



# Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement – 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 report is one of a series of six covering research undertaken by Sciencewise-ERC. The research was carried out by Diane Beddoes, a member of the Sciencewise-ERC Dialogue and Engagement Specialist team.

### Others in the series:

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

Other reports in the series are available at [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)

# Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement

*Diane Beddoes*

*“Participants’ perspectives are critical to defining the costs and benefits of participation. Only by including this perspective alongside that of institutional interests, and considering the wider impacts on local communities and society as a whole, can the true costs and benefits of participation be understood.”<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

This report on how to involve citizens in dialogue with Government has been prepared for the Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre on Public Dialogue in Science & Innovation. Its aim is to provide information and guidance to help all those involved in commissioning and carrying out dialogue and has included discussions with dialogue and engagement theorists, funders, managers, practitioners and citizens. The study is based on their experiences gained through a range of current and recent dialogue activities and on the wider experiences of those who create and deliver public engagement activities – the dialogue and engagement community.

The report documents the findings from desk research, interviews and workshops carried out to increase understanding of how to ensure that people who take part in public dialogue activities have a positive experience. Whilst the focus has been on projects that fall under a science and technology umbrella – often known as ‘science and society’ projects - the findings will also be relevant to dialogue in other areas.

Enabling and sustaining involvement in dialogue cuts across a number of areas, including mass engagement, the use of experts and evaluation of dialogue processes and outcomes. The recent trend towards involving large numbers of public participants in dialogue events means that greater understanding is being gained from analysing the impact of large-scale projects and whether they differ qualitatively from the more usual smaller-scale work. Carrying out analysis through evaluation should help to ensure that whatever the scale of an activity, all those who take part will gain as much as possible from the experience.

Whatever the size of the engagement, a key question regularly asked by those who have taken part in dialogue and deliberation activities is ‘*what will happen to the findings? Will they make any difference?*’ Organisations have to be ready to answer these questions and be clear from the outset about the expected results or impacts of public participation. This study seeks to provide the evidence on which successful public participation in deliberative dialogue can be built.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The True Costs of Public Participation’ (P9) published by Involve, available for download from [www.involve.org.uk](http://www.involve.org.uk).

## Background

Enabling and sustaining involvement relies upon a number of key factors, which need to be taken into account when framing projects. To a large extent the success of a science and society dialogue will depend on the effective involvement of experts, as the subject matter is often technical and can be complex. Participants very often say that hearing from, and discussing issues with scientists is one of the most valuable and interesting aspects of their involvement. However, it should also be recognised that experts are themselves citizens too, which can bring a whole new dynamic to dialogue processes.

Independent evaluation should be a core requisite of all dialogue projects, and indeed is a requirement for all Sciencewise-funded activities. At present, public participants are involved in this process as respondents, in other words, the model of evaluation used is broadly research-based. Exploring the relationship between evaluation and dialogue might provide new models, tools and questions which, in turn, might suggest different ways of enabling and sustaining involvement and provide lessons in how to do this more effectively.

The mainstream media – broadcast, broadsheets and tabloids – are critical channels of communication with the public, especially for science communicators, and have a key role to play in enabling and sustaining participation. There are still many people in the UK who do not have easy access to online communications; some do not have access at all. Therefore the mainstream media are a vital channel for engaging with diverse audiences, beyond those attending a particular workshop or discussion group. In order to make more effective use of these channels, a better understanding is needed of how the media themselves perceive public dialogue. At the same time, those involved in delivering public dialogue need to become more realistic in their expectations about how much, or little, media interest there is in a project.

The rapid development of digital media is already having an impact on participation and engagement. Offering the opportunity to go beyond merely providing information, digital media have the potential to create a whole range of new channels and processes for dialogue, which in itself will sustain interest in public participation.

## Dialogue, engagement, participation, involvement...

These terms are often used interchangeably. Some people are pedantic about distinguishing between them whilst others are more relaxed. However, for the purposes of this section of the report and the issues of sustaining involvement, it is useful to be clear about what we are talking about.

The form of dialogue being considered in this report is that described in the Sciencewise Guiding Principles,<sup>2</sup> which set out a number of criteria to which Government projects funded by Sciencewise must adhere. The most important requirement is that projects must address questions relating to a live policy area. ***“A key requisite of public dialogue as developed by Sciencewise is that it must have a ‘policy hook’ with a clear understanding of who will be listening to the outcomes.”***<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Government’s Approach to Public Dialogue on Science and Technology, <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Other-SW-Docs/Guiding-Principles-Full-Version-final.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Sciencewise Guiding Principles, see [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)

This requirement places certain boundaries on both the type of engagement that can be done and the timescale over which it can take place. The broad project scope, aims and objectives will have been developed with the particular policy area in mind and project briefs usually state a deadline by which reports need to be delivered. This means that the more open-ended forms of engagement – for example, those used to involve people in ongoing decision-making at a local level – fall outside this definition and require a different perspective.

Despite this, there is considerable flexibility in the approaches that can be taken to fulfilling the aims and objectives of this type of public dialogue. One Sciencewise-funded dialogue process which has taken place in recent years, **community x-change**, delivered by the British Science Association, shows very clearly the value of combining grass-roots community development expertise with elements drawn from more formal engagement processes, such as Citizens' Juries<sup>4</sup>.

Focusing initially on capacity-building and developing relationships over time, **community x-change** broke away from the limitations of a purely project-based approach and developed a dynamic and flexible process, drawing on local knowledge and interests to explore issues of national importance. This was a highly innovative approach and clearly, there are many other ways in which the democratic potential of this type of dialogue can be developed further.

**community x-change** also highlights a question that is fundamental to the further development of dialogue activities, i.e. their relationship with research. This is a complex question but in many ways, future good practice will depend on clarifying this relationship. At present, research approaches are drawn upon in sampling and recruitment and in the construction of the 'general public who will take part'.

But who are the 'general public'?

**GM Nation**, an official nationwide public dialogue on the commercial cultivation of genetically modified crops, took place in the UK in 2003 and itself became the subject of some controversy. The main debate concerned whether a representative general public had in fact participated, or whether those already critical towards GM crops had in some sense 'captured' the process.

In 'Representing GM Nation'<sup>5</sup> a paper that looks at criticisms of the GM dialogue, the authors explore the way in which different 'publics' were constituted through the process of their involvement in the debate. They argue that those people seen as representative of the general public were constructed as '*a pure public, stripped bare of civil society mediation, to stand naked before the state and the social scientist.*' What informs their definition as 'pure' is their '*ignorance and lack of connection to the issue*' and the way in which they were distinguished from the 'particular publics' whose association with a variety of self-interest networks and associations were felt to render them unrepresentative. Implicit in this criticism

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<sup>4</sup> For information on Citizens' Juries see: <http://www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/Methods/Citizens+Jury>; [http://www.jefferson-center.org/index.asp?Type=B\\_BASIC&SEC=%7B2BD10C3C-90AF-438C-B04F-88682B6393BE%7D](http://www.jefferson-center.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B2BD10C3C-90AF-438C-B04F-88682B6393BE%7D)

<sup>5</sup> *Representing GM Nation*, Larry Reynolds and Bronislaw Szerszynski, Lancaster University, accessed at: [http://www.macaulay.ac.uk/PATHconference/outputs/PATH\\_abstract\\_1.2.3.pdf](http://www.macaulay.ac.uk/PATHconference/outputs/PATH_abstract_1.2.3.pdf)

is the notion that the public 'stripped bare' become purely objects of inspection rather than political actors in their own right - that is, citizens.

This question is important to sustaining public involvement in the development of post-project activities. If it is the public 'stripped bare' that we wish to involve in dialogue on a particular science issue and if we want this involvement to seed a longer term interest, then we will need to take this into account in the design of processes. People who have no prior interest in or involvement with the issues to be discussed and unfamiliar with the process of dialogue will need a reason to want to sustain their interest and the process itself will need to provide that reason as well as indicating channels through which to pursue interests once the dialogue project is complete. Developing innovative dialogue processes that are flexible and responsive to participants' interests and preferred ways of working, and that empower them as well as answering policy makers' needs, will mean moving away from research paradigms.

## **Objectives of this study**

This study has a number of objectives including:

- Collecting existing evidence and experience of good practice in engaging people in dialogue and maintaining positive relationships beyond the life of a specific project
- Generating 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
- Generating advice and guidance for participants on what they should expect from their involvement in a dialogue project and what is expected of them
- Establishing a framework for a participant network and, if possible, engaging participants from previous and existing projects in the network.

There is a wealth of materials available on good practice in enabling participant involvement through recruitment and project implementation: therefore this study looks purely at some of the critical elements raised in interviews and in the desk research, rather than going into the wider detail of how to get people involved in public dialogue. Instead, the report focuses primarily on the issues of sustaining public involvement after the life of a project.

## **Structure of report**

This report has three main sections:

### **Guidance for policy makers, including:**

- First encounters: recruitment and initial information about the project
- Building a relationship: participant-focused project design and communication
- Sustaining interest: post-project involvement

**Securing effective participation, including:**

- How to get the best out of taking part in dialogue
- How to take that interest further

**The case for post post-project activities, including:**

- The results of recent dialogues and their impact on the participants
- Discussion on 'Participants Plus' and the most effective ways of sustaining interest and developing further participation beyond the 'life' of the project itself.

# 1. Guidance for policy makers

## 1.1 How long is a dialogue project?

The length of the activity will depend on a number of variables. These include the size of the available budget, the timing of the work in relation to other initiatives or policy decision deadlines, the complexity of the issues to be explored and the sort of people who need to be involved in the work.

As in many things, the budget is probably the primary factor determining the length of the dialogue. However, even a small budget can be stretched with some creative thinking. For example, relationships can be forged at a local level, resulting in the recruitment of participants through local groups or networks – for example, by going along to a SureStart Centre<sup>6</sup> to talk to parents or by visiting a carers' support group. By joining up with existing government-funded programmes and other community networks, money can be saved on both recruitment activities and venue costs.

It is easy to underestimate the length of time it can take to set up a project so forward planning is vital. Preparation of materials, including any factual information, needs to be done carefully, to ensure both accuracy and balance, which are critical to success. Video or DVDs are a good way of presenting information – for example, policy makers and experts outlining a range of different views on a topic – but these take time to prepare. If the subject matter is very specialised, finding the right experts with both the knowledge and the communication skills needed can take time. Setting up a steering or advisory group to review materials or guide the design of the process can also add considerable time and needs to be factored into the dialogue timetable.

The length of each activity will also depend on a number of other variables, including how many people are involved, how the activity is designed, the range of issues to be discussed and the depth to which these need to be explored. Dialogue processes can be 'light touch' involving greater numbers of participants or 'in-depth' involving a much smaller group of people who have the time and the tools to immerse themselves more fully in the issues being explored. Whichever process is used, it is important not to ask too much of the participants. Some people may not be used to sitting down all day to talk or read documents and fatigue can set in easily. Some may have low levels of literacy, which means that all the information provided will need to be read out aloud as well as provided in paper form. One person interviewed for this study made the point:

*“There needs to be a careful balance between getting the most out of people and not making them so tired that they start to switch off or become easily irritated.”*

Well written and well considered reports on the outcomes of the dialogue that will be useful to the dialogue commissioners, will also take time to prepare and finalise. Analysis and interpretation of deliberative discussions<sup>7</sup> is not the same as analysis of findings from straightforward consultations, e.g. opinion polls or focus groups. The way in which participants think about the issues during their discussions may well turn out to be different to

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<sup>6</sup> SureStart: the Department for Children, Schools and Families programme of activities which brings together early education, childcare, health and family services aimed at providing the best possible start in life.

<sup>7</sup> 'Deliberative' discussions are characterised as being in-depth and taking place over time.

the way in which the dialogue commissioners and delivers have conceptualised them. The end report is vital in capturing the richness of the discussions, so allowing sufficient time for this type of analysis and interpretation is important.

## **1.2 Who will take part in the project?**

Many projects set out to engage with a 'diverse public'. Broadly, this means taking a fully inclusive approach to the recruitment of participants, rather than trying to represent the views of the whole UK population. To be truly representative means taking into account a whole range of social and diversity issues – such as ethnicity, age profile, gender, language and so on – and making sure that appropriate numbers from each group are represented in proportion to the overall population. This is not possible with the relatively small number of people usually involved in deliberative dialogue projects. A balanced and inclusive approach to recruitment tries to ensure that the final sample is broadly reflective of the population but does not purport to speak on behalf of society as a whole.

A number of factors will influence the final mix of people involved in a dialogue project. Some questions dialogue commissioners might want to consider include:

- Is it important to hear from people with a particular interest in the policy issue? For example, people with particular health conditions; parents or young people; people using particular services; people working in specific area e.g. teachers or health professionals?
- Should the sample be weighted in favour of particular population groups because the issue to be explored impacts most on such groups e.g. older people, people from black or minority ethnic backgrounds, or disadvantaged communities? In smaller activities, it is common practice to over-recruit people from some groups, to ensure that their voices can be heard and their involvement is not simply seen as tokenism.
- Should special interest groups, lobbying or campaigning organisations be included or is it more appropriate to consult them separately so that they do not dominate discussions involving members of the public?
- Which experts or stakeholders need to be involved to ensure participants have the information they need to support their deliberations? Sciencewise-funded projects must include scientists themselves, but there are many others, including members of the public with particular experiences or insights whose input may be desirable.

## **1.3 Recruiting participants**

For participants, the process usually begins with recruitment and getting this right is critical. It is the first encounter a participant will have with the dialogue process and if the mix is not right in the first place, the dialogue activities are unlikely to provide valuable outcomes.

Those responsible for recruitment might work for a professional recruitment agency or run, or belong to, a voluntary or community group. Some agencies have their own in-house recruitment facilities. Sometimes, everyone on the electoral roll is contacted in writing and asked to return a questionnaire providing details of their occupation, age, gender, ethnicity and other relevant variables. A mix of participants is then recruited on the basis of the returned questionnaires.

When evaluations of dialogue projects are carried out, and participants asked what they found enjoyable about an event, they often cite the broad mix of people involved and the diversity of views and opinions expressed. This is one of the marks of a successful project – it cannot be claimed that dialogue activities contribute to democratic engagement if participants feel that everyone in a room looks and thinks in the same way.

*"[I enjoyed] the variety of opinions and room for discussion on various issues/challenging topics. Fully engaging, extremely thought-provoking and a necessary aspect of research (public opinion)." (Student dialogue participant)*

*"It was good because of the mix of age, culture and employment status on the panel, as well as the chance we all had to listen and share views. It opened my eyes to start looking at each person and their needs individually." (Citizens' Panel member)*

Public participants are very astute and therefore very likely to spot any perceived imbalance in the range of people in the room:

*"[Should] have [had] a broader cross-section [of participants] - we had a good mix but a larger number of people would have been better and would have given a broader cross-section." (Dialogue participant)*

*"Encouraging a dialogue is essential and ensuring we capture a variety of the population is also essential."(Comment from a post-project online forum)*

Getting the mix of participants right and reflecting the diverse mix of people encountered day-to-day means that the findings are more likely to be useful to the project commissioner and also adds to participants' experience of being involved.

## 1.4 Targeting particular groups

In order to be truly inclusive, it is important to make sure that the views of those who are seen as vulnerable or on the margins of society are heard alongside more mainstream groups. Defining 'hard to hear' groups is often subjective and those to be particularly included will depend to a large extent on the issues to be explored – for example, they could include people with low levels of literacy, drug users, gypsies or travellers, women from some black or minority ethnic groups, or people with disabilities.

People from these marginalised sections of society are more likely to be reached through support or user groups, rather than through the electoral roll or agency recruitment channels. For example, in the Sciencewise-funded **drugsfutures** project<sup>8</sup>, local drug user projects and support groups for parents of children diagnosed with ADHD<sup>9</sup> were approached to ask if they would like to take part in the discussions. In the case of **community x-change**, mentioned earlier, the project delivery team employed a local community development worker to help with recruitment. In these cases, recruitment becomes less a matter of identifying the 'right' people according to a pre-determined specification, and more about building relationships and developing confidence and capacity within a local area.

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<sup>8</sup> **'drugsfutures'** was carried out in 2007 in collaboration with the Academy of Medical Sciences and the Department of Health and looked into the societal implications of drug use

<sup>9</sup> ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

It should be borne in mind that people from support groups are likely to be poorly resourced; they may be wary about the reasons for approaching them or suspicious about how the information they provide will be used. They may feel they have little to offer to a discussion on science-related issues or they may have tried putting forward their views on other issues in the past, with limited success. Often, they feel that the issue is out of their hands and they cannot possibly have any influence. This is a particular challenge for dialogue deliverers and more research is needed into the best ways of overcoming these barriers so that people from all parts of society feel equally able to participate.

Wealthier people may also sometimes be hard to reach and difficult to recruit. They often lead very busy lives and have little time or inclination to become involved in public dialogue – and they may also have access to alternative routes to influence policy decisions. In the case of professionals e.g. teachers, lawyers or GPs, careful thought should be given to the incentives needed to secure their participation, which may not necessarily be cash.

Some of the easiest people to recruit are those from interest or campaigning groups, who are well used to making their voices heard. Their inclusion needs to be thought about with some care, both how it is done and the impact of their involvement on others in the dialogue. Their experience and knowledge of a subject may be extremely valuable but could unbalance the dynamics of a dialogue activity, either because they are more used to arguing one particular case or because other participants may feel threatened by this confidence and defer to their views. Involving people from one particular group may annoy people from another group and could open up the dialogue to accusations of engineering the process to achieve certain results. More often than not, interest groups are best considered in the category of stakeholders and involved in separate activities, for example, as members of a steering or advisory group, or invited to a stakeholder event.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, it is important to keep in mind the resources (time and money) required to achieve a truly diverse and inclusive mix of participants and that formal recruitment through agencies or the electoral roll is not the only way to reach people. Other methods such as those outlined above may be not only more successful but may have more positive impacts over the longer term.

## **1.5 The use of incentives**

Incentives tend to be equated with money and there are indeed many good reasons for providing some financial support in order to encourage and enable people to come forward and take part. People who might not otherwise give up a Saturday or three hours in the evening to discuss stem cells or industrial biotechnology may be encouraged by the offer of a sufficiently attractive incentive. The event facilitators and others involved in making the dialogue happen are likely to be paid - so is it fair to ask participants to give up their time for free?

This is a question that has exercised many dialogue commissioners and practitioners across Government and elsewhere and there is no easy answer. The dialogue delivery community does advocate financial payments, but usually within the context of support to enable

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<sup>10</sup> Though as noted earlier, this can lead to the accusation that the public involved in a dialogue is 'stripped bare' and constructed as 'pure' of political dimension

participation, rather than as a way of recompensing people for the time they have contributed:

*“Participants can be offered incentives or other support (for example travel expenses, income remuneration, childcare, vouchers) to ensure that they are not excluded from taking part on financial grounds.” (Guidance from participation organisation, Involve)<sup>11</sup>*

People who have been involved in dialogue activities frequently cite the financial incentive as the main motivating factor and some specifically identify the value of spending money on incentives to the overall mix of participants.

*“I only went for the money, but I really enjoyed it.” (Citizens’ Jury participant)<sup>12</sup>*

*“If you asked people to volunteer you’d miss out on those who can’t afford it. So yes, it is public money well spent.” (Sciencewise dialogue participant)<sup>13</sup>*

As practice develops, it may be possible to achieve a better understanding of other factors that might motivate people to get involved with dialogue activities. Archon Fung, Professor of Public Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, who researches and writes on participation and deliberation, widens the discussion on incentives. He points to evidence suggesting that ‘low-status and low-income people’ may participate more willingly if their involvement is likely to yield results that benefit them in concrete ways. He writes:

*“voluntary selection mechanisms for minipublics that address urban crime and basic urban infrastructure result in disproportionately high participation by poor and less educated citizens.”<sup>14</sup>*

Developing a greater understanding of the structural incentives that might be used to increase participation in science and technology dialogue may lead to commissioners and deliverers thinking differently about not only the motivating factors for involvement but also about recruitment processes. At present, incentives tend to be used purely as a way of ensuring that the mix of participants (the ‘minipublic’) extends beyond those who have a prior interest in a subject and who are likely to get involved without any incentives. This is a model that has its origins in market research, but for dialogue and engagement to come closer to fulfilling its democratic potential, it has to break away from such limitations and seek other ways of incentivising participants.

## **1.6 The policy maker’s role in the dialogue process**

Participants value the presence at events of representatives from the commissioning organisation or department. It demonstrates to them that policy makers are genuinely interested in their views and committed to the process as a whole. Their attendance needs to

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<sup>11</sup> see [www.involve.org.uk](http://www.involve.org.uk)

<sup>12</sup> Articulating public values in environmental policy development: Report on the Citizens’ Jury on Air Quality (see p.58)

<sup>13</sup> Participant comment in evaluation of Sciencewise-funded public dialogue on Hybrid/Chimera Embryos led by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, see [www.hfea.gov.uk](http://www.hfea.gov.uk)

<sup>14</sup> Archon Fung: Survey Article: Recipes for Public Spheres: Eight Institutional Design Choices and their Consequences. The Journal of Political Philosophy. Volume 11, No. 3, 2003 pp338-367

be planned in advance with the project delivery organisation and managed openly so as not to spring any surprises on participants. If commissioners turn up as unannounced observers, participants may view them with suspicion as government authority figures and this could have an adverse impact on the openness of the discussions.

The best option is to make it clear that the commissioner is attending as a full participant in the discussions on equal terms with others. People can be unnerved or even feel insulted by having a non-participating observer - perhaps taking notes - who does not interact with them. This works both ways. Sometimes the commissioner may be concerned about unduly influencing the views of participants and thus undermining the process and the validity of the dialogue findings.

This is a valid concern but experience has shown that it is fuelled by positioning dialogue within a research framework, with participants as subjects, creating an 'us and them' opposition. Using the term 'citizen' to refer to all the people who take part in a dialogue frames it within a specifically political context. In this respect, policy makers and others with specific expertise can add greatly to the discussions, for example by providing background on policy-making processes, responding to questions about the science or scientific method, and how experiments or trials work.

In addition to providing background on the content of the topic and the rationale for carrying out public dialogue, it is useful for commissioners (if they are going to speak at the start of a dialogue session) to cover very carefully who is sponsoring the project and what will happen to the findings. This is not only good ethical practice but it also reassures those people who may not wish to provide their views to commercial organisations.

Sometimes, people worry about expressing particular their views, thinking that this may impact negatively on other areas of their lives. For example, people involved in dialogue on health issues may be fearful of describing negative experiences with health professionals in case this affects their future treatment. The reasons for letting people know what will happen to the findings are covered in detail in a later section of this report. However, providing clear information at the start about what and who is interested in a particular project helps to ensure that people understand the nature of their involvement and to assuage their fears. In general, people do not want the responsibility of making decisions but they do want to know that they have been heard and that the enthusiasm and time they contribute is valued and will be treated seriously.

The dialogue commissioner or policy maker's involvement in the dialogue is therefore very welcome, subject to one or two key considerations:

- They should be very clear about the background, purpose and interests vested in the dialogue project and how the findings will be used
- They should be able to respond positively to some participants' natural scepticism about the level of attention 'the Government' is likely to pay to the outcomes of a dialogue project
- People's ability to explore complex questions should not be underestimated; when given information and time to deliberate in a non-threatening environment, participants usually trust the process and are able to give their own insights into the debate

- People may have questions about issues that have already been explored in great detail at policy level but it is important that commissioners are open to proposals and show a willingness to consider views even if these run counter to previous discussions.

## 1.7 Communications

*"This (dialogue) is a form of communication between government and public and it's important for this to happen often" (Dialogue participant comment)<sup>15</sup>*

If the people taking part in a dialogue activity are diverse and reflect a wide range of different interests, opinions, attitudes and experiences, all communications about the project will need to take this into account. Transparency and clarity are essential. The first contact people will have with a project may be a one-page document handed to them by a recruiter. If this is not well-drafted, with clear information about the project sponsor, the focus of discussions, the rationale for undertaking the project, who is interested in the findings and how these will be used and where to go for more information, there may be little interest in taking part. It is sensible therefore for commissioners to at least see a copy of the information the delivery agency intends to use during the recruitment stage to make sure the messages are clear.

*"...it could have been a bit quicker to get going if we had been given more information prior to the event ... When I was stopped in the street there was only the briefest of information - more information beforehand would have been better. I suppose they wanted people to go in cold but I nearly didn't go because of it." (Dialogue participant comment)<sup>16</sup>*

All the materials used during the course of a project will communicate something about the commissioner's attitude towards the people involved. If materials are either over-complicated or over-simplified, written in jargon, or unsuitable as a foundation for the issues to be discussed, people will disengage. A good delivery practitioner should be able to take complex technical issues and present them in a way that is comprehensible to the people involved in the project. Having a science writer or communicator on hand to check materials for accuracy – or to produce them in the first place – is invaluable in making sure people feel comfortable and not intimidated by the subject matter.

## 1.8 What the papers say

The use of broadcast, online or print media to reach more people than by face-to-face methods is considered elsewhere within the Sciencewise ERC. However, it is worth thinking about whether the issues being discussed in a project have received any media coverage in the time leading up to the dialogue, and how this coverage might influence views. It is impossible to control what is reported in the media but due account needs to be taken of media activity and its potential impact when deciding how to run a dialogue process.

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<sup>15</sup> Participant comment in Evaluation of the Academy of Medical Science public dialogue, *drugsfutures*. See <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/drugsfutures-2/>

<sup>16</sup> Participant comment in Evaluation of the Research Councils UK public dialogue on UK energy research. See <http://www.sharedpractice.org.uk/Publications/publications.html>

## 2. Guidance on participation

### 2.1 Getting the best out of taking part in dialogue

People who have been recruited to take part in a dialogue activity to discuss science and technology issues are entitled to know what is expected of them and how they can make the most out of the experience for themselves, their families and communities. So what information and support needs to be given to participants?

#### Stage 1: Before the meeting

The delivery contractor should provide some basic information to participants before they attend the activity. As a minimum, this should include:

- Who is paying for the project
- Why the project is being run
- What kind of activity is being undertaken and how long it will last
- Whether a financial or other incentive is being provided and whether travel or childcare or other expenses will be covered
- What will happen to the findings from the discussion and who is interested in the findings.

Pre-meeting information may also include some brief background on the issues that will be discussed. Although participants should not need to know anything at all about the topic in order to be involved in the dialogue, they often find it helpful to read some basic information beforehand, so they are at least familiar with the subject.

Often during project evaluations people say that they were initially nervous about taking part. This may be because they are not used to speaking in a group or because they do not think they will have anything useful to say. However, most people end up surprising themselves. One person who took part in a project said afterwards:

*“I’m not quite the mouse I thought I was.”*

A short time before the event, those who have initially agreed to take part should be sent a reminder letter or e-mail to check they are still able to attend. It is also worth having a reserve list just in case there is a significant drop out rate, which would adversely impact upon a small group.

#### Stage 2: At the meeting

As in any gathering, there should be a proper welcome from the meeting organisers with tea and coffee available and somewhere to sit and chat with others as they arrive – this will help to break the ice. Inclusiveness and informality are both key to getting the dialogue off to a good start and no-one should be left on their own without being introduced to someone else who is taking part. At this point it is often advisable to ask participants to fill in a short questionnaire about themselves and their knowledge or interest in the discussion topic, which will help to benchmark attitudes for the evaluation phase.

Once the meeting has started, participants should be told more about the project and have a chance to ask any questions. Once this is over, the participants are usually asked to split into smaller groups to begin more in-depth discussion of the issues. It is crucial that these groups are guided by an experienced facilitator who can make sure that the information provided is clear and that everyone has an equal opportunity to give their views or ask for clarification and further information. If people are giving up their time to take part, they must expect to be able to say what is important to them and for this to be listened to with respect by the organisers and other members of the group.

In some of the best dialogues, a pack with reading materials is introduced at some point to provide more background on the issues being discussed. It is the facilitator's role to go through this pack with the group so that questions can be asked – but participants should not be expected to have a lot of material to read. They may not be able to read, or may not have the time to do this outside the session and this has to be managed sensitively within the group. As in any type of discussion, the task is made easier by using visual aids to impart information quickly and in an easily digestible fashion – video presentations, slides, artwork, flipcharts and so on.

A key requirement of the Sciencewise Guiding Principles is that scientists and other experts take part, often giving presentations or joining in the round-table discussions as participants themselves. Participants should have ample opportunity to question them and discuss the issues and it is important that the scientist or expert responds in a clear down-to-earth way, without the use of jargon or technical terms that people may not be able to understand.

Throughout the event, participants should expect to listen to other people's views on the issues under discussion (without one or two people dominating the conversation) and to learn more about the science and technology that underpins the issues. This is a key part of the dialogue; often people say that they only start to look at the issues from a different perspective as a result of hearing from others and as a result, pre-conceived views can change.

Overall, there are some basic guidelines about how to get the most out of the activity. Participants should expect to:

- have a clear understanding of the purpose and aims of the activity and the project as a whole
- know exactly who is sponsoring the project and why
- have time to consider and reflect upon their own views and the views of others
- have the background information that will help the discussions, presented in a way that is clear and easy to read or hear
- have time to put questions to scientists and other experts
- know what will be done afterwards with the findings from the discussion and who will read the report
- know when the project organisers will present the dialogue report and what contribution the participants have made
- have reasonable breaks throughout the event
- have refreshments provided

Finally, participants can expect to be surprised and challenged and to enjoy themselves. General feedback from previous dialogue events has included:

*"It has made me realise that my contribution as a citizen is important."*

*"It was a surprise to me that I expressed my opinions."*

*"I enjoyed it so much I would like to do it again."*

### **Stage 3: After the meeting**

A summary copy of the report produced by the organisation that ran the event should be distributed to all participants fairly shortly after the end of the project. The timing is important – if too long elapses, people may lose interest or become frustrated that they are left ‘dangling’ without knowing the outcomes. If the full report has been published, participants who are interested in reading more should be given the opportunity to obtain a copy.

Participants might also be invited to a launch event or to present their views to a Steering Group or other body charged with taking forward the outputs from a dialogue project.

*"Transparency relates not just to purpose but also to outcomes: it is vital that participants receive a clear response to their deliberations, so that they can assess the extent to which they have actually informed or influenced policy."<sup>17</sup>*

## **2.2 What is expected of the participants themselves?**

In addition to turning up on time and staying until the end of the meeting or event, participants should be expected to:

- ask questions if something is not clear: often, many people in the room have the same question but may be afraid to ask it themselves
- ask questions if more information is wanted about a particular issue
- listen to the views of others without interrupting, even if people in the group disagree with the opinions expressed; the facilitator will usually ask a group to agree on some courtesy ground rules at the start of the meeting
- contribute to the discussion as openly and honestly as possible
- fill out the evaluation questionnaire at the end of the meeting, so that participants' experiences and views can help to improve future projects

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<sup>17</sup> *Bowling Together online public engagement in policy deliberation*, Stephen Coleman and John Gøtze. <http://www.bowlingtogether.net/bowlingtogether.pdf> p14

## 3 The case for post-project involvement

Data from evaluations of dialogue projects, industry guidance on good practice, anecdotal reports of participants' comments during and immediately following projects and the findings from the work done as part of this study all suggest that there is value in carrying out some kind of post-project activity.

The participation organisation, Involve, has published a document outlining Nine Principles<sup>18</sup> of public engagement, which emphasises the importance of keeping participants informed. The Principles suggest that 'interest in policy can be supported and harnessed post-project' by:

- encouraging participants to stay in touch with each other after the event
- giving participants information to help them stay involved in the issue or service through volunteering, campaigning or interest groups
- providing information about other public participation initiatives

The importance of some form of post-dialogue engagement was also noted by those involved in commissioning and project delivery, who took part in this study:

*"It's important – you turn these people on and they get incredibly interested in an area. It's true that our dialogue work is essentially selfish because we're looking to improve our decision-making. But it's not a good way of going about things to leave one half of the conversation out." (Commissioner)<sup>19</sup>*

### 3.1 Why develop Participants Plus?<sup>20</sup>

#### 3.1.1 Contributions to democracy

Though the people who took part in this research approached the question of post-project activity from a range of perspectives, most of the points raised related to the contribution this would make to democracy. One interviewee put forward the view that developing post-project activities may help to show that democracy is '*working well*'.

A cynic might say that deliberative processes are little more than another way of eliciting the views of a very carefully selected number of people (the public 'stripped bare') over a fairly brief period of time. In other words, that dialogue is little more than research 'dressed up' and because of the dressing up, poorer quality research. Whilst the approaches used and the nature of discussions – especially in many science projects - may be more engaging and informative than straightforward focus groups, the same limits remain on people's power over process design, content and analysis of dialogue as they do over conventional research.

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<sup>18</sup> Deliberative Public Engagement – Nine Principles: published by Involve and available from [www.involve.org.uk](http://www.involve.org.uk)

<sup>19</sup> Research interview respondent

<sup>20</sup> The term 'Participants Plus' is used in this report to refer to any activity following the close of a dialogue project that provides further opportunities for participants to stay involved in some way

So, far from contributing to democratic involvement, there are arguments that dialogue provides no more than another structured way of finding out what people think about a certain issue, just as focus groups do. More than this, through the careful provision of information designed to support deliberation, views are managed – perhaps manipulated – whether intentionally or not. So perhaps dialogue is just a way of managing opinion, to the exclusion of different voices saying other things in other ways and through other channels? From this perspective, post-project activities could be seen as the managed continuation of a managed discussion.

In addition to identifying a broad democratic value in post-project activities, some people saw them as having the potential to improve policy-making:

*“How can the policy process evolve if the engagement process always cuts off at the same point?”<sup>21</sup>*

Post-project activities could, it was suggested by some contributors to this project, provide an opportunity to create an ongoing “*mutual feedback system mechanism*”<sup>22</sup> between policy makers and the public through which each would increase their understanding of the other. Policy makers would have opportunities to gain a more direct insight into the capabilities of some of the people in whose interests they work, and these people in turn would have increased opportunities to develop an understanding of the policy-making process and to deliberate on the trade-offs it involves.

Some dialogue/engagement practitioners position their support for post-project activities within the wider context of an argument for moving away from project-based practice, in which the nature and scope of engagement is delimited, towards more fluid, open-ended and dynamic processes. This too is part of the exploration of the political, rather than research focused nature of dialogue and develops the point raised earlier, about ownership of the space of dialogue. In relation to the active role of commissioners, stakeholders and delivery agencies, the role of publics in project-based practice is seen as primarily passive: they are not the creators of the structures that they inhabit, as ‘publics’ but are moulded by them. Publics are not involved in the analysis, interpretation and reporting of their deliberations either. If the mechanisms established for post-project involvement reinforce this passive role, they will not contribute to the development of dialogue as a political practice through which people engage actively with policy questions and influence the processes as well as the topics of discussion. Less structured and more fluid processes introduced into the approaches used during a funded and focused dialogue project may encourage more active pursuit of the questions afterwards.

*“If citizens feel disempowered, ignored, not updated they will tell their friends and family.”<sup>23</sup>*

Finally, some people felt that the UK was currently leading citizen engagement practice and hence should be at the forefront of developing post-project activities which could be spaces in which to test and find new ways of doing dialogue.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview respondent (project commissioner)

<sup>22</sup> Participants in stakeholder workshop, 29 October 2008

<sup>23</sup> Participant in post-project discussion, 3 February 2009

### 3.1.2 A snapshot or a journey?

Dialogue can offer a snapshot of the views of a group of people who have had time to deliberate on a particular question. However, many of those questioned in this study felt that post-project activities would offer benefits to policy makers by providing opportunities to track developments in public views.

*“Is the aim (for the public) to grow with you or take their pulse? This should be the first question to ask.” (Policy maker)*

If the aim is for policy makers to take the pulse, it is worth asking whether people pursuing discussions with each other or with scientists after participating in a dialogue project will be aware that their pulse is being taken – as ethically they must be – and, if so, whether their pulses beat sufficiently strongly to register as useful to the policy holder.

### 3.2 What is the value of Participants Plus?

A formal mechanism for post-project involvement – such as a website – was seen by interviewees as providing an opportunity for people to continue to learn about topics. In science, where developments can be fast-moving and new applications can raise new questions about the direction of research, sustained dialogue is seen as particularly important. This continuing dialogue is seen too as providing opportunities for stimulating wider interest in a topic, helping different ‘publics’ to become more informed and raising the general level of scientific literacy.

Rather than seeking to organise post-project opportunities in advance, some interviewees suggested that a meeting should be held at the end of each project to find out what, if anything, those involved wanted to do afterwards. For example, are they interested only in continuing discussion on the issues or does their enthusiasm extend to helping to develop dialogue practices? How do they want their ongoing involvement to work? Providing a menu of options that would accommodate a range of preferences was seen as important, including web-based and face-to-face channels and signposts to other forums or discussion groups as well as more formal activities.

Some interviewees (mainly dialogue commissioners) questioned whether it was the role of Government agencies or departments to facilitate ongoing dialogue or simply to advise on future involvement:

*‘our role should be to divert them intelligently to existing local forums and networks’ (Policy maker).*

This view seems to be based on a number of points. First, any successful and sustained post-project activity will work only if the people involved are sufficiently motivated and able to continue discussions on their own. Whilst the desire to stay involved is often expressed in post-project evaluation questionnaires, it is not known whether this desire lasts very much beyond the immediate enthusiasm generated by taking part in an event or if it translates into behaviour change. If people were diverted to existing forums and networks, the role of the Government would be to offer the support required for these discussions to take place, for example, by actively brokering relationships between scientists and ‘publics’ outside a formal project.

Some interviewees were concerned that post-project Government-sponsored activities would inevitably end up being constrained in some way by Government interests rather than

allowing people to explore the issues that are of interest to them. Supporting the idea of 'signposting' people to existing forums, one interviewee suggested that post-project activities were *"about listening in, in some way, to the conversations that are already happening but that Government isn't part of it"*.

Interviewees also felt that people are more likely to be interested in taking part in further activities that are locally based. If this is the case, pointing them to activities in nearby universities – for example, through the Beacons for Public Engagement<sup>24</sup> – or in science museums, is seen as more likely to lead to sustained involvement.

### 3.3 Current practice

The first and usually only form of follow-up to dialogue activities currently taking place is fulfilling the promise of giving feedback to participants. Giving immediate feedback on the impact of an engagement project is emphasised in guidance produced by practitioners and is seen as the bare minimum. If feedback is not given, the engagement process *"could not be considered to be complete"*. Moreover, feedback is better given face-to-face, if at all possible, rather than through an impersonal email shot *"Participants may get a report, but they need the personal touch."*

Giving feedback on the findings of the dialogue is one thing. Feedback on how, if at all, it has affected policy thinking presents more of a challenge. This is sometimes because the reporting stage and the actual policy development or impact being demonstrated may be some years apart. Another scenario is where the project deliverers have moved on before the impact of their project can be fully felt, or the policyholder themselves (i.e. the original commissioner of the project) may have moved jobs. In the absence of anyone having formal responsibility for ensuring that this longer-term impact is reported back to participants, they are unlikely ever to discover 'what happened next'.

Project participants' perspectives on what constitutes good feedback may also differ from that of those involved in organising and managing a project. An example of this disparity can be seen in the different views expressed following the Department of Health consultation, *'Your Health, Your Care, Your Say'*<sup>25</sup>. In a stakeholder workshop, one attendee highlighted the participant involvement and feedback arrangements as 'an interesting and brave example of post-project activity'. During the dialogue, a citizen's advisory board was established to help shape the materials and provide an oversight group. Participants received a summary report of key messages on the day of each event; a citizen's version of the White Paper was produced in an accessible A5 format, and it used an approach, which stated that *'you said this and then we did this'*. Participants were also given the opportunity to reconvene a year after taking part to see what had changed as a result of the dialogue.

This positive view of the consultation and dialogue contrasts sharply, however, with that described in the independent evaluation of the dialogue. This states:

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<sup>24</sup> Beacons for Public Engagement: university-based consortia funded by the UK Research Councils (RCUK) and the Wellcome Trust to encourage undergraduates and researchers to communicate their science more effectively with the public.

<sup>25</sup> 'Your Health Your Care Your Say' – national public consultation on patient services carried out by the Department of Health.

*“The follow-up with the public participants does not seem to have been as effective as it could have been. Quite a few of the public participants were keen to stay involved, and contribute more. There was some sense that they had had their say at their event and that was the end of their involvement. Although all participants had been sent a summary of the White Paper when it was published, few remembered receiving it, let alone what the content was.” (Evaluation report conclusions)<sup>26</sup>*

### **3.4 Who owns dialogue?**

As a rule, dialogue is ‘owned’ by commissioners and practitioners. A project takes place when policy makers or other project commissioners feel that public views would be useful in considering a particular policy area. The content is usually decided in advance of participants’ involvement and the work has a defined aim. The process is designed and the space of dialogue decided in advance of public involvement. All in all, the distribution of power favours commissioners and organisers.

If this is explained to participants in advance of their involvement; if the process and delivery organisation have integrity; if the organisers and commissioners are honest and open about what they are doing and why and have given good thought to the power dynamics, then they will understand the terms and limits to their contribution.

At present the more that the people having the conversations also have control over the process and space of the dialogue, however, the more questions can be raised over the value of the outputs, from the perspective of policy makers. This point was raised by one interviewee, both a theorist and practitioner, and can be illustrated with the example of Democs, a game developed by the new economics foundation.<sup>27</sup> This is a game that, as evident in its name, is explicitly democratic in intent. The game can be used inside or outside the formal spaces of projects. Democs provides an opportunity to widen conversations on specific topics to people who may not, for whatever reason, attend dialogue events or for people to continue discussions started in dialogue projects. People playing Democs can, to a greater extent than is often seen in formal facilitated activities, govern the direction of their own discussions – though the information seen as a necessary basis for those discussions will be provided in the game. However, as the interviewee noted, the outputs may be poor, in terms of their fitness to inform policy-making. Will people bother to write a report on their discussions – and will it be useful from the perspective of those charged with listening to public views?

This question about the relationship between the power that participants have over the process or elements of it and the value of the outputs for policy makers was also raised by two interviewees who had taken part in dialogue projects. Both said that they learned most from informal discussions with other people involved, including experts, over coffee and lunch. This opportunity to have informal conversations with scientists or other participants about the things that excite and enthuse them most is something participants often highlight as an enjoyable aspect of dialogue activities. Unconstrained by an agenda, they are able to develop their views and consider those of others at a pace and level of detail of their own choosing.

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<sup>26</sup> Independent evaluation report on ‘Your Health, Your Care, Your Say’ by Diane Warburton from Shared Practice.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/democs.aspx>

### 3.5 The 'expert participant'

One of the aims of deliberative dialogue processes is for participants to use what information is provided on the topic and the discussions they have with other participants and with experts to develop their views. In effect, they move from being a 'lay person' to an 'educated stakeholder'. Some of those involved in this study suggested that post-project activities could build on this learning and that those involved could become '*a group of (citizen) stakeholders who you could get reliable information from*'. Building on this principle, it was suggested that a group of individuals could form '*a sort of citizen's advisory board, providing a quick response – so policy makers could check things out - they could serve as a proxy for the public*' (Policy maker).

This suggestion raises the much-discussed issue of the 'expert participant'. People who have taken part in dialogue activities are recognised to have been changed by their involvement in some way – and that can mean they are no longer able to act as 'pure' publics:

*"People end up in a different place to where they started – which makes them less representative than they were when they came in the room – they become less like other people."* (Dialogue and engagement practitioner)

This is generally characterised negatively: having participated in a dialogue project, an individual is no longer considered a representative of 'the public'. "*if you're looking for the 'general public' they may not be ideal*"<sup>28</sup>. However, this is another example of looking at deliberative dialogue as an offspring of social research. Whilst it is no doubt true that as a result of being involved in dialogue people do gain a greater understanding of the process and their knowledge of the particular topic may increase, their position as 'public' participants is not absolute. It is a function of the process in which they are taking part: they are 'public' in distinction to others i.e. scientists, policy makers, practitioners. They are public because their participation is largely passive in relation to the process, which is both created and completed without their active involvement.

A dialogue and engagement adviser involved in this study felt that the "*expert participant issue*" should not be a barrier to people making future contributions:

*"Having taken part in a dialogue means they will simply be able to get up to speed with a topic more easily. Furthermore if we have invested in participants - getting them up to speed with a complex subject - it makes a lot of sense to sustain engagement. We are missing a trick if we don't develop this."*

Whatever the motivation, in terms of politics and citizenship, individuals who are hungry for further involvement can be supported in a number of ways – whether in post-project outreach activities or as a pool of interested and already experienced 'publics'. However, at present interviewees agreed that there were some practical barriers to developing this type of 'Participants Plus' approach.

### 3.6 Resources for ‘Participants Plus’

A current barrier to developing and sustaining post-project involvement is resources – the activity needs to be funded by someone but who is responsible for this once the project has finished?

The easiest solution to resourcing post-project activities is for commissioners to include some form of activity in project specifications and budgets. At this study’s stakeholder workshop, it was suggested that five per cent of a project budget could be ‘ringfenced’ to ensure that effective follow-up activities were undertaken. However, it was also pointed out that a case for doing this and demonstrating its longer-term value would need to be made to commissioners.

Project deliverers have the closest ties with the public participants, but unless it is built into their contract, further activities are impossible to organise without additional funding. By the same token, commissioners are in the business of undertaking activities to inform policy decisions, not in enhancing the dialogue experience for individuals or taking it further into the community at a local level. Both currently fall outside their remit and this is a barrier that will have to be addressed in due course.

### 3.7 Involving scientists, experts and facilitators

Interviewees for this study felt that scientists should be a ‘*key constituent*’ of post-project activities. However, they acknowledged that these need not be senior members of their profession or those who had taken part in the dialogue itself: post-graduates and PhD students with an interest in science communication might be just as effective in interacting with people over a longer period than the life of the project.

As science communication activities increasingly become a requirement of research grants and the Beacons for Public Engagement university consortia begin to develop policies and practices around engagement, post-dialogue activities might well find the necessary scientific expertise through this initiative more easily than is currently the case. Scientists in universities are already charged with outreach activities and have the funding to engage on a wider level; this could be a key resource for ‘Participants Plus’.

### 3.8 Managing expectations

Some interviewees emphasised the importance of managing expectations. This involves being honest, clear and upfront with citizens about what resources are available for post-project activities, what support can be offered and at what point the participants are no longer able to influence the development of a particular policy. This is largely to ensure that the commissioners of dialogue and engagement are not accused of misleading people and ‘*are not committed for the rest of their life*’.

*“In our responses to the empowerment agenda, we need to be careful not to make promises that cannot be kept.” (Comment at stakeholder workshop).*

Another workshop attendee questioned whether the very existence and process of ‘Participants Plus’ could end up being intrinsically disempowering. She stressed that for most dialogue participants ‘*it’s about really seeing outcomes and having influence*’ and she questioned the extent to which participants’ views could make an impact – if at all – after dialogue and consultation events have formally finished.

### 3.9 Raising aspirations

In considering this dilemma, some practitioners questioned talked instead of the value of 'raising aspirations'. This view was linked to a different perspective on how citizens are affected by taking part in a dialogue project. Rather than individuals being transformed from a 'pure' representative of the general public into an 'expert participant', some people described a dynamic process through which individuals begin to develop a collective perspective:

*"In the best participative events people shift from 'you could' to 'we should' – so expectations belong to 'we the people think...'. So they shift to 'we're all in this together' – aspirations can do their work."<sup>29</sup>*

Instead of being looked at as 'expert participants' the people who take part in dialogue are seen as growing collective in outlook and see themselves as active rather than passive players.

### 3.10 Making the case for 'Participants Plus'

One question that emerged in discussion at the stakeholder workshop was: *"what are the benefits to a Government department and project commissioner of offering post-project activities, relative to the costs involved?"* A number of positive arguments were put forward:

- **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 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 slag off the process of dialogue and engagement if they feel 'dropped'"*
- **Scientific literacy** – post-project activities could provide citizen spokespeople who can empower others to become interested and involved in science dialogue
- **Meeting the Government agenda** – interviewees noted that there is a trend for more ministers to engage with citizens with engagement and dialogue becoming more and more common both nationally and locally

Having identified these benefits, stakeholders involved in this study went on to consider whether it was the Government's role to support post-dialogue activities. Several felt that

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<sup>29</sup> Individual interview respondent

responsibility for what happens *after* a dialogue event should not lie with the policy maker and it was suggested that there should be a 'handover' of responsibility to others.

### **3.11 Participants' views on dialogue and post-project activities**

Part of this study involved gathering project participants' views on their experiences of being involved in public dialogue. However, data protection and Market Research Society rules make it very difficult to contact participants after a dialogue is finished. Only those people, who agreed in writing during the original project evaluation feedback form to be contacted again, could be approached. A further difficulty was presented by contact details being wrong or out-of-date, either because people had moved home or because handwriting proved difficult to transcribe accurately.

Some thought therefore needs to be given by the dialogue industry and commissioners to two specific issues. The first is that a specific question about more general involvement needs to be added to evaluation forms. A second and more difficult question is whether dialogue and deliberation is properly regulated by the Market Research Society or whether some other professional body is necessary to oversee this type of engagement. This is a question which arises throughout this report on the fundamental differences between research and dialogue/deliberation and this needs to be given further attention.

#### **3.11.1 Discussion group**

Six people who attended a discussion group as part of this study had taken part in *sciencehorizons*, a Sciencewise-funded dialogue project some 21 months earlier. Most follow-up evaluation work is done within six months of the end of a project, so this particular project provided a rare opportunity to carry out some initial exploration of how different people recalled their involvement and what, if any, longer term impact it had on them. This was only a small group of people but their enthusiasm in having the opportunity to contribute to this piece of work and their very positive memories of their involvement, were clear and further underline the benefits of 'Participants Plus'.

The members of the group were asked to give their views on a number of aspects of each part of the dialogue activity.

#### **3.11.2 The dialogue project process**

After a discussion of the specific issues discussed during the dialogue, of which they had very detailed recollections, the group talked about their responses to the scientists involved. They agreed that some scientists had given considerable thought to how they would present complex issues in laymen's terms. Others were seen as "*boring*" on the grounds either that they "*didn't use a language I could understand*" or because they "*come into the environment and then try to baffle us workers*". The solution was, they suggested, that all science university students and researchers "*should be taught communication skills when they do science*".

Whilst scientists who use jargon or 'try to baffle' participants are clearly not effective, participants are also put off by those who underestimate the capacity of the wider public to deal with quite complex concepts.

*“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.”<sup>30</sup>*

Several in the discussion group contrasted the experience of learning through dialogue – which they saw as an important aspect of their involvement – with reading a book. The opportunities to ask questions, to explore ideas and to express their own views were highlighted:

*“The discussion allowed you to open your mind up – there were so many different opinions.”*

*“They listened and they gave you time.”*

*“I don't think you appreciate science until you do something like this. You take things for granted.”*

### **3.11.3 The dialogue project follow-up**

Whilst they enjoyed the process and felt it was worthwhile, the group was not so happy about the fact that they had not received a report following the event. Their comments on this show clearly that they were interested not only in learning about the views expressed during the project, but also in how these views had been used subsequently:

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

*“What about feedback on the subjects we discussed – did they act on it?”*

*“We've listened to them and they've listened to us but have they done anything about it?”*

The group's views echo those of dialogue participants more generally; they do not like to feel they are being 'used' then dropped once the commissioner has the required output from the project i.e. a report that can inform decision-making.

### **3.11.4 The impact of taking part in a dialogue project**

All but one members of the discussion group said that they now paid closer attention to media coverage of the issues discussed in their dialogue and, as noted earlier, their awareness of the 'science around them' had been awakened. The role of science research in technologies such as mobile phones and computers, for example, was not something they said they had previously considered and the dialogue had opened up a whole range of new perspectives.

For two participants, the impact had extended beyond merely reading press articles and following the debate in the media. Two had spent some time discussing the issues with their grandchildren, who had then taken some of the project materials into school:

*“I went home and showed my grandson the things and he took them to school”*

*“My grand-daughter took things to school and kept pestering me.”*

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<sup>30</sup> Comment from participant in online discussion.

One of these had also visited a science museum for the first time with his grandchild, which is a significant step to take for someone who, prior to his involvement, had had no interest in science at all. The longer-term impact of sustaining interest in the issues discussed in the course of a dialogue project was also mentioned in the online facility set up as part of this particular dialogue project. The comments also make clear that people do often stay in touch with those they have met during a dialogue project:

*“We read a lot more than the documents we had been given and many of us are still reading literature on the subject and recommending articles and TV programmes to others who had been on the panel.”<sup>31</sup>*

Other than its impact on attention to the role of science in the world around them, one participant said he had been particularly impressed by the *“commonality and lack of selfishness”* of those involved. He had thought that people would be motivated by selfish interests but instead, he said, discussions focused on collective concerns and, in particular, on the impact of decisions made now on future generations. This had made him think differently – and more positively – about people around him and their motivations.

### **3.11.5 Money well spent?**

All the discussion group members were adamant that funding projects such as the one they had been involved in was good use of public money. They argued that, in comparison with the cost of research, the budget for public dialogue was tiny. Moreover, they saw it as a way in which Government and publicly-funded science research could be held to account and a way in which understanding and support for the direction of research could be developed:

*“It’s our money they’re spending – I’d like them to be accountable.”*

*“It’s taxpayers’ money going into projects.”*

*“You need to get a consensus and support for the way ahead.”*

Asked whether it was fair for only a small number of people to have the opportunity to take part in such projects, they argued that the value of the activities they had taken part in extended beyond the individual to their family and friends, both through the project materials and through discussion. However, they did emphasise the importance of diversity – *“you need to get the opinions of a lot of people from a lot of different backgrounds”*

### **3.11.6 The purpose of post-project activities**

The discussion group was provided with cards containing different possible reasons for developing some mechanisms by which people who have taken part in dialogue activities on science and technology might remain involved.<sup>32</sup> Continued involvement might be with the issues discussed or with the process of dialogue itself. Blank cards were also provided on which to capture ideas not covered by the pre-printed cards. Individually, each person selected four cards and then talked through the reasons why they had selected those four in particular.

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<sup>31</sup> Feedback from contributor to small online project conducted as part of this research.

<sup>32</sup> Please see Appendix 1 for details of sort cards.

Figure 1 below shows the range of cards chosen by each of the six people who took part in the discussion group.

Choice	Card 1	Card 2	Card 3	Card 4
<b>Participant 1</b>	Creating a space for the public to contribute towards the future of public dialogue	Providing a discussion space for participants to help shape future science dialogue activities	Providing a space for individuals to share their concerns and aspirations about science	Helping policy makers to develop a better understanding of public dialogue
<b>Participant 2</b>	Building public confidence in the Government's policy decisions on science	Giving science policy and decision makers a wider perspective on the issues	Helping to develop public knowledge of scientific method	Creating a level platform for debate and discussion amongst scientists, policy makers and publics
<b>Participant 3</b>	Providing a portal for the public to find out how else they can get involved	Creating a sense of shared commitment to a broader social project	Giving people a voice	Providing a space for discussion of the social and ethical implications of science and scientific research
<b>Participant 4</b>	Helping the public to gain more insight into public dialogue processes	Providing a channel through which the public can help to shape the direction of future science research	Helping the public to play a relevant part in making the best possible decisions for public policy through engagement with science	Generating wider awareness of the role of business in science
<b>Participant 5</b>	Taking on responsibility as a citizen	Helping scientists to respond to the concerns of ordinary people	Generating wider awareness of the value of science to the UK economy	
<b>Participant 6</b>	Learning about science	Making science exciting and accessible to the general public	Providing a way for participants in science-related projects to stay involved with the issues	

**Figure 1. Individual participants' views of the purpose of post-project activities**

Broadly, participants' priorities in becoming involved in dialogue activities can be categorised under the following headings:

- **Contribution to policy-making:** in discussion of the cards which mention either policy-making or policy makers, people said that good policies were those that took the population along with them. Policy and decision-makers who are able to take a wider view on the issues through engaging in dialogue with different publics and who understand the role that dialogue can play in informing policy decisions are seen as more able to shape effective policies
- **Citizen voice:** as noted earlier, one participant was particularly struck by the lack of selfishness in the discussions he had joined during the science dialogue. Having a voice in deliberations and contributing towards choices on subjects with wide social implications was seen as a right. In exercising their right to have their voices heard, however, people felt they would also be exercising their responsibilities as citizens. Having an event in which the voices of policy makers, scientists and publics held equal weight ('a level platform for debate') was seen as particularly important
- **Science and scientists:** in the course of the discussion about 'learning about science' (which was chosen, after consideration, in favour of 'talking about science'), participants said that they needed to have at least some understanding of the science that gave rise to the social and ethical questions they were considering. As noted earlier, the scientists able to do this are those who can make their subject exciting and accessible. In addition to learning about specific research areas, learning about scientific method and what distinguishes scientific knowledge from other types of knowledge was seen as important as were arenas in which publics, scientists and policy makers can learn and share their views and attitudes. As public money supports scientific research, some participants argued that publics should therefore have opportunities to help shape its direction
- **Dialogue processes:** some people were interested in the process of dialogue, as well as the content. Providing opportunities for people who had been involved in projects to contribute to future practice – both in science and technology projects and more generally – was seen as a valuable purpose of post-project activities
- **Science, business and the economy:** people felt that one impact of participating in the science dialogue project was their wider awareness of its application in their everyday lives. This led to a discussion about the value of science to the economy and the role that business and industry play in science. They suggested that it was important to have scientists from industry as well as academia involved in dialogue projects, primarily on the grounds that they were likely to be better communicators, but also because this would help to highlight the wide range of different occupations to which an education in science could lead

Following the discussion of individual choices, the group agreed on eight priorities for post-project activities. These were:

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 group as a whole prized the opportunity to have a ‘citizen voice’ together with the dialogue and post-dialogue activities as a way of helping scientists and policy makers to respond to the challenges of making better policy. Widening awareness of the economic importance of science to the economy as a whole was also seen as a high priority.

### 3.11.7 Stakeholder views on dialogue and post-project activities

Scientists, policy makers, science communicators, and project commissioners who took part in the stakeholder workshop held as part of this study, undertook the same exercise as the participants’ discussion group. Collectively, they decided to differentiate between the benefits for policy makers and for public participants and between short and long-term aims and benefits. Their views are as follows:

**Table 2: Stakeholder views on dialogue and post-project activities**

	<b>Short term aims</b>	<b>Long term aims</b>
Benefits for participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Talking about science</li> <li>•Providing a way for participants in science-related projects to stay involved with the issues</li> <li>•Learning about science</li> <li>•Creating a community of interest</li> <li>•Providing opportunities for discussion of the social and ethical implications of science and scientific research</li> <li>•Providing opportunities for individuals to share their concerns and aspirations about science</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Empowering citizens</li> <li>•Providing a channel for the public to influence the future of science policy</li> <li>•Building greater confidence and trust between Government, scientists and society as a whole</li> </ul>
Benefits for policy makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Giving science policy and decision makers a wider perspective on the issues</li> <li>•Providing opportunities for people to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Building greater confidence and trust between Government, scientists and society as a whole</li> </ul>

	raise their own issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Creating a corporate memory for when policies/technology have developed further</li> </ul>
Benefits for both participants and policy makers	Helping scientists to respond to the concerns of ordinary people	Building public confidence in the Government's policy decisions on sciences

## Conclusions

Enabling and sustaining public involvement in dialogue can be challenging – but also exciting and rewarding for all those involved. The joint experiences and views of stakeholders and public participants who took part in this study show that where commissioners and delivery organisations are prepared to be flexible and creative, many of the traditional barriers to engaging with the public can be overcome.

Successful dialogue projects rely upon a number of key considerations, which should be taken into account if the outcomes are to be valuable both to policy makers and to citizens. Broadly, these include:

- Clarity about who is funding the dialogue, who owns the results and how these will be used
- A well thought out recruitment process resulting in an inclusive and diverse range of participants
- 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 preferably to be involved in designing the process itself
- 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 to participants on the results of the dialogue and their impact on policy
- Inclusion of robust evaluation to learn from each project, improve processes and sharing best practice
- Provision of 'aftercare' opportunities – 'Participants Plus' – to sustain interest and build up a more scientifically literate and engaged stakeholder and public community

Increasingly, citizens and Government are seeing public involvement in policy decision making as both a democratic right and also a responsibility. Providing the right environment and conditions for dialogue to take place and ensuring processes are transparent, honest, balanced and have integrity is likely to reduce the risks of unacceptable policies being developed as well as enhancing the effectiveness of good decisions.

## Appendix 1. Sort cards

<b>Motivations for enabling and sustaining public involvement in dialogue</b>	
Harnessing social energy	Giving scientists a wider perspective on the issues
Evaluating Government policies and plans	Contributing to DIUS Science and Society programme
Giving people a voice	Meeting the Sciencewise ERC objectives
Helping to build support for science policy	Providing a portal for the public to access information on science and science policy
Empowering individuals	Providing a way for participants in science-related projects to stay involved with the issues
Empowering communities	Providing a discussion space for participants to help shape future science dialogue activities
Bringing together people who might otherwise not have any occasion to be together	Providing a portal for the public to find out how else they can get involved
Creating a sense of shared commitment to a broader social project	Helping to change the way policy makers and participants interact
Learning about science	Helping to change the way scientists and public interact
Talking about science	Creating a level platform for debate and discussion amongst scientists, policy makers and publics
Talking about science policy	Helping to create a society that is excited by science
Learning about science policy	Creating innovative ways to provide people of any age with access to scientific resources and information
Talking about Sciencewise	Helping to create a society that is confident in its use of science
Learning about Sciencewise	Making science exciting and accessible to the general public
Providing a space for discussion of the social and ethical implications of science and scientific research	Helping to develop public knowledge of scientific method
Providing a channel through which the public can help to shape the direction of future science research	Generating wider awareness of the role of business in science
Providing a channel for the public to influence the future of science policy	
Participating in experimental democracy	
Providing a space for individuals to share their concerns and aspirations about science	
Taking on responsibility as a citizen	
Creating a community of interest	
Helping policy makers to develop a better understanding of public dialogue.	
Building greater confidence and trust	

<p>between Government, scientists and society as a whole.</p> <p>Helping scientists to respond to the concerns of ordinary people</p> <p>Helping scientists to develop personal skills</p> <p>Helping the public to gain more insight into public dialogue processes</p> <p>Creating a space for the public to contribute towards the future of public dialogue</p> <p>Creating a space for the public to contribute towards the future of public dialogue in science</p> <p>Giving science policy and decision makers a wider perspective on the issues</p>	<p>Generating wider awareness of the value of science to the UK economy</p> <p>Building public confidence in the Government's policy decisions on science</p> <p>Helping the public to play a relevant part in making the best possible decisions for public policy through engagement with science.</p> <p>Providing scientists with opportunities to communicate their research easily and directly with the public</p>
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## Appendix 2: Mechanisms for post-project activities

Grid developed as an initial way of determining the level and type of participant interest in post-project activities and the mechanism(s) that might support this.

Focus of interest	Level of interest	Mechanism
Interest in subject matter	Happy for name and contact details to be retained for use in future projects on same subject matter	Database
Interest in any future dialogue projects	Happy for name and contact details to be retained for use in future projects on same subject matter	Database
Interest in subject matter and would like to find additional ways of participating in dialogue on similar subjects	Would like name on database and signposting/contacts for future participation opportunities	Database Website/information store Other relevant contacts (e.g., scientific institutions with Science and Society programmes, local authority community involvement etc)
Interest in process and would like to find additional ways of contributing to development of process	Occasional, short, ongoing contributions	Occasional meetings Online facility Contact with other participants 'Citizen evaluator'
Interest in supporting participants in future projects	Project focused contributions	Database of people willing to be contacted by new participants about nature of involvement Online facility for new participants to learn about dialogue and participation
Interest in commissioning process	Project focused contributions	Advice to commissioners on participant focus in brief (e.g., around what to look for in proposals) Sitting on commissioning panel

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# Sciencewise-ERC Research reports

This is one of a series of reports from the Sciencewise-ERC that cover a range of strategic issues 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)
- Evidence Counts - Understanding the Value of Public Dialogue (Diane Warburton)
- Departmental Dialogue Index (Lindsey Colbourne)
- The Use of Experts in Public Dialogue (Suzannah Lansdell)



## Contacts and links

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