



Organisational learning in and around the Sciencewise programme in 2013

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This report details the findings and recommendations resulting from in-depth qualitative research into organisational learning mechanisms within Sciencewise throughout 2013. This research was funded by an ESRC 1+3 PhD studentship (number ES/ I022120/1). The author gratefully acknowledges the support of BIS and the Sciencewise programme in carrying out this research, in particular those who gave up their time to be interviewed and to offer guidance on the project.

Background and justification for the project

A strong argument in recent academic literature has emphasised the need to look beyond individual instances of public participation in science policy to gain a more systemic understanding of their multiple forms and effects. This argument also comes in the context of the increased institutionalisation of public participation methods within governing bodies in the UK, Europe and beyond, over the past decade – a development which has not yet been extensively described and analysed by academics. The current widespread use of the language and practice of public participation and engagement within government raises new questions for academics and practitioners alike, such as:

- what effects have public participation processes had on policy and on the cultures and routines of important decision-making bodies?
- do such bodies learn anything new about public participation and citizens through these processes, and does this learning result in any changes in shared assumptions and routines?
- what are the limitations to or influences on these organisational learning processes, and are there any ways that these organisations can improve their ability to learn and reflect?

Sciencewise is an important body in understanding the evolution of the UK Government's approach to public participation. It was initially launched in 2004 in the wake of high profile calls for public participation to become an integral part of science policymaking. Since Sciencewise's re-launch in 2007 as the Government's Expert Resource Centre for public dialogue, the programme has carried out public dialogue processes around a wide-range of high-profile science policy areas from stem cell regulation to regional flood responses and an international decision about the use of leap seconds. In the most recent programme contract, which began in 2012, Sciencewise has built on its existing reputation, enjoying a higher profile and influence within Government. This has been supported by an increasing number and range of public dialogue projects and supporting activities, as well as the development of key strategic relationships with a number of important bodies in and around Government. Furthermore, Sciencewise's new-found profile has enabled members of the programme to play an important role in recent debates about significant concepts and policy practices such as open policy, localism and evidence-based policy.

In many ways then, 2013 seemed like an appropriate time to take stock of Sciencewise activities and learning processes, in the context of new programme partners, a refreshed programme structure, and the accompanying broader set of public dialogue processes and other activities. Its position as an increasingly significant body in defining and experimenting with approaches to democratic representation and policy-making in the UK also made it an ideal case study to answer broader questions about shifting meanings and practices of liberal democracy in twenty-first century Britain.

Research approach

I undertook in-depth qualitative research into organisational learning processes in and around the Sciencewise-ERC programme from January to December 2013. This research involved interviews with 30 actors related to the Sciencewise programme, participant observation of Sciencewise events and management meetings, and the analysis of around 300 documents from Sciencewise and other relevant bodies. These data were analysed using an interpretive coding structure, guided by a focus

on organisational learning and reflection but largely inductive in approach, using the ATLAS.ti software package. The thesis was supervised by Jason Chilvers and Peter Simmons at the University of East Anglia, and submitted in December 2014. There will be a number of academic papers written from this research which I expect to be published in 2015 and 2016.

Headline findings:

My research unsurprisingly uncovered a series of rich, complex and intricately connected organisational learning processes in and around Sciencewise, concerning science policy topics, public participation approaches, Government approaches to policy-making, citizens and more. Below I summarise the 6 most important findings for Sciencewise and those working in similar or related bodies.

1. All Sciencewise actors feel that constant organisational learning and reflection is central for the programme's continued success. However, the programme's main procedures and measures of learning tended to focus more on the learning of other bodies over internal learning processes.

Interview respondents unanimously felt that learning was central to the programme's activities and success. For example:

'I think it's critical because we have to be improving what we are doing all the time, [...] in order to make it more effective, I guess also in order to make it more attractive'

'I mean, everything we do I guess is learning, because you know, it's all contributing because one of our other objectives is to develop best practice in everything we do, so whether it's the project, whether it's the events, whether it's the high-level networking, whether it's the website, whatever it is, it is one of our objectives to develop best-practice. So you take what you've learned and put that into practice'

'it's very important, I mean, the idea of Sciencewise is basically to help government to do public dialogue better, and you obviously can't do that if you're not watching your own processes and trying to learn how to do it'

Though learning is a key focus of the evaluation processes for individual projects and the whole programme, this tends to be understood in terms of Sciencewise's success in encouraging other bodies such as Government departments or research councils to learn. Similarly, the motivations behind Sciencewise thought leadership and social intelligence reports are directed more towards stimulating learning and reflection outside Sciencewise, and are often not discussed or even read by all those working for the programme. Whilst stimulating the learning of other bodies is central to Sciencewise's aims and mission, a more explicit focus on Sciencewise's own learning or potential for learning as a result of public dialogue projects, reports and other activities would create new opportunities for deeper learning and the consolidation of lessons learned by individual actors within the programme.

2. The increased size of the Sciencewise programme in the 2012-2015 contract created new challenges for the management and promotion of learning within and around the programme.

The increased number of people and activities in the Sciencewise programme from 2012 onwards led to the creation of a more formalised management structure based around different teams of people carrying out different parts of the programme. This in some cases reduced the amount of face-to-face contact between programme actors, raising new challenges for decision-making within the programme as well as for the communication of key strategic decisions and activities.

Shared databases have been developed to help with the sharing of organisational documents and information, but these were under-utilised during the period of research due to a number of factors including: technical difficulties; lack of fit with some team members' working styles and routines; and the limited formats in which information could be shared. This led to some actors in and around the programme feeling dislocated from others in the programme and sometimes meant that they were unaware of more diffuse processes within the programme, such as the engagement of some actors with debates about 'open policy'. This also created a burden on key individuals tasked with creating a link between different Sciencewise management groups and ensuring that activities were sufficiently coordinated.

There have been several changes to the management structure of the programme since the period of research, which I suspect have gone some way to address some of these problems of communication and coordination, thus improving the management and promotion of learning across the whole programme. However, within the larger and more ambitious programme which Sciencewise has become there are likely to be ongoing challenges to communication and collective learning.

3. The 2012-2015 programme contract saw an increased focus on advocacy work within Sciencewise, which has had both positive and negative effects on organisational learning processes.

The Sciencewise programme's increased profile and influence within Government has both resulted from and fostered a greater focus on advocacy work in the programme. This advocacy work encompasses the promotion of public dialogue in policy-making, advocacy around the outcomes of public dialogue methods, the promotion of democratic engagement or citizen inclusion more generally, and more recently, the promotion of the Sciencewise programme itself as a centre for excellence and best practice around policy-making.

On the one hand this advocacy work has promoted important organisational learning processes through increased contact with policy- and decision-makers. This has led to learning within the Sciencewise programme about specific policy areas and opportunities for public dialogue projects, as well as learning about how to tap into and influence important policy debates, such as open policy, evidence-based policy, and significant agendas like the 'Eight great technologies' announced in 2013. On the other hand, this focus on the external image of the Sciencewise programme means that other opportunities for learning and reflection might be missed. An increasing proportion of Sciencewise activities, including public dialogue projects and thought leadership, are thought about

primarily in terms of how they could be used to influence external actors, playing down their potential to help Sciencewise actors learn and reflect on the practice of public dialogue, science policy topics, or how to influence policy actors. This has potentially held back advances in the practice of public dialogue across the programme, amongst other learning outcomes.

4. The Sciencewise programme's approach to evaluation has changed significantly creating the potential for evaluation to stimulate increased reflection and high-level learning.

Towards the end of 2013 all members of the Sciencewise programme were involved in a 'theory of change' process based around the collective identification of key long-term and then short-term goals for the programme, working backwards to defined key future activities and measures of success. This process provided an important forum for discussions about the current context of the programme, and for the solidification of incipient changes in practices and ways of thinking within the programme. The process will also form the basis for the next whole-programme evaluation, providing a considerably more expansive scope than previous evaluations, and foregrounding Sciencewise's learning and development more prominently. Furthermore, the decision taken to employ an external team to carry out the evaluation, means that the evaluation may generate entirely new insights and ideas about the programme.

5. Many significant instances of learning and reflection in and around Sciencewise have come from unexpected places and processes, rather than from formal learning mechanisms.

Some of the most significant and impactful learning processes that I observed during the period of research did not come from formal learning mechanisms like evaluations or thought leadership work, but had more diffuse or unexpected origins. For example, the engagement of several Sciencewise actors in the debate about defining and demonstrating open policy, was initially informal and opportunistic but it led to a number of significant and transformative changes, including: the strengthening of relationships with the Cabinet Office; an improved understanding of current concerns in Government and how to influence them; and increasing Sciencewise engagement with issues related to the digital agenda, and attempts to incorporate digital methods into public dialogue projects. This process also contributed to a broader discussion which is ongoing within Sciencewise about the relationship between public dialogue and other methods for democratic participation, and how Sciencewise could have a role in promoting public voices in policy debates more generally.

Another example of this kind of learning is the sometimes unexpected ways in which Sciencewise actors have learnt from public dialogue projects. The Bioenergy Distributed Dialogue was a project carried out by the BBSRC (Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council) 2012-2013 with Sciencewise support. The project adopted an unusual methodology by running much shorter deliberative events than conventional dialogue exercises, and developing a set of materials which could be downloaded by anyone in order to run a deliberative process anywhere in the country and then feed their outputs back to the BBSRC. The project experienced several challenges in practice, such as how to encourage broader uptake of the materials, and was met with some scepticism amongst dialogue professionals who felt that some of the deliberative sessions were too short to be

meaningful. However, the more experimental methodology adopted in this project has prompted broader discussions around the future of public dialogue methods within Sciencewise, including the potential to 'scale-up' dialogue projects and create a more iterative and ongoing relationship between citizen input and policy-making in institutions like the BBSRC.

6. The model of outsourcing the work of public dialogue, thought leadership and other activities from the Sciencewise programme can potentially undermine opportunities for organisational learning.

Many of the activities Sciencewise supports and carries out, including public dialogue projects and project evaluations, are outsourced to third parties. This has always been part of the programme's delivery model, and is necessitated by a number of factors, including: the relatively small size of the programme; the need to generate a neutral third party assessment of funded activities (in the case of project evaluations); and the desire to increase the quality of project delivery through competition between different bodies. Whilst this outsourcing model is a common feature of similar Government-funded bodies and may have learning benefits, such as bringing in new insights and ideas from third parties, there are also ways in which this model potentially limits opportunities for learning from and holistically reflecting on Sciencewise projects.

Outsourcing means that very different people and bodies will be involved in different stages of a public dialogue project, from its initiation, to approving a business case, and then carrying out, reporting on and evaluating the public dialogue. This potentially creates a situation where, depending on the specific role of the Dialogue and Engagement Specialist overseeing the project, no one individual has a full overview of the project which is underway. It also creates challenges for the communication of more diffuse information, such as the initial impulses which led to the creation of the project, or the subtleties of the policy area which the dialogue is hoping to influence.

Though Sciencewise has developed productive relationships with some of its contractors over time, leading to a general increase in the quality of their public dialogue work, concerns about damaging competition or giving certain bodies an unfair advantage prevent Sciencewise actors from offering in-depth training in public dialogue methods directly to contractors, or suggesting major alterations to the proposals they submit. Furthermore, the contractors themselves are often dissuaded from suggesting more experimental or novel process designs for public dialogue processes due to the competitive tender process, and are potentially less likely to fully disclose perceived problems or failures in their work due to the fear of losing future business, though these may be important opportunities for learning.

Recommendations

Based on my research findings I have the following suggestions to help to sustain and develop Sciencewise's expertise in public dialogue and engagement and its position within Government.

1. Sciencewise can build on its current expertise and institutional memory to position itself at the fore-front of imagining and anticipating the possible futures of public dialogue and engagement

Due to its increasing profile and influence in Government, Sciencewise is now in a good position to offer practical and intellectual leadership around the futures of public dialogue and engagement. The programme already has a wealth of material to draw on here, from the considerable expertise of the programme team, to its now extensive library of thought leadership and social intelligence reports. These resources could be further consolidated through a more explicit and focussed attempt to imagine and anticipate potential futures of public dialogue and engagement, drawing both on internal and external expertise. This would provide a focal point for future thought and practice in the public participation community, as well as distilling important insights for the benefit of policy actors. Such a process would also be useful in identifying potential future stumbling blocks or negative unintended consequences, as well as more positively laying out key milestones or watershed moments which may lie ahead.

2. The success of the 'theory of change' process during 2013 suggests that creating periodic organised opportunities for collective reflection and learning are constructive

The 'theory of change' process as described above created a constructive opportunity for broader learning and collective reflection amongst Sciencewise actors, and crucially crystallised a number of shifts in practice and understanding which were already occurring in and around the programme. The results of this process have the potential to inspire and direct activities in Sciencewise for the remainder of the current project and beyond, benefitting from the new ideas and insights which were generated and collected. This suggests that though potentially time-consuming, organised processes for reflection and learning play an important role in stimulating high-level learning and new insights within the programme, and should be conducted periodically.

3. Adopting a conscious disposition of 'experimentation' would potentially help Sciencewise actors and the programme to reflect on and learn more systematically from current Sciencewise activities

In any programme trying to get the most out of its budget and team there are likely to be few opportunities for times and activities exclusively focussed on promoting organisational learning. However, Sciencewise actors can make the most opportunities for learning and reflection which arise from existing activities by being conscious of how these opportunities can emerge from unexpected places or even from perceived mistakes and failures. Furthermore, procedures could be put in place to more reflexively monitor and therefore iteratively and responsively modify current activities against pre-defined dimensions or against the reactions of particular stakeholder groups. The metaphor of 'experimentation' is one way of capturing such an approach and reflecting a disposition which is open to new learnings, however surprising their origins or forms.