

Sciencewise and Science Museum drones event pilot – summary

An event was held at the Science Museum from 7-9pm on 28th January 2016. The event was piloted by Sciencewise, to understand whether one-off, public workshops could be a way of delivering useful information to policymakers, while also raising awareness of key issues, and the visibility of the department's involvement. The idea was that such events might be used to gauge whether a full dialogue was worthwhile, or be used as a supplement to a dialogue. The key differences between this type of event and a full-scale deliberative dialogue were: that the participants in this case were reached by open invitation rather than recruited to be a 'representative sample' and paid for their time; and this was a shorter, one-off interaction, as opposed to the usually two or more events in a deliberative dialogue. There were some similarities in the intention and structure of the event, with the Science Museum event including technical specialists and policy makers from the Department for Transport attending to provide information and listen to the debate; and breaking into small discussion groups which debated the issues around drones and fed back to their facilitator who recorded their views. The participants also saw a demonstration of a drone flight.

The independent evaluators found that the main value of the event for policymakers was to interact with 'grassroots users' – a middle ground of participants between traditional stakeholders or specially recruited public participants with no specific interest or previous knowledge of the topic. The policymakers found the outputs from the event were useful as they were consistent with the themes emerging from main public dialogue (also supported by Sciencewise) which was running at the same time but also had novelty and validity within the wider dialogue process. Participants found the event useful and felt this was a good way to input into policy. Some were taken by surprise at the format of the event (though the opportunity to feed into policy was a key selling point in the marketing). This may be due to the unfamiliarity of this format with attendees at this venue, which traditionally place the audience as listening to experts, rather than providing input. The event was an opportunity for skill exchange, with Science Museum facilitators and the dialogue engagement specialist each providing expertise and learning. The lessons included that there was potential for improving the targeting of the audience and clarifying the purpose of the event to take advantage of their special contribution; and clarification that this audience was not the general 'public'. Sciencewise has concluded that open public events of this type can complement rather than replace other dialogic methods; that setting up these events takes time; and that it would add another valuable dimension to create opportunities for participants to feed back further thoughts after the event if they want to (e.g. online).

This type of event is recommended as a potentially valuable addition to a full dialogue process, in which case it should be integrated into the overall planning of that dialogue. It will be interesting to see if other types of venues, for instance art galleries or community centres, may bring an audience with different types of expertise. An analysis of likely costs suggests that an event of this sort held within a dialogue project would cost a minimum of £10,850 and a stand-alone event would cost a minimum £15,075. In both cases there may be additional costs for facilitation training, catering and venue hire up to a further £3,300. Depending on the type of venue, and audience involved, there may be extra costs of development, particularly if the department does not have existing links or contacts, and time is required to build a relationship.