



**Helix**  
research & evaluation

# **Review of NERC's Public Engagement with Research Strategy 2019 - 2024**

**Summary report for the Natural Environment Research  
Council (UK Research and Innovation)**

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The work would not have been possible without the willingness of members of the wider NERC research community, other funders, collaborators and commentators, and publics already connected with NERC to give up their time to tell us about their views on NERC’s draft PER strategy. We hope they feel their views and experiences are adequately reflected in this report.

The Full Report (60 pages) and five Annexes was accepted by NERC as an internal document in October 2019. This Summary Report is an abridged version of the longer full report.

## Executive summary

NERC commissioned Helix Research and Evaluation, in partnership with the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement to:

- Conduct a rapid review of the current status of public engagement (PE) with environmental science, drawing on learning and insight from within and outside NERC's portfolio
- Seek feedback on NERC's new, draft Public Engagement with Research (PER) Strategy 2019-2024<sup>1</sup>, through consultation with stakeholders via interviews and an online survey.

The review and consultation took place between June and September 2019 and its **main findings** were:

- Respondents from across the environmental science sector, and more widely, were **supportive of the overall intention** of NERC's draft PER strategy. **All aspects of the strategy were endorsed** by the majority of respondents and most agreed with its guiding objectives and statements.
- Respondents highlighted, significant **points to add and amend**, and a need for **more clarity**, both of the stated purpose of the strategy, and in the strategy's language and phrasing.
- There were also many queries raised about **how each of the five objectives would work in practice**, both in terms of NERC's own plans for implementation and relating to the support needed from the wider environmental science sector (within and outside higher education).

The review and consultation recommended **key priorities** for focussing NERC's future support for PER:

- Clarify NERC's **purpose** for doing PER and consider the link between public engagement, wider stakeholder engagement and societal outcomes
- Create, value and broker **partnerships with non-academic organisations and PE professionals** within and outside the HE sector and look for opportunities to work together.
- Consider opportunities for **strategic linkage** around public engagement, Pathways to Impact and other core issues across UKRI and its component organisations, in order **to build on supporting the infrastructure for PER and removing barriers to engagement**.
- Build on **internal partnerships** and existing **commitment to PER within NERC** to ensure that public engagement is acknowledged and valued as part of the grant application, assessment and award process (including through requests for resource and Pathways to Impact planning).
- Consider a **focused and targeted approach to funding PER** to ensure that most value can be gained from the relatively modest budget of £500,000 per year and address the need for more openness and information about how PER is supported in **NERC centres and investments**.
- Work with strategically selected public groups and also focus on engaging **more diverse publics** through NERC's own engagement activities and consider how to encourage and support researchers to do this too.
- Support the infrastructure for building **knowledge and capacity for good practice** and consider supporting research on **PER in its own right**.
- Draft an **implementation plan** to publish alongside the strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of NERC's draft PER Strategy 2019-2024 is provided in Annex A at the end of this report. Although extracts of relevant sections are provided where relevant, readers are advised to view the draft strategy in its entirety, alongside this summary and the main report.

## Summary report

### 1. Background and aims

NERC is currently working to shape and develop a new, draft Public Engagement with Research (PER) Strategy 2019-2024<sup>2</sup>, which will supersede the existing Public Engagement with Environmental Science 2016-2018 Strategy<sup>3</sup>. NERC's goal is for the new PER Strategy to be open, evidence-based, innovative and informed by the views of those who will enact it and those who will be affected by it.

To this end, NERC commissioned Helix Research and Evaluation (Helix), in partnership with the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) to:

- Review the current status of public engagement with environmental science, drawing on learning and insight from within and outside NERC's portfolio
- Seek feedback on NERC's new PER strategy through consultation with stakeholders.

The review and consultation took place between June and September 2019.

### 2. Approach

The approach to the review consisted of the following phases:

- **Rapid evidence review** - This phase of the work involved a rapid evidence review of formal/grey literature and other relevant material on public engagement with a particular focus on environmental science, using search terms and inclusion criteria agreed with NERC. The results of the evidence review are not included in this Summary Report but featured in one chapter and one Annex of the Full Report (NERC internal document).
- **Key informant interviews** - These allowed us to seek initial feedback on NERC's planned PER Strategy. Informants included key contacts from other funders, collaborators and commentators able to provide an overview/analysis of the status of PER in environmental science who were identified by NERC.
- **Online consultation** - We designed and launched an online consultation, aimed at the wider NERC community and publics already connected with NERC. A questionnaire was developed in consultation with NERC's PE team and included open and closed questions to explore respondents' understanding and perceptions in relation to NERC's planned PER strategy. We worked with NERC's public engagement and communications teams, and with NCCPE, to identify routes for publicising the consultation, via social and conventional media (e.g. UKRI/NERC/NCCPE websites, Twitter and Facebook; NERC engagement, training, public mailing lists; etc):
  - The survey was launched on Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> July 2019 and was open for 40 days until Sunday 8th September 2019. In total, 73 respondents completed the survey
  - 79% completed the survey in their professional capacity (in paid or voluntary role as part of an organisation), and 21% in a personal capacity (as a member of the public)

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<sup>2</sup> A copy of NERC's draft PER Strategy 2019-2024 is provided in Annex A at the end of this report. Although extracts of relevant sections are provided where relevant, readers are advised to view the draft strategy in its entirety, alongside this summary and the main report.

<sup>3</sup> <https://nerc.ukri.org/about/whatwedo/engage/public/nerc-per-strategy/>

- 51% of respondents work within the academic sector (in research, teaching or professional capacity), with 7% working within civil society/third sector, 5% as research funders. 5% from museum, library or science centre sector, 4% from public sector (not government), 2% from business, 1% from Subject Association or Learned Society, and 1% from central/devolved government. 21% left this section blank
- Primary areas of interest included: natural environment (48%), engineering and physical sciences (11%), business and innovation (5%), biotechnology and biological sciences (4%), economic and social (4%), medicine/health (3%), and arts and humanities (1%). Other areas accounted for 18% of respondents and 5% left this section blank.

### 3. Key issues highlighted by review respondents

This review indicated that interview and survey respondents from across the environmental science sector, and more widely, were supportive of the overall intention and tone of NERC’s draft PER Strategy 2019-2024. They highlighted, however, some key gaps and issues that required attention, along with a lack of clarity, both in terms of the stated purpose of the strategy, and in its language and phrasing.

#### 3.1. Purpose of PER

Respondents called for greater clarity in the strategy on the purpose of public engagement with research, and on the link between public engagement and wider stakeholder engagement and societal outcomes. These decisions could then provide a clear focus and direction for the PER programme.

##### **NERC Draft PER Strategy 2019 - 2024: Purpose**

As environmental science will continue to be at the heart of some of society’s biggest challenges NERC has an opportunity and a responsibility to find creative and relevant ways to engage the public with current research in order to promote best practice in this field. This may be through enabling public groups to have input on environmental science research from an early stage, representing the findings of research to diverse public audiences in engaging ways, and/or providing opportunities for the public to directly engage with researchers to gain an understanding of the science. Our remit is to promote public engagement with environmental science and in doing this we will support the UKRI Public Engagement Strategy.

#### 3.2. Objectives

All five objectives were endorsed by the majority of respondents. The most highly endorsed objective was ‘to foster a strong engagement community for environmental sciences’, with nearly all respondents (93%) either strongly agreeing (66%) or agreeing (27%) that this should be a guiding objective for NERC’s approach to public engagement over the next five years

Around three-quarters of respondents endorsed each of the remaining objectives, either agreeing or strongly agreeing that these should be guiding objectives for NERC’s approach to public engagement over the next five years. Few respondents disagreed with any of the guiding objectives.

In terms of their clarity, the objectives most commonly viewed as being clear (by over three-quarters of respondents) were ‘to foster a strong engagement community for environmental sciences’ and ‘to convene informed public debate’. Between half and two-thirds of respondents found the remaining objectives to be clear. Other respondents mainly thought that objectives were at least partially clear, with few noting that the objectives were unclear.

## Objective 1: Supporting researchers: Engaged research, informed by people and of benefit to society

### Objective 1: Engaged research, informed by people and of benefit to society

To enable public groups to inform researchers of the areas of environmental science about which they wish to engage and how they wish to do this. This will benefit both society, by engaging with current research, and researchers and research by providing positive opportunities to learn from the public and opening new techniques to add to the research process.

Reasons for supporting Objective 1, and specifically the concept of engaged research, included:

- Trust and openness - opening up research in a meaningful way may help to allay public suspicions of 'experts' and restore public trust in science
- Adding value and relevance - publics hold a wealth of knowledge, interests and insights
- Accountability and social responsibility - NERC has a duty to engage about the research it funds

Despite strong support for the underlying sentiment, (i.e. the concept of engaged research) respondents raised many queries about how this objective would work in practice including:

- How will NERC enable public groups (including diverse publics) to engage with researchers?
- How will NERC enable (more and diverse) researchers to engage with publics?
- How will NERC ensure that the environmental science community will respond to, and act on, the outcomes of public engagement and engaged research?

There were also comments relating to the lack of specific reference to Citizen Science and participatory research, alongside engaged research, as key and established ways that publics are engaged with environmental science in the UK and internationally at present.

Respondents welcomed the focus on engaged research, with two-way engagement that benefits researchers and publics. They also commented, however, on the need to be clear about the purpose of PER and to explain the desired outcomes related to this objective.

## Objective 2: Supporting researchers: Fostering a strong engagement community for environmental sciences

### Objective 2: To foster a strong engagement community for environmental sciences

To build the capacity and capability of researchers at all academic career levels to plan, fund and deliver effective public engagement that benefits research, through for instance, developing knowledge, skills and confidence; building networks; and recognising and celebrating excellent examples of public engagement with environmental science research.

There was very strong support for the sentiment of Objective 2 from survey respondents. People described it as important, exciting, essential and needing to be embedded in research from undergraduate level onwards. Areas that respondents felt needed further attention, thought and discussion included:

- How will NERC implement this objective, and specifically what support will NERC offer over and above what is already available?
- How will NERC support higher education institutional change and encourage universities and senior academic leaders to value public engagement?
- How will NERC ensure non-academic partners can access the same levels of support as academics and researchers?

Respondents were clear that beyond supporting PE activities, it would be important for NERC to contribute to investment in infrastructural support for PER in order to remove barriers to engagement.

The issue of adequate funding for PER was widely cited, as was the lack of any announcement of new resources from NERC within the strategy itself. Respondents recommended taking a focused and targeted approach to public engagement, to ensure that most value could be gained from a relatively modest budget. A small number of well-funded projects was seen as preferable to spreading the budget more thinly.

Respondents noted the importance of recognising, valuing and supporting the role and expertise of public engagement professionals, both within and outside the HE sector. Recognising and valuing public engagement as a discipline and area of study in its own right was also emphasised.

### **Objective 3: Convene informed public debate**

#### **Objective 3: Convene informed public debate**

To convene informed public debate about contemporary issues in environmental science, including the ethical and social implications. To strive to make topical and/or contentious NERC-funded research accessible.

Respondents affirmed the importance of engaging publics with contemporary research whilst also recognising that the focus should be broader than topical and/or contentious issues. Respondents identified key areas that needed further clarification:

- What is the purpose of this objective, what outcomes does NERC wish to see from this, and how will its success be evaluated?
- How would the objective would be implemented and resourced by NERC?
- How is NERC intending to extend the remit of this objective to publics who are under-served and representative of the wider population?

Respondents stressed the importance of ensuring that researchers are trained in the most appropriate engagement techniques, particularly where issues are likely to be contentious and/or challenging. Again, the essential role of public engagement professionals in providing evidence-based information and training on effective engagement practice was highlighted.

A large number of respondents questioned the nature of the role of NERC as a ‘convener’ of public debates, asking whether it was appropriate for NERC to take the lead in this way.

### **Objective 4: Engaged NERC: a responsible organisation**

#### **Objective 4: Engaged NERC: a responsible organisation**

To carry out public dialogue which informs NERC-led research and actively listen to members of the public to allow NERC to make decisions that are relevant to society. To learn and improve as a funder of high-quality public engagement as a result of our track record.

Respondents highlighted the important role of public dialogue and the need for it to play a greater role in research than it currently has. They suggested that NERC should also ensure that the expertise of its research community continues to inform its decision-making. Any public dialogue would need to provide meaningful engagement, with clear opportunities to influence decision-making. In particular, respondents needed further explanation of:

- How such engagement would actually make a difference to NERC’s decision-making in practice

- How NERC would ensure public dialogues included a broad cross-section of the population, and that diverse and under-represented publics had opportunities to contribute
- To what extent the operation of NERC as an organisation is reflecting the broader values of society.

**Objective 5: Interesting and inspiring future communities**

**Objective 5: Interesting and inspiring future communities**  
 To support opportunities and resources, which will interest, inform and inspire the broad future communities of environmental science researchers and innovators. We will do this by connecting our existing communities with opportunities and broader engagement networks and skills and celebrating the science and public engagement work of our community in various ways.

Although this objective was supported by most respondents, the wording was seen to be confusing in places and there were many queries around definitions and what NERC intends here. For example, who are ‘innovators’ and ‘future communities’? Is this about engaging with young people and schools? Who does NERC mean in this context?

The wording of the objective also drew comments about the need for diversity and inclusion in NERC’s PER approach. Significant (long-term) resources would be needed to support the effective implementation of this objective, including support for engagement within institutions. As with previous objectives, respondents noted that further detail on the purpose of NERC’s public engagement work was required to strengthen and clarify this objective.

**3.3. Implementation**

Around three-quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that each of the elements in NERC’s implementation section discussed below should be part of NERC’s plans for implementing its public engagement with research strategy. Very few (between 2% and 5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with any of the statements.

**Leading the way**

**Leading the way**  
 We will continue to build on the past twenty years where the UK has been at the forefront of research and debates into the nature and value of public engagement. We will champion best practice in PE and related areas including ethics, environmental sustainability, and equality, diversity and inclusion. Central to this strategy is the NERC Responsibility Framework and the NERC Delivery Plan.

Despite general agreement with the content of the section on ‘Leading the way’ respondents queried whether this was actually a plan for implementation. For some respondents, this section read more like an objective, as did the other sections under the heading of implementation.

Respondents highlighted the need to define and understand what constitutes best practice in PE, explain how NERC will actually act to champion best practice, and identify resources to enable this to happen. Respondents commented that championing best practice should be a cross-UKRI priority requiring collaboration across the whole organisation. The brief reference to ethics, environmental sustainability, and equality, diversity and inclusion required more detail on how NERC would address such major issues.



## Evidence-based decision-making

### Evidence-based decision-making

Our engagement approach identifies effective ways of enabling others to use environmental science evidence in their decision-making. Similarly, we will make sure that our delivery and evaluation of public engagement champions evidence.

Respondents agreed that evidence should be championed, and that evidence and evaluation were important, but asked how this would be implemented in practice, given the inherent difficulties of evaluating public engagement.

Respondents suggested that a long-term approach to tracking the impact of public engagement activities and investments was necessary to capture the full value of this work. Different ways of collecting, understanding and sharing evidence were needed to suit the needs of different groups.

## Partnership working

### Partnership working

Our ambition will require strong partnerships working internally and externally, as public engagement in the UK is an increasingly rich, interdisciplinary landscape and to bring in engagement specialisms to reach diverse audiences. We will seek to include researchers in partnerships that deliver programmes with specialist organisations/individuals, and across academic disciplines, to improve the quality, reach, and impact of the engagement and provide opportunities for researchers to enhance their skills.

Partnership working was seen as an important objective, acknowledging the valuable contributions that other organisations and individuals can make through their subject knowledge, audience access and awareness, and expertise in public engagement. Working with public engagement specialists was seen as key to maximising the impact of engagement. Respondents also called for greater partnership working with organisations such as museums and galleries that could provide access to, and specialist understanding of different audiences.

Questions were also raised about how such partnerships would work in practice, particularly in terms of funding and HEI support to researchers to enable them to develop and maintain such partnerships, including partnerships with non-academic communities/organisations.

People were also keen to know how NERC would be working across UKRI to implement its public engagement with research strategy, and to link this with the PER strategies of other component councils.

## 3.4. Audience

### Audience

At a time of unprecedented public interest in how human actions affect the environment, we aim to make our research as accessible as possible. In the public attitudes survey commissioned by NERC in 2017, over three quarters of the public feel they “ought to hear about potential new areas of science and technology before they happen, not afterwards” and 74% felt that scientists should listen more to what “ordinary” people think. This strategy will support engagement that seeks to reach defined and diverse UK audiences, relevant to the five objectives above.

Four fifths of survey respondents agreed/strongly agreed that this should be part of NERC’s plans for implementing its public engagement with research strategy. Very few (2%) disagreed/strongly disagreed with NERC’s proposals.

Although there was a high level of support for the focus on inclusion and diversity, respondents raised questions about defining the audiences with whom NERC wants to engage, and how NERC would address the inherent tensions between reaching broad/diverse audiences and engagement with defined audiences.

Respondents also commented on the need for NERC to seek support and advice on how to reach under-served audiences who may find it difficult to engage with environmental science, and to provide training and support for researchers in reaching audiences and developing inclusive communication approaches.

### 3.5. Background

Two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the individual elements of the background section discussed below should be part of NERC's on-going commitment to public engagement with research. Very few (between 3% and 6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

#### Public engagement as a condition of funding

##### Background

Public engagement is a condition of all NERC grants and fellowships and we will continue to capture activities and evidence through existing reporting mechanisms.

Respondents thought that NERC needed to be more explicit that public engagement is a condition of grants and fellowships and that further guidance is needed on what this actually means in practice and what the expectations are. It would also be helpful to work with HEIs to encourage support for researchers undertaking PE as part of their grant obligations.

Respondents also thought that the inclusion of public engagement in grants needed to be explicitly evaluated to signal the importance and value of these activities. Some questioned whether grants assessors and panels were fully aware of this condition or understood and acted on this as part of the peer review and assessment process.

Respondents asked whether any high-level monitoring, evaluation or reporting is undertaken on the impacts of PE that is delivered through NERC funding.

#### Public engagement in NERC research centres

##### Background

Public engagement in research centres is supported through NERC National Capability funding and NERC's capital investments will continue to be accessible for public engagement, whilst prioritising science needs for these facilities.

Comments reflected a significant lack of clarity regarding the meaning of key concepts in this statement. Respondents wanted more openness and information about the PE supported within NERC centres and investments and called for more scrutiny of:

- The extent and nature of PE being undertaken within this context
- The audiences reached
- How is the PE being evaluated within these centres and investments
- How does NERC monitor PE within its centres and investments if this is already included (and funded) in their remit?

## Pathways to Impact

### Background

NERC's research community will continue to be able to apply for support through Pathways to Impact, to carry out public engagement specific to their research grant, as highlighted in NERC's commitment to the Concordat for Public Engagement with Research.

Overall, this statement was met with positive agreement – there was general consensus that supporting and resourcing PE through Pathways to Impact (PtoI) is critically important. However, some respondents were concerned that the process was not meaningful or robust and was undervalued.

Respondents requested further information, and clarity from NERC with regards to different aspects of the PtoI process, including NERC's expectations about what a 'good' Pathways plan and request for resource looks like.

Respondents highlighted the need for NERC to demonstrate its commitment to this statement through ensuring that:

- Advice and guidance are available on how to plan for/cost public engagement within proposals
- Peer assessors and panel chairs/members understand NERC's expectations and have access to training and guidance to assess the quality of the public engagement, and adequacy of the resources sought, in grants proposals
- Applicants/grantees can be confident that their plans for public engagement will be taken seriously and the assessment of their plans will be rated as part of the overall assessment of their grant proposals.

### 3.6. Evaluation

#### Evaluation

Evaluation will be planned into NERC's commissioning of public engagement activity. We will enable researchers to evaluate their public engagement, and to capture proportionate evidence to measure outputs, outcomes and impact from the public engagement activities, some of which may be relevant for use in impact case studies in the Research Excellence Framework (REF), Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). We will strive for high quality and transparency through sharing best practice and effective evaluation. Our approach to evaluation follows the UKRI Monitoring and Evaluation framework. As well as specific reporting and evaluation for individual projects, we gather outcomes information on all of our investments including through the Researchfish® system.

Three quarters of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that NERC should continue its commitment in this area. Very few respondents (6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Many respondents applauded NERC for its commitment to supporting evaluation of public engagement.

A large number of respondents queried exactly how NERC was planning to 'enable' researchers and highlighted the importance for NERC's expectations about evaluation to be realistic, appropriate and evidence based. There was widespread acknowledgement of the need for training and capacity-building in evaluating PE amongst the research community and partner groups/organisations.

Respondents re-iterated their questions about 'PE for what purpose' as a necessary starting point for any evaluation, for example: What outcomes are you expecting? What debates are you informing?

## 4. Recommendations for future priorities

- Clarify NERC's **purpose** for doing public engagement with environmental science, and consider the link between public engagement and wider stakeholder engagement and societal outcomes.
- Create, value and broker **external partnerships** with non-academic organisations and look for opportunities to work together on specific issues (e.g. widening access to broader/diverse audiences). This might include partnerships with organisations who are involved with environmental science, and/or have expertise in doing/supporting public engagement.
- Acknowledge the role, expertise and contributions of **Public Engagement professionals** within and outside HEIs and look for opportunities to work together.
- Consider opportunities for **strategic linkage across UKRI** and its component organisations around public engagement, Pathways to Impact and other core issues.
- **Work with UKRI to support the infrastructure for PER** in order to remove barriers to engagement.
- Review whether and how **Pathways to Impact** is being used as a means to plan, support, implement and evaluate public engagement by the NERC community. (It may be worth referring to STFC's review on similar issues<sup>4</sup>).
- Build on **internal partnerships** and existing **commitment to PER within NERC** to ensure that public engagement is acknowledged and valued as part of the grant application, assessment and award process (including through requests for resource and Pathways to Impact planning).
- Consider a **focused and targeted approach** to public engagement, to ensure that most value can be gained from the relatively modest budget of £500k per year.
- Address the need for more openness and information about how public engagement is supported in **NERC centres and investments**.
- Consider supporting more research on **PER as an area of study in its own right**.
- Work with strategically selected public groups and also focus on **engaging more diverse publics** through NERC's own engagement activities and consider how to encourage and support researchers to do this too.
- Support the infrastructure for building **knowledge and capacity for good practice** – through journals, conferences, networks, case studies, training, reviews, evaluation, etc.
- Collate and publish **case studies** of effective practice and examples of excellence and/or innovative use of PE tools and techniques in each of the areas of PE identified by the rapid review – participatory inquiry, outreach, dialogue, creative, etc.
- Clarify NERC's expectations relating to the **evaluation of public engagement**. What do researchers need in terms of training and support to build their capacity?
- Draft an **implementation plan** to publish alongside the strategy.

## 5. Concluding comments

This review has provided comprehensive feedback on NERC's new draft Public Engagement with Research (PER) strategy. Overall, the review has highlighted that respondents from across the environmental science sector, and more widely, were supportive of the overall intention and tone of the strategy but identified some key gaps and issues that require attention. The evidence points to a number of recommended priorities for NERC in developing its approach to PER.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://stfc.ukri.org/files/stfc-pathways-to-excellence-report/>

## Annex A: NERC's draft PER Strategy 2019-2024

### Purpose

As environmental science will continue to be at the heart of some of society's biggest challenges NERC has an opportunity and a responsibility to find creative and relevant ways to engage the public with current research in order to promote best practice in this field. This may be through enabling public groups to have input on environmental science research from an early stage, representing the findings of research to diverse public audiences in engaging ways, and/or providing opportunities for the public to directly engage with researchers to gain an understanding of the science. Our remit is to promote public engagement with environmental science and in doing this we will support the UKRI Public Engagement Strategy.

### Objectives

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

#### Supporting researchers

##### **Engaged research, informed by people and of benefit to society**

To enable public groups to inform researchers of the areas of environmental science about which they wish to engage and how they wish to do this. This will benefit both society, by engaging with current research, and researchers and research by providing positive opportunities to learn from the public and opening new techniques to add to the research process.

##### **To foster a strong engagement community for environmental sciences**

To build the capacity and capability of researchers at all academic career levels to plan, fund and deliver effective public engagement that benefits research, through for instance, developing knowledge, skills and confidence; building networks; and recognising and celebrating excellent examples of public engagement with environmental science research.

#### The role of NERC

##### **Convene informed public debate**

To convene informed public debate about contemporary issues in environmental science, including the ethical and social implications. To strive to make topical and/or contentious NERC-funded research accessible.

##### **Engaged NERC: a responsible organisation**

To carry out public dialogue which informs NERC-led research and actively listen to members of the public to allow NERC to make decisions that are relevant to society. To learn and improve as a funder of high-quality public engagement as a result of our track record.

##### **Interesting and inspiring future communities**

To support opportunities and resources, which will interest, inform and inspire the broad future communities of environmental science researchers and innovators. We will do this by connecting our existing communities with opportunities and broader engagement networks and skills and celebrating the science and public engagement work of our community in various ways.

### Implementation

#### Leading the way

We will continue to build on the past twenty years where the UK has been at the forefront of research and debates into the nature and value of public engagement. We will champion best practice in PE and related areas including ethics, environmental sustainability, and equality, diversity and inclusion. Central to this strategy is the NERC Responsibility Framework and the NERC Delivery Plan.

### **Evidence-based decision-making**

Our engagement approach identifies effective ways of enabling others to use environmental science evidence in their decision-making. Similarly, we will make sure that our delivery and evaluation of public engagement champions evidence.

### **Partnership working**

Our ambition will require strong partnerships working internally and externally, as public engagement in the UK is an increasingly rich, interdisciplinary landscape and to bring in engagement specialisms to reach diverse audiences. We will seek to include researchers in partnerships that deliver programmes with specialist organisations/individuals, and across academic disciplines, to improve the quality, reach, and impact of the engagement and provide opportunities for researchers to enhance their skills.

### **Audience**

At a time of unprecedented public interest in how human actions affect the environment, we aim to make our research as accessible as possible. In the public attitudes survey commissioned by NERC in 2017, over three quarters of the public feel they “ought to hear about potential new areas of science and technology before they happen, not afterwards” and 74% felt that scientists should listen more to what “ordinary” people think. This strategy will support engagement that seeks to reach defined and diverse UK audiences, relevant to the five objectives above.

### **Background**

This strategy represents a renewed strategic commitment to public engagement from NERC, and a progression in the strategic activity achieved over the past four years. Public engagement is a condition of all NERC grants and fellowships and we will continue to capture activities and evidence through existing reporting mechanisms. Public engagement in research centres is supported through NERC National Capability funding and NERC’s capital investments will continue to be accessible for public engagement, whilst prioritising science needs for these facilities. NERC’s research community will continue to be able to apply for support through Pathways to Impact, to carry out public engagement specific to their research grant, as highlighted in NERC’s commitment to the Concordat for Public Engagement with Research.

### **Evaluation**

Evaluation will be planned into NERC’s commissioning of public engagement activity. We will enable researchers to evaluate their public engagement, and to capture proportionate evidence to measure outputs, outcomes and impact from the public engagement activities, some of which may be relevant for use in impact case studies in the Research Excellence Framework (REF), Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). We will strive for high quality and transparency through sharing best practice and effective evaluation. Our approach to evaluation follows the UKRI Monitoring and Evaluation framework. As well as specific reporting and evaluation for individual projects, we gather outcomes information on all of our investments including through the Researchfish® system.