

Evaluation: facing the tricky questions - Assessing value for money

Presentation at Science Communication Conference, London 25 May 2011

Sciencewise-ERC has developed ways to measure and demonstrate the value of public engagement because, in the current financial climate, we needed to think about:

- reduced budgets and increased scrutiny on the use of public funds
- the need to maintain support as well as funding
- it is useful to review the costs of different designs and methods for public engagement.

Practical and other problems included:

- "*Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted*", Albert Einstein
- A cynic is "*A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing*" Oscar Wilde
- Measuring can be very expensive in time as well as money
- It is very hard to get detailed accurate cost data. It is sometimes hard to get any cost data at all

Measuring value needs to be relevant - asking the right questions - and proportionate. It is not always appropriate to fully assess and measure everything, especially smaller projects with smaller budgets.

We began our work by reviewing existing models of analysing value for money including:

- Value For Money: economy, efficiency, effectiveness
- Social Return On Investment: Cabinet Office approach to social value
- Cost benefit analysis

We found these were not appropriate as models we could use because they were too complex, too detailed, made too many assumptions and had too much focus on 'monetising value'. Full details of our analysis are available in the report *Evidence Counts*, from www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk. However, we learnt from these and developed a rather different approach.

Rather than looking at *benefits*, our work focused on assessing four types of *impacts*:

- impacts on policy and policy making - and policy and the policy making process are particularly important for Sciencewise
- impacts on policy makers - separately from the impacts on policy
- impacts on public participants
- impacts on scientists and others involved

This approach allowed us to identify short term as well as long term impacts, on people and policy - the earliest impacts are usually on the people involved. Those impacts can be immediate.

Once we had started to collect information on impacts, we started to focus more on costs, and came up with six questions to assess the costs of public engagement projects:

- 1 What was the basic budget?** Examples of budgets for Sciencewise-ERC projects are: Nanodialogues £240,000; and Drugsfutures £300,000.
- 2 What were public participants' and stakeholders' perceptions of whether it was 'money well spent'?** Here, we wanted to know what factors affected people's perceptions of value, as well as their overall view. For example, a public participant in the Drugsfutures project said: "yes, if our views are listened to". We have found that public participants' view of the value of the types of public engagement Sciencewise does is closely linked to whether they think their input has been listened to.
- 3 Could costs have been reduced without losing quality?** This has been a useful question to prompt people to reflect on whether and in what ways it might have been possible to do the project more cheaply, with no loss of quality. One example is from the geoenvironmental dialogue. The evaluation suggested that the public access events did not add enough value to match the costs, and there was a very detailed evaluation; both areas where costs could have been reduced.

- 4 Could a *small additional investment* have achieved *significant extra benefits*?** Projects often realise that they could have done a *lot more* with just a *little extra* in terms of resources given to one aspect of the project. Answering this question can help in allocating resources better in future planning. Examples we have found include:
- Synthetic biology dialogue: could have included follow on work to maximise the impacts of project reports. Reports are often published and then not widely disseminated or used.
 - Big Energy Shift: a few more public participants at the final workshop at which the public discussed their recommendations directly with policy makers would have cost very little extra and added significantly to the value of the process for both.
- 5 What costs could be *saved later* by having had good public engagement?** There is lots of anecdotal evidence that early public engagement saves costs later (better decisions). Although we have no specific examples to answer this question yet, the evaluation of a current project funded by Sciencewise-ERC may provide some relevant information.
- 6 What are the costs of engagement *compared to overall programme budgets*?** This question is designed to put the costs of public engagement into the wider context of the costs of the programme the engagement is designed to feed into. We have quite a few examples from Sciencewise-ERC:
- Geoengineering: cost £155,000; fed immediately into an EPSRC / NERC sandpit which alone allocated £2.5 million
 - Synthetic biology project: cost £360,000; compared to an overall budget for synthetic biology research in UK 2005 - 2010 of £18 - £33 million
 - Nanodialogues: cost £240,000; value of nano research in 2007 estimated at \$12 billion
 - Stem cell dialogue: cost £300,000; industry valued at more than £500 million per year

All these details on costs are useful in assessing the value of public engagement. However, there is also the broader argument of - 'what is the alternative?'. As Andrew Acland says: "If you think dialogue is expensive, try conflict"

In summary, in assessing the value for money of engagement, we have found that:

- Costs are only part of the story, but an important part and usually missed out.
- The overall balance of costs and benefits almost always depends on understanding longer term impacts, especially on policy.
- Different audiences perceive value differently. From all the evaluations we have done, we have found:
 - policy makers value robust evidence and advice from the public, raising public awareness, or testing ideas to manage risk
 - public participants value being listened to and having influence, or just the fun of taking part
 - experts and scientists value taking their work to new audiences, and learning new communications skills

And finally, we have found that:

- Evidence of value is vital to maintain funding and support and equally importantly to learn lessons about when and how best to do public engagement in future. More specifically, numbers are always powerful, but often hard to pin down
- Different audiences want different evidence of value and so need different messages
- Collaboration and sharing experience helps development but ...
- Can it continue in the current financial climate?



Diane Warburton, Evaluation Manager, Sciencewise-ERC

www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk

diane@sharedpractice.org.uk