Putting trust at the heart of your strategy

Six practical conversations for senior leaders

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

Introduction

Trust in science and scientists in the UK looks stable at headline level: 63% of the public say they trust scientists. But that trust is not evenly shared across all types of scientists or institutions.

An extensive, nationally representative survey by the Policy Institute at King's College London and Sense about Science has revealed that headline trust hides deep variation by values, identity and politics, echoing patterns already visible in US science debates and elsewhere. It also masks disengagement and unexpected views about how scientists behave.[1]

This workbook sets out six practical conversations to help senior leaders in research institutions reflect on how organisational strategies and plans should respond to changing patterns of trust.

This underexplored area is of growing importance to research institutions. The combination of increasingly polarised societies and identity-driven politics alongside elements of science being pulled into 'culture war' debates presents a clear risk. If trust in science becomes part of more deeply held political identities, engaging people with sceptical views will be much more difficult.

The survey was commissioned to provide fresh insights into tested approaches to communications and engagement. These are presented in ***Earning Trust: A briefing for research leaders on communication and engagement in a lower trust environment,***[2] accompanied by examples of effective approaches and new tools to strengthen trust through communications and engagement.

[1] 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

[2] Sense about Science, *Earning trust: A briefing for research leaders on communication and engagement in a lower trust environment*, Trustworthy Communication (2026), www.senseaboutscience.org/trust-in-scientists/earning-trust.

How to use this workbook

Putting trust at the heart of your strategy is a suggested process for senior leadership to address the risks and opportunities presented in the **Earning Trust briefing**. The relative importance of each of the conversations will vary depending on your organisation, your specialism, audiences and the risks you face.

Before using this workbook, read the Earning Trust briefing document, then:

Work through the six conversations in the following sections:

1. **Our dependence on trust**
2. **Inclusiveness**
3. **Contributing to polarisation and culture wars**
4. **Frank, transparent dealings**
5. **Explaining the value of research**
6. **The relationship legacies in our work**

Use each conversation to work out your organisational priorities and then develop your strategy and action plan to address the changing trust picture.

Draw from the approaches and tools in the Earning Trust briefing where relevant, and use the data to develop other ways of tackling these issues. As you implement changes, evaluate how these new organisational approaches and tools have performed and how to improve further.

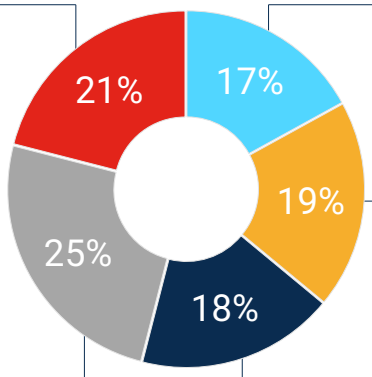
The five trust groups that make up the UK

The Trust in Scientists survey found that the public splits into five distinct trust segments — ranging from Science Advocates (17%) to Science Critics (21%) — each with different views about institutions, the integrity of scientists, the motives of scientists and the benefits of research, and each paying attention to different types and sources of science information, if at all.

The strongest driver of trust is not perceived expertise, but whether people feel scientists are 'on the side of people like them'.[3] See Annex for a summary of each segment.

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

[3] 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*.

1. Our dependence on trust

Research organisations' actions, plans and communications contain assumptions about public trust and values. Understanding the importance of trust to our work will help us identify strengths, weaknesses and opportunities to build relationships with research that benefit the public, nurture staff and maintain credibility. Survey data on the views of different segments of the population will help identify actions that could be taken to build trusting relationships.

Questions to consider:

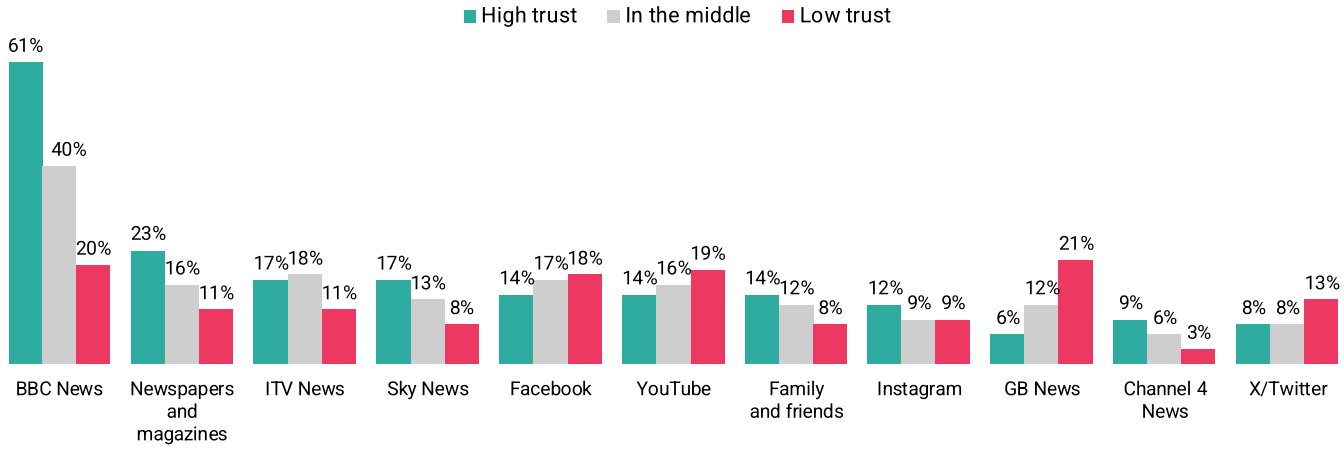
- How does trust in scientists affect us directly (profile, study recruitment, safe working, local relationships, influence and impact of our research) or indirectly (research funding, academic independence, impact)?
- Are we seen as a trustworthy institution by the public, and how might that affect our researchers?
- Where in our organisational strategy are we assuming a reservoir of public trust that these data suggest we can no longer take for granted?
- What would be the cost if polarisation increased and trust among contented, betrayed and disengaged trusters eroded further?

2. Inclusiveness

Trust segments reveal quite strongly demarcated attitudes towards institutions, scientists and some areas of research. This is very likely already affecting how much some segments are participating in activities around research institutions or how frequently they encounter research communications.

This is against a backdrop where UK civic participation has fallen: the 2025 Community Life Survey by the UK government found that 34% of adults had engaged in some form of civic activity in the past year, down from 42% in 2020.4 As well as being less likely to be involved in common endeavours, people are also consuming different media. It's important to understand whether some groups of people are being systematically not reached or excluded in an organisation's activities.

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



* Including through their websites and online. Base: 2,817 UK adults 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.

Questions to consider:

- Who are we engaging with? Which of the five segments are under-represented in our participant recruitment, advisory panels, engagement and outreach activities, and public-facing communications?
- Whose perspectives and levels of trust are currently represented in our engagement activities – and whose might be missing?
- Are Science Advocates and Contented Trusters over-represented in those activities?
- How could we better recognise and respond to differences in how people trust and engage with science throughout our activities?
- What would a deliberate strategy to reach Disengaged Trusters and Betrayed Trusters look like, and how would it be resourced?

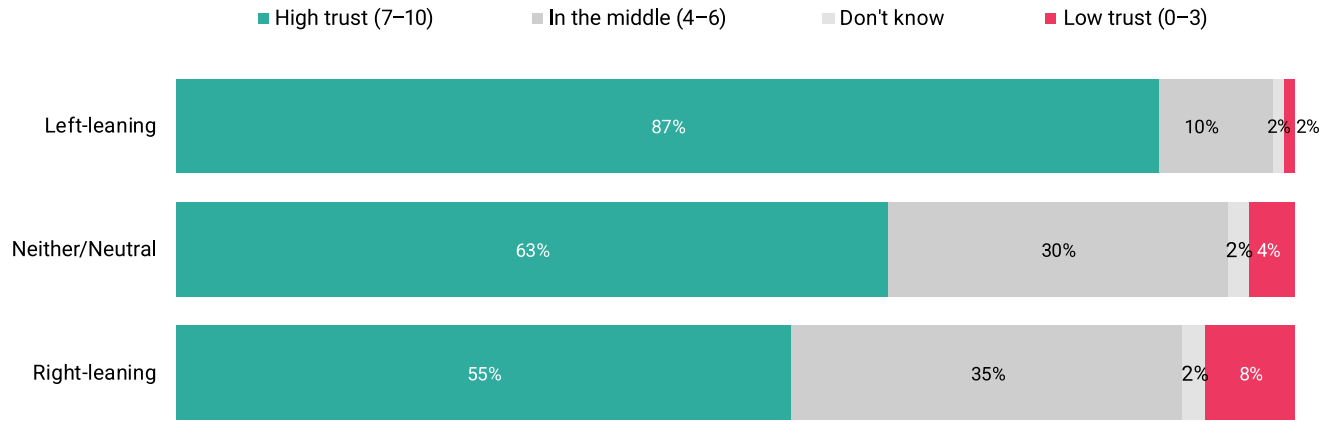
[4] Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, Community Life Survey 2024/25 (UK Government, 2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202425-annual-publication.

3. Contributing to polarisation and culture wars

Our survey found that people are more likely to trust scientists when they believe they share their values. In a lower-trust environment what scientists say, and perceptions of whose side they are on, can contribute to levels of trust. This is particularly the case where areas of scientific research are caught up directly in political debates.

As culture wars and political polarisation intensify, unrelated issues also become identity driven. As we have seen in other countries where political polarisation is strong, this can include science. There are already indications in the UK that attitudes to particular areas of research are driven by general political identities rather than specific views of the issue, as we see in climate science. It is harder to maintain or establish trusting discussions if rejection or embrace of science becomes part of a wider sense of belonging to a particular side.

How much, if at all, do you trust scientists in general? Please answer on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 is 'do not trust at all' and 10 is 'trust completely'.



Base: 4,262 UK adults, of whom 1,220 identify as left-leaning (1–2), 983 right-leaning (4–5) and 1,277 neutral (3), 8–11 May 2026.

Agreement that 'scientists have the same values as me' ranges from 34% among high-trusters to just 2% among low-trusters, and low-trusters are nearly five times as likely as high-trusters to say scientists are 'too woke' (38% vs 8%).

Only 32% of Reform UK supporters feel scientists are 'on their side' versus 71% of Green supporters — a 39-point gap. Earlier research by More in Common (2026)[5] found that 65% of surveyed scientists identify as left-leaning or progressive, compared with 33% of the British public. This difference in political outlook can mean that neutral statements or genuine questions from the public are perceived as more hostile than intended. This is particularly pronounced in climate science and other politically polarising fields.

Questions to consider:

- Thinking about our communications activities in particular, which areas might be seen by some segments of the population as identifying us with political or culture war positions?
- Are our communications teams and public researchers sufficiently aware, and what role should we play in increasing awareness of polarisation risks?
- Are there areas of our work where we should make a strategic priority of involving low-trust groups? How can we develop our expertise and practice to support that?
- In which areas might staff and researchers need more support to engage with sceptical or hostile questions? Do we, in organisational responses, have trouble distinguishing 'good faith' challenges we may not agree with from 'bad faith' challenges?

[5] Archie Herrick et al., *Britain Talks Trust in Science* (More in Common and Wellcome, 2026), https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/final_bttis_1504.pdf.

4. Frank, transparent dealings

Looking at the UK population as a whole, the survey revealed that nearly half the public (46%) believe scientists won't publish results their funders don't like — including 38% of high-trusters.

Perceived openness and transparency is one of the most powerful trust levers within our control: **73% of high-trusters believe scientists are open and transparent, against just 28% of the middle segment and 10% of low-trusters.**

Conversely, perceived past 'betrayals' by scientific institutions are strongly corrosive: 55% of low-trusters and 30% of middle-trusters report often feeling betrayed by scientific institutions, against just 10% of high-trusters. Research by RAND Europe also found that transparency is a key factor of trustworthiness.[6] It has set out the dimensions of trustworthiness in a way that supports organisational reflection. It shows that cues of trustworthiness differ between an individual level, institutional level or in terms of science as a system. For example, individual scientist transparency may be communicated through their qualifications and affiliation, whereas institutional transparency is demonstrated through openness about processes. Science as a system shows transparency through open science. Crucially, each level is dependent on the behaviour and qualities of the other.

Questions to consider:

- Is information about our research activity in the public domain? What isn't open or known?
- How readily could we point to routine, visible practices on funding sources, conflicts of interest and how findings are used?
- Where do our funding relationships or messaging create the appearance of a predetermined conclusion?
- What are our principles and guidance for ensuring transparency in our research and public engagement activities?

[6] R. Milne *et al.*, Public Trust in Science and Scientific Trustworthiness (2026), https://wellcome.org/insights/reports/public-trust-science-and-scientific-trustworthiness.

5. Explaining the value of research

Scientists explaining how their work improves ordinary people's lives is one of the actions most likely to build trust (44%). For the crucial middle-trust groups specifically, explaining benefit to ordinary lives is the single most important factor in building trust.

Co-creating explanations of value with the people the explanations are intended for is not yet something the sector does well.[7]

Questions to consider:

- Does our public communication lead with policy influence and expert credentials, or with tangible benefit to people's everyday lives?
- How could we involve the public or affected communities more meaningfully in shaping and co-creating explanations of value?
- What role should our organisation play or support in responding to misinformation?
- What is our process to correct our own mistakes or misrepresentation of our work actively and quickly?
- Do we have a clear process that enables the public to raise concerns or mistakes in our work with us?
- How could we record our experiences, successful and less successful, to build the sector's understanding of how to express the value of research in ways that are useful to all segments of the public?

[7] The Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) is currently undertaking work on this subject to address this gap.

6. The relationship legacies in our work

The survey found that around half of high-trusters personally know a scientist, compared with only 16% of low-trusters. This may be a feature of belonging to a more professional socio-economic group, but the survey also found that having 'someone you know and trust to ask' about a scientific question is strongly associated with overall trust. For people in lower socio-economic bands, having someone to ask is associated with an even larger uplift in high trust (18 points) than for higher bands (14–15 points). Relationships may matter most where they are scarcest.

During the pandemic, researchers in many unrelated fields reported that they were contacted with questions about the virus, the vaccine and safety measures by past research subjects, people on social media, non-research staff at their university, students' families, local authorities and many others. Contact often began, 'I don't know who else to ask'. Some had dug out an old publication or an email from an event.

Many different people interact with research organisations. These interactions present opportunities to form a greater sense of relationship and possibly a standing invitation to make contact on research questions.

Questions to consider:

- Who do we know and interact with? How might we convert those connections?
- Are we creating more 'people who can be asked' — named, known, reachable scientists? Can we support this centrally to make it sustainable?
- When our funded projects and studies end, do participants and communities know what happens next? Would they know how to contact us about this and feel invited to do that?[8]
- How would we know if a community felt we hadn't followed through on our engagement, and what would we do about it?

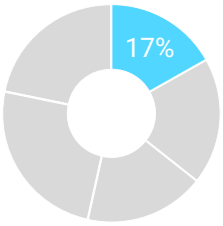
[8] NB. A global study in 2025 found that less than half of clinical trial participants are contacted about the results of the trial, despite this being a regulatory requirement (https://www.clinicalleader.com/doc/it-s-a-fact-sharing-clinical-trial-results-with-participants-builds-trust-0001)

Annex

The five trust groups that make up the UK

The Trust in Scientists survey found that the UK is made up of five groups with distinct positions on trust in scientists, ranging from 'Science Advocates' to 'Science Critics'. These groups have different views of scientists' behaviour, their motives and contributions, and the benefits of research, alongside varying levels of attention to science and shifting political identities.

Science Advocates



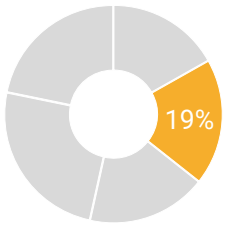
Key characteristics

- 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



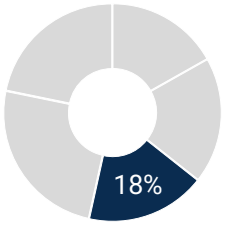
Key characteristics

- 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



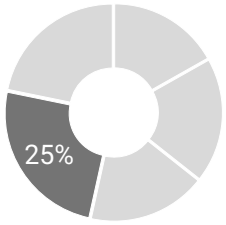
Key characteristics

- 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 Contented Trusters (47%)

Disengaged Trusters



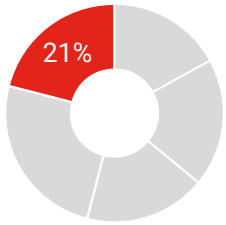
Key characteristics

- 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%)

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