

Engaging Environments

Lessons from the NERC-funded
Engaging Environments Programme



Between October 2017 and October 2018 the Engaging Environments Programme sought to develop consortia of partners, working together to engage the UK public with environmental science. The project aimed to realise more effective approaches to public engagement, moving beyond standard dissemination methods, to co-creating engagement with communities, artists, and publics.

There has been rich learning from the project, relating to how engagement is viewed and valued by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) academic community. These include the benefits of taking more collaborative approaches to engagement; drawing on and building the evidence-base for effective practice; understanding the motivations, interests and needs of publics and researchers and identifying some of the structural changes needed within research organisations if public engagement is to thrive.

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) acted as a coordinating hub for this programme, bringing the projects together to pool learning, make connections and produce this shared resource.

The booklet pulls together key learning from the programme, that we hope will be useful for anyone working to develop more effective public engagement with environmental science, whether as a researcher or as an engagement professional.

Investment

When we launched Engaging Environments at NERC, our hope was to foster excellent examples of public engagement across the NERC research community. We wanted to raise the bar for quality activities that were genuinely engaging for public audiences, and that directly addressed complex environmental issues and debates.

We also wanted to demonstrate how much NERC values impactful public engagement. Indeed, Engaging Environments is NERC's biggest single investment in public engagement to date, and the first public engagement grants processed through the Je-S system alongside our research and innovation funding.

We very much welcome the fact that public engagement is central to the initial thinking in the launch of UKRI. We are keen to ensure we develop our approach in light of broader development and by learning from outputs and feedback from this programme. All this will inform our thinking around future funding in this space.

Relevance

When we developed the 2016 NERC public engagement strategy, we asked why, as a public funder of environmental science, public engagement with research is so important, concluding:

“As environmental science will continue to be at the heart of some of our society’s biggest challenges, NERC has both an opportunity and a responsibility.”

NERC science is essential to forming and delivering policy that makes it possible for the environment, people and businesses to succeed together. The UK public recognise this work as critically important and in their consciousness, it is only matched by future health challenges, to which environmental considerations are increasingly linked. According to our 2017 Public Attitudes survey, 76% of the public want to understand more about the science we fund. The projects funded through Engaging Environments have shown us it is possible to respond by bringing together

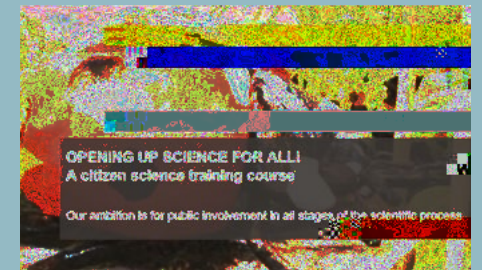
The Climate Communication Project

Bringing together leading academics and practitioners to 'audit' UK capacity and expertise in public engagement with environmental science; develop the first synthesis of key research and recommendations and listen to community groups' views and needs. Co-creating a capacity-building model for climate change communication which provides the groundwork for further science engagement activities.



Engaging Environments hub

Supporting the projects to work together and share learning, drawing on the NCCPE's expertise in



What was distinctive about Engaging Environments?

Engaging Environments drew on many different traditions and approaches to engaging the public with environmental science.

Distinctive to the project as a whole was a commitment to building consortia of organisations wanting to work together; developing and enhancing evidence-based practice and encouraging researchers to leave their comfort zone.

What we learnt

It is important to invest in consortium building science,1 (e f)15 e d eat(ed wi(o tiv)2ivil

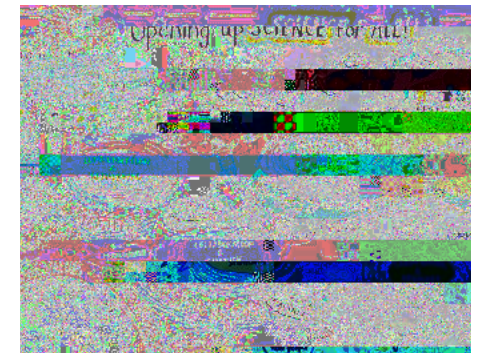
It is important to invest in consortium building

Consortium building was an integral part of the Engaging Environments programme. Each team invested from the outset in getting to know each other and their key partners.

Future of Our Seas started with an internal *Knowledge Audit* – a podcast series in which team members interviewed each other about their past experiences with environmental science engagement. This helped to create a common vocabulary and understanding.

ENCOMPASS worked with partners Citizens UK to deploy their community organising approach to establish which contemporary issues resonated with civil society. Issues raised were often found to have an environmental dimension, opening up new pathways for research and engagement.

Opening up science for all adopted a community of practice approach: “a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner 2017). The approach involved creating online and face-to-face spaces for the project team and wider community to foster collective values, share learning and community assets, and examine barriers and opportunities around public engagement with environmental research.



Capturing the learning from the Opening up science for all project

The Engaging Environments Hub brought together delegates from across the environmental sciences and engagement sectors at a one-day symposium, to collectively address the challenges of engaging the public with environmental science. Participants had a wealth of experience and advice, especially around the value of collaborating and building strong partnerships.

There exists a broad evidence base – academic and practice-based – that can be used to inform good public engagement practice. But it isn't always easy to access. The teams went out of their way to ground their work in evidence and to share this evidence with others. They all built reflection and learning into their approach.

The Climate Communication Project

brought together leading academics and practitioners working on public engagement with climate change to produce a report benchmarking best practice in climate change communication.

A survey mapped the landscape of engagement and how evidence is being used, and an expert elicitation workshop dug deeper. For example, experts agreed robust scientific evidence should be at the heart of climate communication, but that doesn't mean scientists can't advocate for policies or use evocative communication methods.

All of the Engaging Environments projects challenged their teams to push boundaries and take some risks; the goal was to be as open as possible to trying new approaches.

Climate Stories invited climate scientists to experience their own narratives of change working with community groups, through creative writing, printmaking, song-writing and theatre making.

I've really enjoyed the process of writing a song....You can take it and

Environmental science issues can be complex, critical and sometimes contentious. Unless common ground can be established, engagement will break down. Aware of this, our project teams put great emphasis on listening to communities and to exploring the values that motivated people. This meant not always starting from the science.

It's important to remember that it can't be taken for granted that researchers will want to get involved in public engagement.

Many were less motivated to engage because they were:

- concerned that they would be expected to know all the answers
- doing research that had no clear or immediate relevance to the public
- unclear how to engage when their values did not align with those of their potential audiences
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Avoiding potholes

Our project teams learnt a lot of practical lessons about building capacity, developing consortia and doing public engagement.

There are lots of potholes on the way which need to be navigated for successful outcomes for all.

What we learnt

Quality engagement takes time – so plan for it

- Don't underestimate how long quality engagement takes to design, build, establish and evaluate. The same goes for forming project teams and building capacity. Make sure you plan this in at the start

Change is difficult

- Understand that building capacity and consortia, and doing public engagement, require changes to how you work and who you work with. Enthusiasm, positivity and curiosity are key ingredients, but changing practices is difficult. Be prepared for this, but remember that change is inevitable

Be practical and learn from other people's experience

- It is not enough to be ambitious and share a common purpose; you need to take account of the practical considerations in planning and developing your engagement. There are lots of practical tips and guidance out there – use them!

“Time pressure! Although perhaps obvious, nearly everyone involved in Future of our Seas has commented on the amount of time and resources required to produce public engagement interventions which engage deeply. Nearly all of the project consortium committed many more hours than anticipated to the project.” Ian Rowlands, Future of our Seas team

Avoiding potholes

Quality engagement takes time – so plan for it

Quality engagement requires time to design, build, establish and evaluate. It demands collaborative project teams, capacity-building activities and a strong sense of the audience.

Building teams can't be rushed

Never underestimate the time it takes to build an effective team. A key element of the Engaging Environments programme was to build consortia and we had dedicated time and resources to do this – but even so, all the teams would have liked to have more time to invest in this area.

So where does that time go?

- Effective team building and developing a shared common language and values
- Getting to know and supporting each other
- Mentoring
- Developing quality engagement activities

Quality engagement requires careful planning

So what practical steps can be taken to help ensure the engagement activities work well; both between project collaborators and with the public?

- Allow budget for meetings and mentoring; these can be overlooked, but taking short cuts can impact on the quality of the project
- Be realistic about what is possible, especially when you are nurturing new partnerships or innovative approaches. Be prepared to ask for more money to realise your ambition, or to scale back your ambition. Sometimes less is more
- Learn from what works and what doesn't. Recognise the process is iterative and refine approaches over time
- Just because it is time consuming or initially unfruitful, don't assume it is not worth it. Once relationships are built, it is possible to act quickly, based on trust and mutual understanding



Future of our Seas, Plymouth event

All the project teams felt that they had 'missed tricks' or run up against challenges that they would be able to anticipate and navigate better next

Making the case...

Long term, strategic approaches to public engagement are not always considered important to research groups. Our projects have sought to gain support for their work, embedding it into the institutions that they are part of and galvanising people to get involved. They have learnt a lot along the way and identified some of the key factors that help win support and commitment for this important work, which is vital if it is to be sustained.

“ We do public engagement because it is beneficial to our research, and it breaks down barriers.” Environmental Researcher, ENCOMPASS project

1 Lesson 1: This is about culture change

Universities tend not to prioritise public engagement and often value other activities much more highly – for instance, publishing in high impact journals or engaging with other sectors like policy or business. Understanding this context – and how to address it – is important. Drawing on resources like the NCCPE has produced can help to address this, and win support from senior sta .

2 Lesson 2: NERC's support matters

The fact that NERC had invested in this project, and backed it with strong senior advocacy, helped teams to convince colleagues of its value. They also made explicit links to the Research Excellence Framework and n.091n.091

Resources



In this section we signpost you to some of the resources produced across the project.

The Climate Communication Project

Project website and blog

www.theclimatecommsproject.org

Climate communication in practice: how are we engaging the UK public on climate change?

<https://bit.ly/2ucTCuQ>

Creating Lasting Change for Climate Communication: Lessons learned from the Climate Communication Project

<https://bit.ly/2ug20cZ>

ENCOMPASS

Project website

www.encompassuk.wordpress.com

An introduction to Community Organising and Citizens UK

www.citizensuk.org/what_we_do

Climate Stories

Project website

www.climatestories.org.uk

Future of our Seas

Project website and blog

www.futureofourseas.wordpress.com

Opening up science for all

Project website

www.research.reading.ac.uk/openupsci

An introduction to Communities of Practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2015)

<https://bit.ly/2JnZITE>

Introduction to Citizen Science: a free online course

<https://bit.ly/2JozyAh>

NCCPE

Project website

<https://bit.ly/2yiBgdT>

Methods of Engagement

<https://bit.ly/2OfEMNI>

Culture change resources, to help you make the case for public engagement

<https://bit.ly/2FIWEDh>

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