



Evaluation of the Sounding Board dialogue on the research priorities of the Environment Agency for onshore oil and gas

Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2015, Sciencewise developed a Sounding Board model as a form of deliberative engagement with public participants in response to requests from policy makers throughout Government for processes which are quicker and cheaper than most previous public dialogue projects.

This Sounding Board project was developed with the Environment Agency to work with a group of public participants to consider the EA's research priorities on onshore oil and gas. A total of 17 public participants was involved in the project which ran from January to March 2016.

The aim of the project was to enable public input to the future direction and priorities of the Environment Agency research work related to the environmental regulation of the onshore oil and gas industry. The outputs were intended to help the EA's technical experts understand lay concerns and drivers better, and to equip better those experts when they participate in governance on external research including Research Council projects. A light-touch evaluation was completed to test whether the project met its objectives, and to identify lessons for future Sounding Board projects.

The Sounding Board approach and activities

Many aspects of the process were similar to other public dialogue projects – a design and development phase; recruitment of public participants specifically for this project to be broadly reflective of the population in terms of demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status) and in this case from areas in England near historic oil production sites, where further exploration for onshore oil and gas might occur in the near future; information materials produced to support the public discussions; involvement of technical specialists in providing information and answering participants' questions; discussions facilitated; all public input recorded and analysed; report of the results drafted and agreed.

This specific Sounding Board project consisted of six stages: design and development of the process; the recruitment of a sample of public participants; drafting and production of information materials to support the public discussions (presentation slides and briefing documents); two introductory hour-long online information sessions each with approximately half of the public participants; two further online sessions (again each with half the public participants) lasting 1.5 hours to allow for more discussion; and rapid drafting of final report.

The aspects of the project that were different from other public dialogue projects were:

- **Online deliberation.** All deliberation was online, with no face-to-face workshops.
- **Speed.** The process was designed to be set up and completed quickly.

What worked well and less well

The evaluation research identified the following aspects of the project that worked well:

- **Non-confrontational nature of the engagement.** The EA had sought an engagement approach that would allow a thoughtful interaction in a non-confrontational way. They particularly valued the mood and style of the interaction here with the public participants, reflecting on the 'rational' feedback gained.
- **Engaging people without entrenched views or positions.** The EA identified the value of reaching different sorts of people from those they usually engage with, especially those without preconceptions or entrenched existing views or positions.

- **Opportunity for a toe-in-the-water engagement on a highly contentious topic.** A deliberative approach of this sort was new for this part of the Environment Agency. The EA valued the way that this approach provided an opportunity to experiment with a different type of engagement with the public from their past experience.
- **Engaging people from across the country.** The EA specialists valued the capability of the online approach to engage people from around the country in a single event which would have been impossible or very expensive to do in face-to-face workshops.
- **Speed of starting and completing the project.** EA specialists valued the speed of the project overall. There were just under seven weeks between agreement on funding for the project and the start of the initial sessions with public participants. The deliberative sessions took place one week later with the first draft of the full report the following week. This is just over two months (nine weeks) from agreement on funding to production of the final report; under three months (11 weeks) from that agreement on funding to an agreed final report.
- **Effective process design and delivery.** There was good design and preparation, effective information presented to participants including the involvement of a team of up to four EA specialists at each session, use of polling within the interactive sessions and good delivery and facilitation. Feedback from public participants was positive about their experience of taking part: 100% said they were satisfied with the Sounding Board sessions they were involved in; 100% said they were able to contribute and have their say. 93% (13/14) said they felt participants had made a meaningful contribution through these sessions.
- **Recognition of the limitations of the approach.** The project report is clear that, given the small sample size, the results cannot be interpreted as representative of the views of the public at large. However, the report points out that the approach can offer opportunities to open up the policy process to input from a fairly broad range of perspectives.

The evaluation research also identified some aspects that worked less well and could be improved:

- **Limited time for discussion and dialogue reduced depth and richness.** The approach to facilitation was quite formal and protracted. In addition, not being able to see each other reduced the depth of connections between people and technical issues that took up time all contributed to less depth of discussion. There were also challenges in the breadth of the framing of the topic. The discussions ranged widely and picked up some detailed points but the discussions lacked clear focus. As a result, it was more difficult for specific new insights to emerge from the participants that were of value to policy makers.
- **Some technical issues.** There were some significant technical problems with the Whiteboard technique and with the phones (the EA specialists could not be heard at various points). As above, these took time to deal with which lost time for discussion.

Impacts

It is still too early to identify the impacts of the project on specific decisions and actions. However, there are some immediate impacts and some indications of potential future impacts.

Impacts on policy and policy makers

The two EA specialists most closely involved in the project identified a number of immediate impacts on their thinking and policy planning. In particular they valued:

- **Confirming expectations about participant views.** The Environment Agency valued the opportunity to test participants' views on the topics to check if they had missed anything that was important to the public. The confirmation that they were on the right track was of value to the EA.
- **Seeing how participants' views developed over the sessions.** The EA found the polling results particularly interesting in that they showed how the participants' views changed during the course of the sessions. The findings from the polling were that more participants became 'very concerned' about the environmental impact of fracking, and more had become 'unconcerned'.
- **Creating more interest in future public engagement on EA research planning.** The EA reported that the project had helped them think about how to involve the public in future research planning.

Impact on public participants

- **Learning and taking part in future.** 92% (12 out of the 13 respondents) said they had learned something new as a result of taking part. 93% or 13/14 said they were likely to get involved in these sorts of activities again; 86% or 12/14 said they were more likely to get involved in *online* activities like this in future as a result of taking part here. *NOTE: 14 survey responses were received from the 17 participants; not all participants answered all questions.*

Comparative time and costs

Some analysis of the costs and time taken has been completed including comparisons to six previous Sciencewise-supported public dialogue projects. It is difficult to make direct comparisons because other public dialogue projects account for time and costs slightly differently. However, in summary, the total costs for this project were £24,000, and it took just over two months (9 weeks) from agreement of budget and roles to production of the draft full report. From agreement to proceed with the project to final report took just under three months (11 weeks).

Overall, the Sounding Board approach in this case was significantly faster and cheaper than some previous dialogue projects, and about 20% faster and about 20% cheaper than the previous fastest and cheapest projects.

Conclusions and lessons

The Sounding Board project enabled the Environment Agency to test a new form of public engagement on their research work, and gained some useful insights to inform future research plans and priorities within the EA. Future Sounding Board projects will want to address the problems that arose including:

- ensuring focused framing so that maximum use of the limited time for deliberation can open up relevant issues for discussion between the participants and with the technical specialists
- piloting any innovative features in the technologies so that any problems can be identified and dealt with prior to their use in the interactive sessions, or other techniques used.

Overall, and in summary, this Sounding Board project largely met its key objectives by providing feedback to the Environment Agency on participants' views on the environmental impacts of onshore gas and oil as a toe in the water engagement with a disinterested group of public participants from diverse backgrounds from around the country. The project identified useful insights for EA decision makers and gained sufficient credibility with them to enable them to be willing to use the results in their work and to use the Sounding Board approach again.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Sounding Board model is a form of deliberative engagement with public participants which Sciencewise¹ has developed in response to requests from policy makers throughout Government for processes which are quicker and cheaper than most previous public dialogue projects.

This report summarises the evaluation of the Sounding Board project run by Sciencewise with the Environment Agency between January and March 2016. A total of 17 public participants was involved in the project which cost £24,000.

The aim of the project was to enable public input to the future direction and priorities of the Environment Agency research work related to the environmental regulation of the onshore oil and gas industry. The outputs were intended to help the EA's technical experts understand lay concerns and drivers better, and to equip better those experts when they participate in governance on external research including Research Council projects such as ESIOS (the Energy Security and Innovation Observing System for the Subsurface). A light-touch evaluation was completed to test whether the project met its objectives, and to identify lessons for any future Sounding Board projects.

2. POLICY CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT

There has been increasing interest in, and increasing controversy over, the potential for onshore development of 'unconventional' hydrocarbon energy sources, coupled with much greater focus on the existing UK oil and gas industry. The development of this industry could have major economic and energy security implications but has also raised substantial objections in the public mind. Public trust in the impartiality of regulatory bodies such as the Environment Agency (EA) seems to have been questioned.

The Environment Agency (EA) is an Executive Non Departmental Public Body under the auspices of Defra. The EA has a key role to play in ensuring effective regulation of the onshore oil and gas industry and in protecting the environment. Yet in recent months, the EA has felt under criticism from some parties who have implied that their decisions are not impartial or fair or based on sound science. Whilst there is always a risk of attack from parties who feel disadvantaged by a particular decision, the EA felt that some of the other reasons behind this may be a lack of understanding of the EA's role under current legislation and the resulting limits of the powers and duties of the EA, combined with a limited transparency in decision-making, particularly in their assessment of relative risks. They felt that the EA's expert views of risks may not have addressed the public's concerns.

Traditionally, the EA research programmes have been developed through understanding evidence gaps and needs. Priorities and topics are reviewed on an annual basis by expert staff and internal customers. The EA has a series of principles which govern their evidence work but although one of these principles states that they will engage the public, this has not been fully acted on in the research area. In addition, many scientists tend to operate within a 'deficit model' of public understanding ("*if only they knew more they would understand...*") which they recognise is unhelpful alone.

The aim of this project therefore was to enable external, non-specialist, input to the future direction and priorities of Environment Agency research on work related to the environmental regulation of the onshore oil and gas industry.

In particular, the insights from the project were intended to inform:

¹ Sciencewise is the UK's national centre for public dialogue for policy making involving science and technology issues, and is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). See www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk

- The EA internal research plan, updated annually in mid-year
- The EA's externally published 'research priorities' document which is updated annually
- The informal detailed research questions the EA use to inform the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and other research organisations
- The EA's operational public engagement activities around potential oil and gas sites.

In the longer term, any changes to the direction or priorities in the EA's research work will feed through to EA operational activities and decisions in regulating this industry.

In identifying the research they need to undertake the EA expects some criticism whatever they decide. Yet, in spending public resource, the traditional research plan process gives no voice to the public. In this high profile and contentious topic, the EA felt they needed to understand better, document, address, and be seen to address, public concerns which may not be the same as their own expert view. However, because this is a contentious issue and because the EA is keen to keep pace with new developments in public dialogue, they sought an approach which could allow a thoughtful interaction in a non-confrontational way. Simply carrying out public meetings in affected areas would be unlikely to achieve this.

The internal EA research planning for 2016/17 was currently underway when the project was established. In addition, there was a large amount of other government funded research currently being planned and for which EA experts provide input by sitting on Research Council and Departmental advisory committees.

The EA saw the Sounding Board project as representing a first step into responsible research for them on oil and gas. As well as advice on research topics, they hoped the participants would also advise on what else is appropriate for the EA in engaging the public in future.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

The formal aim of this Sounding Board project was to enable public input to the future direction and priorities of Environment Agency research on work related to the environmental regulation of the onshore oil and gas industry and to do this through a structured and non-confrontational dialogue that helped the EA's technical experts to understand lay concerns and drivers better.

The objectives of the Sounding Board (as outlined in the case from the EA for Sciencewise support for the project) were:

- To explore and capture through dialogue the nature and extent of environmental concerns of participants about shale gas exploration and production in England.
- To help build the case, and develop skills among those involved, for using dialogue to influence research directions within the Environment Agency.
- To inform the direction and priorities of Environment Agency research on the onshore oil and gas industry, its approach to formulating regulation and its external communications where these are relevant.

4. SOUNDING BOARD ACTIVITIES

In summary, the Sounding Board consisted of six main stages:

- Design and development of the process
- Recruitment of a sample of public participants
- Drafting and production of information materials to support the public discussions (presentation slides and briefing documents)
- An introductory hour-long online information session (in two groups with approximately half of the participants in each)

- An online deliberative session lasting 1.5 hours (again in two groups with half of the participants in each)
- Rapid drafting of a full final report.

Each of these activities is described in more detail below.

- **Design and development.** This stage involved the Sciencewise team working closely with the Environment Agency to agree the scope, structure, timing, length and coverage of the interactive sessions with the public participants. The aim was to complement and not duplicate existing evidence.
- **Recruitment of public participants.** Participants for the Sounding Board were recruited from the general public using stratified random sampling on the basis of demographic characteristics including age, gender, geographical location and social background. Twenty four participants were recruited from areas in England near historic oil production sites, where further exploration for onshore oil and gas might occur in the near future: Merseyside (including Liverpool); southern Nottinghamshire (including Nottingham); and southern Hampshire (including Winchester and Eastleigh). Seventeen participants then took part in the online sessions.

Recruitment was carried out by a specialist agency that approached members of the public by telephone. The recruitment brief required participants to be recruited from a variety of age ranges and to be reflective of the wider population in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Furthermore, the brief specified that participants should not have an entrenched view on onshore oil and gas, positive or negative – or any existing relationship with the Environment Agency or the oil and gas industry. Questions were included in the recruitment questionnaire to determine this. Participants were offered and paid incentives of £40 each for their involvement. The resulting sample is shown in Annex 1.

- **Drafting and production of information materials.** The materials for participants included the following (all materials are provided in the main report on the project [\[add weblink\]](#)):
 - **Written briefing materials:** All participants were emailed a short written briefing on the policy issues in advance of the Sounding Board sessions.
 - **Presentations:** Technical experts from the Environment Agency delivered Powerpoint presentations about specific aspects of the topic during the sessions with the public.
 - **Q&A with EA specialists:** Participants were able to engage directly with policy makers over the online platform, with time set aside for Q&A.

The technical information was drafted by the Environment Agency's Evidence Directorate, developed with input from the Sciencewise team and finalised with the help of detailed feedback from an independent expert: Michael Bradshaw, Professor of Global Energy at Warwick University. He reviewed all the slides designed for the information sessions and provided comments to help ensure the accuracy of the information and to prevent any bias.

- **Introductory online information sessions with public participants.** The participants were split into two groups which each met online for one hour from 7.30pm – one on Wednesday 24th and one on Thursday 25th February 2016. Around half of the participants were in each group. The aim of this session was to present participants with essential information which would assist them in making informed contributions to the following dialogue session. This session also allowed all those involved to become familiar with the technology including the online platform. An audio recording was made of the information sessions and the Sciencewise team made detailed notes to inform the final report.

- **Deliberative online sessions.** The participants were again split into the same two groups which each met online for 1.5 hours from 7.30pm - one on Wednesday 2nd and one on Thursday 3rd March. The aim of this session was to explore three key questions in more depth:
 - any concerns that they may have around the environmental impact of onshore oil and gas
 - what issues researchers at the Environment Agency should concentrate on to address public concerns, and
 - what would build their confidence in the research carried out by the Environment Agency.

Each deliberative session was attended by a team of four Environment Agency researchers, each with their own area of expertise so that they could feed in to discussions as and when appropriate. The same team of specialists attended both dialogue sessions, and two of them had also participated in the information sessions. The specialists were encouraged to participate in 'listening mode' as much as possible, in order to allow the dialogue between participants to develop. The session was moderated by a Sciencewise facilitator.

The facilitator asked each participant in turn to share their view on the discussion topic and, once all participants had spoken, invited Environment Agency experts to reflect on the issues raised. In some instances, the collaboration tool (Whiteboard) of the software was used to gather initial responses to discussion questions; at other times the facilitator simply addressed participants one by one, asking them to speak. Each discussion lasted 15 to 20 minutes, with some five minutes added for the expert response².

Two polling questions were asked at various points in the process. The questions were:

- How would you describe your feelings about the environmental impact of onshore oil and gas extraction in England? Unconcerned / somewhat concerned / very concerned / unsure
- How would you describe your feelings about the environmental impact of fracking in England? Unconcerned / somewhat concerned / very concerned / unsure

The questions were asked during the information session and were revisited twice during the dialogue session. This meant that at the end of the Sounding Board, participants' views on the environmental impacts of onshore oil and gas extraction and of fracking had been recorded three times:

- Before receiving detailed information about the risks associated with onshore oil and gas extraction and fracking and how activities are regulated by the Environment Agency and others
- After the information session and a seven-day 'reflection period' in between the two sessions, but before engaging with the discussion questions, and
- After the dialogue session, having received detailed information and participated in informed discussions with other participants and Environment Agency experts.

As with the information session, an audio recording was made of the deliberative sessions and the Sciencewise team made detailed notes to inform the final report.

² The Adobe Connect technology did not work perfectly in both sessions: in one instance the Whiteboard function was problematic; in another instance Environment Agency specialists could not be heard by participants. The issues were addressed as quickly as possible and alternative options were used to continue the session in accordance with the facilitation plan.

- **Follow-up online questions.** Two questions were added to the evaluation feedback survey which was sent to participants on 6 March, a few days after the second deliberative session:
 - Do you have any further thoughts on the research priorities of the Environment Agency around onshore oil and gas?
 - Having learned more about onshore oil and gas as part of this project, did your views change? If so, why? If not, why not?

Fourteen of the 17 participants responded to the survey (82% response rate) and that input was analysed and presented in the full final report, separately from the summaries of views from the deliberative sessions.

- **Analysis and reporting.** All the conversations throughout the deliberative sessions were recorded and analysed to produce the full final report which provided full analysis covering initial views from participants, polling results, discussion points and final reflections. The first draft of this report was provided to the EA on 11 March. Following comments and discussion of drafts between Sciencewise and the Environment Agency a final version of the report was produced on 24 March 2016.

The report was written with the explicit caveat that, given the small sample size, the results should not be interpreted as representative of the public at large. It was stressed that this type of public engagement should rather be seen as indicative of the range of public views, experiences and perspectives on the issues at hand.

- **Governance and management.** The detailed design and delivery of the project was the responsibility of the Sciencewise team (from Involve), who worked closely with two Environment Agency staff. The management arrangements for the project were informal and essentially within the normal management structure of Sciencewise.

5. AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation was designed to assess the extent to which the project met its own objectives, and also to contribute to the development of the Sounding Board model for the benefit of the EA and others. The aim of the evaluation was therefore agreed to be to assess the quality and impacts of this specific project, and of the Sounding Board as a method, to help identify lessons to contribute to the further development of the method and public dialogue generally.

At the same time, the evaluation was agreed to be light touch, to reflect the level of investment of time and money in the project itself. The evaluation methodology was therefore confined to review of project documents; review of the recordings of the online sessions; a follow-up online survey of public participants (with a good response rate of 82%; 14 out of 17 participants); interviews with the two individuals from the Environment Agency most involved and some written input by EA staff; analysis of findings and production of a final report (this document).

6. WHAT WORKED WELL DURING THE PROJECT

The evaluation research suggests that the following elements of the project worked well.

- 6.1 Non-confrontational nature of the engagement.** The EA had sought an engagement approach that would allow a thoughtful interaction in a non-confrontational way. Carrying out public meetings in affected areas was recognised as unlikely to achieve this.

“The alternative would be to bolt something on to the end of a public meeting about oil and gas that would be doing somewhere where there was a site about to kick off. So the

Agency does do those public meetings in local village hall or something but that wouldn't really be appropriate for our research process." (Environment Agency)

The EA particularly valued the mood and style of the interaction with the public participants, reflecting on the nature of the feedback gained.

"It provided the sort of rational feedback that we are very grateful for." (Environment Agency)

6.2 Engaging people without entrenched views or positions

The EA identified the value of reaching different sorts of people from those they usually engage with, especially those without preconceptions or entrenched existing views or positions.

"It is easy for us to talk to those directly affected, people who are actively engaged - so a company wanting to do something or a protestor wanting to object to that. This was a way to see if there is any relevance in talking to the vast majority of people in the middle of that, not associated with either camp." (Environment Agency)

"It was an interesting thing to do. I don't get enough contact with the wider public as perhaps I ought to. So it is a good way of getting some feedback from people ... It is good to get this wider perspective." (Environment Agency)

6.3 Opportunity for a toe-in-the-water engagement on a highly contentious topic

A deliberative approach of this sort was new for this part of the Environment Agency. The EA valued the way that this approach provided an opportunity to experiment with a different type of engagement with the public from their past experience.

"This was an experiment for us in a way to see whether there is a benefit or purpose in doing more public engagement on what research we do, which is not something that we really do in terms of the public. Nonetheless it is a requirement on us, so this was putting a toe in the water to see what happens when you do that ... It's letting us try something, explore an area that we haven't really done very much in the past." (Environment Agency)

6.4 Engaging people from across the country

The EA specialists valued the capability of the online approach to engage people from around the country in a single event which would have been impossible or very expensive to do in face-to-face workshops.

"It is great that we managed to get participants from around the country on the line at the same time. That was good ... a diverse set of participants from across different parts of the country so very useful in that regard" (Environment Agency)

"It let us bring people from several parts of the country ... doing that for real would be quite expensive." (Environment Agency)

"This was a way of getting involved with a cost and resource and in a time way that was manageable so we could do it from home." (Environment Agency)

Participant survey respondents also identified the online approach as among the things that worked best for them including "ease of access", "easy process" and "the convenience and ease of accessing the call". Not having to travel was also a good thing for some participants:

"Nice to contribute from the comfort of my home" (participant survey respondent)

"Didn't have to leave the house" (participant survey respondent)

6.5 Speed of starting and completing the project

EA specialists valued the speed of the project overall. There were just under seven weeks between agreement on funding for the project (8 January) and the start of the initial sessions with public participants (24/25 February); the deliberative sessions took place one week later (2/3 March) and the first draft of the full report the following week (11 March). This is just over two months (nine weeks) from agreement on funding to production of the final report; under three months (11 weeks) from that agreement on funding to an agreed final report (24 March). These timescales are compared to previous public dialogue projects supported by Sciencewise in section 9 below.

The online approach in particular was seen to save time and effort during design and delivery. The EA specialists also valued the speed of the actual sessions with the public:

“It was a succinct way in getting across to people. A way of getting a lot of information across to people and hearing a lot of feedback from people in a short time.” (Environment Agency)

6.6 Effective process design and delivery

From observation, and drawing on feedback from policy makers and participants, the most effective elements of the process design and delivery were:

- **Good design and preparation.** The Sciencewise team worked closely with the EA to design an appropriate structure, and provided a walk-through of the technology before interactions with the participants.

The structure of splitting the initial session into two groups worked well as it meant that any technical issues could be dealt with more easily with smaller numbers of people (the first Sounding Board project had one large single group for the information session; this approach of having two smaller groups worked better). It also worked well to have the two deliberative sessions on two separate weekday evenings so that facilitators and EA specialists did not get too tired having to do two sessions on one day (again, the first Sounding Board project had three small group discussions on a single Saturday, which was a long time to be online especially at the end of a working week).

- **Effective information presented to participants.** The process to draft and agree the information was managed so that an external perspective and oversight was provided by a senior academic specialist to help avoid bias. Professor Michael Bradshaw of Warwick University reviewed all the slides designed for the information sessions and provided comments to help ensure the accuracy of the information and to prevent any bias.

Participant survey respondents were generally very positive about the information provided:

- 100% or 14/14 said they understood clearly the purpose of the Sounding Board project (of these 64% or 9/14 strongly agreed with this)
 - 100% or 14/14 said enough information was provided to help them contribute to the discussions (50% or 7/14 strongly agreed)
 - 85% or 12/14 said the information provided seemed fair and balanced
 - 100% or 14/14 said they understood and could use the information provided
 - 93% or 13/14 said they could ask questions easily and get appropriate answers.
- **Polling.** There are debates about the validity and value of polling / scoring within deliberative processes. The dangers of this approach are well recognised (e.g. results can be taken out of context, results of numbers are more obvious and attractive to some audiences and can be

misused). Carefully managed and reported, polling and scoring can work well in deliberative events rather than inferring strength of feeling across all participants in other ways.

In this case, the polling worked well to provide evidence of views at particular points in the process. Polling took place at three points and the results were displayed so that participants could see them. In particular, the EA were interested to see how participants' views changed over the course of the process (see section 8.1).

- **Good delivery and facilitation.** The facilitation worked well. The initial informality achieved through the warm-up exercise of getting everyone to talk about one good thing that had happened to them that week ensured that everyone spoke and could hear how their input sounded.

Almost all the participant survey respondents confirmed that the process worked well for them: 93% or 13/14 said the way the sessions were facilitated was fair and not biased (no-one disagreed; one said 'neither agreed nor disagreed'). The EA specialists agreed that the sessions were well facilitated and reported.

"I thought it was well managed, well facilitated, and thank you very much for getting the draft report to us very quickly as well. I thought it was well written ... So we are quite impressed with that." (Environment Agency)

"Pretty good in terms of people handling ... getting people along to the sessions and dialled in and managing the conversation as we went through the session. That was very impressive" (Environment Agency)

It worked well to have the graphic on screen of a table with people dotted around it, so that the facilitator could go round the table (virtually) and ask for input without that being too much pressure or creating any unexpected focus on individual participants.

The system for participants indicating when they wanted to speak, showing virtual 'hands-up' on screen, also worked well for the participants and the facilitator (the facilitator could see people's names on screen when they put up their hands).

Several participant survey respondents identified the 'hands-up' and going round the circle of names as among the things that worked best:

"Being able to ask questions by raising my hand and being able to hear answers to other people's questions that I wouldn't have thought of" (participant survey respondent)

"Each person answering in turn on the phone was easier and clearer than people in a room trying to talk at once" (participant survey respondent)

It worked well to have the facilitator and the EA specialists visible on screen, but not the participants. That made the facilitator and policy makers real, and showed them listening to what the participants said. The decision not to use webcams with all participants enabled the participants not to be seen, and just to be heard, which put less pressure on them as well as avoiding potential difficulties with that technology.

- **Opportunities for deliberation.** Although the deliberative sessions were short (1.5 hours), it was possible for the participants to hear each others' points, even if the scope for discussion was limited. Some participant survey respondents said hearing other people's views was among the things that worked best for them:

"[What worked best was] listening to other people's views" (participant survey respondent)

*“Being able to hear what a range of people thought whether I agreed with them or not”
(participant survey respondent)*

“It was interesting to hear a range of opinions” (participant survey respondent)

*“There was sufficient time for all to contribute. Everybody got their chance to talk”
(participant survey respondent)*

Overall, feedback from participant survey respondents suggested that they were satisfied with the deliberative process:

- 100% said they were able to contribute their views and have their say
- 93% or 13/14 said they had enough time to take in the information given and to discuss the issues
- 100% said they were satisfied with the Sounding Board sessions that they took part in.

However, although participants were engaged and interested throughout the interactive sessions, there was little opportunity for conversations to develop (see section 7 below). This was partly due to some technical problems, which interrupted the flow of conversation, and partly due to the approach to facilitation which focused more on individual questioning rather than enabling an open conversation.

- **Connection between participants and EA specialists.** Although there were not really opportunities for direct dialogue between participants and EA specialists, the participants valued the chance to talk directly to those who would be making future decisions and taking actions:

*“[What worked best was] I was able to ask a question directly to the Agency”
(participant survey respondent)*

“[The best thing was] To get the ear of persons who may have the ability to change policy in a national agency” (participant survey respondent)

6.7 Recognition of the limitations of the methodology

The report of the project very clearly states that, given the small sample size, the results cannot be interpreted as representative of the views of the public at large. The report points out that the approach can offer opportunities to open up the policy process to input from a fairly broad range of perspectives, and can help policy makers test whether they have correctly understood the range of relevant issues around the topic, and to identify additional aspirations, questions or concerns which may need to be addressed.

7. WHAT WORKED LESS WELL AND COULD BE IMPROVED NEXT TIME

Some problems with the design and delivery of the project provide lessons for future projects.

7.1 Limited depth of discussion and dialogue

Although the public participants were pleased to have the opportunity to talk directly to EA specialists, there were a number of problems which limited the depth of discussion and dialogue. Discussion among participants was not particularly relaxed and did not flow easily and the approach of the facilitator going to each in turn, with pauses in between presumably to allow others to respond to each participant’s point, made the whole thing quite stilted and the points from participants emerged more as statements than points of discussion.

The approach of taking all participants’ views on the specific discussion point and then getting EA specialist feedback at the end of discussion on that point was quite formal and protracted, and it

meant that the specialists could not respond to specific points (or misunderstandings) from participants as they arose. It reduced the potential for interactive dialogue.

"We were in listening mode, rather than having an exchange of views about some of the issues that people brought forward ... Clearly we want to give people enough time to get their points across. I and my colleagues were very much in listening mode rather than being able to offer any comments on some of the points they were raising. We did in some cases, but by and large when people expressed concerns, we didn't say what we were doing to address those concerns at the moment, what research was going on or what technical approaches we had to deal with those concerns. Just listening and taking on board those points. So it may well be that in other circumstances we would have a chance to have a wider discussion and talk through with people what we were already doing." (Environment Agency)

Not being able to see each other was also seen to be a disadvantage in creating deeper engagement for both participant survey respondents and EA specialists:

"We couldn't all see each other, they could see us but we couldn't see them ... it perhaps limits the amount of engagement you can get when you don't have the body language as well as the verbal contact."(Environment Agency)

"I'm not sure we always hit the mark with the people listening so maybe that would be easier to do in a face to face"(Environment Agency)

"Not enough face-to-face contact especially with the other participants" (Participant survey respondent)

There were also challenges in the breadth of the framing of the topic. Somewhat counter-intuitively, it can open up discussions if there is a relatively narrow focus on specific issues and questions rather than very broad ones (e.g. participants' feelings about the environmental impacts of onshore gas and oil). In this case, the discussions ranged very widely and picked up some detailed points but the discussions lacked clear focus. As a result, it was more difficult for specific new insights to emerge from the participants that would be of value to policy makers.

In addition, the technical problems (see below) interrupted the flow of conversation and reduced the time available for open discussion. 1.5 hours for a discussion can allow for quite an in depth conversation if the process is very carefully framed and managed and there are no unexpected interruptions. In this case, the various problems created quite a stilted exchange.

7.2 Problems with the technology

Problems with the technology were raised by the participant survey respondents and the EA interviewees. In particular, the problems in 7.1 above were made worse by the use of the Whiteboard technique, which did not work well (or at all at times). Participants were supposed to be able to write up the points they wanted to make on the Whiteboard, and the facilitator then went through those points one by one. The Whiteboard element was an experiment in this project but it had not been piloted fully so the technical glitches had not been addressed in advance. For example, new comments added by participants sometimes over-wrote existing comments on the Whiteboard, and some comments did not appear at all.

Three of the participant survey respondents picked the Whiteboard up as the thing that 'worked least well' in the sessions and both the EA specialists interviewed identified the Whiteboard as creating difficulties. This was partly due to the technical problems but it also added to the formal nature of input from participants and much more of a question and answer approach to facilitation rather than encouraging and managing a more free flowing conversation.

In addition, in one deliberative session there was a problem with the EA specialists phones being stuck on mute for a while, so their voices could not be heard.

All these relatively small problems contributed to the pressure on time which again reduced the opportunities for any depth of discussion.

7.3 Small numbers of participants

The EA specialists commented on the small numbers involved and the implications of those numbers for the credibility of the results. One talked about the value of the process in *“getting some feedback from people”* although *“clearly it was to a limited extent, the number of people we managed to get to”*.

“We covered probably the range of ground that you would expect to cover for this topic. So that was good but whether that would be seen as credible and robust by others because of the limited population [i.e. small numbers involved] is another matter. So I think on balance you would need to back this up with other information as well so this is part of your evidence gathering tools.”(Environment Agency)

However, although the small numbers were noted, it was not seen to remove credibility from the process or results overall:

“Is it credible with policymakers? I think so ... I think it is credible. There’s some discussion about numbers of people – is that a statistically representative sample - but this is about understanding issues rather than trying to measure or quantify them.”

8. IMPACTS

It is still too early to identify the impacts of the project on specific decisions and actions. However, there are some immediate impacts to note on those involved and some indications of potential future impacts.

8.1 Impacts on policy and policy makers

The two EA specialists most closely involved in the project identified a number of immediate impacts on their thinking and planning.

- **Confirming expectations about participant views.** The Environment Agency valued the opportunity to test participants’ views on the topics to check if they had missed anything that was important to the public. The confirmation that they were on the right track was of value to the EA.

“The important things were, I suppose, would the public in the session come up with similar sorts of interests to those we’d expect to see and that we’re already interested in, or would they come up with something completely different. In the end they came up with pretty much what we would have expected. So it’s nice to have that confirmation.”

“The issues that came up were pretty much consistent to what my understanding would be, which may be confirming that we have a pretty good handle on what the issues of concern might be.”

- **Seeing how participants’ views developed over the sessions.** The EA found the polling results particularly interesting in that they showed how the participants’ views had changed during the course of the sessions. The findings from the polling were that more participants had become ‘very concerned’ about the environmental impact of fracking, and more had become ‘unconcerned’. This was of particular interest to the EA:

“It is interesting that concerns about fracking increased as people gained more knowledge or perhaps were influenced by others on the discussion. Not quite sure what the reasons might have been but that was an interesting factor.”(Environment Agency)

However, the picture is more complex than participants’ concerns simply becoming more negative overall about fracking. The tendency was, more generally, that participants’ views became slightly more polarised.

The participant survey also addressed this issue, by asking whether taking part had affected their views. This feedback suggests that there was a balance between those who felt more negative and those who felt more positive – with probably more survey respondents feeling more positive overall. Not all participants took part in the survey and not all answered this question in these terms, but the feedback certainly suggests that the shifts in views was not entirely negative. Comments from two participants exemplify the complications:

“Less negative about onshore wells. However, the session has reinforced my negative views on fracking.” (Participant survey respondent)

“I have a clearer understanding of what onshore oil and gas is and the positives and negatives but am still unsure of my overall opinion of whether it should go ahead or not”. (Participant survey respondent)

In many ways, this complexity demonstrates both the value and the limitations of polling within deliberative processes. The polling worked well to identify how participants’ views shifted, but cannot be relied on to provide anything more than an illustration of those shifts and directions of travel. Polling results within deliberative processes are therefore much better used as the basis for reflection and further discussion, rather than a definitive answer.

- **Creating more interest in future public engagement on EA research planning.** The EA reported that the project had helped them think about how to involve the public in future research planning.

As one EA specialist said *“This is a project about research and what research we should do. But it is also a research investigation in and of itself. Does this kind of engagement work for us?”*

Both EA interviewees agreed that they would be keen to use this sort of approach again.

“I certainly would be keen to do it again. I think it is a very useful tool. I think it is one tool amongst a number ... I’ve spent a lot of time speaking to researchers and fellow professionals on the subject but I haven’t spent enough time speaking to people on the ground affected by local activities. So I would want to place it in the array of tools we have for doing this sort of work. (Environment Agency)

“It makes me more reflective about the approach I use and the importance to get more understanding of what the general public are thinking and to find out ways of getting public engagement in trying to set the research agenda ... that will have some impact on the way our organisation works – not a major impact in terms the way the Environment Agency works but the way in which we establish our research needs.” (Environment Agency)

“This is an experiment for me so the impact will be to what extent and how we do that public engagement around our research programmes ... It’s whether we should do public engagement and how ... I think I’d be keen to try it again” (Environment Agency)

“I thought it was a very worthwhile exercise.” (Environment Agency)

The EA also noted that participants understood the issues but had less clarity over the EA role:

“Perhaps one of the most important findings is that there’s a lot of work for us to do. The people seemed to have a reasonable grasp of issues ... They didn’t fully understand the administrative role that we have. There is work for us to do there.”

8.2 Impacts on the public participants

In feedback from the participant survey respondents, several positive impacts on participants themselves were noted, as follows:

- Impacts on knowledge and views:
 - 92% of respondents (12 out of 13) said that they had learned something new as a result of taking part; 1 said they neither agreed nor disagreed that they had learnt anything.
 - 85% of respondents (11 out of 13) said that taking part had affected their views; 2 neither agreed nor disagreed with this.
- Positive expectations of participants of the influence of the project:
 - 93% or 13/14 said they felt the participants had made a meaningful contribution through these sessions; 1 tended to disagree
 - 86% or 12/14 said they thought their input would make a difference to policy in these areas (2 tended to disagree); 92% or 12/13 said they agreed their input should make a difference to policy (1 strongly disagreed)
- Positive views on the value of this approach to policy making:
 - 86% or 12/14 said they were convinced of the value of Government talking to the public on these topics; 2 tended to disagree
- Impacts on future participation by participants:
 - 93% or 13/14 said they were likely to get involved in these sorts of activities again; one didn’t know
 - 86% or 12/14 said they were more likely to get involved in online activities like this in future as a result of taking part here; one said they neither agreed nor disagreed, another said they didn’t know

The ‘best things’ for participant survey respondents were ‘learning’, ‘being listened to’, “taking part in meaningful discussions on an important subject” and ‘hearing others’ views’.

9. COMPARATIVE TIME AND COSTS WITH OTHER DIALOGUE PROJECTS

The Sounding Board approach was developed to meet Government policy and decision maker interest in dialogue projects that could be developed and completed faster and at lower cost than previous public dialogue projects. This section considers these issues.

9.1 Budget for the Sounding Board

The total cost of the project was £24,000. It was funded by £9,500 from the Environment Agency plus in kind input (development of materials, attendance at online sessions etc), with the remainder (£14,500) from Sciencewise.

The specific costs were as follows:

Set up, management, design, delivery and reporting	16,338
Recruitment costs (external agency)	4,200
AdobeConnect platform and conference call costs	471
Incentives to participants (£40.63 each)	691
Evaluation	<u>2,300</u>
Total costs	£ 24,000

These costs do not take into account the input of time from the policy makers and technical experts at the Environment Agency, who were involved in the development, production and presentation of the information materials during the sessions, and in agreeing the final report. These costs are not usually included in other dialogue project costs, so can be discounted for the purposes of comparison.

9.2 Overall timetable for the Sounding Board

The main steps and timing of the development and implementation of the project are as follows:

Date	Activity
8 January 2016	Business case for joint Sciencewise / Environment Agency project agreed
11 - 19 January 2016	Agreed roles and budget, held inception meeting, agreed sample frame for participants, engaged a recruitment company to recruit participants – 24 recruited
31 January 2016	Drafts of materials to support the online sessions; liaison with participants
7 February 2016	Input to information materials by technical experts and materials completed; walk through of the technology with the experts to be involved in the sessions
21 February	Final materials circulated to public participants
24/25 February	Initial online information sessions run for 1 hour in the evenings with half the participants on each day
2/3 March	Online deliberative sessions run for 1.5 hours each again with half the participants on each day
6 March	Evaluation feedback survey sent to all public participants. Two additional content questions were added to the top of the survey to gather more feedback on the topic from participants; deadline 12 March; 82% response
11 March	First draft of full final report completed and sent to Environment Agency for review and comment
18 March	Revised version of report completed and sent to Environment Agency for agreement, subject to final proof read
24 March	Revised version of evaluation report completed and agreed

This is about nine weeks (just over two months) from agreement to do the project to production of the final report. The time from agreement to do the project to agreed final report was just under three months (11 weeks).

9.3 Costs and timescale for other dialogue projects

The table below shows examples of six other Sciencewise-supported dialogue project from both ends of the budget scale – three with the smallest budgets, and three with the largest budgets.

Project name	Timescale	Cost	Number of events and participants
Living with Environmental Change (LWEC)	15 months, from May 2010 to July 2011	£30,450 (Sciencewise £17,625)	Forum which met 3 times; total of 18 public participants
Cambrian Mountains Initiative (Natural Resources Wales)	5 months, from November 2012 to March 2013	£45,600 (Sciencewise £21,000)	7 workshops in 7 different locations; total of 45 public participants
Trajectories for carbon emission reductions (Committee on Climate Change)	9 months, from August 2013 to April 2014	£43,500 (Sciencewise £21,000)	3 workshops in one location; total of 25 public participants (one group met three times)
HFEA Mitochondrial replacement	13 months, from March 2012 to March 2013	£220,000 (Sciencewise £72,000)	Groups met twice in three locations (6 workshops); total of 90 public participants Project also included other activities so project costs do not relate only to these workshops.
Synthetic Biology (BBSRC and EPSRC)	21 months, from July 2009 to April 2011	£334,000 (Sciencewise £234,000)	Groups met 3 times in four locations (12 workshops); total of 160 public participants
Disposal of Radioactive Waste (DECC)	10 months, from May 2013 to February 2014	£440,600 (Sciencewise £167,440)	Groups met twice in four locations (8 workshops); total of 63 public participants

It should be noted that the timescales shown in the table above include additional time at both ends of the project, covering everything after agreement of business case to completion and publication of the evaluation report. In most cases, without these additional activities at the beginning and end of the project, timescales may be reduced by 2-3 months.

9.4 Generic timescale for public dialogue projects

Recent internal analysis for Sciencewise identified the key elements of a public dialogue project and what were considered realistic but tight timescales, based on previous experience. These are shown in the table below.

Time allocated	Task
3 weeks	Initial discussion up to draft concept note
7 weeks	Agree detailed business case and funding arrangements between Sciencewise and commissioning body
	Set up Oversight Group. No time allocation given for this as it may be done prior to procurement of external contractors (which can make overall timescales longer but has significant benefits in terms of buy-in), or can be done after that. If done in advance, an allowance of 3 weeks needs to be given
10 weeks	Procurement process – from drafting ITTs, receiving tenders, assessing tenders and appointing contractors (for design and delivery, and for evaluation)
6 weeks	From inception meeting with design and delivery team, commissioning body, Sciencewise and evaluators; to first events with the public
2 – 4 weeks	Interactive events with the public
4 weeks	Analysis and reporting
TOTAL: 32 – 34 weeks; 7.5 months	

9.5 Comparison between the Sounding Board and other dialogue projects

It is not possible to make a detailed and accurate comparison between the Sounding Board and other dialogue projects because timescales and costs are calculated slightly differently. However, some cost and timing comparisons can be made.

- **Comparisons of costs.** The design and delivery costs for this Sounding Board project were £24,000. This compares with the lowest cost for another public dialogue project - the LWEC project cost a total of £30,450. The Sounding Board involved 17 public participants compared to the LWEC project's 18 public participants. The Sounding Board held two online interactive sessions lasting a total of 2.5 hours compared to LWEC's three face-to-face workshops for a full day each (total 3 days). The most expensive Sciencewise-supported project identified in the table above for comparison is the DECC Disposal of Radioactive Waste project, which cost £440,600.

In summary, the Sounding Board approach in this case was significantly cheaper than some public dialogue projects, and some £6,000 (or about 20%) cheaper than the cheapest.

- **Comparisons of timescales.** The timescale for the Sounding Board was just over two months (nine weeks) from agreement to proceed to first draft of the full final report; just under three months (11 weeks) to completion of an agreed final report.

The earlier Cambrian Mountains initiative project was the fastest previous public dialogue project supported by Sciencewise. That took five months to agreed and published final report. Other public dialogue projects took very much longer; even the generic project timescale (above) is 7.5 months, which is significantly longer.

In summary, the Sounding Board approach in this case was significantly faster than some dialogue projects, and nearly two months (around 20%) faster than the fastest.

- **The differences in costs and timescales.** The key difference in timescales, and the key advantage from the policy makers' perspective, is that the Sounding Board moved very quickly from agreement to do the project to the first interactive events with the public and then to the production of the report of the results from the project.

Time was saved by not needing a procurement process to commission external contractors (the Sciencewise team delivered the Sounding Board) and by public participants meeting online rather than needing to find and book appropriate venues for face-to-face workshops.

These savings in timescales have related savings in costs – costs for venues, providing refreshments and travel costs. Incentive payments for participants are also lower as less time and effort (no travel) is required of participants.

- **Other differences.** Savings in time and money have other implications. In this project, fewer participants met for less often and for less time than in many other dialogue projects, which inevitably reduced the richness and depth of deliberation among the participants, and reduced the potential for insights into participants' deeper values for policy makers. Time for exploring the complexities, or sensitivities of highly contentious topics, was also reduced.

However, as EA specialists made clear in their feedback on this project, the Sounding Board approach did work well as a high level test of feedback from public participants, a toe in the water on this contentious issue. Further research and further dialogue may follow but this Sounding Board project was clearly valuable in this case and both EA specialists agreed they would use it again in similar circumstances.

10. MEETING THE OBJECTIVES

This pilot project was set up with specific objectives. The extent to which these objectives were met is shown below (on the basis of whether the objective was met, partly met, not yet met, not met, not considered).

Project aims and objectives	
Objective	Extent to which the objective was met
To explore and capture through dialogue the nature and extent of environmental concerns of participants about shale gas exploration and production in England.	This objective was <u>partly met</u> in that the participants articulated their environmental concerns about shale gas and oil exploration in England. The extent to which the process created a dialogue was more limited than may have been expected and may have been possible in other circumstances.
To help build the case for, and develop skills among those involved in the dialogue in using dialogue to influence research directions within the Environment Agency.	This objective was <u>met</u> . The EA specialists involved confirmed that they would use this form and potentially other forms of dialogue again, and that they more fully understood how this approach worked and could influence research directions within the Environment Agency.
To inform the direction and priorities of Environment Agency research on the onshore oil and gas industry, its approach to formulating regulation and its external communications where this is relevant.	This objectives is <u>not yet met</u> . It is too early to gain any evidence on which to assess whether or how the project has informed the direction of priorities of EA research on the onshore oil and gas industry and the EA's own approach to regulation and communications. However, the EA specialists involved confirmed that the insights from the project would inform future plans for research.

11. CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

The Sounding Board project enabled the Environment Agency to test a new form of public engagement on their research work, and gained some useful insights to inform future research plans and priorities within the EA. The project used methodological innovations that included online interactive sessions only (no face-to-face workshop). It was monitored to test timing, costs and quality (through this evaluation).

The Environment Agency confirmed that this Sounding Board approach did work well as a high level test of feedback from public participants, a toe in the water on this contentious issue. Both EA specialists interviewed for the evaluation agreed they would use the Sounding Board approach again in similar circumstances. They particularly valued the non-confrontational nature of the engagement; reaching people without entrenched views or positions; engaging people from across the country; and the speed of starting and completing the project. They also confirmed that the project had provided insights of value to them that have informed their thinking and would inform future planning on research priorities.

Public participants were also satisfied with the approach to the dialogue, largely coping well with the technology and feeling able to contribute their views and have their say.

The design and delivery of the project was well organised, and the facilitation enabled some discussion. The analysis and reporting of what was said by participants was comprehensive and effective, with the final report provided to the agreed deadline. Overall, the quality of the design and delivery, the value of the outputs to the policy makers, and the credibility of the process with the policy makers, were all achieved.

Given the innovation of the technology and the little time for participant deliberation, the depth and richness of the dialogue was inevitably less than in face-to-face processes that allow much more time for participant interaction.

The main approach to online interactive sessions was effective but there were some quite significant technical hitches (with the Whiteboard feature and telephones), which should be addressed in future similar projects.

The costs were lower than any other dialogue projects supported by Sciencewise, and the timescale was faster.

Any future Sounding Board projects will want to address the challenges identified in section 7 above including:

- ensuring focused framing so that maximum use of the limited time for deliberation can open up relevant issues for discussion between the participants and with the technical specialists
- piloting any innovative features in the technologies so that any problems can be identified and dealt with prior to their use in the interactive sessions, or other techniques used.

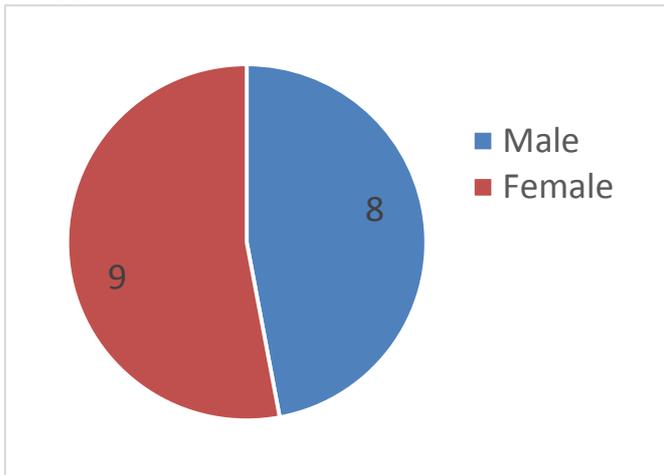
Overall, and in summary, this Sounding Board project largely met its key objectives by providing feedback to the Environment Agency on participants' views on the environmental impacts of onshore gas and oil as a toe in the water engagement with a disinterested group of public participants from diverse backgrounds from around the country. The project identified useful insights for EA decision makers and gained sufficient credibility with them to enable them to be willing to use the results in their work and to use the Sounding Board approach again where relevant.

Diane Warburton
Sciencewise Evaluation Manager
30 March 2016

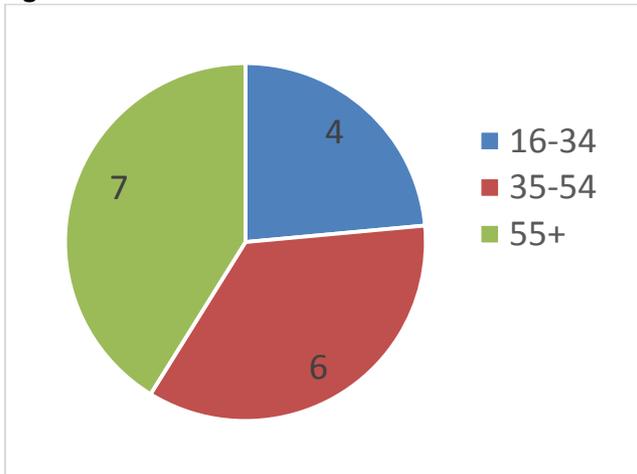
ANNEX 1. ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE SOUNDING BOARD PROJECT

Sciencewise selected 17 participants for this project. Participants were recruited from the general public using stratified random sampling on the basis of demographic characteristics including age, gender, geographical location and social background. Participants were recruited from areas in England where exploration for onshore oil and gas might occur in the near future: Merseyside (including Liverpool); southern Nottinghamshire (including Nottingham); and southern Hampshire (including Winchester and Eastleigh). The charts below set out the basic demographic characteristics of recruits.

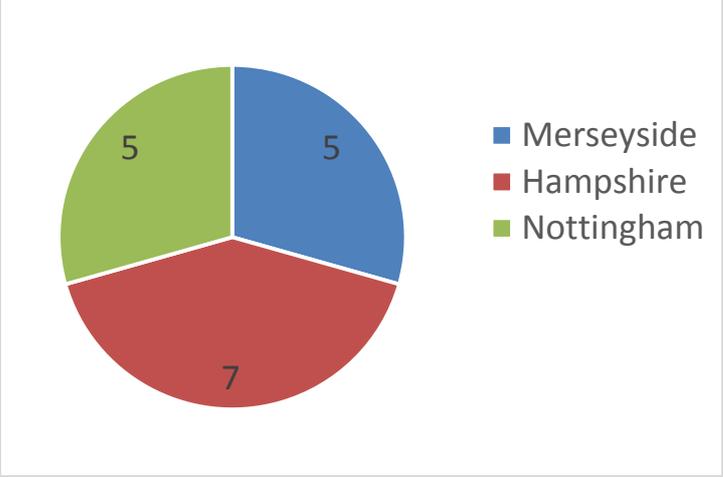
Gender



Age



Location



Social grade

