

# Exploring the wonders of science

## An inside look at Cheltenham Science Festival 2024

- Marieke Navin shares her journey from particle physics to becoming the Head of Programming at Cheltenham Science Festival, UK.
- The Festival uses storytelling and everyday materials to make complex scientific topics accessible and engaging.
- FameLab and other year-round learning and participation and outreach projects ensure the Festival's impact extends beyond its six-day duration.
- It also features a diverse lineup of speakers and events, covering a wide range of scientific disciplines.
- Future aspirations for the Festival include increasing free content and expanding community engagement to reach a broader audience.

Cheltenham Science Festival (CSF) in the UK is one of the most anticipated events in the scientific community, known for its engaging programmes and diverse array of speakers. Since its inception in 2002, the Festival has grown into one of the leading science festivals in the world. Founded with the aim of making science accessible and engaging to the public, the Festival has consistently attracted top scientists, innovators, and thinkers from around the globe. Each year, it offers a rich programme of events that includes talks, workshops, and interactive exhibitions, covering a wide range of scientific disciplines. The Festival's commitment to public engagement and learning and participation has made it a beloved fixture in the scientific and local community.

We sat down with Marieke Navin, Head of Programming at Cheltenham Science Festival, to discuss her journey, the impact of outreach,

and the essence of this year's Festival. Having attended Cheltenham last year and spoken with notable figures like [Johnny Drain](#) and [Florence Schechter](#), we can personally attest to the Festival's vibrant and inspiring atmosphere. Below, Marieke shares insights from her career and offers a sneak peek into the exciting events on this year's programme.

*Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you came to be involved with Cheltenham Science Festival?*

My journey into science began with a fascination for space and the solar system when I was just five years old. This early passion led me to study physics and astronomy, followed by a PhD in particle physics at Sheffield University. My interest in public engagement started during my PhD, where I found myself drawn to explaining complex scientific concepts in an accessible way. This passion for science communication eventually



Marieke Navin, Head of Programming at Cheltenham Science Festival

brought me to Cheltenham Science Festival, where I now head the programming team.

*What inspired you to pursue a career in science communication?*

It started with a project called 'Physics in a Box' during my PhD, where we used simple physics experiments with everyday objects to make science relatable and engaging. I discovered that I loved breaking down complex topics and seeing the spark of understanding



Cheltenham Science Festival showcase a range of engaging, interactive exhibits for all ages to enjoy.

### Cheltenham Science Festival is about sparking curiosity and showing that science is for everyone.

in people's eyes. This led to my first job as a science communication officer at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, where I organised events and worked with scientists to bring their work to the public.

*How do you approach making complex scientific topics accessible to the general public?*

The key is storytelling. People connect with stories far more than facts and figures. Whether it's artificial intelligence or quantum computing, I always try to relate it to everyday experiences. By telling human stories and showing real-world applications,

we can make even the most complex subjects understandable and interesting.

By way of examples, we often hear from attendees who walk in unsure if they'll understand the topic but leave feeling enlightened and enthusiastic. This transformation is especially common among children. Hearing a child say, 'That was the best thing I've ever seen' after a demo or a talk is incredibly rewarding. It's all about making science fun and accessible.

*Can you tell us more about the year-round projects that stem from the Science Festival?*

One of our key initiatives is FameLab, a competition where scientists deliver three-minute presentations judged on content, clarity, and charisma. We also run the FameLab Academy for year nine students, encouraging young people to develop their science communication skills. These projects ensure that our impact extends beyond the six days of the festival, engaging the community year-round.

*How do you decide on the lineup for the Science Festival each year?*

It's a collaborative effort. Our small team of four works tirelessly to cover a broad range of topics and include diverse voices. We seek recommendations from trusted advisors and continuously scout for new talent. Our theme 'Be the Change' allows us to feature not just scientists but also activists and change-makers, broadening the Festival's appeal.



The festival uses storytelling to make scientific concepts relatable and engaging for the general public.



Initiatives like the Farnham Lab nurture and inspire young science communicators.



Cheltenham are experts at making marvels out of even the most everyday.



From the wonders of space to the creatures in our garden, Cheltenham has something for everyone to enjoy.

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This year's festival is shaping up to be fantastic. We have a great lineup of speakers and events, from well-known figures like Brian Cox to emerging scientists and activists. Attendees can expect a mix of deep dives into complex topics and bite-sized sessions designed to be accessible and engaging. We're also excited about our free events, such as late-night sessions that offer a unique, fun experience.

**What are your aspirations for the future of Cheltenham Science Festival?**

I'd love to offer more free content to make the Festival accessible to everyone. We already have free events and activities, but increasing these would help us reach a wider audience. Additionally, expanding our outreach efforts to include more community engagement and showcasing the diverse career opportunities in science is a key goal.



Expect anything from keynote speakers, workshops, and even a chance to try out the latest technology.

Moreover, by integrating science into these events, we reach people who may not actively seek out scientific content but find themselves captivated by it nonetheless. It's all about meeting people where they are.

**How do you see the role of Cheltenham Science Festival in inspiring future generations?**

Our Festival is about sparking curiosity and showing that science is for everyone. By making science fun and relatable, we hope to inspire young people to pursue careers in science and see the value of scientific literacy in everyday life. Whether it's through attending the Festival or participating in our year-round projects, we aim to create lasting enthusiasm for science.

Cheltenham Science Festival continues to be a beacon of inspiration and exploration, fostering a love for science in people of all ages. Through the dedication and vision of Marieke Navin and her team, the Festival not only brings cutting-edge scientific discussions to the forefront but also ensures that these conversations are accessible and engaging for everyone. As we explore this year's event, it is clear that Cheltenham Science Festival remains

committed to its mission of sparking curiosity and empowering everyone to explore the wonders of science.

Next year's Cheltenham Science Festival will take place 3-8 June 2025.

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