Public Engagement Strategy
School of Life Sciences

Overview
Public engagement is a core component within the School of Life Sciences. Used effectively it can enhance research, teaching and learning, and increase the impact we have on society. The School of Life Sciences supports public engagement activities that improve relationships between the School and local community, and increase external engagement with research. The School recognises the increasing importance of public engagement for universities and provides opportunities for all members of Life Sciences to engage with the public.

Current position
Approximately 10% of staff and PhD students currently take part in public engagement, with the majority of activities being to ‘inform and inspire’ the public. The EDGE tool is a measure of public engagement within institutions, assessing key aspects that lead to public engagement being embedded in organisations. Analysis of the School was performed in November 2015 and 2017 (Figure 1). The outcomes demonstrate that the School is at the Developing stage, suggesting that ‘some support has been put in place, but in a relatively unsystematic and non-strategic fashion’. This is an improvement from analysis in November 2015, where the School was measured as Embryonic (‘institutional support for engagement is patchy or non-existent, although some engagement activity is underway’). This strategy documents the plans to increase the measure, with the aim to be Gripping (‘The institution is taking steps to develop more systematic and strategic support’) by a review in November 2019. This will bring us in line with the current average in the sector.

Figure 1: Analysis of the School of Life Sciences public engagement using the EDGE tool, assessed in 2015, 2017 and the projection for 2019.
Definition of public engagement
The School follows the definition of public engagement by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement:
"Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit."

Need for change
The University of Sussex recognises the importance of public engagement, as demonstrated by signing the Manifesto for Public Engagement in 2017. The University landscape is changing, with the impact of research being increasingly significant. A large proportion of non-academic engagement within Life Sciences has been business-focused, and while this is an important aspect of external engagement, prioritising this leaves a large proportion of the public dis-engaged with research. Knowledge is not only generated within universities, and the public can often provide valuable insight into questions posed. It is essential these people are engaged earlier in the research process; both before projects commence and as research progresses.

Reasons for engaging
As a School we have a responsibility to our local community, the general public and all stakeholders who our research affects. We recognise that engaging with non-academics is essential to completely understand our research questions and their implications on society, and by engaging with relevant groups we are increasing the impact of our research. We are also the local faces of scientific endeavor, and as such have a responsibility to represent good scientific practice and act as role models in promoting science and inspiring future researchers. In addition, much of the research carried out at the School is publicly funded, therefore we have a duty to inform the public about that research, and work with the public to ensure the relevance of the research.

Aims
We want to increase the quality of engagement taking place within Sussex Life Sciences, to encourage more activities that consult and collaborate with the public, ensuring that outcomes of the engagement feed directly into the work of the School. We want to target these activities to specific audiences who our work impacts and/or who do not engage with science regularly. We aim to:

1. Increase the quantity of good quality public engagement within the School of Life Sciences, and in particular engagement with research
   - Inform, consult and/or collaborate with people who are impacted by the School's research, whether at a local, national or international level
   - Establish meaningful partnerships that support research with impact
   - Provide opportunities for the general public to contribute to scientific research

2. Improve perceptions of, and engagement with, scientific research by the local community, increasing the diversity of our engaged public
   - Support the local community to engage with science: with disengaged local audiences and young people being a priority
   - Inspire future generations from more diverse backgrounds into Life Sciences, with schools in quintile 1/2 of the POLAR4 measurement being a priority
   - Motivate people outside of academia to connect more with science, to ask questions and contribute to idea generation
   - Enable non-academics to develop informed opinions/enter into debate about subjects relevant to Life Sciences
   - Generate and maintain public interest in and support for research
3. Provide an environment where public engagement is supported, with appropriate recognition for those participating

- Provide support through the School Public Engagement Coordinator
- Recognise staff and students who participate in public engagement
- Provide skills training to increase the quality of public engagement within the School

Methods of engagement

- Informing and inspiring: The majority of current activities within the School focus on engaging the public through science festivals, talks and lab tours. Members of Life Sciences who are not active researchers are encouraged to participate in informing and inspiring activities.
- Consultation: Groups of the general public will have lived experiences that relates to research subjects within Life Sciences. Enabling a non-academic’s experience to be heard will enable researchers to gain a different perspective on their work, and identify other avenues/priorities as a consequence; increasing the relevance of our research and therefore its impact.
- Collaboration: Working with the public on specific research questions can take place throughout a project, but are often most effective when initiated during the planning stages. This provides non-academics the opportunity to draw on University expertise about a question relevant to them, while increasing the academic’s research scope and collaborators.

Impact

Through supporting members of Life Sciences to engage with the people who are affected by their research, we aim to increasing the quality and impact of research. Through consulting and collaborating with these communities, academics will be better placed to pose relevant research questions and influence changes in society through health, policy, environmental, economic or other terms.

Recognition

As public engagement is a valued component of the School’s remit, we aim to recognise staff and students who participate in activities. Over the coming years we plan to:

- Incorporate public engagement into the staff work load model and ensure it is measured in appraisals and promotions criteria and listed on job adverts
- Postdoctoral Research Associates are encouraged to take part in public engagement activities in agreement with their manager and as part of their work load model. Certificates of involvement will be available from the Public Engagement Coordinator on request.
- Students will be paid for participating in public engagement activities. Depending on the responsibilities and experience of the students, this will be at a rate between grade 3 and 5.

Support

All members of staff are supported by the Public Engagement Coordinator, whose priority is to enable members of Life Sciences to lead public engagement projects (see section: ‘Public Engagement Coordinator role’), through methods listed in the final section of this strategy. In addition, the School is providing limited funding for projects that fit into the priorities above, including:

- Consumables for events that highlight research of the School and inform and inspire the public
- A competitive pilot fund scheme for Principle Investigators: for new projects that focus on consulting or collaborating with specific audiences
- A funding scheme to support initiation of long-term partnerships with the local community

Where internal funding is not possible, support is provided to apply for external funds through the Public Engagement Coordinator.
Training
Training in techniques for public engagement will be provided in partnership with the Doctoral School and Research Development team, with reference to Vitae’s *Researcher Development Framework*. In addition, within Life Sciences we plan to:

- Provide subject-specific training
- Showcase external speakers who incorporate public engagement with research
- Offer public engagement masterclasses, with priority to Early Career Researchers
- Run extracurricular sessions on public engagement for undergraduates
- Provision of ‘lay summary’ sessions, where researchers can present grant proposals to a non-academic audience prior to grant submission

Public Engagement Coordinator Role
The Public Engagement Coordinator will lead the School in achieving the above aims, through:

- Encourage and support Life Sciences to engage with the public
  - Collaborate with staff to set-up public engagement events
  - Develop, deliver and source training opportunities for staff and students in public engagement methods and best practice
  - Provide resources for use by the School (e.g. equipment, guides)
  - Oversee the allocation of School resources to engagement projects
- Promote and support the delivery of a broad programme of engagement activities
  - Responsive to the UK landscape and priorities
  - Develop partnerships with local and national audiences
  - Broaden and diversify our audiences
- Advise on best practice for embedding public engagement into research
- Work with researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of individual projects
- Support inclusion of public engagement within ‘pathways to impact’ statements for grant applications, for REF purposes, and support applications to specific public engagement grants
- Establish a culture supportive of public engagement
  - Provide regular communications to the School
  - Promote and recognise excellence within the School
  - Report to senior management team
- Develop University-wide public engagement networks