

INVESTING IN ENGAGEMENT: HOW LONG-TERM FUNDING LEADS TO IMPACTFUL RESEARCH



CENTRE FOR INTEGRATIVE NEUROIMAGING,
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

FOREWORD

Public engagement is not simply an add-on to our research—it is fundamental to making our research better. When we actively engage with communities, patients, schools, and diverse audiences, we gain invaluable insights that shape our research questions, inform our methodologies, and ensure our findings have genuine societal relevance.

The public engagement funding we received from Wellcome through our Centre Award in 2017 has been nothing short of transformative. With 10% of our Centre budget ringfenced for public engagement, we moved from ad hoc activities funded from researchers' own pockets to a strategic, sustainable approach. This generous support allowed us to appoint dedicated engagement staff, build lasting partnerships, and create ambitious projects like our 'Your Amazing Brain' exhibition and 'SHElock' escape room that would have been impossible with piecemeal funding.

The case studies in this report demonstrate what effective engagement really takes: long-term commitment, trust, and genuine partnership. From our multi-year collaboration with Banbury Museum & Gallery to our ongoing work with schools and community organisations, these examples showcase how meaningful engagement deepens over time and evolves through mutual understanding. We share these examples in the hope that others in the higher education community can learn from our journey and see the tangible benefits of embedding engagement strategically within their institutions.

Essential to our success has been buy-in from all levels of seniority within our Centre. From our Public Engagement Ambassadors programme that trains researchers and core staff each year, to hands-on involvement from senior leadership in both strategic planning and delivery, engagement has become one of our four core values. This institutional commitment—recognised through our NCCPE Engage Watermark Silver Award—has been critical to creating a culture where engagement flourishes.

We are indebted to our partners: external advisory board members, museums including Banbury and Discover Bucks, schools such as Sarah Bonnell School in East London, and community organisations including African Families in the UK and the Oxford Asian Cultural Centre. Their expertise and collaboration has made our engagement richer and more effective and has improved the impact and relevance of our research. We also thank Wellcome for their innovative funding approach that recognised engagement as essential infrastructure for excellent research.

As David Lloyd George observed, "You can't cross a chasm in two small jumps." Our eight years as a Wellcome Centre show that sustained, secure funding for engagement enables the step-change needed for research to have real societal impact.

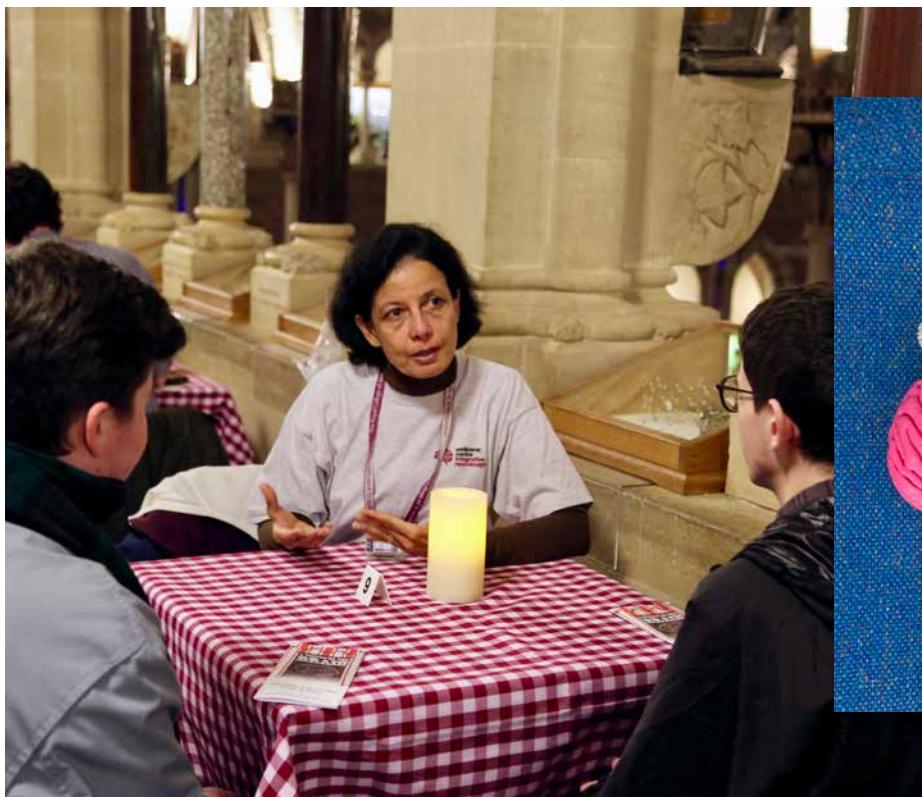
As I hand over to a new Director, and as we move forward with our new name - the Oxford Centre for Integrative Neuroimaging (OxCIN) - I look forward to continued commitment to engaged research at the Centre. The team will continue to nurture relationships with partner organisations, involve a wider diversity of people in our research, and support our members to embed engagement in the research they do.



HEIDI JOHANSEN-BERG
DIRECTOR, WELLCOME
CENTRE FOR INTEGRATIVE
NEUROIMAGING (WIN)
2017-2025

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“Well-funded engagement enables the development of long-term, mutually beneficial relationships which are essential for continually improving, progressive programmes that result in an engaged research culture and impactful research.”



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BENEFITS OF RINGFENCED, FLEXIBLE FUNDING FOR ENGAGEMENT:

We make the case that secure funding for engagement activity leads to **high-level, high-quality and sustained engagement**. This, in turn, leads to research that has greater benefits and relevance to society.

1 STRATEGIC APPROACH

Long-term funding allows for a more systematic and purposeful engagement strategy, enabling organisations to reach diverse and under-served audiences beyond traditional research circles.

2 DEDICATED STAFF

Secure funding permits hiring specialised engagement professionals who can build expertise, manage complex logistics, and support researchers in creating meaningful engagement activities.

3 RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Consistent funding enables long-term relationship development with stakeholders like schools, museums, and community partners, creating mutually beneficial collaborations.

4 INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Dedicated resources help build and retain expertise in engagement practices, allowing researchers to incorporate high-quality engagement without starting from scratch each time.

5 WIDER REACH

Funding covers travel expenses for researchers and participants, making it possible to engage audiences beyond immediate geographical limitations and increase science accessibility.

6 FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility in how funds are allocated allows organisations to invest resources strategically, supporting both small, low-cost projects and large, complex long-term initiatives.

7 CAPACITY BUILDING

Resources can be used to develop internal programmes like Public Engagement Ambassadors, which help create a culture of engagement within the organisation.

8 FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Experience gained through well-funded engagement activities can lead to successful applications for further engagement grants from various organisations.

9 IMPACTFUL RESEARCH

Strong support for researchers allows for higher quality and greater speed of implementation of funder requirements, with greater benefits to society.

WELL-FUNDED ENGAGEMENT

The Wellcome Centre for Integrative Neuroimaging (WIN) was formed in 2017 with a generous Centre Award from Wellcome. Consistent with Wellcome's strategy at the time, 10% of the Centre budget was ringfenced for public engagement.

Before the Centre Award, our engagement happened on an ad hoc basis, often limited to schools where individual researchers had children, and expenses were usually paid by the researchers themselves or covered by small amounts of money from Departments. The science content was generally limited to the specific interests of the researchers rather than tailored to the needs of the audience or incorporating the breadth of our research, and there was little opportunity for proactive engagement.

Wellcome's funding allowed us to be more strategic in our approach to engagement. This resulted in:

- A greater and more diverse set of stakeholders
- Longer-term projects with mutually beneficial impact on us, our partners, and our audiences.
- Building up knowledge and expertise in all aspects of engagement practice.
- Systematic evaluation of our strategy and activities (supported by an external evaluation consultant), resulting in continually improving activities and support for researchers while also tracking progress towards our strategic engagement goals.



Having dedicated engagement staff allows for the continuity needed for relationship building with many types of stakeholders. It also allows acquisition of institutional knowledge and expertise in effective engagement practice, which enables researchers to incorporate the highest quality engagement in their own research without the need to reinvent the wheel.



BUILDING A SKILLED TEAM

The original engagement budget (£632k for 5 years) came with very few stipulations from Wellcome, giving us the flexibility to spend it when and where it had the biggest impact. It afforded us funds for dedicated engagement staff, training for staff and researchers, a generous activity budget that meant researchers and staff were able to consolidate learning through practise, and a thorough evaluation programme to further support improvement.

The appointment of a dedicated Public Engagement Coordinator in 2017 marked a significant shift in our engagement capabilities. Having specialised staff meant researchers could focus on their research while still participating meaningfully in engagement activities. The coordinator role went beyond simple administration, building expertise and relationships that benefited the entire Centre. This role provided crucial support in developing researcher ideas, delivering training, and managing complex logistics for events.

As our engagement activities grew, we recognised that staff capacity, rather than activity funding, was our primary limitation. In response, we expanded the team in 2020, adding a Public Engagement Officer position. This expansion allowed us to balance strategic planning with the practical management of numerous partnerships and activities, while maintaining high standards of delivery.

The expanded team brought complementary skills that enhanced our engagement capabilities. We could now effectively manage event planning, staff training, relationship building with schools and museums, and coordination with various professional services. Perhaps most importantly, the dedicated team could identify and foster collaborative opportunities between researchers, leading to richer and more impactful engagement activities.

TAKING A STRATEGIC APPROACH

To achieve maximum impact from our funding, we developed a public engagement strategy centred around informing and inspiring under-served audiences, incorporating public input to enhance our research, and build a growing number of skilled engagers among staff and researchers across the Centre. We focused on reaching beyond traditional audiences and research topics, particularly aiming to connect with those outside central Oxford who might not typically seek out science engagement.

The success of our strategic approach also benefits enormously from strong institutional support. Engagement was established as one of WIN's four core values (and remains a core principle at OxCIN), with visible commitment from senior leadership. The Centre Director, Heidi Johansen-Berg, exemplifies this commitment through her active involvement in both hands-on activities and strategic planning.

Central to implementing this strategy was our Public Engagement Ambassadors programme, which built capacity by training cohorts of Centre researchers and core staff each year. This approach helped create a culture where engagement became an integral part of our identity.

FLEXIBILITY IS KEY

Flexibility in how and when to spend our funding was crucial to our ability to deliver on our strategic aims. For instance, alongside the smaller, low-cost projects, we were able to work on large-scale, long-term projects that would have been out of reach without sustained funding.

Examples include our Your Amazing Brain exhibition with Banbury Museum & Gallery (see case study on page 14) which was several years in the making, involved multiple partners with specialist expertise, and was picked up by two additional museums. We were also able to create a stand-alone escape room which is still a mainstay of our engagement programme (see 'SHElock' case study on page 18).

Meeting audiences where they are is an essential component of successful engagement. Our funding allowed us to pay for researchers to travel (individuals as well as large groups) to venues beyond Oxford. Additionally, we were able to cover the otherwise prohibitive costs of transport when state schools visited us. This allowed us to reach a wider audience with our research, resulting in greater science capital in areas where access to science is not as easy as for those living in the centre of Oxford.

The expertise, knowledge and experience our staff gained through the sheer variety of engagement projects has also resulted in a large number of successful applications for **additional engagement funding** (including from Wellcome's Enriching Engagement fund; the Medical Research Council; NIHR-BRC and other internal (Oxford University) and external funding schemes).

Finally, funding meant we were able to share our expertise, materials and time widely: within the University, as well as externally through the NCCPE and research societies.

To provide some context on the scale of our project delivery costs, the figures below represent direct activity expenses incurred beyond the substantial staff time contributions from our team and partners. These ballpark estimates cover materials, venues, catering, travel, and external services, but do not include the significant salary costs that form the majority of our project investments. For larger initiatives like "Your Amazing Brain" at Banbury Museum and Gallery, the exhibition component required approximately £100k in activity expenses, while our ongoing Neuroscience Experience Programme runs at around £1,250 annually including catering. Smaller-scale activities vary considerably: Museum Late events cost roughly £5,000, our Rogue Brain Takeover escape room required £35k in development and setup costs, and the Ambassador programme operates at approximately £2,000 per year covering catering and external trainer fees. For focused engagement activities like PPI focus groups, costs range from £400 for online sessions to £625 for in-person meetings including travel and refreshments. These figures illustrate the additional investment required beyond core staffing to deliver meaningful engagement at different scales and formats.

LONG-TERM, MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Long-term relationships between researchers and audiences are crucial for research that aims to have a significant impact on society. Such relationships, which allow for genuine dialogue and are based on trust, need to be fostered at an institutional level, rather than relying on individual researchers to maintain them.

Establishing relationships requires careful consideration of the mutual benefits for all parties. As a result, while engagement activities may be based on the same research, the key messages should always be carefully tailored to each new audience and should evolve with repeat engagement with the same audience. Crucially, this process should happen together with the audience or partners.

Often, partner organisations link us to potential audiences, and they are essential in translating our key messages into something that works for their audiences. For instance, the original Brain Diaries exhibition, which was created for an Oxford audience, was entirely overhauled together with the Banbury Museum and Gallery curators to become 'Your Amazing Brain', an exhibition that their very different audience could relate to. When the exhibition was then picked up by Discover Bucks Museum in Aylesbury, the programme of activities alongside the exhibition was tailored to their audiences, for example adding lecture style activities that their audiences enjoy.

The first strategic partnership we created was our external advisory board. This board included representatives from each audience category we wanted to engage with, including primary schools, secondary schools, patients, and museums. They helped us to think about our strategic objectives for the audiences they represented and were a sounding board and source of feedback for activities we proposed to do with those audiences.

Over the last several years, we have developed long-term institutional partnerships with museums (Banbury, Discover Bucks Museum, Rumble Museum), schools (Sarah Bonnell School in East London, and various Oxfordshire schools), and community organisations (African Families in the UK, Oxford Asian Cultural Centre, Football Beyond Borders).

PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDS TIME

For partnerships to be mutually beneficial and strategically relevant for both us and our partner organisations, sustained relationship-building time is required, ideally encompassing multiple years and not reliant upon the availability or capacity of a single staff member. This development time allows for trust-building (particularly

important for partnerships with historically under-served communities or those who are wary of medical research) and encourages greater mutual understanding of the respective expertise involved. While we recognise that each partner's needs, priorities, and strengths are different, the experience we have gained in managing such partnerships is a strength that the Engagement team uses to inform new partnership development.

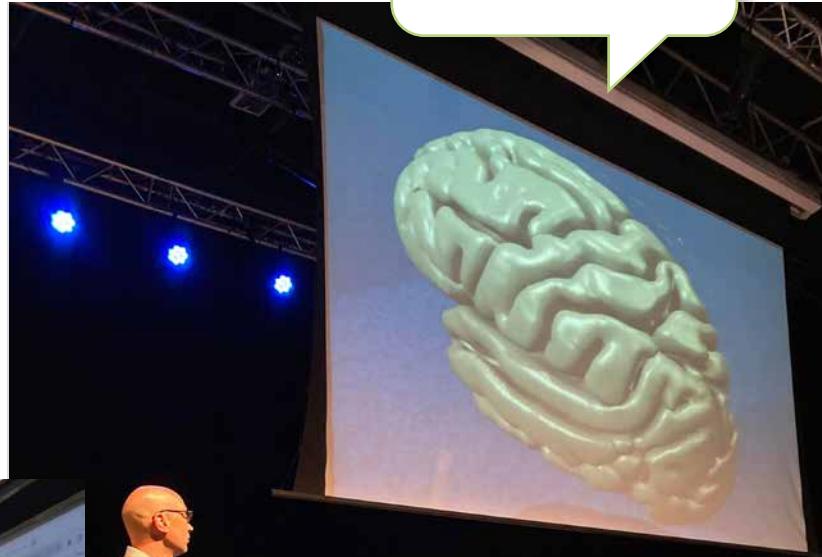
MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

Academia can be myopic about the expertise held by partners outside its walls, to the detriment of potential collaborations. Through our partnerships, we came to understand how much better the engagement becomes when each partner's distinct expertise is identified and valued. It is essential that proposed collaboration activities fit the strategic objectives of each partner, to ensure they feel sufficient ownership of the project rather than serving in a more removed 'contractor' role.

'Mutual benefit' can take many forms: shared skills, resources, or capacity. Particularly for educational or non-profit organisations, the availability of financial support can be transformative to the collaboration, because they have limited flexibility in their own funding to commit to these types of projects despite staff capacity and willingness. To support developing partnerships aligned with these principles, we create Memorandums of Understanding with our partners as a way to explicitly establish mutual expectations.



Effective engagement depends on the ability to know your audience. Building strong partnerships with organisations who are already engaged with the audiences you want to reach can help forge trusting relationships more quickly and effectively. In addition, partners will help you understand your new audience and allow you to design engagement activities that will speak to those audiences.



ENGAGED RESEARCH CULTURE

BUILDING RESEARCHER CONFIDENCE

The volume and quality of engagement activity at the Centre has allowed researchers to develop their communication and engagement skills. Wellcome's generous funding made it possible for researchers to try new things, above and beyond the tried and tested activities or those funded by specific research grants. This positive attitude has resulted in many new and successful approaches to engagement, and a greater openness of researchers to try something different, knowing that they are supported by a strong professional engagement team.

MODEL FOR CULTURE CHANGE

Engagement at the Centre involves all levels of seniority and all types of roles. Senior leadership investment and involvement, including from the Centre Director and Director of Operations, has been crucial to the momentum and energy for engagement. Everyone, from students to senior professors, gets involved with hands-on engagement activities. While the activities are rooted in the Centre's research, the involvement of our core staff is integral to the success of many of the engagement activities and projects (e.g. see the Inclusive Scanning case study on page 22).

The evolution of the Centre's engagement culture has become a model for broader cultural changes within the Centre. The development of the Public Engagement Strategy (developed in 2018; revised and expanded as the Engagement Strategy, to include patient and policy engagement too, in 2023) achieved two major goals beyond delivering engaged research: it clarified the purpose and value of engagement among senior leadership and provided a framework for guiding future engagement priorities. This process also paved the way for a more strategic approach outside engagement, including the development of strategies for a range of Equality, Diversity, & Inclusivity (EDI) and Open Science initiatives.

Engagement is one of our core values, firmly embedding it in the organisational culture. This commitment is reinforced at every 'New Starter Welcome' talk for new employees, and engagement staff are integrated into the core team to ensure visibility and collaboration with researchers. The Centre views engagement as essential to both research and the professional development of its staff.

Our strong engagement culture was recognised in 2023 when we received the Engage Watermark Silver Award accreditation from the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE).



Our engagement practices have provided the Centre with a template for more strategic approaches in other areas, including EDI and Open Research practices. The principles of engagement are highly applicable to many organisational aspects (e.g. running events and workshops, being more strategic about initiatives, evaluation of activities outside of engagement itself) and having a strong engagement team to support those initiatives has proved really effective.

IMPACTFUL RESEARCH

PROVIDING MOTIVATION

Researchers are aware that funders increasingly expect meaningful engagement with external audiences. For medical science researchers particularly, there is an expectation that patients and the public will be involved in research design and communications. Regardless of this, our researchers are independently realising that engagement makes their research better not only through their own improved communication skills, but more importantly through increased societal relevance of their research. This can be through new collaboration opportunities, a wider range of perspectives on their research, or access to stakeholder audiences who would otherwise not have a voice, but for whom the research is particularly relevant.



Having a strong engagement team improves the quality and speed with which researchers can fulfil funder requirements with regards to lived experience and PPI activity, resulting in greater societal impact of the research. It also allows for projects that improve research practice more widely (e.g. Inclusive Scanning).

PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

Our research has been enhanced through strategic engagement activities. For instance, an increasing number of research programmes now include strong Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) practice supported by the engagement team. Focus groups and workshops now routinely inform our research questions, methodologies, and future directions. The [Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviours project](#) exemplifies this *lived-experience* approach, combining research with public engagement and drawing on lived experiences from both the Principal Investigator and patient community members brought together by charity partnerships to design new research foci.

Engagement initiatives have also catalysed unexpected research opportunities. The Football on the Brain project, initially designed to apply neuroscience to football, generated recurring audience questions that are evolving into new research directions, including studies on the neuroscience of Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) injuries.

Our [Inclusive Scanning](#) project takes a broader approach, involving public contributors to improve our tools, methodologies and communications to achieve greater ethnic diversity among research participants. By increasing ethnic diversity among study participants, this initiative aims to make our MRI research findings more representative and relevant to wider populations, ultimately leading to better health outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Our experience of the last eight years as a Wellcome Centre has led us to make the case that secure, long-term funding for engagement leads to high-level, high quality and sustained engagement and that this is an essential ingredient for research that has a significant impact on society. We argue that impactful engagement depends on **institutional knowledge and expertise, the ability to build and maintain lasting relationships** with partners and audiences, and **an adaptability and flexibility to work with audiences in ways that are beneficial** to each stakeholder (researchers, audiences, partners).

The Wellcome centre grant provided a monumental opportunity for a step-change in engagement skills, opportunities, materials, and culture at WIN. Most of it would not have been possible if relying solely on pieced-together small grants.

Sustained funding for us meant we have acquired a huge amount of expertise and knowledge and are able to efficiently and highly effectively support our researchers to do what is required to make their research truly engaged and more impactful.

We are grateful to Wellcome for the difference that their funding has made. As we look to the future of the Centre, we are optimistic that the case for the benefits of engaged research is clear. We look to funders of all kinds to support not just the science, but also the environment that allows impactful research to flourish.

Carinne Piekema, Stuart Clare, Hanna Smyth (with assistance from Claude, Anthropic, for summarisation and harmonising voice across sections)

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You can't cross a chasm in two small jumps.

-DAVID LLOYD GEORGE





CASE STUDY

YOUR AMAZING BRAIN

ORIGINS

Following the successful Brain Diaries exhibition at Oxford's Natural History Museum in 2017, we sought to reach audiences beyond central Oxford. Banbury Museum and Gallery expressed interest but questioned whether the existing exhibition would suit their community. Over 18 months, we built a strong partnership with the museum and co-created an entirely new exhibition tailored to Banbury audiences.

ADAPTATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Your Amazing Brain was a family-friendly, highly interactive exhibition exploring the brain and how it makes us who we are. The exhibition was co-created with the Banbury Museum and accompanied by an extensive community engagement programme.

The collaborative team brought together exhibition consultants, researchers, and museum specialists. Despite COVID-19 challenges, the exhibition opened on 12 February 2022, featuring five interactive zones exploring optical illusions, emotional responses through smell, reaction time challenges, and hands-on brain puzzles.





COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME

The exhibition was accompanied by extensive outreach activities. Primary school engagement included classroom visits and a live scanner experiment broadcast directly to students. Secondary schools participated in three Big Brain Roadshows and an A-level day at the museum. Beyond traditional educational settings, our researchers conducted Reminiscence Sessions with older adults and collaborated with Banbury Mind on an art workshop exploring depression and anxiety.

The programme culminated in the sold-out 'WINdow on the Brain' museum late event, with 50 of our staff hosting over 100 community members—marking the museum's first after-hours event.



IMPACT AND LEGACY

Museum visitors provided overwhelmingly positive feedback, and researchers noted significant personal development in communication skills and teamwork. While school participation was lower than anticipated due to post-pandemic recovery challenges, the project exceeded the museum's initial scope and transformed their approach to ambitious exhibitions.

The exhibition's legacy extended far beyond Banbury. It toured to Discover Bucks Museum in Aylesbury (November 2022-April 2023) and has been permanently installed at Cheney Secondary School in Oxford since February 2024, attracting over 4,000 visitors. The project was highly commended with a Vice Chancellor's Award and fundamentally changed our engagement practice, shifting from viewing external professionals as suppliers to treating them as integrated co-creators.

**CASE STUDY**

BUILDING STRESS RESILIENCE IN EARLY ADOLESCENTS' LIVES

PROJECT OVERVIEW

BReal was a four-year public engagement project funded by Wellcome's "Enriching Engagement" scheme (£72k) to develop a three-lesson programme teaching stress resilience skills to Year 7-9 students. The programme combined neuroscience research with practical coping techniques, focusing on how understanding brain changes during adolescence can help students manage stress more effectively.

ADAPTATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Awarded funding in July 2020, the project's original co-creation workshop design became unfeasible due to the pandemic. The team adapted by conducting focus groups with PSHE teachers and piloting lesson materials in classrooms, collecting feedback through questionnaires. An Advisory Board was established midway through, including academics, a psychology teacher, and two young people from the Charlie Waller Trust Youth Ambassador Programme.

The project produced three animated videos summarising key lesson messages, created with animation company SciAni over 10 months in 2023. These unexpectedly popular standalone resources have achieved 44,391 combined views on YouTube and Vimeo as of February 2025.



RECOGNITION AND IMPACT

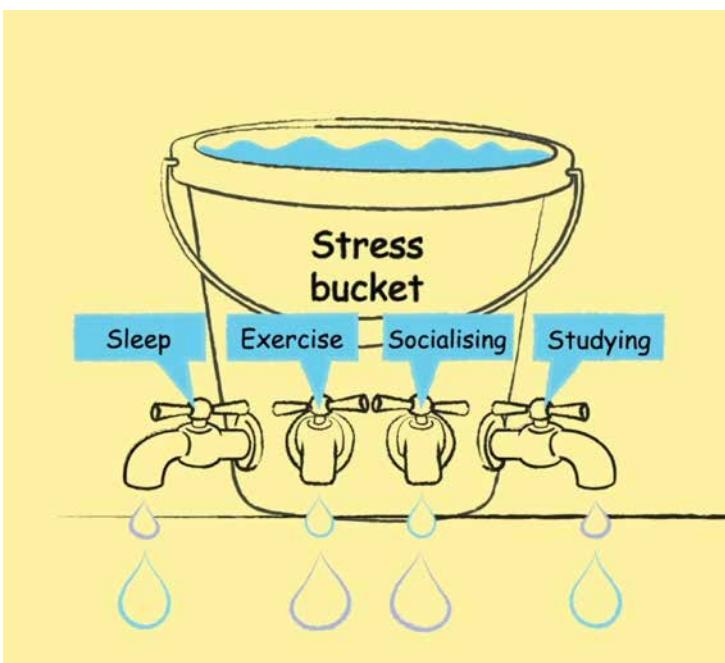
The three-lesson materials received accreditation from the PSHE Association's Quality Mark scheme in autumn 2024 following a nearly year-long assessment process. They are now cross posted on the PSHE Association website as trusted resources for Key Stage 3 teachers.

Final piloting collected feedback from 32 students in focus groups, with pre-lesson questionnaires from 170 students and post-lesson questionnaires from 107 students. Results showed positive impacts on knowledge and behaviour: more students disagreed that "stress is always bad" (31% to 57%) and fewer avoided dealing with stressful situations (43% to 29%). 28% reported learning new ideas, 58% had already applied them, and 60% planned to continue.



LEGACY

All materials remain freely available on our website indefinitely, with animated videos accessible on YouTube and Vimeo. The project was shortlisted for a 2025 University of Oxford Vice-Chancellor's Award in Research Engagement, with further dissemination planned through a Charlie Waller Trust webinar for educators and parents.



CASE STUDY

SHELOCK AND ROGUE BRAIN TAKEOVER

ORIGINS

In 2018, one of our engagement ambassadors was keen to spark an interest in physics and engineering among secondary school girls. The activity she came up with, SHElock, was a programme of 'whodunnit' style workshops that included an escape room inspired by the brain imaging techniques we use in our research. The escape room, later dubbed '*Escape the Lab: Rogue Brain Takeover*' has become a central activity in our engagement library.

WHAT HAPPENED

The first iteration of the escape room was created using photocopied acetates, padlocked boxes from Poundland, and 'kinetic sand' moulded into a brain for the escape room finale: to retrieve the key from the brain through surgery. Videos and an exciting narrative helped to enhance the scientific learning aspects of the escape room.

The escape room debuted at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History as part of SHElock, featuring workshops, an escape room, and a panel discussion about science careers. Subsequent outings included the Oxfordshire Science Festival, and Oxford Open Doors.

With engagement funding from WIN's Centre grant from Wellcome, the team developed a more immersive escape room experience. Collaborating with professional escape room consultants and exhibition fabricators over 18 months, we launched it at Discover Bucks Museum in 2023 and then brought it to Sarah Bonnell School in East London in 2024. Students from this diverse all-girls school enthusiastically participated and requested a return visit. The immersive escape room has also been WIN's offer for the 2023-2025 annual Oxford Open Doors event.





IMPACT AND LEGACY

The escape room remains a versatile engagement tool, appealing to teenagers and adaptable to various venues. The room is now used with people of all ages and genders such as a local Further Education college and with community group 'African Families in the UK', and we are planning a further visit to Sarah Bonnell School.

This project highlighted the importance of long-term resources and dedicated staff. Initial evaluation feedback revealed participants sometimes focused more on "winning" than engaging scientifically. Evaluation of the SHElock programme as a whole helped improve scientific messaging and also showed that the escape room significantly boosted girls' confidence in science.



**CASE STUDY**

FOOTBALL ON THE BRAIN

COLLABORATING WITH FOOTBALL COMMUNITIES TO UNDERSTAND HOW OUR BRAINS ARE INVOLVED IN FOOTBALL

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Football on the Brain is a four-year public engagement project (£218k from Wellcome's "Enriching Engagement" scheme) that connects neuroscience with football communities. The project works with coaches to embed neuroscience theory into training, helps students improve skill learning, and supports football fans in understanding brain health. Partner organisations include Football Beyond Borders, Ignite Sport, Oxford United in the Community, SheKicks Magazine, and Oxford University Sport.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

The project originated from researchers' shared passion for football and desire to reach Oxford audiences who wouldn't typically engage with science. The team identified partner organisations to broker relationships with three key audiences: coaches, players, and fans.

ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMMES

The project comprises several concurrent streams:

- **Educational Materials:** The Education Lead has developed 'youth modules' (classroom and pitch-based lessons) and coach training materials connecting football and neuroscience.
- **Roadshow Activities:** The team developed quick, engaging activities adaptable for various ages and settings. These are tested and refined at public events including Meeting Minds alumni events, community festivals, and partner organisation activities. The most popular activity is the bespoke "Football Snap" card game, where players match football actions to brain areas.
- **Publications:** Annual themed inserts co-written with SheKicks magazine explore different aspects of football neuroscience, with all editions available for download.
- **Ambassador Programme:** The team recruits and trains 3-5 Sports Engagement Ambassadors annually, drawn from across the university with both sport and research expertise.
- **Ongoing Engagement:** The project maintains relationships with the university's SDG Impact Lab, hosting 45 local secondary school students annually for half-day neuroscience and football activities.



IMPACT AND EVOLVING LEGACY

As an ongoing project (until spring 2026), many outcomes are still developing. The project has provided valuable learning about managing five simultaneous collaborative partnerships and the importance of continually establishing mutual benefit.

Activities have enhanced researchers' communication skills across diverse audiences. Significantly, the project is now catalysing new research directions, with studies planned around frequently asked questions from Football on the Brain events. A September 2025 conference bringing together researchers and football practitioners will serve as a catalyst for these research projects.

The project's legacy encompasses both tangible materials and skill development. All written materials—youth modules, SheKicks inserts, newsletters, and blog posts—will be freely available online indefinitely. The 'train-the-trainer' approach has equipped partner staff to deliver activities independently, while roadshow activities and equipment offer potential for future adaptation and repurposing by partner organisations.

CASE STUDY

INCLUSIVE SCANNING

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION TO IDENTIFY BARRIERS TO WIDER PARTICIPATION IN MEDICAL RESEARCH

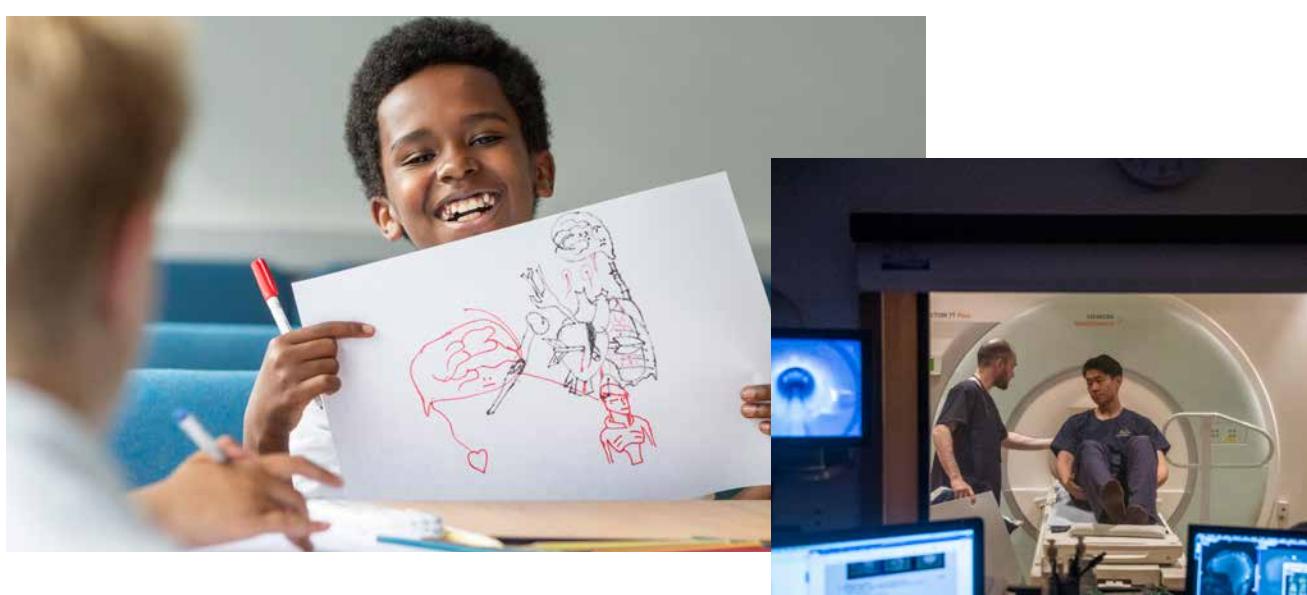
ORIGINS

The cultural and political climate of 2020 highlighted the urgent need to improve equity in research participation. WIN researchers recognised that many diseases affect people from different ethnic backgrounds differently, yet we lacked the diverse participants needed to understand these differences. A specific example emerged when researchers noted that hairstyles common amongst the Afro-Caribbean population prohibited participation in electrophysiology (EEG) research, leading to broader questioning of research practices and barriers faced by people from non-white ethnicities.

WHAT HAPPENED

The engagement team secured £4,700 from the Participatory Research Fund (Medical Sciences Division) to address ethnic diversity gaps in research participants. The funding supported two community workshops with public contributors from non-white ethnic backgrounds, alongside researchers, radiographers, and engagement professionals.

The first workshop introduced contributors to our research through facility tours and explanations of current practices. Contributors identified key barriers including uncertainty about what to expect during research visits, religious concerns about required clothing, and confusion about safety screening questions. A second workshop enabled researchers and radiographers to develop mitigation strategies, which were then presented to public contributors for feedback in a third session.





SPECIFIC OUTCOMES

The consultation process resulted in tangible changes to research practices:

- Professionally produced videos: one explaining the scan day experience and another featuring diverse participants sharing their motivations and experiences
- Inclusive clothing options: long-sleeve alternatives to standard short-sleeved scrubs and MRI-safe head coverings for those preferring to cover their heads
- Enhanced communication: expanded MRI safety screening questionnaire explaining the rationale behind each question

IMPACT AND LEGACY

Despite the modest cost, these changes created lasting improvements to research conduct across the Centre. Researchers gained invaluable insights into participant experiences, improving their sensitivity and confidence when handling diversity issues.

We now collect anonymous demographic data on all research participants to monitor the effectiveness of these initial changes. The goal is to recruit a long-term panel of paid community connectors who can advocate for research improvements within their communities while serving as voices for better research practices.

Building on this success, the engagement team secured a second Participatory Research Fund grant in 2024 to develop relationships with local Oxford community organisations serving people from non-white ethnic backgrounds. This funding supported dedicated educational and trust-building events developed in partnership with Oxford's Asian Cultural Centre and African Families in the UK, furthering the original project's aims through sustained community engagement.



**CASE STUDY**

ANNUAL TRAINING PROGRAMME DEVELOPING SKILLS IN PUBLIC, POLICY AND PATIENT ENGAGEMENT

ORIGINS & DEVELOPMENT

Prior to 2017, public engagement at the Centre was carried out by a handful of motivated individuals participating in ad hoc opportunities. Engagement was viewed as a niche additional activity rather than an integral part of research. To broaden participation and create a culture where engagement was valued and rewarded, we developed the Engagement Ambassador Scheme as part of the initial strategy for the newly created Wellcome Centre.

Initially focused on public engagement, the scheme was expanded in 2022 to include policy engagement and patient and public involvement (PPI), reflecting the broader scope of engagement activities.

HOW IT WORKS

Each November, we issue an internal call for applications to become Engagement Ambassadors. 6-7 staff and students are appointed annually, ranging from DPhil students and early career researchers to established core staff. No prior experience is required—selection is based on interest and motivation, with consideration given to research diversity within each cohort.

All ambassadors complete mandatory training covering topics such as idea generation, storytelling, and museum partnerships, delivered by the engagement team with external input. Ambassadors participate in existing Centre activities (scanner demos, primary school visits) and can develop their own engagement projects with mentoring from the engagement team. The year begins and ends with celebration events where outgoing ambassadors share their experiences with incoming cohorts.



IMPACT AND RECOGNITION

Since 2017, over 65 ambassadors have been trained, with many remaining actively involved in ongoing engagement. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with participants noting improved communication skills beneficial to their broader science careers. The scheme has catalysed significant projects including the SHElock escape room and NeuroFashion show.

Researchers value the recognition the scheme provides for engagement work and the opportunity to learn from others' experiences. This culture of engagement is reflected in high participation rates—over 75 researchers contributed to the 'Your Amazing Brain' exhibition alone.



LEGACY AND EXPANSION

Beyond training over 65 people in engagement, the scheme has inspired broader cultural change at the Centre. The success led to the creation of Ambassador schemes in Open Science and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. In 2025, all three Ambassador schemes jointly won a University of Oxford Vice-Chancellor's Award in Research Culture.

The model has been adopted by other neuroscience departments in Oxford (NDCN and Experimental Psychology) and two other Wellcome Centres, demonstrating its effectiveness as a template for building engagement capacity across research institutions.

CASE STUDY

BESPOKE SUPPORT FOR RESEARCHERS

The Centre encourages its researchers and core staff to show initiative in developing and delivering their own engagement activities. Ad hoc support for these is available to individual members upon request. A wide range of support is provided by our engagement staff: covering a large variety of target audiences and activity formats, and across the whole spectrum of development from refining initial ideas to legacy-planning and evaluation. These support requests are increasing in number and variety each year.

ORIGINS

The engagement team has always provided ad hoc support to individuals, as individual engagement activities can support two aims of our Engagement strategy: increasing research impact through engaged research and diversity, and sharing engagement and scientific expertise widely to increase our impact. The third aim, providing practical tools for engaged research for researchers, is how the Engagement team empowers researchers to fulfil the other two.

In 2022, the Engagement team began tracking ad hoc requests, to better understand the skill gaps and support needs across the Centre.

WHAT HAPPENED

Ad hoc support requests increased from 41 in 2022, to 78 in 2023, to 88 in 2024, to over 120 in 2025.

In 2024, the Engagement team also began providing ad hoc support to the Experimental Psychology department and Nuffield Department of Clinical Neurosciences. This has increased the engagement support provision available to members of both departments, and the increased awareness of activities across both departments and the Centre has provided opportunities to streamline and collaborate on intra-department activities.



Examples of activities and projects

- A 'NeuroFashion Show' showcasing equipment used in a variety of our research studies via a 'fashion catwalk' event format
- Festival activity support, including insurance and risk assessment approvals
- 'Other Than Oxford', a photography exhibition highlighting stories of diversity in STEM research
- Assisting with preparation for school talks by researchers – all ages Y1-12
- Advising on contract documentation for a PPI project with a visual artist
- Brokering relationships with community organisations – including a research project needing contacts with local museums
- Providing expert guidance on 'Lived Experience' practice (methodology and direction)
- Providing materials and activities for events engaging children in various non-school settings
- Editors, and/or invited co-applicants on Public and Community Engagement with Research Seed Fund applications
- Assisting with a Royal Society Partnership Grant with Aylesford School in Warwick, involving researchers from three research centres
- Securing funding for, and leading a podcast project with Sarah Bonnell School, training students to interview MRI researchers



DRIVING IMPACT

The nature of support requests varies widely, reflecting researchers' diverse needs at different engagement stages. Support often begins at conception, helping researchers move from "I'd like to do something but I'm not sure what" through to identifying target audiences and messages, then translating these into concrete activities.

The team provides strategic guidance on PPI, Policy and EDI challenges. They assist with grant applications, often co-writing engagement grants and engagement sections of larger bids. They also plan, facilitate, and evaluate PPI focus groups and events, ensuring these are both meaningful and methodologically sound.

Finally, the team brokers connections across the research engagement ecosystem—referring researchers to opportunities and collaborators, connecting them with community organisations, and navigating internal systems by liaising with insurance, facilities, and finance teams. This support increases the effectiveness of the engagement and drives impact.

LEGACY

Ad hoc support is considered an ongoing cornerstone of the support provided by the Engagement Team. Especially as the funding model for the team is shifting towards time buy-outs by specific research projects, the empowerment of individual researchers to develop and deliver activities - outside of those centrally coordinated by our core staff – will be critical for maintaining and expanding our capacity to fulfil its strategic engagement aims.

