



Evidence Counts: Understanding the Value of Public Dialogue – Summary Report

Introduction

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

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

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

This report summarises research on how best to demonstrate the full value of public dialogue. The research explored existing and new ways to evaluate the quality, costs and benefits of dialogue processes and their impacts.

Research and reports by Diane Warburton, the Sciencewise-ERC Evaluation Manager.

Others in the series:

- Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement (Diane Beddoes)
- Widening Public Involvement in Dialogue (Pippa Hyam)
- Working with the Media (Melanie Smallman)
- The Use of Experts in Public Dialogue (Suzannah Lansdell)
- Departmental Dialogue Index (Lindsey Colbourne)

Copies of the full research report, and others in the series are available at www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk



Summary

In an era of greater enthusiasm for public engagement, but reducing budgets in all sectors, it has never been more important to demonstrate the full value of dialogue. Evaluations of dialogue processes have become more widespread over the past five years and there is growing understanding of the benefits and positive impacts. However, two major gaps in evidence remain: measurement of costs and assessment of quality. There is anecdotal evidence that dialogue can save costs in implementing policy

and on conventional communications, and that it is a highly cost effective component of evidence-based policy-making with significant benefits to public policy. However, there is little recent detailed research data to support that view. This research study examined how best to tackle these gaps, to summarise the evidence currently available, and to find some practical ways forward for collecting evidence in future about the costs and benefits, and thus demonstrating the full value, of public dialogue. It concludes with a practical approach to evaluating dialogue in future, including a detailed framework for assessing quality, costs and benefits.

Process

The first stage of the research was to establish early contact with relevant academics and practitioners, to identify existing sources of knowledge and experience, followed by a series of discussions and a review of the literature currently available on evaluations of public engagement,

and particularly on any mechanisms for considering costs and benefits. Emerging findings were presented at the two Sciencewise-ERC workshops in 2009. Further revisions were made as a result of that feedback, and testing with several public bodies, leading to the final version of the framework that is summarised overleaf.

Findings on costs and benefits

The research found a growing literature on evaluating public engagement, covering practical guidance by practitioners, practical evaluations and academic reflections on evaluation theory and processes. It examined existing models for measuring the cost effectiveness of engagement, including from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), Environment Agency, New Economics Foundation, Involve and others. It found (as had all those sources) that there was no off-the-shelf model that could be used to measure the costs and benefits of public dialogue, and that conventional cost benefit analysis models were not appropriate to this sort of assessment.

There was found to be very little data on the costs of public engagement, although the Sciencewise-ERC case studies, Involve work on the True Costs of Participation and some work for the Environment Agency provided information on a few specific examples.

There was much more data on the benefits and positive impacts of public dialogue. These findings, from practical evaluations and academic research, are summarised below.

Benefits for policy makers included:

Better policy solutions that are more robust, legitimate, socially informed and socially acceptable as they are based on a richer and wider evidence base. Dialogue has

provided 'political' confidence to policy makers by clarifying public views on difficult decisions (e.g. stronger regulation), and by identifying and testing levels of public concerns and aspirations, why they hold those views and what affects them. It has also provided 'practical' confidence by drawing on public knowledge and experience to find new ideas for policy and services that better meet public needs.

Better policy and decision-making processes that are more open and transparent, and subject to public scrutiny. Public input can help improve communications planning (identifying more appropriate messages), risk management (identifying potential areas of conflict and consensus early) and better internal communications by providing a focus for considering how issues can best be discussed with the public.

Savings of time and money in launching and implementing policy solutions by finding appropriate and acceptable policies that can be easily and quickly implemented with minimal conflict and controversy.

Spreading public awareness and understanding of science issues. Dialogue has provided a depth of learning and understanding through which participants internalise and effectively retain the knowledge they develop. It has enthused participants so they spread their new interest in the subject to others. They also often develop a better understanding of the practical and political pressures on policy makers.



Benefits for scientists and experts included:

New knowledge, skills and confidence in communicating complex ideas to lay audiences, and opportunities to talk to wider audiences (particularly the public) about their work. Scientists have valued discovering that they are met with public interest rather than hostility.

Interaction with other scientists/experts in an informal, safe environment in which ethical issues can be explored.

Opportunities to hear public views, fears and questions first hand, and to watch the public's immediate reactions to their subject, so scientists can test their own assumptions as well as identify where (and how much) the public is excited or worried about the implications of their work. This can help scientists ensure improved transparency and scrutiny of their work, ask better questions of and within their own research, and it can stimulate ideas for new research of public value.

Higher personal profile, and higher profile for their work, with other scientists/experts, with the sponsoring/commissioning Government department or research institution, as well as with the public.

Benefits for public participants included:

Influence. Participants are pleased to have an opportunity to have their say, be listened to and taken notice of. They recognise that the Government (or other commissioning body for the dialogue) will take the final decision, but value having their views seriously considered as part of that process. Indeed, many say they only value the dialogue process if they feel their input is listened to and taken into account.

Learning. Participants learn about the topic being discussed, and about how to participate. They report new interest in the topic, new knowledge, and new skills and confidence in using information, articulating their own views, listening to others and reporting back on behalf of their working groups. They report learning as much from hearing each other's views, and from the debate, as from hearing new information.

Social interaction. Participants enjoy discussing important issues with people they would not normally meet in their everyday lives. The diversity is important to them, as is the mutual respect and listening that develops in dialogue.

Greater trust in public policy-making. Participants often enter dialogue events being sceptical about Government and other public bodies. Good dialogue builds trust in the sponsoring body, if participants feel they have been listened to and treated with respect. Participants then report being more willing to take part in future and feeling strongly that the public has an important role in public policy.

Personal satisfaction. Participants report that they simply enjoy taking part, for all the reasons outlined above. They also report feeling proud that they have taken part in a nationally important debate, that their contribution has been valued, and they see taking part as a responsibility but also a pleasure: all important factors in building active citizenship.

Benefits for wider society include:

Building trust in Government and public institutions by increasing openness and transparency in decision-making processes, and helping public participants to understand and have confidence in public policy processes.

Strengthening democracy, by providing new ways that citizens can engage in, and influence, political and policy decisions (e.g. the allocation of resources). Appropriate recruitment ensures the involvement of traditionally disenfranchised sectors of society.

Building skills and enthusiasm for active citizenship. As people gain confidence in their opinions and that someone will listen to and take account of their views, their interest and willingness to take a greater part in society increases.

Building social cohesion and social capital by bringing diverse types of people together in a safe environment in which they can exchange views and work together on a joint enterprise, and get to know and better trust people from sectors of society that they would not normally meet. Dialogue ensures everyone is tolerant of the views of others, even if they disagree.

In summary, public dialogue provides four types of benefits:

- 'added value' benefits (dialogue adds to the value of the process)
- 'unique' benefits (which can only be achieved with dialogue)
- 'developmental' or 'transformative' benefits (around learning and capacity building) and
- 'instrumental' benefits (such as legitimacy of decisions or strengthened democracy)

A new framework for evaluation

This research has led to the development of a new framework for future evaluations of public dialogue. While the framework continues to emphasise the importance of assessing the impacts and benefits of dialogue, it provides particular guidance on the gaps identified through the research – on measuring costs and assessing quality.

The framework summarises how evaluation can work by using both **audit and learning approaches** to improve practice, extend knowledge and provide accountability for dialogue processes. It shows how evaluation can help **set objectives** that are specific, measurable, achievable, made public, used consistently, ambitious enough to motivate without being unrealistic, focus on the impacts and outcomes as well as the ‘activities’, and clarify the scope and boundaries of the dialogue. It summarises that evaluations need to have the **scope** to ensure all these issues are included by covering the key elements of all dialogue processes:

Purpose + Process + Context = RESULTS

The framework provides a set of 12 evaluation criteria, based on the Sciencewise-ERC Guiding Principles, to assess the quality of the dialogue. Nine process and three outcome criteria are proposed as follows:

1. **Clearly articulated and agreed objectives, scope and limits to the dialogue**, especially what can and cannot be changed as a result
2. **Appropriate timing**. Dialogue takes place as early as possible to have the necessary influence on decision-making. It does not duplicate but builds on and links with other relevant engagement activities
3. **Appropriate diversity and scale of participation**, with sufficient diversity to cover all relevant social groups and interests, plus special efforts to ensure ‘seldom heard’ or ‘hard to reach’ groups are not excluded; plus sufficient numbers so that the dialogue is credible
4. **Design and methods are appropriate to the objectives and delivery is competent and professional**, ensuring that the process enables participants to contribute fully, individually and collectively, and do what is asked of them

5. **Transparent recording and reporting of the dialogue**, so that participants are clear about what is going forward in their name, all involved are clear about what has emerged from the dialogue, and participants are kept informed
6. **Neutrality**. The dialogue is not biased or directive, provides a neutral space for discussion with no set of views allowed to dominate, expert input provides a range of viewpoints, and all participants are treated equally
7. **Commitment and honesty from project staff**, who are willing to make the dialogue work well, and are open-minded and listen to, take account of and respond to the results
8. **Effective evaluation**, to assess the process and outcomes to ensure accountability and legitimacy, and that objectives and standards of good practice are met
9. **Cost effective**, showing an appropriate investment of time and resources to make the process work well, and an appropriate balance between costs and benefits in the short and longer term
10. **Participant satisfaction** with the dialogue up to, during and after interactive events
11. **Impacts and influence** on policy, decisions and those involved and evidence of these communicated to those involved
12. **Learning for all involved, both about dialogue processes and about the issues covered**

This evaluation framework provides a step by step guide to gathering evidence and using it to assess the extent to which the objectives of the process, and the quality criteria, have been met, including assessing the impacts (on policy, policy makers and others) and the satisfaction of those involved.

It considers the importance of **measuring the costs of the dialogue**, including ensuring simple budgets are set and costs monitored according to various checklists provided. It identifies some key questions to enable evaluators to identify ways of demonstrating the balance of costs and benefits including:

- the potential for **reducing costs/maximising benefits** through efficiency savings in the design and delivery of the process without sacrificing important benefits (e.g. different venues, less expensive design and printing)

of materials); or gaining more benefits for the same or only slightly higher costs (e.g. more participants at workshops which could provide greater validity for results at minimal additional cost)

- identifying the **costs that may be saved later** by good dialogue, including:
 - > lower costs (time and money) for implementation because potential conflict and protest are identified early enough to minimise those risks
 - > lower costs for marketing and communications because dialogue has identified key concerns, who has those and why, so materials can be minimised and better targeted
 - > lower costs on implementation because certain options or activities were shown by dialogue not to be essential or high priority and therefore dropped, reducing development costs
 - > lower staff costs because less need to deal with complaints from individuals and campaign groups because dialogue has identified likely areas of conflict that can be dealt with early or avoided and therefore need less staff time to deal with legal challenges, parliamentary questions etc
 - > reduced staff sickness and absence caused by pressure from conflict and complaints
 - > lower legal fees because less need to take appeals etc to court by reducing or avoiding conflict early
- identifying the **costs of using alternative methods** to gain data on public views (e.g. detailed social or market research to gain intelligence about public concerns); to provide a rough comparison of the costs of alternative methods which may or may not provide the required depth, quality and immediacy of results

- **comparing costs and benefits overall**, using a qualitative framework based on the following questions:
 - > what were the main costs and negative impacts?
 - > what would have been lost by not using dialogue?
 - > what was the total budget for the project/programme, and what proportion was used on dialogue?
 - > what were the most important benefits and positive impacts?
 - > what later costs may have been saved by dialogue?
 - > what was the feedback from those involved on whether it was money well spent?
 - > do the benefits outweigh the costs or vice versa, and thus how cost effective was the dialogue overall?

The framework concludes by proposing that evaluations identify key lessons for the future by asking six overall questions:

- has the dialogue met its objectives?
- has the dialogue met standards/criteria of good practice?
- have those involved been satisfied with the dialogue (what is in it for them)?
- what difference/impact has the dialogue made?
- what was the balance overall of the costs and benefits of the dialogue?
- what are the lessons for the future (for practice, in terms of what worked and what did not, and more widely for future planning of dialogue activities)?

This framework will be used to inform future evaluations of Sciencewise-ERC funded projects, and further developed over the coming months. Feedback on this summary, and the full framework and full report, is very welcome.

Contacts and links

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The full report is available through Sciencewise-ERC at www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk