



# Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement – Summary Report

## Introduction

The Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre (Sciencewise-ERC) aims to create excellence in public dialogue and to inspire and inform better policy in science and technology by helping policy makers commission and use public dialogue in emerging areas of science and technology. The Sciencewise-ERC is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

Sciencewise-ERC provides practical support to policy makers and over the past year has undertaken innovative research into six key strategic issues in public dialogue.

This summary is one of a series of six covering research undertaken by Sciencewise-ERC.

This report summarises the research into enabling and sustaining citizen involvement within public dialogue.

The research was carried out by Diane Beddoes, a member of the Sciencewise-ERC Dialogue and Engagement Specialist team.

### Others in the series:

- Departmental Dialogue Index (Lindsey Colbourne)
- Widening Public Involvement in Dialogue (Pippa Hyam)
- Working with the Media (Melanie Smallman)
- Evidence Counts - Understanding the Value of Public Dialogue (Diane Warburton)
- The Use of Experts in Public Dialogue (Suzannah Lansdell)

Copies of the full research report, and others in the series are available at [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)

## Summary

This study looked at both enabling and sustaining citizen involvement, focusing on the type of dialogue that falls within the Sciencewise-ERC's Guiding Principles for informing policy decisions. However, the main focus of the report is on sustaining involvement after a project has ended, which is a new area of interest for both commissioners and practitioners of this type of dialogue.

The report provides guidance on citizen involvement for policy-makers commissioning public dialogue. It also provides information on what participants can and should expect from their involvement, as well as what is expected of them. It includes a discussion of the issues raised around how and whether to sustain involvement, and some practical suggestions for how commissioning and project design might encourage and support this.



# Process

## The study drew on:

published materials relating to dialogue and engagement, including theoretical literature, project reports and evaluations, interviews with practitioners, commissioners and policy-makers and the findings from two workshops with key stakeholders, which were held as part of the Sciencewise-ERC research programme. An online forum was trialled, to explore enthusiasm for post-project involvement among a few participants in previous dialogue activities and a discussion group was held with people who had taken part in a Sciencewise-ERC funded dialogue project, Nanodialogues, some 21 months earlier.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Generate advice and guidance for policy makers and other dialogue commissioners on:
  - > Involving people in projects, taking into account a range of different approaches
  - > Building and maintaining positive relationships over the life of a project
  - > Involving people after the end of a project
- Generate advice and guidance for participants on what they should expect from their involvement in a dialogue project and what is expected of them
- Establish a framework for a participant network and, if possible, engage participants from previous and existing projects in the network

## Findings

The discussions around sustaining involvement generated some very interesting findings which, if taken into consideration by commissioners and practitioners, have some clear implications for the way in which projects are commissioned and designed. One of the primary factors involved in shaping post-project activities will be the shape and nature of the initial project itself.

In answer to the question of *why* we should seek to sustain involvement in a dialogue project, the main reasons provided were that this would:

- Contribute to democracy, helping to show that democracy is ‘working well’
- Contribute to policy-making, both as a process through which publics and policy-makers gained a better understanding of each other and as a way in which policy-makers can understand better the views of the public on specific issues; more specifically, sustained involvement in science-related projects was seen as helping to deliver on the policy aim of increasing science literacy across the general population

- Provide a space for people to continue learning about developments in fast-moving areas of science and for continued conversations about the new social and ethical questions that research developments generated
- Provide a channel through which project commissioners and practitioners could deliver more effectively on the promise to feedback findings on the impact or influence on policy of a particular dialogue project

Stakeholders saw the benefits to a Government department or public body of offering post-project activities as:

- Corporate memory – post-project activities could help to provide a ‘corporate memory’ of learning around engagement topics, which would exist despite changes in ministerial approach, staff and policies. The enterprise would function as a repository of learning and expertise, including on topics in which policy is constantly evolving, e.g., the debate on genetic modification (GM)
- Sounding board – ‘sustained citizens’ can be used as a ‘sounding board’ to explore issues and policies before decisions are taken on whether a full public dialogue

is needed. They could, for instance, fulfil the needs of a minister who requires a quick up-to-date public view on a topic in order to decide how to proceed with consultation

- Policy advocates – under certain conditions, post-project activities might lead to the creation of ‘policy advocates’ with informed people being able to explain to others how policy-making is made and how it can be influenced
- Marketing and communications – post-project activities could have benefits in disseminating policy ‘messages’. On the same theme, some interviewees identified a real risk in not offering such opportunities: ‘people could rubbish the process of dialogue and engagement if they feel dropped’
- Scientific literacy – post-project activities could provide spokespeople who can empower others to get interested in science
- Meeting the Government agenda – it was noted that under the current Labour leadership there is a trend for more ministers to engage with citizens, with engagement



and dialogue becoming more and more common both nationally and locally

Members of the public who took part in the discussion group identified eight priorities for post-project activities:

1. Giving people a voice
2. Helping scientists to respond to the views of ordinary people
3. Generating wider awareness of the value of science to the UK economy
4. Creating a level platform for debate and discussion amongst scientists, policy makers and publics
5. Helping policy makers to develop a better understanding of public dialogue
6. Providing opportunities for discussion of the social and ethical implications of science and scientific research
7. Creating a sense of shared commitment to a broader social project

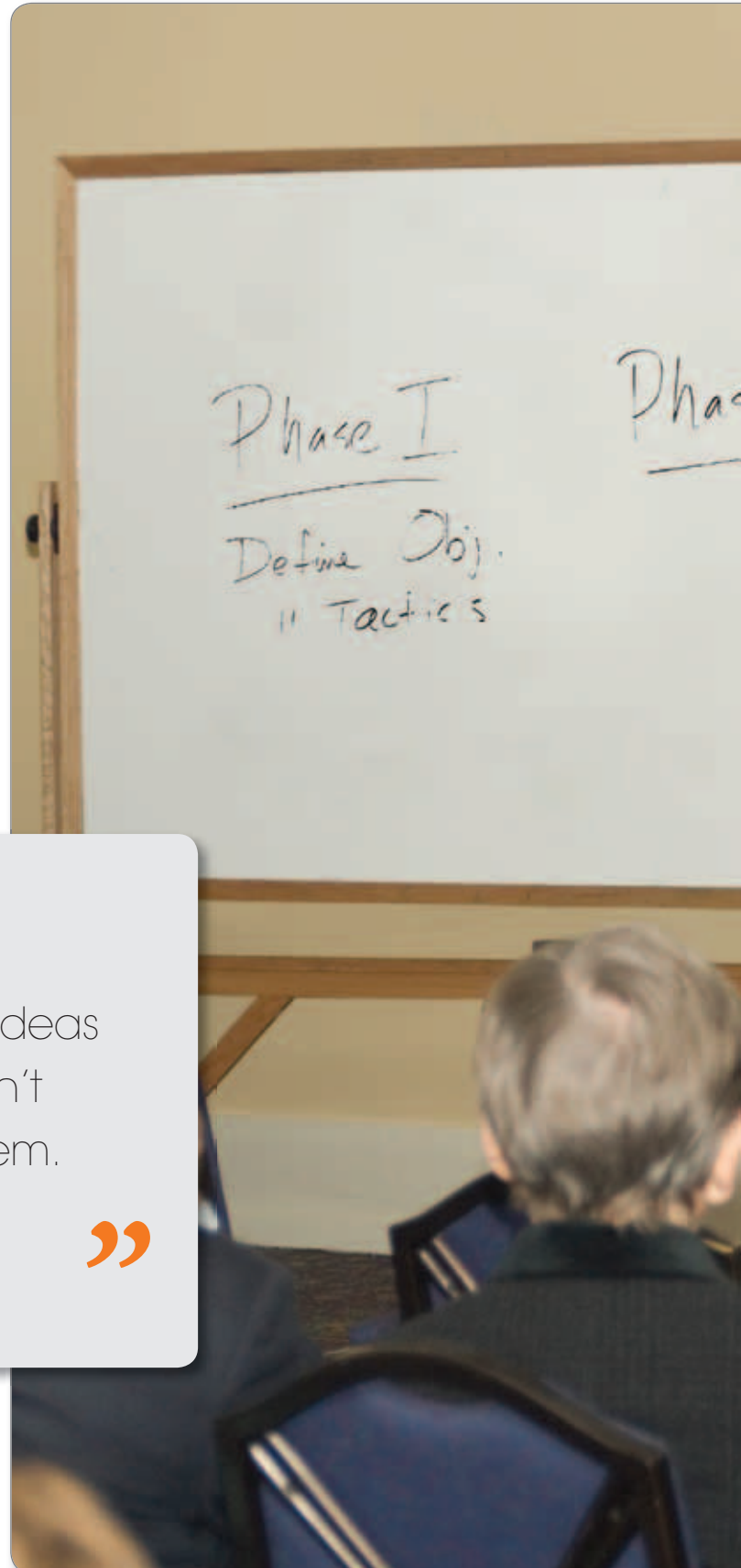
8. Providing a way for participants in science-related projects to stay involved with the issues

The conclusions drawn on the basis of this study are that a number of considerations are key to successful dialogue, including:

- Clarity about who is funding the dialogue, who owns the results and how these will be used. Providing openness and transparency
- A well thought out recruitment process resulting in inclusive and diverse, rather than representative, public participation
- A willingness to offer incentives to those who would otherwise be excluded to allow a 'level playing field'
- The development of genuine two-way dialogue processes which do not 'talk down' to the public but allow them to explore complex issues on their own terms and to pursue the issues that they feel are most important and interesting



- A willingness from commissioners to support innovative and untried approaches, where these are recommended by experienced practitioners
- Creating opportunities for public involvement in the design and structure of projects
- The use of expert facilitation at dialogue events to ensure that all voices are heard and respected
- The participation of scientists and other experts who are good communicators and 'in tune' with the group
- The participation of commissioners and policy makers in the dialogue events alongside recruited members of the public
- Timely feedback of results and their impact on policy
- Inclusion of robust evaluation to learn from each project, improve processes and sharing best practice
- Provision of 'aftercare' opportunities to sustain interest and build up a more scientifically literate and engaged stakeholder and public community. These should be varied in nature, with a local focus if possible, and be designed into the fabric of a project, rather than being considered at the end.



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They come and they get our ideas but they go away and we don't know what's happened to them.

Participant in discussion group

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## Sciencewise-ERC Research reports

This is one of a series of workstream reports from the Sciencewise-ERC. These cover a range of strategic issues in engaging in public dialogue as an input to policy on science and technology issues. These reports (and the authors) are:

- Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement (Diane Beddoes)
- Widening Public Involvement in Dialogue (Pippa Hyam)
- Working with the Media (Melanie Smallman)
- The use of Experts in Public Dialogue (Suzannah Lansdell)
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“

I think experts can forget that people outside their own field may be just as intelligent and well informed as they are but on different matters. If given interesting information in a clear way then there is no reason why a motivated member of the public can't understand.

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Participant in online discussion

## Contacts and links

The research was carried out by Diane Beddoes, a member of the Sciencewise-ERC Dialogue and Engagement Specialist team.

For further information, please contact Sciencewise-ERC by email at [enquiries@sciencewise-erc.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@sciencewise-erc.org.uk) or by phone on 0870 190 6324

The full report is available through Sciencewise-ERC at [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)