

# Evaluating Sciencewise public dialogue projects

Sciencewise project funding is provided by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). It is a condition of funding that projects are independently evaluated, and therefore proposals for funding include budgets for independent evaluation. Sciencewise can provide detailed advice on commissioning these evaluations, which need to meet Sciencewise as well as commissioners' objectives.

This document describes the requirements for evaluating public dialogue projects co-funded by Sciencewise, as well as key questions and principles for evaluation, that need to be met in all circumstances. However, the ways in which any individual evaluation approaches these requirements, questions and principles is not circumscribed, and innovation and experimentation are encouraged.

## 1. Sciencewise aims and objectives for evaluating public dialogue projects

Sciencewise aims to improve policy making involving science and technology across Government by increasing the effectiveness with which public dialogue is used, and encouraging its wider use where appropriate.

The aim of evaluating the dialogue projects co-funded by Sciencewise is to contribute to the overall Sciencewise aim by:

- Providing an independent assessment of the impacts as well as the quality of the design, delivery and governance of the dialogue project, to demonstrate the extent of the project's success, credibility and effectiveness against its objectives
- Contributing to increasing the wider effectiveness and use of public dialogue.

The objectives of these evaluations are to:

- Gather and present objective and robust evidence of the nature and quality of the impacts, achievements and activities of the project in order to come to conclusions.
- Identify lessons from the project to support capacity building across Government, and the wider development of good practice in public dialogue.

## 2. The seven key questions in evaluating Sciencewise projects

- Has the dialogue met its objectives? Were the objectives set the right ones?
- Has the dialogue met standards of good practice (according to Sciencewise guiding principles)<sup>1</sup>?
- What are the benefits and value of the project, including the extent to which those involved have been satisfied with the dialogue outcomes and process?
- How successful has the governance of the project been, including the role of stakeholders, oversight groups, the commissioning body and Sciencewise?
- What difference/impact has the dialogue made on policy and decisions, on organisational learning and change, and on policy makers and others involved (including relationships with and between stakeholders and public participants)?
- What was the balance overall of the costs and benefits of the dialogue (including potential future costs avoided)?
- What are the lessons for the future (what worked well and less well, and more widely)?

<sup>1</sup> Sciencewise (2013). *The Government's approach to public dialogue on science and technology*. <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/guiding-principles/>

These project evaluations will include some elements of auditing quality, although this will not involve assessing the personal performance of those involved. The focus needs to be on identifying the impacts of and lessons from the design and delivery of the dialogue project overall. This will require analysis based on detailed evidence using both quantitative and qualitative data.

Evaluation reports should cover all dialogue project activities, including:

- Preliminary activities (e.g. desk research)
- Governance (e.g. oversight groups) and stakeholder engagement
- Public dialogue activities (e.g. sampling, recruitment and number of participants; number, location and design of events; the key questions addressed by the public; quality of information provided; specialists involved)
- Any other related public engagement activities (e.g. polls or online surveys)
- Reports from the project, including to public participants; and other activities to disseminate and use the dialogue results
- Any other activities affecting the impacts, value and credibility of the dialogue results.

It is expected that there will be three main stages of dialogue project evaluation:

- **Baseline assessment.** Early review of the specific policy context for the project, and the expectations of those involved about the likely achievements and impacts of the project on policy decisions.
- **Interim assessment of design and delivery.** As soon as possible after the completion of dialogue events, a review of the quality of the design and delivery of the dialogue activities, based on evidence from the evaluation research including observation of events and feedback from public and other participants (e.g. experts and other stakeholders). This will feed into the final assessment of the project, and final evaluation reporting.
- **Final assessment of the project overall.** Following the dissemination of the dialogue project reports, an overall assessment, based on further feedback from those involved (e.g. the oversight group,

commissioning body and others). This stage will complete the evaluation research and reporting and will cover all impacts (achieved and expected); the dissemination and use of dialogue results; the credibility of the dialogue process and results; the costs, benefits and value of the project; the extent to which the project objectives have been met; and lessons for future practice.

Sciencewise will undertake a fourth stage of evaluation, following up the longer term impacts of and lessons from projects.

### 3. Principles for evaluating projects

Evaluations of Sciencewise-funded projects should conform to the following principles:

- **Starting early:** and continuing throughout the detailed design and delivery of the project
- **Clarity:** of the purpose, scope, approach, levels of participation in and limits of the evaluation
- **Rigorous and fit for purpose:** using appropriate methodologies
- **Constructively critical:** seeking understanding and learning rather than apportioning blame
- **Confidential:** respecting the sensitivity of data collected, and avoiding personal or reputational harm
- **Avoiding conflicts of interest:** including privileged access to information not being used for future competitive advantage
- **Proportionate:** with sufficient resources and in sufficient depth to meet evaluation objectives
- **Transparent:** the evaluation should be explained to participants and stakeholders, and evaluation findings published
- **Practical:** evaluation data sought can be collected, assessed and reported within timescale and budget
- **Useful:** evaluation findings should be reported in accessible language and in a form that is useful for learning and to provide evidence of impacts, what works, and lessons for the future
- **Independent:** from commissioners, funders, delivery team and participants
- **Credible:** status and reputation of evaluator, and use of effective evaluation frameworks and methodology.