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Defence, security, and the nation

What is the role of public
opinion in shaping defence
research and innovation?

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shaping defence research and innovation?

*UK Research and Innovation
Sciencewise roundtable discussion summary*

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Introduction

As the geopolitical and security landscape rapidly evolves, defence spending and strengthening the UK's preparedness have become urgent priorities.

In 2025, the Government published the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy and Defence Industrial Strategy, highlighting the significant untapped potential of the defence sector for creating growth through research and innovation (R&I). Advancements in science and technology, including in artificial intelligence (AI), engineering biology, and cybersecurity promise to enhance national capabilities and transform society.

As research and innovation in the UK prepares to ramp up its efforts to contribute to the national security and defence agenda, it is important to involve the public in shaping the values, boundaries, and oversight of defence-relevant science and technology. This includes addressing the ethical and societal implications of dual-use technologies, ensuring transparency and public trust, and supporting responsible innovation in line with democratic principles.

One of the key conclusions of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review was that national security can no longer be outsourced solely to the armed forces and that a 'whole-of-society' approach is needed. The Review promises a 'national conversation' on threats, risks, and resilience led by the Government to reconnect defence with society. But what does this look like in practice?

In May 2026, Sciencewise and the British Science Association brought together policymakers and leaders from across UK universities, the private sector, and civil society to discuss the UK public's role in shaping defence science and technology policy.

In this roundtable discussion, participants explored the challenges of engaging the public on defence and security R&I and what could be done to start a more open conversation with the public about defence and security-related policymaking.

Key Messages

1. **The current defence debate in the UK is fragmented and framed in a way that does not resonate with the public.** Most people do not see defence as relevant to their own lives and feel overwhelmed by the rapidly changing national security landscape. There are also signs that the public are uninterested in hearing from current defence spokespeople.
2. **Public legitimacy is essential, but the purpose of engagement needs to be clearly defined.** Is engagement about building trust and legitimacy, making better decisions, or mutual learning? There is a need for specificity and transparency when engaging the public in conversations about defence and security R&I.
3. **The discussion about defence R&I and economic growth is in its early stages.** The Industrial Strategy and Strategic Defence Review emphasise the link between defence and economic growth, but there is no consistent narrative on how defence innovation supports growth. Moreover, as defence spans many sectors and types of organisations, it is difficult to define what a defence company is and measure the impact of the defence industry on economic growth.
4. **There is an urgent need to reframe the debate and shift to participatory and locally grounded approaches.** It is important that the defence R&I community moves on from abstract, top-down, and binary narratives towards everyday relevance and local conversations focused on resilience, jobs, and communities, including how defence R&I can affect local economies and people's lives.
5. **It is crucial that public engagement outputs are considered seriously for policy and practice** and are followed up with appropriate communications informing the public how their views were taken into account. There is a need to be clear about how the public can make a difference and create feedback loops to ensure that the difference can be articulated.
6. **Young people are a key audience to connect with.** There is often an assumption that they do not care, but this is not a useful narrative. It is well known that young people have different views and values and receive their information in a different way to older generations. To build long-term legitimacy, when engaging the public on defence and security topics, there is a need to prioritise younger age groups and adapt the messaging and channels to meet young people where they are.

What is known about public attitudes to defence and security?

In their annual survey of UK public opinion on foreign policy and global affairs, the British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG) found that the UK public's interest in UK foreign policy has fallen 12% from 83% last year to 71% in 2026.¹ The proportion of Britons who feel informed about the UK's international activities has also fallen from 67% to 50%. The authors suggest that this is likely due to the multiple recent global crises and growing distrust in key allies causing people to disconnect.

The BFPG also reports that national security emerged as the clear priority in 2026, with 47% of the public listing it as one of the UK's top foreign policy priorities. In a rapidly changing global landscape, the UK public report feeling increasingly insecure, with 26% feeling unsafe, up from 19% in 2025.

The report also highlights that the public are broadly supportive of increasing defence spending, with 60% agreeing that the UK should increase its defence spending to 3% of GDP either now or in the next few years. However, people are unwilling to accept trade-offs that might be required to fund increased defence spending. 58% oppose increased defence spending if it means reducing spending on the NHS, 46% if it requires cuts to education, 42% if it requires cuts to welfare, and 41% if it required increasing taxes.

There are also signs that the public are uninterested in hearing from current defence spokespeople. Research by Montfort Communications found that 72% of the public did not think the defence industry communicates clearly enough.² When asked who they would like to hear from in the defence industry, the top responses were 'the end user of the kit in the armed forces' (46%) and engineers and scientists developing the kit (39%). This might be an indication that rather than relying solely on military leaders, the sector might need to rethink who it is nominating as messengers and review the language and platforms they are using to reach the public.³

¹ British Foreign Policy Group. (2026). UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs. Annual Survey – 2026. <https://bfpg.co.uk/reports/2026-annual-survey-of-uk-public-opinion-on-foreign-policy>

² Montfort Communications. (2026). Britain and Defence: What the Public Really Think. <https://montfort.london/britain-and-defence-what-the-public-really-thinks/>

³ British Foreign Policy Group. (2025). The Public: The Missing Piece in UK Readiness. <https://bfpg.co.uk/2026/04/public-support-uk-defence-readiness/>

The challenges of engaging the public on defence and national security topics

The roundtable participants agreed that defence is a broad and complex topic that requires careful handling in terms of public engagement. It encompasses many different aspects, such as frontline military commands, national security, foreign policy, cybersecurity, and defence technologies. When engaging with the public, it is important to unpack the topic and clearly define the purpose of engagement.

Is engagement about building trust and legitimacy, making better decisions, or mutual learning? There might be more than one reason to engage the public, but there is a need to be transparent about the purpose and how engagement is going to influence outcomes. It is important to be clear about what the public can do and to create feedback loops to ensure that the difference can be articulated. If there is no visible impact and follow-up, there is a risk that the public will lose their trust in the R&I community and public engagement processes.

Engaging the public on defence topics is important because it drives transparency and helps build legitimacy. It can also be used by policymakers as a tool to devise robust policies which are both acceptable and sustainable. Through public dialogue and deliberation, the Government and Ministers can help develop an understanding of how and why the public are likely to react and what kind of trade-offs they might be willing to accept. At a time when politicians have very difficult decisions to make and the public opinion on defence spending is split,⁴ it can also help inform a strategic narrative around defence and the funding needed to deliver it.

Sciencewise and other public engagement programmes have been running for over 20 years and have engaged the public on a range of potentially controversial science and technology topics. Defence, however, has always been considered too sensitive to deliberate with the public and is often out of scope for public engagement exercises. This might mean that there is a gap between what the Government wants to do (e.g. a national conversation and ‘whole of society’ approach to national security) and where the public are now.

⁴ Ipsos. (2026). Britons split on increased defence spending as public resists core tax and spend trade-offs. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/britons-split-increased-defence-spending-public-resists-core-tax-and-spend-trade-offs>

It was also highlighted that people currently do not see defence as relevant to their everyday lives. For a long time, the public contribution to the UK defence debate has been dominated by an interest in ceremonials and memorials and the media's preoccupation with the views of retired naval and military officers. This resulted in the armed forces being perceived by the public as more iconic than instrumental. There are some early signs that the debate is beginning to be reenergised, but it will take time to shift the dynamics and unlock engagement.

While there is a strong sense of mission among most people working in the defence sector, this does not necessarily translate into the sector's engagement with the public. There is a need to reframe the debate and connect defence to people's lives in a credible way. Shifting the perspectives and positioning civil society as an active part of the debate are necessary to meaningfully engage the public in conversations about defence and national security.

It was also noted that some people are opposed to any military actions and might not be willing to engage in any discussions about defence. One participant, who held a public-facing role as a senior official in the MoD, shared that this role required a certain level of bravery as some people can be hostile and protest against any actions related to defence. There was a consensus in the room that it is easier to engage the public in discussions about national security and resilience which do not provoke the same level of opposition as a defence framing.

Defence R&I as an engine for growth?

In the Industrial Strategy and Strategic Defence Review, the Government puts a strong emphasis on the link between defence R&I and economic growth, leveraging long-term spending commitments to boost regional prosperity and technological capability.

Some of the roundtable participants, however, thought that this discussion is very nascent and lacks a consistent cross-Government narrative on why defence spending and innovation is an engine for economic growth, and how defence or dual-use start-ups can effectively scale while remaining in the UK.

It was highlighted that there are persistent systemic challenges with defining what a defence company is, because 'defence' activities span so many sectors and types of organisations such as manufacturing, software and information technology, cybersecurity, and aerospace. Furthermore, as many technologies have dual-use potential and can serve both civilian and military purposes, it is not always clear where the line between a commercial company and a defence

firm is. This means that it is very difficult to measure the impact of the defence industry and evidence how it has contributed to economic growth. It is easier to count the number of jobs and opportunities the defence sector provides. Barrow-in-Furness is a good example of a local economy being driven by the defence industry.

National conversation on a local level

When asked about solutions for improving the quality of the UK defence debate and better public engagement, participants pointed to a range of participatory and locally grounded approaches.

There was a strong agreement that there is a need to act urgently and move the debate on from abstract, top-down, and binary narratives (e.g. positioning defence spending vs. NHS spending) towards everyday relevance and local conversations focused on resilience, jobs, and communities. There is also a need to be clear about how defence R&I can affect local economies and people's lives.

While there are sensitive issues in defence that cannot be widely shared due to security considerations, it is necessary to have conversations with the public about threats, and it is possible to do it without scaring people. There is a substantive body of work around engaging the public with science and technology and contentious research. Many principles of this work can be applied to defence. The defence sector can also learn from other sensitive areas which require careful public engagement, such as protecting public places and climate change adaptation.

It is important not to underestimate the public's ability to listen and engage. Previous public engagement work⁵ has shown that people are capable of understanding complex and sensitive issues, without needing everything reduced to black-and-white simplicity.

Some lessons can be learnt from other countries and how they communicate to and engage the public in discussions about threats and national security. For example, Finland and other Nordic countries are much more open about preparedness and what actions households and individuals need to take in case of an external attack. Others have called for a whole-of-society approach to

⁵ For example, CETaS.(2025). UK Public Attitudes to National Security Data Processing: Assessing Human and Machine Intrusion. https://cetas.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-04/cetas_research_report_-_public_attitudes.pdf

defence effort and to make changes which help to protect all of society – for example, protecting research and financial institutions from cyberattacks.

An emphasis was also put on the need for long-term change. Public engagement is often thought of in terms of one-off initiatives, but this is not enough to move the dial and reframe the debate. A key audience to engage with in conversations about defence and national security is young people. There is often an assumption that they do not care, but this is not a useful narrative. It is well known that young people have different views and values and receive their information in different ways. For a long-term change, there is a need to adapt and meet young people where they are, in the right language, and on the media platforms where they get their information – as well as countering unhelpful counter-narratives. Schools and universities could play a key role in this effort.

The discussion also highlighted that the public's trust in government institutions is at an all-time low. The defence R&I community should not rely on institutional messaging and one-way communication. To reach the public and meaningfully involve them in decision-making, there is a need to scale the tried-and-tested deliberative approaches, such as public dialogue and citizens' assemblies, and co-develop and co-design across diverse communities as much as possible. It is also important to note that trust in scientists is still high,⁶ which can be seen as an opportunity in the current context.

Recent context and next steps

In the weeks following the roundtable, there was a growing interest in defence spending and fiscal trade-offs.

The Defence Investment Plan has been a source of high-profile tensions between the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury and then Prime Minister's Office, with the Secretary of State for Defence resigning over an insufficient military funding increase that "falls well short of what is required for the defence and the country at this dangerous time."⁷ The Treasury has argued that more defence spending means funding cuts to other public services, including hospitals, schools and libraries.

⁶ UK Research and Innovation. (2025). Public Attitudes to Science 2025. <https://pas.ipsos.com/>

⁷ HM Government UK. Letter from Rt Hon John Healey MP to the Prime Minister. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a2af42da3674dfd3eb50760/Letter_from_Rt_Hon_John_Healey_MP_to_the_Prime_Minister.pdf

What is the role of public opinion in shaping defence research and innovation?

If the challenging fiscal landscape indeed means that some difficult trade-offs will have to be made, the issue of increased defence spending becomes more relevant to the UK's population as it might affect people's everyday lives and their ability to access public services. This relevance is a key reason why policymakers should have an honest and open conversation with the public about the harsh reality of the current political and fiscal situation. It also reinforces the Strategic Defence Review's conclusion that there is a need to engage the whole of society in these discussions – however, there is no guarantee that such engagement will result in any public consensus on the way forward. Some politicians may now see defence spending as a difficult no-win electoral topic, and fight shy of engaging with tough choices.

The roundtable discussion was the first step towards bringing together government departments, researchers, business leaders, and public engagement experts to discuss the role the UK public can play in shaping national defence policy and research. Sciencewise will continue to engage with the sector and support policymakers with bringing public insight into the formulation and implementation of government policy.

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About Sciencewise

[Sciencewise](#) is a UKRI-funded public engagement and public dialogue programme that supports government departments and other public bodies to listen to and act on diverse voices, to shape policy and priorities.

Important benefits of the programme include:

- Helping decision makers to formulate policy with a deeper understanding of public views, concerns and aspirations;
- Supporting high quality, best practice public dialogue; and
- Bringing credibility and independence to government-led public dialogue projects.

Since 2004, Sciencewise has supported over 90 public dialogue projects on often controversial technologies and cross-cutting issues of societal change, from AI, gene editing, and climate technology to low-carbon growth and the future of food production. The programme is run in a partnership between UKRI and a consortium led by democracy charity Involve, with the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) and British Science Association.

The views expressed in this report are not representative of the views of UKRI and the British Science Association.