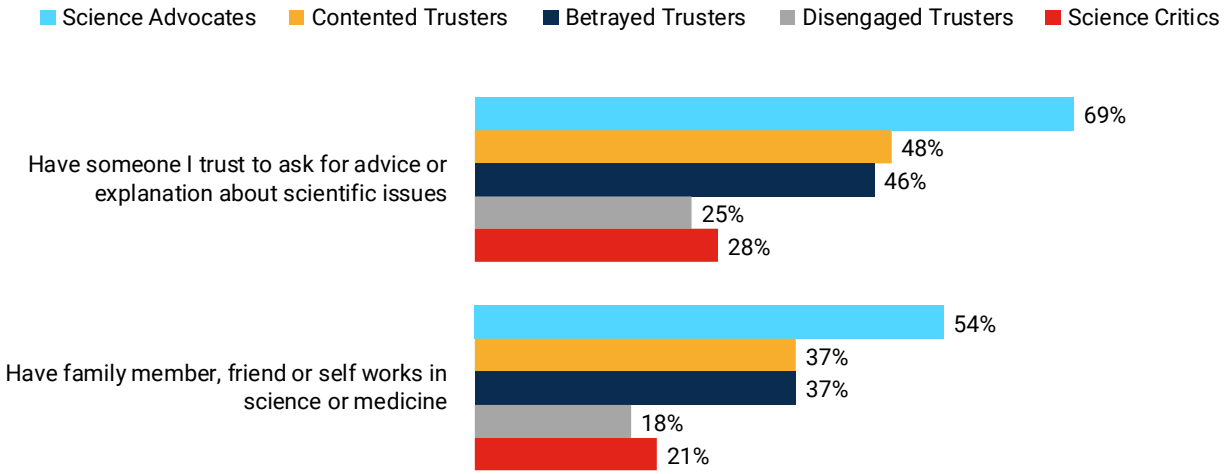
There are two elements of this: how easily people can grasp signifiers of trustworthiness and how easy it is to see the connection between research and benefits to knowledge or well-being.

We *all* look for indicators of trustworthiness. As a scientist, you may use evidence-based indicators to decide what you think about a research controversy, but rely on recommendations from friends when choosing a lawyer. In both cases, you are looking for reasons to trust your choice but your access to ways of making a judgement is more limited on one than the other.

The more research leaders empathise with this and make the signifiers of trustworthiness and the purpose and motives of research accessible (and reliable), the more readily people will use them to make some of their judgements. And the less likely it is that identities will crystallise into a generalised mistrust of scientists.

Figure 6: Most Advocates have a personal connection to a scientist, or someone they can get science advice from, while only minorities of Disengaged Trusters or Science Critics do.

Do you, or do any of your friends or family, work in a job using science or medicine? / Do you have anyone you know and trust you could ask for advice or an explanation around a scientific issue you were interested in, or not?

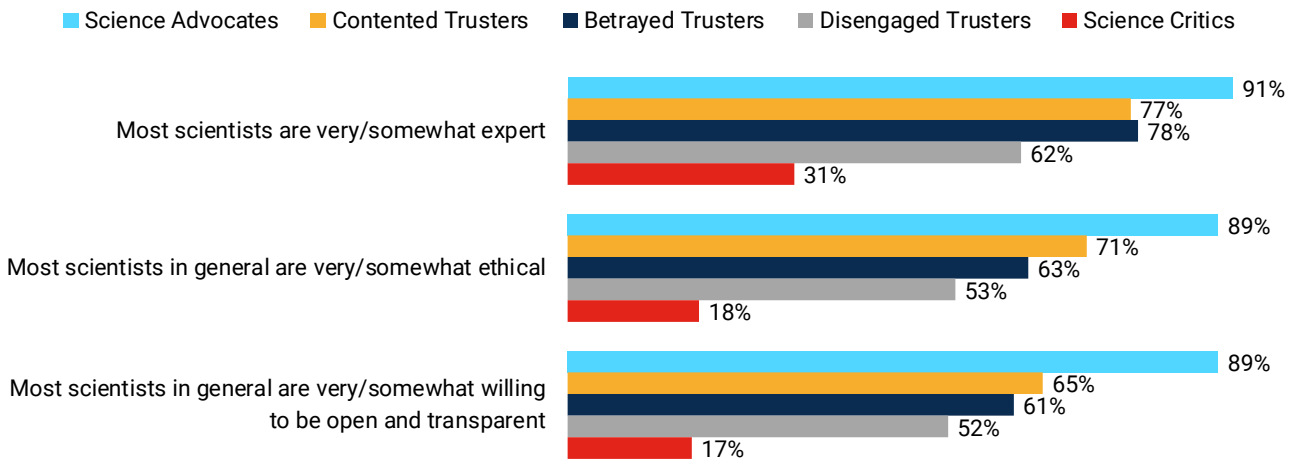


Base: 795 'Science Advocates', 811 'Contented Trusters', 788 'Betrayed Trusters', 996 'Disengaged Trusters' and 872 'Science Critics', 8–11 May 2026.

ii. Signifiers of trustworthiness are diverse

Figure 7: Perceptions of scientists' expertise, ethics and openness become progressively more negative as levels of trust decrease.

How [expert or inexpert] / [ethical or unethical] / [willing or unwilling to be open and transparent] are most scientists in general?



Base: 795 'Science Advocates', 811 'Contented Trusters', 788 'Betrayed Trusters', 996 'Disengaged Trusters' and 872 'Science Critics', 8–11 May 2026.

Expertise may be a defining characteristic of a scientist but it is not what determines levels of trust. Betrayed Trusters and Science Critics are more likely to agree that scientists are expert than that they are ethical or transparent.

This does not mean that expertise is unimportant to trust or to the perceived motives of scientists, but does mean that work needs to be done in other areas to strengthen trust. Divergent trust segments and growing polarisation make it impossible to anticipate what gives every segment assurance about science being reliable. But we know from RAND Europe's 2026 review, that it is likely to be a combination of expertise, integrity, transparency, benevolence and responsiveness (or inclusiveness).[19]

[19] Milne et al., *Public Trust in Science*.

The RAND Europe report also makes an important point about explaining what you tell people **(responsible openness)**: for some groups, discussion about uncertainty or funding causes more doubts than for others and this requires explanation – explaining your funding, for example, instead of simply publishing it.

Organisations also must think about ways to include and demonstrate these qualities, noting that cynicism about institutions is growing, while trust in researchers' competence remains high across all segments. It is important to note that routine demonstration tends to be more effective, particularly in a media landscape where it's hard to make a clear statement once and where grand statements about virtue are not well received.[20]

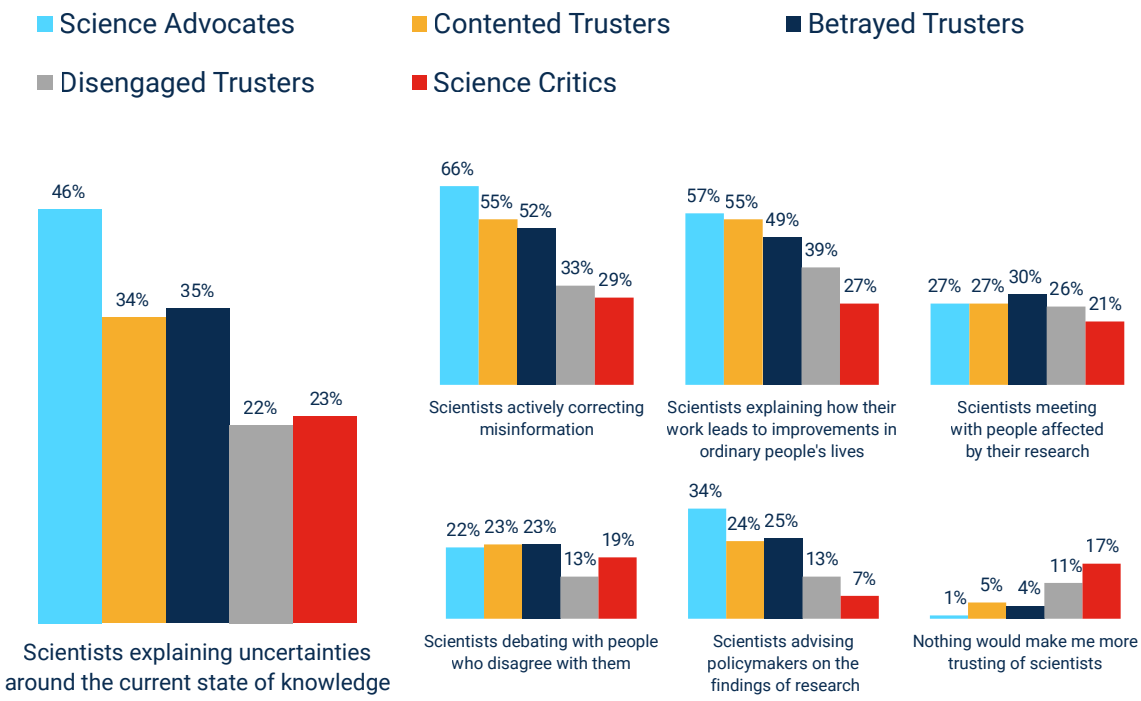
> "Well, the benevolent approach is to cut pollution out fast everywhere you can do it. But benevolent to who? Benevolent to the people who work in those industries, benevolent to the shareholders, benevolent to the people who are at the sharp edge, which is usually the poorer communities, but not always...There is this difference I see between the evidence and the solutions."
>
> (Input from research leader consultations, 2026)

[20] See for example: Emily Yarrow and Karen Johnston, 'Athena SWAN: "Institutional Peacocking" in the Neoliberal University', *Gender, Work & Organization* 30, no. 3 (2023): 757–72, https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12941.

iii. Uncertainty must be communicated clearly in a more polarised context

Figure 8: The top actions to increase trust vary significantly by segment, but relatively few of any segment – even Critics – say nothing would make them more trusting.

Scientists need to decide how to spend their time between doing their scientific research and engaging with the public and other groups to explain their research or its implications, so that people understand and trust their work. Which of the following, if any, is most likely to make you more trusting of scientists? Please select up to four.



Base: 795 'Science Advocates', 811 'Contented Trusters', 788 'Betrayed Trusters', 996 'Disengaged Trusters' and 872 'Science Critics', 8–11 May 2026.

At least a fifth of every trust segment said that scientists explaining the uncertainties around the current state of knowledge would increase their trust (ranging from 22% of Disengaged Trusters to 46% of Science Advocates).

Research leaders acknowledge that talking about uncertainty is central to honest communication of science. But bridging the gap between scientific understanding of the term and the social meaning, which embodies more apprehension, is daunting. This is especially so in polarised subjects such as climate, where scientists are less trusted and uncertainty may become an excuse to reject the science.

The best way to look at this is that some misrepresentation is inevitable, genuine misunderstanding can be avoided with clarity, and in a more polarised context it's an opportunity to lead a conversation about the uncertainties rather than leave it for someone else or the internet to do.

Sense about Science and the former Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication have well-used and long-enduring resources about communicating uncertainty.[21] Their key principles can be summarised as:

Be upfront: Honest communication about what is unknown does not undermine trust

Be mindful of the gap between scientific and everyday uses of uncertainty: Explain what uncertainty doesn't mean: uncertainty doesn't mean that anything could be true, or that we can't take any action

Use numerical ranges: Actual numbers and numerical ranges work better than vague words or hidden caveats

Distinguish settled and unsettled knowledge: Separate core, agreed-upon facts from actively debated or evolving areas

Show data quality: Explain the strength or weakness of underlying evidence so people neither over-trust nor unfairly dismiss claims

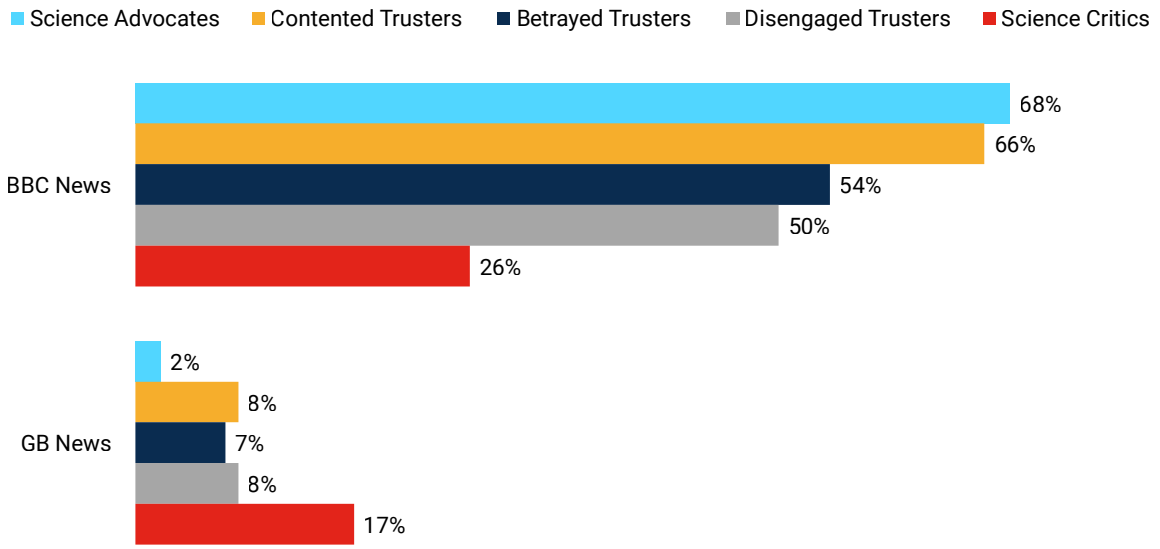
Specific numerical formats tested by researchers are available from the Winton Centre archive, which is now curated by Sense about Science and Lloyd's Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk (IPUR) at RiskKnowHow.org.

[21] Sense about Science, 'Talking about Uncertainty in Science'. https://senseaboutscience.org/activities/talking-about-uncertainty-in-science/.

iv. Use doesn't indicate trust in the new media ecosystem

Figure 9: The BBC is a significant source of general news for all groups, except Science Critics – although not all who use it think it's reliable. Few of the other segments use GB News.

Which of the following do you use most often to find the news? Please tick all that apply.



Base: 795 'Science Advocates', 811 'Contented Trusters', 788 'Betrayed Trusters', 996 'Disengaged Trusters' and 872 'Science Critics', 8–11 May 2026.

"...there is this question that in an increasingly fragmented media landscape where the people who are most likely to be sceptical of science are not going to be watching the main channels. How do you approach that?"

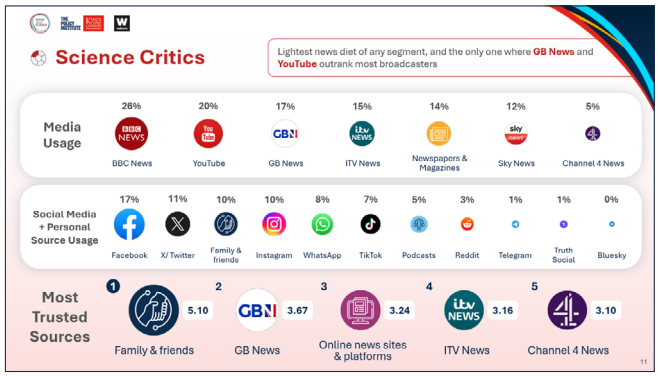
(Input from research leader consultations, 2026)

In the new media ecosystem personal networks matter a lot, with friends and family the most trusted source in the population as a whole, and highest for three segments (Disengaged Trusters, Science Critics, and Betrayed Trusters).

Thinking about who is using which sources AND what they trust will help research leaders to work out where to focus their time — and where it is unlikely to have an impact.

TrustLens explores the different media platforms that the UK public use and trust for news and information according to the Trust in Scientists survey. It can be used to support research communications planning among research teams and public engagement professionals.





In addition to more informed media and social media strategies, given the emphasis on friends and family for some groups, research leaders should consider how outreach activities might be an opportunity to create and sustain more direct networks of connection and news.

For example, researchers engaging people in work on over-the-counter tests offer people the opportunity to follow their own social media accounts for updates on further research. This creates a more direct connection between participants and the researchers, rather than directing them to the university's corporate account, which is less relevant to their interests.

v. Communication of science needs public engagement

Thinking about the public and interested parties at the 'dissemination' point in a study is unlikely to lead to successful engagement and it limits the impact of communication. Late-stage thinking has long frustrated public engagement leaders, communication professionals and funders.

Research leaders want to do more effective dissemination but wonder where to start. Some feel they resort to standard publication plans because everything else feels like guessing.

Instead of guessing, we can ask the people we want to reach to advise on or co-create dissemination plans so that results can be seen and used by 'people like me'. They are well placed to describe the research, think about where they would expect to read about it and what they would show up for. This can be low budget: asking a few community groups if you can join them to discuss it for example.

The And… But… Therefore… approach described on page 18 can be adapted to think of each component as a moment for involving people in what and how to communicate.



For larger-scale, longer-term projects, Sense about Science has written up its experience of using a process for co-creating public interfaces with research.

Creating a public interface with your research is a workbook for researchers, particularly aimed at projects introducing new research facilities, including substantial data monitoring, or spanning longer timescales, as well as those that will produce results or data for decision-making, all of which rely on public confidence.

It's important to think about other intermediaries too from a trust perspective. Policy, Expertise and Trust in Action (PERITIA), a Horizon Europe-funded project led by University College Dublin, with King's College London, Sense about Science and others, has written up the impact of different intermediaries on trust.[23]

[23] PERITIA, 'Working Paper and Guidelines on Holding Citizens' Fora in 5 Capital Cities', May 2023, https://peritia-trust.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/D11.1-Working-Paper-and-Guidelines-on-Holding-Citizens-Fora-in-5-Capital-Cities_vsn-1.0.pdf.

vi. Inclusion of all trust segments in public engagement

For research leaders engaging with a more complex trust environment, participation is likely to be harder to achieve among Disengaged Trusters, and constructive dialogue harder with Science Critics and the 18% of people who feel betrayed by scientific institutions. The Public Attitudes to Science survey (2025)[24] found that 19% of people want more of a say in science and research but only 9–12% want to be involved.

'Drive-by' consultations and sudden announcements of results are missing the relationships that are key to building trust in research outputs. In the same vein, we must look afresh at whether public engagement is experienced as extractive – helping the research but failing to offer anything back. We must also look at whether engagement activities that look diverse by all demographic measures are actually systematically missing some trust segments.

Breadth: Where researchers are embarking on structured engagement projects, guidance available from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)[25] covering the whole cycle emphasises relationship building, including:

- Identifying research questions
- Design and priority-setting
- Governance
- Co-delivery of research activities
- Communication of key findings
- Involvement in knowledge exchange.

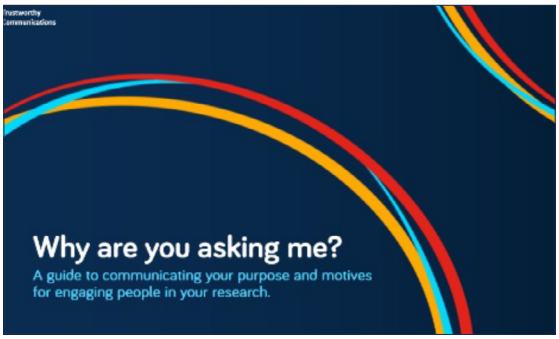
Researchers will need to think about how different trust segments might respond to and engage with differently in each of these areas. Helpful resources for this include **TrustLens**, the RAND Europe guidance on trustworthiness and the segment analysis from the Trust in Scientists survey.



TrustMapper, a new tool published alongside this briefing, lets researchers explore trust in scientists among a group of their own participants. Researchers can invite a group to answer four questions from the Trust in Scientists survey. The tool will then use the responses to allocate each participant to their most likely segment. This allows the researcher to quickly gauge whether the people in the room represent a range of trust attitudes across the five UK trust segments. TrustMapper also provides a snapshot of how the group compares with the national picture.

[24] Ipsos et al., *Public Attitudes to Science 2025: Main Report*.
[25] UK Research and Innovation, 'Co-Production in Research', 5 October 2026, https://www.ukri.org/manage-your-award/good-research-resource-hub/research-co-production/.

Researchers undertaking engagement in contentious areas often encounter suspicion about their purpose – and sometimes people are just puzzled or a bit intimidated about potentially being asked questions they won't know the answer to. In the context of polarisation, disengagement and suspicion, we would expect this to happen more often. Sense about Science has written up the way it coaches researchers to think about their reasons ahead of time.



Why are you asking me? is a guided slide deck to help researchers introduce participants to the principles and practical reasons for involving them in engagement activities, including a prompt for participants to add their own aims.

Depth: Wellcome's 'Engaged Research for Health' provides guidance and resources for inclusion of people who face practical and trust barriers to involvement, and many of the principles and practices are relevant to reaching people who are critical or disengaged.[26] The quality framework for engagement activities developed by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE)[27] offers the flexibility to consider trust segments in quality evaluation.

There is a lot of undocumented relevant experience that is likely to include insights and case reviews that would be helpful to other researchers in navigating difficult subjects with less common ground on trust. An initial case log compiled for this project found close to 300 examples where insights that are relevant to building trust are likely and could be further tested. Documenting experiences, while sometimes challenging for resources, will be crucial for the testing and sharing that is now needed as the research community engages with the changing drivers of trust.

[26] Wellcome, 'How to Use an Engaged Research Approach', accessed 16 September 2026, https://wellcome.org/research-funding/guidance/prepare-to-apply/using-engaged-research-approach.
[27] National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 'Tutorials: High Quality Engagement 101', February 2024, https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/resources/tutorials/high-quality-engagement-101.

Liverpool Civic Data Cooperative: Residents' Assembly & Community Charter

Case review:

The Liverpool City Region (LCR) Civic Data Cooperative brought together 59 residents for four days of structured deliberation to co-produce a Community Charter on Data and AI, later adopted by the LCR Combined Authority, the NHS Data into Action Programme and the University of Liverpool's Civic Health Innovation Labs (CHIL).

The team sought to get beyond what they felt were tokenistic consultations on AI and resisted any temptation to control the discussion or keep it on terms the researchers were most comfortable with – and this paid off in how satisfied people were with the impact of their contribution. One participant, reflecting on their AI knowledge before and after taking part, said the process gave them 'a chance to produce something that will have an impact on our community.'

Prof Iain Buchan (CHIL Director, University of Liverpool) said it mattered to 'keep things open, even if that's going to result in some difficult, gritty conversations.' A resident described the group afterwards as 'such a diverse group. You've got everyone – people from all walks of life.'

Born in Bradford: Age of Wonder

Case review:

Age of Wonder is Born in Bradford's seven-year longitudinal study following up to 30,000 young people through adolescence, using regular co-production groups with young people, parents and schools to shape questions, materials and how data is used.

Sometimes, it's hard to anticipate what you might be asked to compromise on or change, so stay open to considering unexpected challenges. What might be a technical consideration for researchers can have a different kind of meaning for other people. When young co-producers rejected a standard socio-economic status measure researchers had planned to use, the team recalled: 'They hated it... So, we scrapped it. We said, "Fine, we hear you guys and this is clearly a massive no go.""

Sickle Cell Society, James Lind Alliance and Genomics England: Priority Setting Partnership

Case review:

The Sickle Cell Society, the James Lind Alliance and Genomics England worked with people affected by sickle cell disorder (SCD)[28] to identify the most important research priorities for sickle cell and genomics.[29] The partnership recognised that many people with SCD have experienced under-resourced services, negative experiences of care, limited specialist knowledge and a lack of research into the condition, giving them substantial reasons to question whether healthcare and research institutions would listen to and address their priorities.

The team adapted the James Lind Alliance Priority Setting Partnership model[30] to make participation more accessible, hosting pre-workshops to gather advice on communication barriers, using plain-language digital outreach, offering introductory workshops on genomics, and conducting targeted sessions for younger audiences. The process involved hundreds of people affected by SCD, carers, carriers and healthcare professionals, resulting in a shared top ten list of research priorities.

"Trust is hard won but easily lost. It's important to create opportunities for people who have historically had less influence over research agendas, and to acknowledge people's experiences and concerns rather than treating them as obstacles to participation. However, involvement alone is not enough. Institutions need to build long term relationships with communities, demonstrate how people's contributions have shaped decisions, respond to the priorities identified, and be transparent about where change has and has not happened." (Sickle cell and genomics Priority Setting Partnership team, 2026)

[28] A collection of inherited health conditions that affect red blood cells, and can cause tiredness, anaemia, pain, and increased risk of infection, and which disproportionately affects those with an African or Caribbean family background.

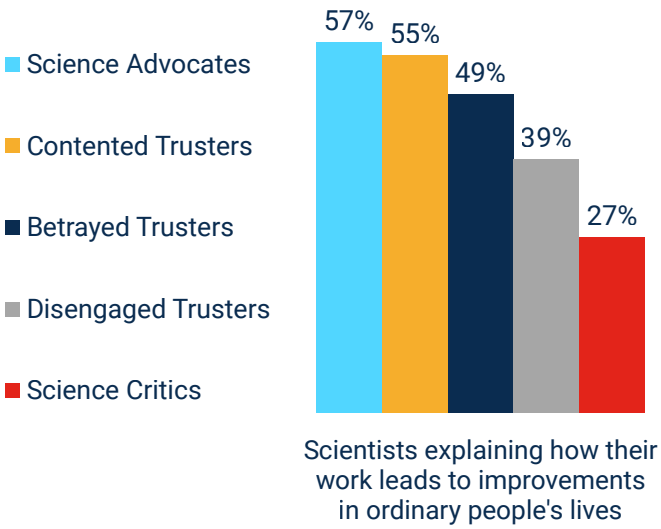
[29] Your genome is the instructions for making and maintaining you. It is written in a chemical code called DNA. All living things – plants, bacteria, viruses and animals – have a genome. Source: https://www.genomicsengland.co.uk/genomic-medicine/understanding-genomics.

[30] NIHR James Lind Alliance, 'About Priority Setting Partnerships', accessed 3 November 2026, https://www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/about-priority-setting-partnerships.

vii. Communicating the benefits of research

Figure 10: Communicating the benefits of research plays well across the segments, with even a quarter of Science Critics agreeing.

Which of the following, if any, is most likely to make you more trusting of scientists?



Base: 795 'Science Advocates', 811 'Contented Trusters', 788 'Betrayed Trusters', 996 'Disengaged Trusters' and 872 'Science Critics', 8–11 May 2026.

CaSE Public Attitudes to R&D 2025[31] found that 80% people say it's somewhat important that R&D delivers benefits for them and their family. More in Common reports from its 2025 survey that advances in medicine (31%) and technological innovation (30%) top the list of reasons for optimism.[32] NCCPE's guide on How public engagement helps create a more inclusive knowledge society advocates for engagement focusing on demonstrating how research benefits society and creates public value – explaining why it matters with reference to real-world applications.

The Trust in Scientists survey has revealed that the benefits of research are important to trust in all segments: scientists explaining to the public how their work leads to improvements in everyday life is top or second for all of the middle-truster segments as an action likely to increase trust.

In discussions about these findings, research leaders were keen to emphasise that it doesn't mean more hype or public relations but rather being thoughtful about why research matters and open about its implications.

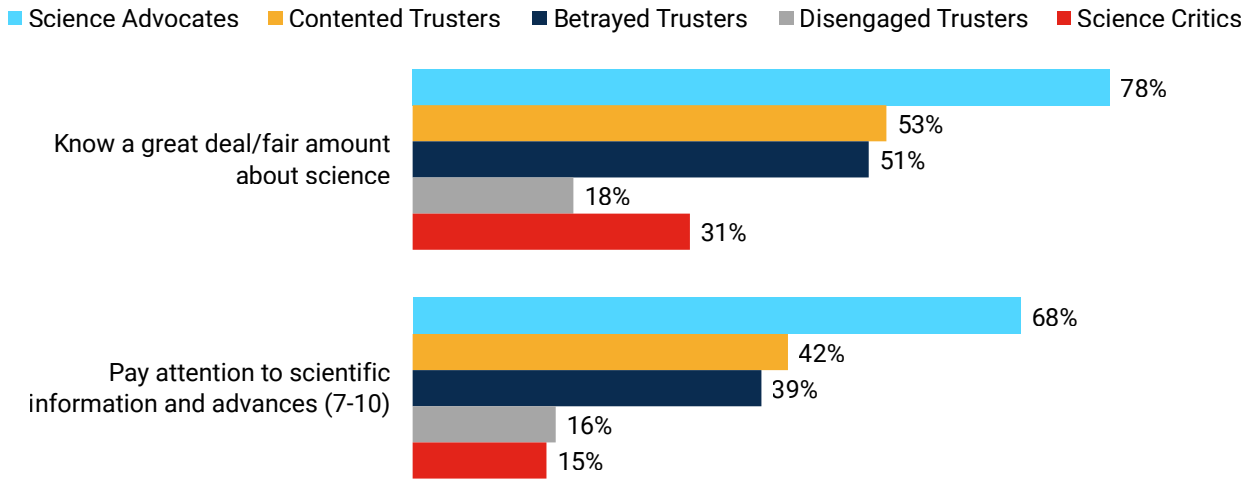
Research leaders also pointed out that despite cuts, the UK still benefits from having experienced science communicators, as well as science journalists who are adept at drawing out these implications on major findings. CaSE has produced resources to help researchers to communicate about the benefits of research.[33]

[31] Campaign for Science and Engineering, *Public Attitudes to R&D* (CaSE, 2025), 23, https://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/analysis-and-publications/detail/public-attitudes-to-rd-2025/.
[32] Herrick et al., *Britain Talks Trust in Science*.
[33] Campaign for Science and Engineering, 'CaSE's Guide to R&D on the Doorstep', What We Do, n.d., accessed 9 October 2026, https://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/what-we-do/public-opinion/advocacy-toolkit/case039s-guide-to-rampd-on-the-doorstep/; 'CaSE's Guide for Engaging the Public', What We Do, November 2025, https://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/what-we-do/public-opinion/advocacy-toolkit/guide-for-engaging-the-public/.

However, there is a considerable hurdle facing both researchers and the media in gaining the attention of lower-trust groups.

Figure 11: Self-rated knowledge about science generally aligns with levels of attention paid to science. The exception is Critics, who are twice as likely to say that they know at least a fair amount about science (31%) as to say they pay attention to it (15%).

How much do you personally know about science? / In general, how much attention, if any, do you pay to scientific information and advances? Please answer on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 is 'do not trust at all' and 10 is 'trust completely'.



Base: 795 'Science Advocates', 811 'Contented Trusters', 788 'Betrayed Trusters', 996 'Disengaged Trusters' and 872 'Science Critics', 8–11 May 2026.

How much attention people pay to scientific information explained 11% of the variation in trust in scientists in general. Attention is a significant positive driver of trust.

Understanding the media ecosystem through the lens of the five trust segments and engaging the audience with the design of communications as described in sections iii and iv above will help address this. Research that tracks the impact of approaches and subjects will also be needed, to help make more strategic decisions about the time and resources spent on communicating benefits.

> "What we need to do is not just go to people during a time of crisis, but have the stories out there all of the time"
>
> (Input from research leader consultations, 2026)

viii. Maintaining relationships

It is clear from investigating drivers of trust and reviewing effective engagement that building networks and relationships, particularly with people not already engaged with science, matters above all else.

At first glance, this might seem to require significant additional time and resources. However, researchers and research institutions already make a lot of relationships in the course of their work. The Trust in Scientists survey shines a new light on the importance of maintaining them. Even organisations that are fully focussed on public activities, such as the Royal Institution and British Science Association, are keen to think about areas where their connections could be given a greater permanence for people. The impact of many small increments in maintaining connections could be very significant to the future of trust in scientists and science.

We form our identities based on our relationships. The social psychologists who contributed to this study drew on their experience working in conflict zones, where relationships that cross entrenched in-groups and out-groups can help people engage with a wider range of ideas and perspectives.[34]

Given what we now know about the importance of connection and relationships to trust, building and maintaining these relationships may also be one of our strongest safeguards against growing polarisation and identity-based mistrust.

There are considerable holes in that endeavour. One is the tendency for research engagement and public outreach programmes to come to a sudden halt when funding ends. It is important to be transparent and honest with people involved in engagement or consultation exercises about whether and how the relationship will be maintained, or not. NCCPE sets out a 'partnership cycle' — from scoping and finding a partner, through agreeing governance and expectations, to sustaining or ending the relationship well.

A second challenge is turnover of people. University and College Union statistics show that two-thirds of research staff are now employed on fixed-term contracts.[35] Organisations need to look at how to support continuity: research leaders can use **Putting trust at the heart of your strategy**, published alongside this briefing, to encourage senior leaders to discuss what they can do. There are also team organisation approaches that help mitigate staff changes. This has worked well for the Institute of Clinical Sciences at Imperial College London and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, which has documented its experience.[36]

Thirdly there is poor behaviour that needs to be addressed with colleagues – a global study in 2025 found that less than half (42%) of clinical trial participants are contacted about the results of the trial, despite this being a regulatory requirement.[37]

[34] 'Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends Programme', XCEPT, King's College London, accessed 5 October 2026, https://www.xcept-research.org/.
[35] University and College Union, 'Manifesto Launched as Data Shows over 6 in 10 University Research Staff Denied Permanent Jobs', February 2025, https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/13919/Manifesto-launched-as-data-shows-over-6-in-10-university-research-staff-denied-permanent-jobs.
[36] O. Gafari et al., 'Building Trust and Increasing Inclusion in Public Health Research: Co-Produced Strategies for Engaging UK Ethnic Minority Communities in Research', *Public Health* 233 (August 2024): 90–99, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2024.05.007.
[37] Shaloime Sine and Annick de Bruin, 'It's a fact: sharing clinical trial results with participants builds trust', Clinical Leader, May 2026, https://www.clinicalleader.com/doc/it-s-a-fact-sharing-clinical-trial-results-with-participants-builds-trust-0001.

ix. Finding common ground for different views

A healthy trusting relationship between science and society does not mean that everyone has to agree. As some of the work on communicating about use of animals in research has shown, people with diametrically opposed views can engage respectfully and be open to learning from each other.

When dealing with misinformation and hostility to scientific evidence, researchers often feel at a considerable disadvantage, with the tools that others use to gain attention and approval seemingly at odds with science (such as exaggeration or opinion-driven facts) or outside their reasonable skill set. On the other hand, researchers can bring some relief to politicised debates, a fresh perspective and something useful to people who are trying to make sense of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or AI. Trustworthy research will find no place in these discussions if no-one puts it there. As the Science Media Centre stated in discussion about the Public Attitudes to Science survey 2025, if organisations with the most suitable experts keep them away from debates where there is controversy, the problem will definitely get worse.

Understanding more about the drivers of trust and exploring others' views will help to create a more empathetic approach. **Figuring out the question**, published alongside this briefing, is a workbook to help researchers to do this, drawing on a listening well approach, and also to consider whether public comments are made in good faith and when it's worth engaging.

Codifying what we have learned as a sector about engaging in more difficult and hostile debates is work that needs to be undertaken in light of the insights gained in this project.

> **"If you're trying to get evidence across, you're optimising for two things, you're trying to engage people and you're trying to get accuracy. I think often...in the wider ecosystem, we've got a lot of people who are just optimising for engagement. I think that creates a lot of challenges really in that kind of competing attention ecosystem."**
>
> (Input from research leader consultations, 2026)

Research leaders are keen to share and learn on this. What they agree about is that firing broadsides and corrections at public discussion does not work. While 'scientists correcting misinformation' scored relatively highly on the list of actions scientists could take to improve trust, this is unlikely to be a vote for simple fact checking. Set alongside the public's views about scientists' beliefs and values, and their feelings about information overloads, this may indicate a desire for scientists to show humility and a willingness to self-correct. It may also reflect a desire for scientists to play a protective role in tackling scams and misinformation.

Either way, when researchers engage with the public in a questioning and open way, there is the possibility of finding agreement or establishing some common ground for different views, and building the relationships on which trust depends.

For an easy to access online version of the insights and tools in this briefing, visit: **www.senseaboutscience.org/.**

Acknowledgements

We thank Wellcome for commissioning this work, and particularly Dr Alexandra Parsons, Emily Jesper-Mir and Rebecca Asher of the Engagement Labs team, as well as Mark Henderson, Philippa Michael, Lara Clements, and all Wellcome colleagues who fed into this work for their input and insights.

We thank the Policy Institute at King's College London for their collaboration and insights, particularly on the Trust in Scientists survey. We thank Professor Bobby Duffy and Dr Eliel Cohen for their close collaboration, Dr Paolo Morini for survey analysis, George May for communications leadership, and YouGov for administering the survey.

Sense about Science's core project team comprised Tracey Brown OBE, Dr Nita Pillai, Hayley D'Souza and Dr Isaac Reynolds.

The case reviews featured in this briefing were conducted by Simon Bradley, Hayley D'Souza, Dr Isaac Reynolds, and Dr Nita Pillai, with scoping and development support from Dr Toslima Khatun, Emily Cope and Holly Monkhouse. Our thanks to the British Geological Survey; John James, Greer Roberts, and Suzannah Kinsella; Professor Iain Buchan and Gary Leeming; Professor Sheena Asthana and Dr Kieran Green; Professor John Wright, Dr David Ryan, and Zarina Mirza; and Professor Sabina Mihelj, Freya Robb, and Dr Alun Davies for sharing their knowledge and experiences.

Hundreds of people contributed to this work through discussions, interviews, workshops, and user testing from February – November 2026 including research leaders, public engagement specialists and public and patient representatives. This work would not have been possible without the input, thoughts, and feedback of many colleagues, reviewers, and collaborators to whom we are very thankful.

Thanks in particular to:

Professor Adam Kucharski
Dr Adam Wright
Professor Aja Murray
Dr Alasdair Cameron
Alexander James Phillips
Alexis Mastroyiannis
Dr Alun Davies
Amarpreet Singh Judge
Dr Angela Bednarek
Professor Dame Angela McLean
Becky Coniam-Gudka
Bella Starling
Dr Branwen Morgan
Professor Brooke Rogers
Dr Caroline Gillett
Professor Catriona McKinnon
Professor Charlotte Summers
Professor Christina Pagel
Dr Claire Bithell
Professor Conrad Keating
Deb Cohen
Dr Doreen Tembo
Emma Greenwood
Fiona Fox
Dr Fiona McEwen
Dr Frances Downey
Professor Gesche Huebner
Dr Guy Hooper
Holly Rogers
Professor Iain Buchan
Professor J. Tim Newton
Dr James Canton
Professor Jane K Hill
Jo Osborn
John Burn-Murdoch
Professor John Wright
Professor Joy Zhang
Dr Julia Wilson
Katherine Mathieson
Katie Weeks
Levin Wheller
Dr Lindsay Keith
Lynn Laidlaw
Maili Raven-Adams
Dr Manos Tsakiris
Mark Easton
Professor Mark Miodownik
Martin Wessel
Max Tse
Professor Melanie Smallman
Melissa Bovis
MySociety
Dr Nafees Hamid
Natalie Creary
Neil Packenham-Walsh
Nick Ross
Professor Noura Al Moubayed
Nuffield Trust
Osama Rahman
Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser
Professor Pasco Fearon
Professor Paul Halloran
Paul Manners
Professor Peter Knight
Rachel Coyle
Dr Rebecca Hill
Richard Stephens
Dr Robin Lovell-Badge
Professor Rosie Green
Professor Sabina Mihelj
Professor Sarah Bohndiek
Dr Sarah Cumbers
Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore
Shahid Islam
Professor Shakoor Hajat
Simon Denegri OBE
Sophie Duncan
Sophie McCann
Stephen Gibson
Steve Palmer
Professor Tereza Capelos
Tom Saunders
Tony Ageh
Professor Trudie Lang
Professor Wiebke Arlt

Published in November 2026

This publication is part of the Trustworthy Communications and Engagement project by Sense about Science and the Policy Institute at King's College London, funded by Wellcome.

The text in this document is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, provided the original author and source are credited.

Design: Open Creative Communications
www.opencc.co.uk

Sense about Science is an independent body that promotes the public interest in sound science and evidence. Founded in 2002, Sense about Science works with decision-makers, world-leading researchers and community groups to raise the standard of evidence in public life and to ensure the public has access to the evidence behind important decisions.

For further information, contact Sense about Science:

www.senseaboutscience.org
hello@senseaboutscience.org

Sense about Science
Registered Charity No. 1146170
Company No: 6771027