

# Evaluation: facing the tricky questions

## Assessing value for money

Diane Warburton, Evaluation Manager  
Sciencewise-ERC

[www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)  
[diane@sharedpractice.org.uk](mailto:diane@sharedpractice.org.uk)



# Question:

When is a public engagement project good value for money?

# Why we have assessed value

Sciencewise has developed ways to measure and demonstrate the value of public dialogue because:

- reduced budgets and increased scrutiny
- need to maintain support as well as funding
- useful to review costs of design decisions

This became a priority for Sciencewise project evaluations over the last couple of years

# Practical and other problems

- *"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 expensive in time as well as money
- It is very hard to get detailed accurate cost data

We decided that measuring value needs to be relevant and proportionate. And it is not always appropriate.

# Looked at all sorts of models

- Classic VFM: economy, efficiency, effectiveness
- SROI: Cabinet Office approach to social value
- Classic cost benefit analysis

Found were not appropriate because, as models:

- too complex
- too detailed
- made too many assumptions
- too much focus on 'monetising value'

Learnt from these but took a different approach

# Assessing impacts

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

- impacts on policy and policy making
- impacts on policy makers
- 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

# Six questions on costs

- 1 What was the basic budget? e.g. Nanodialogues £240,000; Drugsfutures £300,000
- 2 What were public participants' and stakeholders' perceptions of whether it was 'money well spent'? e.g. Drugsfutures public participant: "yes, if our views are listened to"
- 3 Could costs have been reduced without losing quality? e.g. geoengineering dialogue: public access events did not add enough value to match costs, and very detailed evaluation

# Six questions on costs, continued

- 4 Could a *small* additional investment have achieved *significant* extra benefits? e.g.  
Synthetic biology dialogue: commissioning follow on work to maximise impacts of project reports;  
Big Energy Shift: additional public participants at workshop with policy makers
- 5 What costs could be saved later by having had good public engagement? no examples yet

# Six questions on costs, continued

## 6 What are the costs of engagement compared to overall programme budgets? e.g.

- Geoengineering: cost £155,000; fed into EPSRC / NERC sandpit which alone allocated £2.5 million
- Synthetic biology: cost £360,000; budget for synthetic biology research in UK 2005-10 £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

"If you think dialogue is expensive, try conflict" Andrew Acland

# Assessing value of engagement

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

# Final thoughts

We have found:

- Evidence of value is vital. Numbers are always powerful, but hard to pin down
- Different audiences want different evidence and so need different messages
- Collaboration and sharing experience helps development, but ...
- Can it continue in the current climate?

# Many thanks

Diane Warburton, Evaluation Manager  
Sciencewise-ERC

[www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)  
[diane@sharedpractice.org.uk](mailto:diane@sharedpractice.org.uk)

