



Widening Public Involvement in 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 widening the involvement of the public in dialogue activities.

The research was carried out by Andrew Acland and Pippa Hyam, members of the Sciencewise-ERC Dialogue and Engagement Specialist team and Remco van der Stoep of Dialogue by Design.

Others in the series:

- Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement (Diane Beddoes)
- 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)

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

Summary

This report explores issues involved in widening the involvement of the public in dialogue activities and is intended to provide guidance to policy makers on when it is appropriate to involve larger numbers of the public in dialogue exercises. (For the purposes of this project, we defined large-scale as in excess of 100 people.) The research looked at the motivation behind decisions to undertake large-scale engagement and what additional value it can add in different circumstances. The report covers findings from the research in three main areas:

- Descriptions of three types of large-scale 'public dialogue processes' with contact between Government and citizens regarding policy:
 - > **Communications or campaigning based dialogue:** primarily for the Government to inform and/or influence citizens
 - > **Research based dialogue:** for Government to find out what citizens think
 - > **Co-design style dialogue:** for citizens and Government to inform and influence each other



- An overview of the motivations and drivers that lead policy makers to decide that these processes need to be scaled up to involve more people
- Conclusions and recommendations on when, and how, such up-scaling can improve the quality of the engagement and deliver value for money

Confusion can arise because all three types of processes listed above are commonly called 'engagement' or 'dialogue'. The report begins by arguing the importance of differentiating between them, before up-scaling should be considered, and sets out their differences of purpose, methodology and characteristics, providing examples of each.

The report does not seek to prescribe specific methodologies for large-scale public engagement, partly because all such processes should be individually designed around their specific purposes, and partly because doing so would limit innovation and experimentation. There are many public dialogue processes that have been used in recent years, some more successfully than others. However, by its nature, public dialogue is a fluid process with infinite possibilities around the most appropriate methodologies that can be used. New processes continue to be developed by those who create and run public dialogue activities and there are endless possibilities for mixing methods to suit individual policy needs and using a series of different activities throughout the policy-making cycle.

Key recommendations from the research include:

- It is always advisable to identify positive (rather than defensive) reasons for involving the public in policy-making and to be open and honest about the motivations
- Co-design style dialogue processes, particularly 'up-stream' of policy-making - where Government and citizens seek to influence each other - are likely to be the most appropriate candidates for larger-scale engagement in order to enable more citizens to have direct opportunities to become involved in Government policy-making
- The scale of the engagement should be determined by the objectives of the commissioner; many purposes can be better served by small-scale engagement, rather than simply increasing numbers to involve more people

Process

This report draws heavily...

on desk research and on the results of interviews with practitioners and policy makers in the UK and beyond. The raw data is available from the Sciencewise-ERC. The report also draws on the many years of experience gained by practitioners, and on the anecdotal evidence provided by colleagues and dialogue participants.

Findings

The main conclusions of this study can be summarised as follows:

- It is important to differentiate between engagement that is primarily communication, engagement that is primarily research and engagement that enables public and policy makers to engage with and influence each other. All these are legitimate exercises for Government, but only processes that enable the public and policy makers to influence each other can really be called dialogue
- When the purpose of engagement is research, there is no point in involving more people beyond the necessary minimum to make the research more accurate, but it may help to make the results more credible or to attract greater attention. The great majority of large-scale Government funded engagement processes that have been run over the past few years fall into this category. The increased costs of up-scaled research processes suggest that the need for credibility must be very strong for them to be justified
- When the purpose of engagement is communication, campaigning, calls to action or public relations, then effectiveness will always be measured to some extent by the number of people reached by the process or the numbers that take subsequent action. Actual numbers will be more important than representativeness
- When the purpose of engagement is to enable citizens and Government to influence each other, in content

terms, through a dialogue process, increasing the numbers involved leads to corresponding increases in the time and resources required. There is a consequent danger that up-scaling engagement processes will mean defaulting to involvement that is really research or communications because it is cheaper and easier. This would also mean losing the ancillary benefits of engagement processes, such as increased trust and willingness to change behaviour

- If the purpose of involving people is sustained behaviour change, engagement is a good way to do it. The more people who are involved in such processes, the more people are likely to change their behaviour as a result

Recommendations

As a result of this research, some key recommendation have arisen, as follows:

- Policy makers should always identify positive (rather than defensive) reasons for involving the public in policy-making
- Where there is a desire to up-scale, the temptation to default to research engagement, even if it is not appropriate to achieving the purposes of the process, should be strongly resisted
- Engagement processes should be up-scaled to enable more citizens to have direct opportunities to become involved in Government policy-making
- Policy makers use engagement methods that enable scale to become a strength by, for example, encouraging

large numbers of people to understand complex dilemmas and trade-offs. This enables policy makers to appreciate the range of values that influence the acceptability of policy, and prepare the wider population to implement unpopular but essential decisions

- Engagement processes should always be complemented by communication to ensure their conclusions, and the process through which they are achieved, reach wider audiences
- Government invests in up-scaled engagement processes to help develop a culture of citizenship that includes a willingness to discuss in depth the challenges that face our society, and to take personal action based on the conclusions

Participation in such processes should be presented as similar to any other voluntary activity that involves accepting individual responsibility for, and committing personal resources to, addressing collective problems, but it should also be presented as fun, creative and life-enhancing. This is in contrast to processes where financial incentives are used to ensure participation, which can encourage participants to see consequent action as the responsibility of 'them' rather than 'us'.



Contacts and links

The research was carried out by Andrew Acland and Pippa Hyam, members of the Sciencewise-ERC Dialogue and Engagement Specialist team and Remco van der Stoep of Dialogue by Design.

For further information, please contact Sciencewise-ERC by email at 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