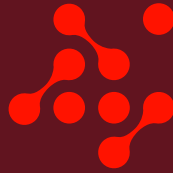
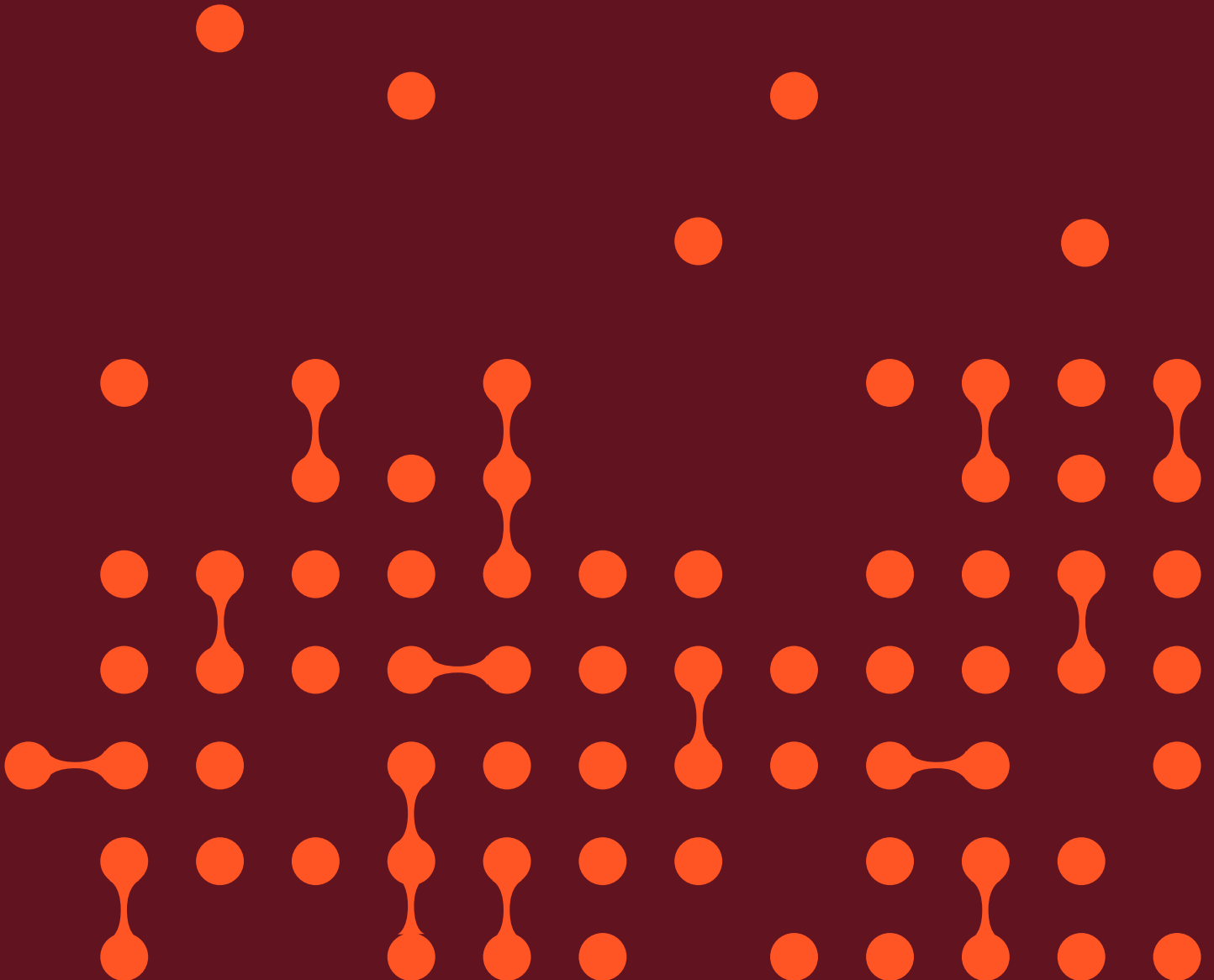




**Public and  
Community  
Engagement  
with Research**



University of Oxford  
**Public and Community Engagement  
with Research Strategy**  
2024-2029



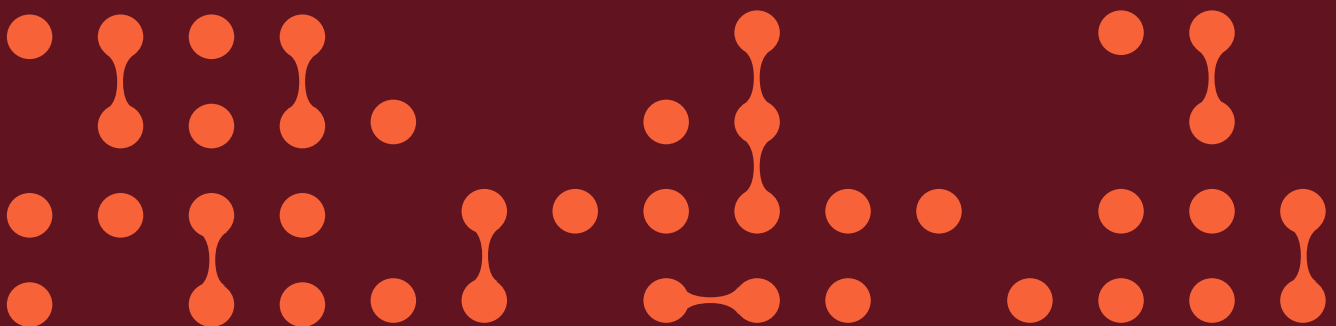
# Connect. Listen. Co-create.

The research done here at the University of Oxford addresses major, complex challenges, including the climate crisis, mental health and democracy, as well as more specific issues such as rare diseases and low traffic neighbourhoods. And our research can affect everyone, from local communities to millions of people across the globe.

But we cannot solve challenges alone and have much to learn from the people around us. That's why it's critically important to partner with the public and communities in our research.

Doing so builds trust, enhances knowledge and inspires others. It increases the relevance and impact of research – ensuring it makes a real difference to society far beyond the University.

At Oxford University we nurture the engagement environment, supporting researchers and the public to work together in research, and to benefit from the process. We drive this collaboration and co-creation to make positive differences. We're committed to improving engagement practice, embodying principles of responsible engagement, and engaging more – and better – with communities and the public.





*"Public engagement powers excellent research. Actively involving communities affected by our work provides invaluable insights and perspectives, enriching our research and creating solutions that are inclusive and equitable. This engagement fuels innovation and achieves meaningful outcomes for all."*

**The Vice-Chancellor,  
Professor Irene Tracey,**  
CBE, FRS, FMedSci



## Foreword

### Public and Community Engagement with Research Advisory Board

Whether by creating relevant, actionable knowledge or innovating new products to improve lives, research done at our University addresses major, complex challenges that affect society, including the climate crisis, mental health and democracy. Such research can affect millions of people globally or dozens of people in local communities. But research alone cannot solve these challenges; wider societal buy-in is required and we have much to learn from the people around us.

Thus, we have responsibility to the public and communities: in undertaking research that we hope will benefit the world in some way, we must share our knowledge and expertise, while listening to and including wider society. Engaging the public and communities like this benefits our research by making our ideas and findings more relevant, and our methods culturally sensitive and respectful. It benefits the University by building trust and credibility through being transparent. Perhaps most importantly, it benefits communities by supporting them to take action, based on our research findings. And last, but by no means least, it is enjoyable and rewarding. It is win, win, win, win.

Modern universities are civic institutions that are embedded within society. Our University has a vital relationship with our city, alongside influence regionally, nationally and globally. Accordingly, one of our Vice-Chancellor's first acts was to appoint a new Local-Global Engagement Officer whose role complements and builds on our extensive existing engagement strengths: at any time, hundreds<sup>1</sup> of projects that integrate engagement with research are being led by University researchers and engagement professionals, while dedicated initiatives and institutes, such as The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH), Oxford Sparks, the Festival of Social Science, Reuben College, the Schwarzman Centre, and our Gardens, Libraries and Museums create valuable platforms for engagement.

Public and community engagement with research is not an appendix to research, it is a vital and integral part of our endeavour at Oxford. It is, simply, the right thing to do: our research must exist beyond the academy, contributing to and improving society. By involving a wide range of stakeholders in research, universities can help ensure that findings are applied in practical settings, leading to positive societal outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> Each year, approximately 13% of all grants awarded to the University by external funders include costs for public and community engagement – over 100 projects. And this is certainly an underestimate: internal funds, not captured on our costing software, further augment engagement activity, while many departments and research groups will simply 'do' engagement with research.

## Reflection from our former Academic Champion

Being a torchbearer for public and community engagement with research is a joy. It provides an opportunity to explore the extraordinary variety of activities across this fascinating university. A strategy refresh like this also gives us a moment to reflect on why and how we engage different groups with our research, and how we can make it even better.

There's work to be done, particularly in collecting, curating and celebrating our achievements. We also need to better connect the dots within the university and with the communities we serve, for everyone's benefit. Our community is brimming with creativity, talent and energy, though, and understands the imperatives before us.

We're in an era of intersecting global challenges dominated by the climate crisis, and sharing the knowledge we generate beyond the academy has never been more vital. It's essential for building trust in research, co-creating groundbreaking ideas, and listening to external voices. We have significant stories to tell, and this strategy is a call-to-arms to tell them well.

Professor Alison Woollard, PCER Champion 2017-2024



## Our strategy

Following extensive consultation across the University, communities affected by our work, and thought leaders in Higher Education, we have identified six strategic objectives that we will focus on for the next five years, in two broad themes.

Our vision is a university where responsible and purposeful engagement with communities and the public is integral to our research, driving collaboration and creating positive change. To achieve this, we will:

1. **Nurture our engagement environment** by:
  - a. **defining** public and community engagement with research broadly and inclusively;
  - b. **integrating** engagement that adds value to society into our research;
  - c. **connecting** the University's engagement work, internally and externally; and
  - d. **stewarding** engagement across the University, ensuring our governance is transparent and joined-up, and capturing our efforts.
2. **Improve our engagement practice** by:
  - a. increasing **community** participation in, and collaboration with, our research; and
  - b. prioritising **responsible** engagement that is purposeful and interdisciplinary.

Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum



## Strategic objectives in detail

### 1a: Define engagement

We will develop a shared understanding of public and community engagement with research across the University that emphasises the purposes of engagement as fostering connections, building relationships and benefitting research and society.

We will avoid a restrictive definition that might constrain the diverse nature of engagement activities and purposes.

### 1b: Integrate engagement

We will work to make engagement that adds value to society the norm within our research, through:

- ❖ **Support:** Increasing support for individuals undertaking public engagement activities, including integrating engagement into proposals, providing training, and removing barriers.
- ❖ **Recognition:** Enhancing recognition for individuals involved in public engagement activities through both informal and formal institutional pathways.
- ❖ **Strategic alignment:** Aligning public and community engagement with other knowledge exchange agendas and activities across the University to ensure cohesive and impactful outcomes.

### 1c: Connect engagement

We will make more people aware of the University's engagement work, internally and externally, and build internal networks through:

- ❖ **Greater visibility:** Enhancing the visibility and awareness of engagement strategies, projects, and opportunities within the University.
- ❖ **Improved connectivity:** Facilitating regular gatherings for individuals involved in engagement activities to celebrate their efforts, share expertise, and build momentum.
- ❖ **Shaping the field:** Leveraging our growing experience and recognition in engagement work to contribute to and influence broader discussions on engagement.

### 1d: Steward engagement

We will strengthen governance for engagement across the University, ensuring we are transparent, joined-up and capture our efforts, through:

- ❖ **Balanced central and divisional roles:** Establishing a governance structure that respects central guidance while allowing for divisional and departmental autonomy, clearly delineating responsibilities, and avoiding duplication of efforts.
- ❖ **Capturing our efforts:** Implementing a shared framework to understand and describe the collective impact of our engagement work, enabling us to effectively communicate our engagement story both internally and externally.

### 2a: Engage with communities

We will work more closely with communities affected by our research, involving, listening to and learning from them, to increase their participation and influence in the University's research, through:

- ❖ **Building for the long term:** Extending community engagement beyond individual projects, employing relational and interconnected approaches, and better coordinating relationships within the University to prevent over-saturation of communities.
- ❖ **Addressing elitism:** Creating more welcoming engagement spaces by prioritising diversity and inclusion in all aspects of engagement.
- ❖ **A culture of feedback:** Developing a culture of feedback in engagement activities to support action, including co-production with communities where appropriate.

### 2b: Engage responsibly

We will develop responsible engagement practices that are purposeful and interdisciplinary, through:

- ❖ **Responsible Knowledge Exchange, Engagement, and Impact:** By the end of this strategy, the six principles of responsible engagement will be the standard framework guiding our engagement practices.
- ❖ **Purpose and added value:** Ensuring that engagement adds value and makes a difference to the participant(s), the researcher, or the research.
- ❖ **Collaboration and interdisciplinarity:** Encouraging engagement that brings disciplines together, reflecting the multifaceted nature of societal challenges.
- ❖ **Quality and innovation:** Supporting quality and innovative practices as essential goals, motivating those involved in engagement activities and fostering innovation.



## Why this strategy?

For over a decade, public and community engagement with research<sup>2</sup> has been a major part of what we do at Oxford. Our previous Public Engagement with Research Strategic Plan built capacity to support and do engagement with research. It was a success: a dedicated central team now works to reduce duplication of effort, coordinate reporting across the University's engagement work, and provide direct support for engagement through funding, evaluation and more.

This new strategy builds on our previous work and reflects the current priorities for community engagement as a distinct set of purposes and practices within public engagement. For us, 'community' means:

1. communities of place – people who live geographically near each other, although not necessarily near Oxford
2. communities of experience – people who have a shared significant life experience
3. communities of identity – people who have a shared identity, e.g., sex or gender, ethnicity
4. communities of practice – people who do a similar thing, professionally or for enjoyment.<sup>3</sup>

Through our new strategy, we will improve the internal environment for engagement by establishing a shared understanding of the purposes for and practices of engagement; integrating it into our research; connecting those who already engage and encouraging others to join; and stewarding our collective engagement efforts. Further, we will improve our engagement practice, ensuring that when we engage communities, especially, with our research we value, learn from and are shaped by their contribution; and that all our engagement is responsible, purposeful and of quality.

### Water and Wildlife Discovery Day at Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum



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<sup>2</sup> Our working definition (see strategic objective 1a) of public and community engagement with research is *any pursuit that fosters connections between research and a wide variety of people, locally, nationally and globally. It strengthens relationships between researchers, communities, the public and the University. Through collaboration, sharing information, and inspiration, it benefits both research and society.*

<sup>3</sup> These four types of community inevitably intersect. For example, Blackbird Leys (a community of place) has a larger than average Black (a community of identity) population (~12%, compared to 4.2% for England), who will often share different experiences (communities of experience) compared to a white Briton.



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## Oxford Inside Out

The University strives for excellence in all its work, including engagement with research. Not only is engagement intrinsically valuable and beneficial, it is now a key competency of research institutions in the context of knowledge exchange and impact. In the next Research Excellence Framework (REF), the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions, 'Engagement and impact' constitutes 25% of an institution's quality profile. Meanwhile, UKRI's Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) measures and compares the performance of higher education providers in public and community engagement as a specific area of knowledge exchange activity. Together the REF and the KEF set a high bar for purposeful and responsible engagement whose impact can be robustly evidenced to demonstrate excellence.

Nonetheless, we recognise the ever-increasing demands required of universities and researchers. With limited time and resources, we must prioritise our efforts. And all too often, there is insufficient reward and recognition for those who do engage. We do not expect all researchers to do public engagement, but research, as a process, should strive to incorporate engagement within its culture and practice – we intend for this strategy to both remove some of the barriers to engagement and improve reward and recognition.

In realising this strategy, the unique engagement strengths within the University ecosystem will shape our practice, learning and impact; namely:

1. Our research on Responsible Knowledge Exchange, Engagement and Impact, which will become integral to our engagement practice (see 2b, above).
2. Our Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM), which do their own research and incorporate that from across the University into freely available cultural offerings that reach millions<sup>4</sup> of visitors each year.
3. Our overseas research units in Thailand, Vietnam and Kenya, which excel at partnering with communities to involve them in research and evaluating the impact of such involvement.

We believe these strengths, alongside the University's commitment to excellence and opportunities for engagement, will enable us to achieve our strategy.

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<sup>4</sup> Data from the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA); [alva.org.uk](https://alva.org.uk)

