



# The Use of Experts in 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 the research into the use of experts in public dialogue, providing guidance on how to make the best use of 'expert' advice in public dialogue and within the wider policy-making process.

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

### Others in the series:

- 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)

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

## Summary

The Sciencewise-ERC Guiding Principles for Public Dialogue in Science and Technology require experts to take part in public dialogue. A great deal of attention has been placed in the past on the public participants and the process by which they are engaged in a dialogue. Somewhat less attention has been given to the reasons why and how experts are involved and the process by which they are recruited, and yet their input can be a key factor in whether the dialogue is a success or not.

The report offers guidance on how to make the best use of 'expert' advice in public dialogue and within the wider policy-making process. Specifically, it offers:

- Guidance on how to commission expert advice in science and technology dialogues and on the actual role of the experts
- Identification of the challenges facing experts and how these can be overcome
- An exploration of the cultural issues which create or contribute to the challenges faced by experts

The report examines some of the practical aspects of involving experts in public dialogue. From the research, it is concluded that to optimise the experts' contribution requires consideration of the role at:

- Planning phase
  - > Understanding the issue and the role of the experts
  - > Ensuring fair representation of views in the selection of experts
  - > Efficient and effective sourcing of the 'right' experts
  - > Investing in the briefing and supporting of the experts
- During participation
  - > Proper introductions and explanations of the role of the experts
  - > Aligning the experts' input with the audience
  - > Flexibility in the use of the experts throughout the dialogue
- Post the public dialogue
  - > The importance of evaluating the experts' contribution
  - > Ensuring that the experts' contribution is valued
  - > Providing further opportunities for their expertise to be used and for them to stay involved

The research covered everything from recruitment and briefing of experts and the roles they might take, to guidelines for their active participation in dialogue sessions and their continuing input after the project has finished. Underlying this guidance is the need to improve the experts' experiences of being involved in dialogue and to make it a valuable exercise with greater impact, not just for the participants, but for the experts as well.



# Process

## The research has involved:

- Interviews with practitioners, commissioners and ‘opinion-formers’, the majority of whom have been, in some way, involved in a public dialogue on science and technology. The interviews had two key purposes:
  - > To inform the recommendations on expert involvement and identify future areas for research by discussing individuals’ experiences, both positive and negative
  - > To gather learning from those experiences and to develop material to be used for case studies
- A desk-based review of relevant literature on expert involvement to help provide context and background for the discussions
- Two workshop sessions to review interim findings from the research, held at the Sciencewise-ERC research topic workshop in October 2008
- Testing the key findings at a Sciencewise-ERC Drop in for Dialogue session in January 2009, involving interested policy makers from across Government
- A final review of the work at a Sciencewise-ERC workshop held in March 2009

## Findings

In order for the public or stakeholders to deliberate effectively, it is essential to give them information on the subject matter under discussion. The assumption in most public dialogues is that members of the public who have been recruited to take part will probably know little about the subject matter. They will, therefore, need to be given information or, at least, be made aware of the context so they can begin to ask questions, interrogate the experts, think about the issues and participate more effectively in the dialogue.

Too much information and the organisers risk spending valuable time getting the participants conversant with the topic in question and may also end up confusing them with too much detail. Too little information and there is a risk of not giving the participants enough of an overview to enable them to get to grips with the subject. Too little information could also open up the project deliverers to accusations of deliberately leaving out critical information.

This research found that to get the information right:

- **A range of views** should be provided on the topic and from a diverse range of sources
- Participants should be asked to **review their information needs** and say what they believe they may require (this could be from first principles, or by giving them a shortlist of options from which to select or agreeing the selection criteria)
- In some situations, the process by which information is gathered can also be usefully **defined by participants**
- A **specific stakeholder review group** is recommended, which is tasked with providing, agreeing or reviewing the information needs of the participants. This may take time, but will add significantly to the credibility of the information provided. It is particularly important when handling contentious issues, as a mixed group of stakeholders agreeing on the information requirements and reviewing the drafted materials can help avoid accusations of bias

Involving experts is an integral component of effective dialogue. This research has highlighted the importance of considering the experts at the **Preparation and Planning**, the **Participation** and the **Post Dialogue** stages. The following sections draw out the key findings and provide guidance for policy makers and practitioners on the use of experts.

## Preparation and Planning

- Understanding the issue and its context to help define the type of information and expert input that may be required. In general, the **greater the level of potential controversy, the more time** that is required for selecting and briefing experts
- Defining the aims and objectives of a dialogue and how expert input can help achieve them. Projects need to think in a broad sense who experts for their project may be – they may be scientists (including social scientists, ethicists, philosophers) but experts can also be drawn from users of a service, sufferers of a condition, stakeholder organisation representatives and so on. **Involving the experts in the planning** will increase ownership and contribution
- Ensuring a fair representation of views in the selection of experts. Participants are entitled to expect a **diversity of views** and if such a range is not present, they may sense that something is being withheld. A range of different views can also stimulate debate amongst participants and enable them to quickly see that there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer
- Defining the exact role and purpose of experts and what they are expected to contribute to the dialogue. **Time spent with the experts beforehand** on the purpose of their input will reduce the risks of an ineffective contribution and will help the dialogue deliverers achieve the objectives of the dialogue



“

There were some people there with very different views from me, people I wouldn't necessarily meet otherwise. Some of them had no experience of science at all, and they had ideas and concerns that I'd never thought of before.

”

Scientist 3, Nanotechnology,  
Risk, and Sustainability

- Employing the most appropriate mechanism for engaging experts. There are no hard and fast rules, as each dialogue process will have its own unique qualities. However, more ‘natural conversations’ between participants and experts should be encouraged. This will involve setting **simple ground rules**, such as ‘there are no invalid questions’ to **encourage openness** and to break down the divides that can sometimes inhibit questioning. In addition, a **maximum time** should be given for clarifications throughout the activity
- Considering the different ways of sourcing an expert. Getting the right expert involved at the right time will always be a challenge for public dialogue and particularly for some issues that are in their formative stages and may not yet have a wealth of experts available. Options to help expert recruitment include linking with **professional associations and networks**, providing a **financial incentive**, involving **local** experts, considering **PhD students or journalists**, and expert involvement through **telephone or video link**
- Setting out what particular attributes experts should ideally have and how they will work within the project. In some instances it is the **ability to communicate** rather than the depth of expertise which will deliver a successful dialogue
- Ensuring that all expert input is on an ‘equal’ footing and is not biased in favour of one viewpoint or another. Practical ways to try to ‘level the playing field’ include ensuring that all experts have the **same time allocation**, setting a **limit on the number of slides** allowed and **vetting talks or slides** in advance to ensure they meet the brief and that they use accessible language

- Investing enough time in briefing and supporting the chosen experts. Feedback shows that people who invest in pre-dialogue **briefing** regard it as **time well spent**, not only in facilitating the process, but also in **helping the experts and participants gain most value** out of a dialogue



## Participation

- Making sure the experts are properly introduced to other participants and that their role is clearly outlined
- Making sure their input is on the right level for the audience, and that written materials and presentations are jargon-free and in a language that everyone can understand
- Being prepared to be flexible and responsive to the use of experts throughout a dialogue process

## Post Dialogue

- Following up and evaluating the experts' contribution and its impact on the other participants (and themselves)
- Keeping in touch with experts after the activities to make sure the experts know the outcomes and how they have been used
- Offering them further opportunities to stay in touch with the issues, such as publicising the dialogue in the media or giving them an advocacy role
- Providing introductions to other support mechanisms

As the practice of using public dialogue for policy-making increases, there will be an increasing need for expert involvement in those processes, and if public dialogue on science and technology is to continue to take place and be of full value to policy makers, then experts need to play a much more central role than they do at present.

This research has identified mechanisms that have the potential to further improve the contribution of experts in dialogue going forward:

- Through enhanced awareness within the communities from which experts are drawn, and in particular within the academic community, of the benefits of public dialogue. Increasing understanding and the opportunities of engaging with the public, there is the potential to build better expert availability and participation
- There are views expressed among the scientific community and others, including policy makers, that public dialogue does not have a place in science. Currently, there is little reward for experts who engage in this type of work, as far as career progression or funding is concerned. The role of the expert will be enhanced through greater recognition by scientific and research institutions
- Similarly, should dialogue commissioners and deliverers fund the experts' participation? Certainly for the public, funding participants is now accepted as an inducement to give up their time to participate. Whilst financial incentives may appear an immediate choice, it is best considered in the light of the dialogue's aims and objectives. If simple delivery of information is required, e.g. as a panel or presentation, then payment may attract greater participation. If, on the other hand, the dialogue seeks to shape future scientific direction, then arguably the expert is more of a stakeholder in the outcome and payment may result in a lack of ownership of the process and the outcomes
- Currently for scientists, there appears to be a perception that anything that is not laboratory work is a potential distraction from core research work and, therefore, to be discouraged. Time is a major factor preventing more scientists from engaging in public dialogue and unless there is provision for this type of work in management structures and reward systems, it will remain a barrier to participation
- An element of the public dialogue project budget being explicitly assigned to feed back the results into the scientific community via journals, scientific conferences and other academic platforms to help increase awareness and value of public dialogue in the expert community
- By introducing new ways of encouraging expert participation; for example, if dialogue is not currently valued in many academic institutions, are there new

or different measures that can be used to assess performance on engagement. If the number of published papers is part of the success criteria for academics, the challenge is to identify a similar measure for dialogue

Only by experts themselves becoming participants, will the dialogue become truly two-way between expert and public, and future science and technology developments reflect more closely public values. Moreover, experts need to be equipped with the skills to take part in a way that enriches the dialogue and also their participation.

“

It is so difficult to provide balanced and unbiased information, to provide enough information for people to be able to discuss, but not too much so they can't take it all in. But in the end, I was very impressed.

”

Stakeholder Advisory Panel member,  
HFEA Hybrid & Chimera Embryos dialogue



## Contacts and links

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

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

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