



Open City Research



What if everyone could help shape science?

What if research and policy decisions were guided not only by experts, but also by the lived experiences of families, young people, and diverse communities?

In the Open City Lab, over 40,000 visitors annually contribute to live science research—sharing views, data, and reflections through games, conversations, and creative tools.

Grounded in authority-sharing, this approach treats the public as active contributors. The result is rich, policy-relevant insight informing areas like data ethics, health research, and climate action.

It's a model which enables research to be more inclusive, transparent, and impactful.



Core Principles of Open City Research

- **Inclusive and Welcoming Public Space** As an independent and trusted public space, the science centre is uniquely positioned to connect researchers with broad and diverse audiences, supported by expert science communicators.
- **Valuing Lived Experience**
We recognise visitors as experts in their own lived experiences. They are invited to contribute meaningfully across all stages of the research process, shifting traditional dynamics and ensuring that research reflects real-world perspectives.
- **Co-creation and Collaboration**
Interactive and impactful activities are co-developed through genuine collaboration between the science centre, academic partners, and the public. This process includes planning meetings, participatory workshops, and pilot sessions held in the venue.
- **Responsive and Ethical Design**
All activities and engagement processes are designed to be flexible and adaptable, integrating partner-specific requirements such as ethical approval or institutional goals with audience focused working practices.
- **Sustainable Impact and Legacy**
As the programme evolves, Open City Research fosters ongoing relationships with partners, supports the development of legacy outcomes, and strengthens public engagement with research well beyond individual projects.





Open City Research: Step-by-Step Partnership Approach

1. **Establishing the Partnership**

Once a partnership is confirmed, the Open City Research team meets with the partner to identify where public contributions can make the most meaningful impact. Our team brings deep expertise in public engagement and authority sharing skills and practice, initiating the co-development process from the outset.

2. **Co-developing Activities**

We lead the creation of interactive, thought-provoking activities tailored to the partner's research goals while ensuring accessibility and engagement for all visitors. This may include externally commissioned content such as film, animation, or immersive set design. Activities are collaboratively refined and piloted with public audiences, positioning the public as active co-creators rather than passive participants.

3. **Skills Sharing and Capacity Building**

Partners are invited to take part in dedicated skills-sharing sessions. These sessions help facilitators deepen their understanding of the research area, while also allowing partners to benefit from our expertise in inclusive, effective science communication and facilitation.

4. **Bespoke Events and Targeted Engagement**

Once the programme is live, we collaborate with partners to deliver bespoke events, allowing for targeted engagement with specific communities or demographics.

5. **Ongoing Data Collection and Adaptation**

Throughout the programme, we collect and share research insights as they emerge. This enables real-time refinements to maximise the impact of public contributions and ensure alignment with research objectives.

6. **Programme Conclusion and Legacy Planning**

At the end of the programme, we review outcomes and assess impact with the partner. We work together to ensure that public contributions are acknowledged and reflected—both in the venue and online - to build lasting legacy for both the research and participants.





What Do the Public Experience?

Over a typical six-month Open City Research programme, the Open City Lab welcomes between 20,000 and 30,000 visitors, all of whom engage with a live research topic. These visitors include a diverse mix of paying audiences, community groups with free memberships, school groups, and others — ensuring a broad and inclusive reach.

Each programme offers a variety of interactive activities designed to support different levels of public engagement. Some activities help contextualise the research theme, while others gather meaningful contributions—from quick sentiment information through to in-depth commentary. This layered approach allows participants to engage in ways that feel accessible and relevant to them.

Interactive methods used to date include: physical games, digital interactives, social and facilitated conversations, and creative challenges and provocations.

This model not only creates meaningful experiences for the public, but also delivers high-quality, diverse public contributions that enrich academic research and strengthen public dialogues with science.



Extending the experience

Beyond our Walls is an opportunity to take Open City Lab activity to public spaces beyond the science centre, reaching those who may not otherwise feed into the activity. We create outreach opportunities to seek contributions from specific partner communities, such as schools, community events, and other outside spaces. These opportunities may be tailored to suit the needs of the partner, for example by connecting with specific demographics in the city. As an organisation, we prioritise people who experience racism, young people, disabled people and areas of multiple deprivation.

We extend all our experiences by creating legacy materials such as online articles and films shared online and on our Big Screen. These materials reflect the public contributions in approachable formats with accessible language. Our programmes are celebrated in venue in dedicated legacy spaces on the exhibition floor.

With our partners, we have co-delivered of project outcomes at conferences, research meetings and formal publications. In all these activities, we ensure the visitor contributions act as a provocation for debate and reflection in further science policy processes and have a live beyond the data collection.



Case Study: *Shopping Trolley Secrets*

Shopping Trolley Secrets was a collaborative public engagement project between We The Curious, the University of Bristol's Digital Footprints Lab, and thousands of public contributors. The project explored people's responses to the use of shopping loyalty card data in health research, with the goal of influencing this developing area of science.

Over the course of the six-month programme, approximately 25,000 visitors engaged with the project, resulting in more than 12,000 light-touch contributions and over 500 in-depth written reflections. This provided critical insight into public acceptability, concerns, and expectations around consumer data use in research.

Co-Designed Activities

The programme featured a wide range of interactive, co-developed experiences that helped participants reflect on and respond to real-world data dilemmas. Key elements included:

- A short film featuring lead researcher Dr. Anya Skatova, which introduced the ethical questions and invited participation.
- A context-setting game and explanatory materials that helped demystify the concept of shopping data as a form of personal data.
- An imitation supermarket, where visitors filled baskets and viewed a real-time, anonymised projection of aggregated "checkout data."
- A "data strings" sentiment board, gathering public opinion on various uses of shopping data in research.
- A postcard station, where participants could write directly to researchers with detailed reflections. Researchers responded with written replies, establishing a two-way dialogue between the public and academia.

Responsive and Evolving Design

Throughout the programme, activities were adapted in response to both public feedback and evolving research questions. For example, the data strings board was updated to explore the linkage of shopping data with other personal datasets, in response to themes emerging from public commentary.

Research and Policy Impact

The transcribed visitor postcards and aggregated contributions have since been used by the Digital Footprints Lab to support funding applications and shape the future direction of their research agenda. The programme has become a flagship example of responsible, participatory public engagement, and has been highlighted by the research team at conferences and online.

"It was hugely beneficial experience for me as a researcher and for the whole lab, and we are planning to do more. Public engagement and involvement is embedded in our work, and it was also great to learn from OCR team how to develop these projects on much more professional level than I ever would be able to do myself"

Dr Anya Skatova, Director of Digital Footprints Lab



“I was surprised with the amount of people that were open and receptive to the research we were discussing. There was a lot more passion, interest and pre-existing knowledge around nutrition and public health - more than I was expecting.”

Dr Laura Fryer, Research Associate at Digital Footprints Lab

