

community x-change

East Anglia pilot phase to discuss climate change issues

Context and Aim

community x-change is the name given to a series of workshops where members of the public, scientists and policy makers meet to discuss issues involving science and discuss their thoughts, feelings and ideas for possible actions. This case study covers the pilot phase which took place in Norwich.

community x-change explores a new methodology for dialogue. The approach takes elements from a number of different initiatives to provide time and space for citizens to discuss issues of local and national concern. In the pilot phase, the priority policy area was climate change.

The community x-change aims to:

- Provide opportunities for people to discuss issues involving science about which they have strong views
- Improve interaction between scientists and members of the public, acknowledging that each bring their own expertise
- Develop effective processes to include marginalised and vulnerable groups in policy debates
- Build capacity locally to enable interaction between participants beyond the lifespan of the project
- Create an involvement process in which policy-makers play a meaningful role.

The Process

Participants met regularly to discuss climate change and other science and technology issues that interested or concerned them. The climate change topic was designed to stimulate a wide-ranging discussion, particularly on issues of more local concern.

Involving participants: Care was taken to ensure the group was diverse so that

a range of views were heard. Marginalised groups were engaged through community groups and using data from the electoral roll. Eight participants were research scientists from local institutions.

Deliberation: Participants were guided through a structured process to discuss each other's perspectives and consider evidence from a range of information providers. Scientists and non-scientists took part on an equal footing, each bringing different experiences and knowledge.

Policy: Policy makers involved in decision-making on climate change at a national and local level were involved at an initial "shaping" event, at the final workshop and at the presentation of a video report.

Dissemination and learning: Participants attended an interactive video report at the 2006 BA Festival of Science in Norwich. Additional project resources were developed for use by the BA's regional offices, resulting in eight further public discussion events across the country attended by 800 people.



Vital Statistics

Project delivery organisations:

The BA (British Association for the Advancement of Science), the Policy, Ethics and Life Sciences (PEALS) Research Centre, Newcastle University, and local partners

Duration of process: 16 months pilot phase (July 2005-October 2006)

Number of participants: 39 (directly) plus 800 in roll-out events

Cost of project: £86,600 (Sciencewise contribution £42,775)

Key Impacts:

- Evaluation of pilot phase led to process improvements
- Groups normally excluded from policy making processes interacted directly with decision-makers
- Scientists overcame fears of two-way engagement with the public.

This project was funded through open competition, not commissioned to provide input into a live policy area.

Benefits and Impact

The Public

Many of the participants thoroughly enjoyed the process and its diversity and appreciated having the chance to talk to decision makers, particularly their local MP.

A trip to the Norfolk Broads was good for building rapport in this diverse group, some of whom had never visited this local area of interest. It quickly became apparent that, for many individuals, their local environment causes significant concerns which are of greater importance to them than issues of national concern. However, for the vast majority of participants (both non-scientists and scientists) there was a real expectation that something was going to come out of the process and that the information generated would be presented to decision-makers.

Scientists

There is increasing pressure on scientists to enter into dialogue with society and the group who took part in Norwich threw themselves wholeheartedly into the dialogue process.

One commented that most communication of science is with those who are already interested or well informed. Non-scientists remarked that the scientists involved in the workshops were quite able to relate to and discuss issues, scientific or non-scientific, without resorting to jargon. By creating a

constructive and mutually respectful atmosphere the project seemed to create a safe environment in which scientists and citizens could discover a common language.

Policy Makers

The community x-change process aims to engage continually with policymakers. In Norwich, this included involving them, alongside a variety of other stakeholders, in a "shaping change" workshop before the participants met in the actual community x-changes. Policymakers were also invited to contribute to the x-change workshops and were invited to the BA Festival of Science session to view the video report. The final edit of the video is available online and has been widely distributed through communications channels.

“ Discussions of controversial issues can succeed if diverse publics are allowed to contribute the expertise they have gained through their life experiences on an equal footing with experts.

Alice Taylor-Gee, Project Manager, community x change, Norwich.

“ I enjoyed the final day most – that was an opportunity to put questions to decision makers or people in a better position to make change – the MPs

community x-change participant

Learning from the Process

The first phase of the project provided insights which are helping to refine the second stage of the project, a community x-change in Liverpool in 2008. Engaging with marginalised and vulnerable groups was particularly challenging and the learning is being embedded into the BA to help it carry out future engagement.

Participants commented favourably about the wide range of people who came from very different backgrounds. They found the sessions interesting and engaging and appreciated the facilitation. Project deliverers found that working with a variety of partners and public participants required sensitivity and openness to the views, perspectives and attitudes expressed.

Scientists and citizens are able to work together constructively provided there is careful preparation and a willingness, particularly from science communicators, to embrace diversity in culture and outlook. This type of engagement needs to be monitored and evaluated as it goes along so that the process can be improved while there is still time available to make a difference. The long-term legacy requires resources to continue to work closely with community groups.

What would be done differently?

- The workshops tried to cover too much; in particular the merging of the national climate change issue with local concerns, was at times found to be confusing
- The challenges of working with marginalised groups were underestimated and are being reviewed for the next x-change.

Contacts and Links

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www.the-ba.net/communityxchange
Project report: (to be produced at full project completion)

Find out more at: www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk