Building an ambassador-led campaign to scrutinise health and research claims

askforevidence.org  #AskForEvidence
Impact of the ambassadors

Our ambassador programme has grown and diversified, bringing the *Ask for Evidence* campaign to more people, in harder-to-reach communities than we could have envisaged. It has proved an overwhelming success, exceeding all expectations and targets to date. Throughout, we have encountered consistently strong interest from the public in the importance of evidence. **Highlights have included:**

- **4,000** people attended *Ask for Evidence* talks in community spaces across the UK
- **1,000,000** people reached on social media, with 100,000 engagements
- **100,000** people reached through local events and festivals
- **80%** of event attendees say they are now more likely to ask for evidence
**Background**

*Ask for Evidence* empowers the public to scrutinise health and research claims made in advertising, the media and online – whether by celebrities, companies, organisations or politicians.

You don’t need to be an expert to ask about evidence. Our campaign equips people to ask the right questions and make sense of the answers. It aims to change the national conversation about evidence - *if we keep asking, then sharing and talking about evidence will become the norm*.

The campaign is driven by a network of passionate *Ask for Evidence* ambassadors, embedded and advocating within their communities around the country.

Since the campaign’s launch, thousands of people who attended our events have asked for evidence on everything from fertility treatments and election manifestos to pet food nutrition and health apps.
Finding our ambassadors

Our original campaign recruited five researchers as ambassadors. But the conversation about evidence needed to reach a wider audience.

In 2018, the Wellcome Trust awarded us a grant to build and diversify our ambassador programme, opening it to the public and ensuring it had UK-wide representation.

Targeting hard-to-reach communities and areas of multiple deprivation, 20 volunteer ambassadors were recruited from all four nations.

To reach as diverse a range of people as possible, we spread the word via social media, regional media, flyers in libraries and community centres and talks by our staff and volunteers to local neighbourhood groups around the country. Around 120 people applied for the 20 ambassador places.
The 20 new ambassadors included a retired ship’s captain in Aberdeen, a public health researcher in the Isle of Man, a youth worker in Newcastle and an outdoor fitness instructor in Cornwall - all active members of their communities.
The ambassador experience

To ensure our ambassadors felt confident, well-prepared and supported before going out into their communities, we designed a training programme.

This outlined the purpose of the campaign, honed their public speaking skills and offered guidance on encouraging open conversations and handling difficult questions.

Our five original ambassadors were part of the programme, sharing their experiences and expertise and establishing a peer support network for the group.
“Having the backing of Sense about Science is really helpful when asking for evidence. My learnings are: 1. It’s interesting and doesn’t take much time. 2. Organisations vanish or ignore you to avoid being held to account. 3. Persevere and use the regulator or other legal instruments if you get the brush off.

Let’s all keep on asking for evidence!”

Louise Dunn
Ask for Evidence Ambassador
Since June 2019, more than 4,000 people have attended 71 talks by Ask for Evidence ambassadors.

They have reached diverse communities in coastal towns, inner cities and rural areas. In addition, our ambassadors have showcased the campaign and discussed evidence at community events and festivals around the UK, reaching more than 100,000 people.
Feedback from the public has been overwhelmingly positive.

More than 80% agreed that ‘[I] would be more likely to ask for evidence the next time I see a claim I am unsure about’ and ‘more likely to encourage people I know to ask for evidence behind the claims they come across’ as a result of attending an Ask for Evidence event.
Over 75% of attendees were also ‘more likely to encourage people [they] know to ask for evidence behind the claims they come across.’

Talks took place anywhere and everywhere – from school assemblies to pubs and disability support centres, from Aberdeen to Truro and Blackpool to Leicester.
Campaign activity: A snapshot

- Networking breakfasts for small businesses in Cornwall
- Podcast for kids in Newcastle
- Flower festival stall in Somerset
- Assemblies at a school in Hertfordshire
- Live “ask-a-thon” in Leicester
- Ask for Evidence festival on the Isle of Man
- Community workshop in Leicester
- Short video guides to asking for evidence on social media
- Community radio interview in Aberdeen
“Incredibly interesting and very important. I have definitely been encouraged to ask for evidence and do my own research to make more informed choices.”

Ask for Evidence event attendee
Leicester

“Very interesting talk, opened my eyes to opposition in arguments that I did not realise existed.”

Frank
Ask for Evidence event attendee
Sheffield

“Informative, friendly, speaker was approachable and seemed highly passionate regarding the topic at hand.”

Dean
Ask for Evidence event attendee
Salford
The importance of online

The Ambassadors were active on social media, promoting their talks on Twitter and Facebook, creating shareable content and writing impactful blogs. To accompany social media posts, Sense about Science also produced bespoke social media content, including Twitpics, graphics, videos and an animation.

Since October 2018, Ask for Evidence has reached over a million people on social media with nearly 100,000 engagements (sharing, retweeting, visiting a blog post).

These figures suggest that the campaign not only resonated with viewers, but that the information is being shared and the message is reaching a significant audience.
Overcoming challenges

We chose our ambassadors because they were passionate about the campaign and rooted in their communities — but work and personal issues meant that volunteering sometimes had to take a back seat.

We mitigated this by creating a support network for our volunteers, and by staying in touch with shortlisted candidates who we called on when needed.

The pandemic also forced a change in approach. Our ambassadors found innovative ways to engage their communities — from online events to publishing blogs and using social media. As the national conversation became increasingly focused on the importance of evidence, they were able to help combat misinformation about Covid-19 and vaccines at a local level.
Positive feedback

The ambassadors told us they found their roles hugely rewarding and enjoyed the opportunities it gave them to engage with their communities. They described the programme as “positive”, “rewarding” and “interesting” and *93% felt well supported* by Sense about Science, saying that our backing gave them credibility and legitimacy.

The vast majority felt well prepared to lead the campaign (86%) in their community and able to communicate effectively with the public.

Almost three-quarters of ambassadors also felt confident in finding and organising opportunities to speak in their communities (71%).

When asked about the effectiveness of different ways of promoting the campaign, *nearly all said that word of mouth was the most effective*, with social media second.
### What we learnt: Key ambassador insights

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<td>1</td>
<td>Our ambassadors found that the public were <strong>very interested in the conversation around evidence</strong>, and that the pandemic has only strengthened that interest.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Online activity was critical, not only because of the pandemic’s impact on live events, but also to <strong>ensure the campaign reached as wide and diverse an audience as possible.</strong></td>
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<td>Balancing volunteering as an ambassador with their jobs and personal lives was not always easy. <strong>Ongoing support from Sense about Science is vital.</strong></td>
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## What we learnt: Key ambassador insights

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<th>We should offer more opportunities for our ambassadors to meet and interact, to ensure they feel part of a community and can support each other.</th>
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<td>We underestimated the need for physical resources for our ambassadors to share with their communities. This would have increased their confidence.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>As the pandemic developed, our ambassadors would have benefitted from more resources to help them respond to questions about Covid-19 and vaccines.</td>
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Looking ahead

The pandemic has demonstrated to people from all walks of life that evidence matters more than ever.

It’s clear that empowering and equipping the public to engage in open and honest discussions about evidence is vital to combatting misinformation.

The success of the ambassador programme in reaching thousands of people, including in previously neglected parts of the UK, demonstrates the importance of building a grassroots campaign that can engage with local communities nationwide. The overwhelmingly positive response from the public shows just how interested people are in the conversation about evidence.
“Shortly after one meeting I got this message: ‘Can I send you something over to check please? A senior nurse friend of mine sent it but not sure about authenticity....scary if it’s true’. I sent her some links so she could do her own research. She concluded it was false and decided to not share it on her social media. It’s nice to know you’ve made a difference.”

Edward Chapman
Ask for Evidence Ambassador
Next steps

We will continue the campaign – to provide insights and materials, create opportunities for accountability and deliberation, and win support for the protection of open discussion about research.

Our aim is to ensure that asking for evidence remains a national conversation.

We are exploring a variety of ways to do this, including embedding Ask for Evidence in institutions such as public libraries and co-producing resources with them. We will also explore how to include Ask for Evidence in schools to ensure we are equipping young people with critical thinking skills as early as possible.
In conclusion

The **Ask for Evidence** campaign has already performed beyond our expectations - despite a pandemic developing mid-way through the roll-out of our ambassador programme. From our very first events, we quickly found that audiences were receptive and keen to learn more.

The funding from the Wellcome Trust enabled us to respond to that public appetite by *scaling up the campaign* and *reaching a far wider and more diverse audience* than would otherwise have been possible.

Global events have only served to increase public interest and strengthen the case for why asking for evidence – and helping people to do it – is so important.