



The hybrids public consultation

In April 2007, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) launched a major public consultation on the creation and use of human-animal embryos for research. This summary report identifies the main findings from the evaluation study of the public consultation. A full report of the evaluation findings is available, which includes detailed analyses of all the statistical and qualitative data.

The evaluation research was carried out over the whole of the consultation period, from April 2007, and was completed in November 2007. The research included observation and informal interviews at events, questionnaires at all events, interviews with public participants, stakeholders, expert speakers and those involved in commissioning and delivering the process, followed by qualitative and quantitative analysis of all data collected.

Context

The creation and use of human-animal embryos for research remains a highly contentious subject on which some people have very strong views indeed. The immediate context for this consultation was the application to the HFEA for two licences for research to derive stem cells from embryos created using animal eggs.

There was significant media coverage of the issue during the consultation, partly because the Joint Committee on the Human Tissue and Embryos (Draft) Bill published their report during the course of the consultation. The impact of media coverage on the participants in the deliberative events was assessed by the evaluation research, which found that although a reasonable proportion of the participants had seen media coverage of the issue, the impact it had made on their views was fairly minimal.

The consultation process was designed and delivered to respond positively both to the strong feelings aroused by the issue and any additional impact of media coverage. The evaluation found that all the engagement processes managed the potential and actual conflicts between the diverse views on the subject (many of which were explicitly included in the consultation) very well.

Stakeholder engagement

A range of stakeholders with very diverse views were engaged, through a Stakeholder Advisory Group, in scoping and developing the dialogue process in collaboration with the Authority, and in line with the wider written and web consultation process. Although there were some problems with short deadlines and a desire for deeper engagement from some stakeholders, the stakeholders interviewed for the evaluation research were largely positive in their feedback on the process and their role in it.

In addition, the Group played an important part in reviewing the draft materials used in the public deliberative events, to ensure that any bias could be identified and removed and the materials could be seen to be fair and balanced. This worked well, and

resulted in the materials providing basic factual scientific information about the nature of the different types of embryos, which worked very well at both stages of the public deliberative process.

Effective deliberative public engagement

A two stage deliberative process was undertaken, with 12 discussion groups in six locations at regional level (total of 106 people), followed by a national level reconvened meeting of around half the original participants (44).

To provide a wider context for the HFEA to fully understand and consider the findings from the deliberative public engagement, an opinion poll was undertaken among a representative sample of the British public, involving 2,073 UK residents.

In addition, an open public meeting was held in London attracting an audience of 153 interested members of the public as well as scientists, academics and others. There was also an open online consultation on the consultation document, and a series of consultations with scientific stakeholders.

The mix of methods, delivered very effectively, provided a particularly valuable process that brought together iterative public engagement, with time for public participants to learn new information, discuss it together and come to a considered view, alongside other methods to gain a wide range of other public views, from a variety of sources, for the HFEA to consider.

Valuable new information was produced

Specially produced briefing information was provided for the public participants, which increased in detail as the process continued. The evaluation showed that the information was clear, useful and understood by the public participants in spite of the highly complex and technical nature of the subject.

The separation of the basic factual information, provided in written briefing materials, and the different views and perspectives given in person by a range of experts (at the

reconvened event and the open meeting), worked very well in allowing the participants to understand the basic science and assess the diverse views being presented without becoming confused between facts and opinions.

Overall, this was a particularly effective approach to public education for engagement on a highly scientific and technical subject.

A diverse set of the public took part

The participants in the deliberative process were recruited to provide a diverse set of the public based on age, sex, social class, white or black and minority ethnic background, and religious views. This was not a demographically representative sample of the UK population but was, both in recruitment and attendance, a diverse set of the public.

Clear reporting to aid the Authority's policy decision

The results of the dialogue project were captured in detail at the meetings, analysed and reported by Opinion Leader to HFEA in a series of separate and summary reports. This approach allowed for separate analysis of the findings from the different strands.

The summary report, that drew together the findings from the deliberative research, the opinion poll, the open public meeting and the written and web consultation, was found to be particularly useful for the HFEA staff in preparing the final reports for the Authority.

The HFEA prepared reports for the Authority members, based on the Opinion Leader reports. The feedback from the interviews with Authority members were that the reports were very useful and easy to use in considering and coming to their decision.

Clear impact on the Authority's final decision

There was a clear line from the conclusions of the public in the deliberative events to the wording of the HFEA's final decision in September 2007. The Authority's decision included the caveat that the research should go ahead only "with caution and careful scrutiny" and that any specific applications for licences to carry out such research has to demonstrate that their research project is "both necessary and desirable". This reflects the caution of the public overall, as well as the conclusion of the majority of public participants at the reconvened event that such research on cytoplasmic hybrid embryos should be allowed to go ahead in those circumstances.

The outputs and outcomes of the process fully met the objectives of the consultation

The objectives were:

- To engage stakeholders in the scoping and development of the dialogue process in collaboration with the Authority and in line with the wider written and web consultation process.
- To undertake a deliberative process with a diverse set of the public which accords with the Government's Guiding Principles for Public Dialogue on Science and Technology¹.

- To capture, analyse and report the results of the dialogue project so that they can be easily understood by policy makers and can inform the Authority's policy recommendations along with the results of the written and web consultation.

The evaluation assessed the overall process and showed in detail how the activities and outcomes fully met the objectives.

The outputs and outcomes of the process fully met the agreed principles of good practice

It was part of the objectives of the consultation that it should meet the Government's Guiding Principles for Public Dialogue on Science and Technology¹. The evaluation assessed the overall process and showed in detail how the activities and outcomes fully met these principles.

The process had significant value for the public participants, stakeholders, and the Authority

The evaluation has identified several specific areas where the process has provided significant value for all involved:

For public participants. The two main benefits identified by public participants as having arisen from their involvement in the consultation were learning and influence:

- **Learning.** Public participants identified learning as a major benefit from the process, particularly listening to the experts and gaining other information, sharing their own views and listening to each others' views. They clearly enjoyed taking part and gained a lot from it, as can be seen from their overwhelmingly positive feedback.
- **Influence.** The other key benefit that participants felt the process had given them was the opportunity to influence an important decision. The evaluation has shown that there was a clear line from the outputs from the public consultation process to the final decision, and the feedback from public participants shows that they clearly believed that the HFEA was indeed listening to their views, and would take them into account. It is likely that this was an important factor in the level of satisfaction public participants expressed about the process overall.

For stakeholders. There were four specific areas where the consultation process had been valuable to stakeholders (on the Stakeholder Advisory Group and in other ways):

- confirming that public engagement in policy can be done effectively, that it was not too daunting and that it provided outputs of real value in scientific and policy decision making
- providing an opportunity for stakeholders to participate in the preparation of information materials for the public consultation activities through the Stakeholder Advisory Group
- showing that the public could engage in complex technical scientific debates, and could take on significant levels of complex information, and come to conclusions that took account of the learning they had achieved; stakeholders saw this as a good example of increasing public understanding of science in this field, as well as of how science develops and proceeds in general.

- showing the value of public engagement in extending public understanding of scientific issues, especially the trickle-down effect of people talking to others about what they had learnt

For Authority members. The particular value of the consultation process for the Authority members was in providing evidence of public opinion from diverse sources that they could take account of in coming to their decision. This provided two specific benefits for the quality of their decision:

- **Confidence.** The consultation process and its outputs increased the confidence with which Authority members felt they could take their decision, as they were reassured that it was based on sound evidence that public opinion was in favour of the research in certain circumstances, which the decision clearly spelled out.
- **Legitimacy, accountability and credibility.** The consultation also provided a level of accountability and legitimacy for the final decision when it was made, as the issue had been openly and extensively tested with the public, and the final decision reflected the views of the public after the deliberative processes. Authority members also felt that on major controversial decisions of this sort, there has to be public consultation, without which the credibility of the Authority could have been damaged.

What worked well

The evaluation identified several aspects of good practice:

Mix of methods. Various respondents to the evaluation particularly praised the mix and range of methods used throughout the consultation process. The evaluation shows that all the activities worked very well, and participants were very satisfied with the overall approach.

High quality design and delivery. The process was well designed and delivered by skilled and experienced people. The consultation methods were appropriate to the specific objectives and target groups of each activity, the organisation and management of all the activities were efficient and effective, the recruitment was appropriate, recording and reporting by internal and external staff worked well to provide the outputs that the HFEA needed and could use easily to feed into their final decision-making. There was good collaboration and communications between internal and external staff, and with stakeholders. All these factors resulted in an appropriate process that was delivered very effectively.

The development of good quality information materials. Specially produced briefing information was provided for the public participants, which increased in detail as the process continued. The evaluation showed that the information was clear, useful and understood by the public participants in spite of the highly complex and technical nature of the subject.

The advice from the Stakeholder Advisory Group led to the separation of the basic factual information, provided in written briefing materials, and the different views and perspectives given in person by a range of experts (at the reconvened event and the open meeting), which worked very well in allowing the participants to understand the basic science and assess the

diverse views being presented without becoming confused between facts and opinions. Overall, this was a particularly effective approach to public education for engagement on a highly scientific and technical subject.

Openness and transparency. The whole process was very transparent throughout, with specific elements of the process (the open public meeting and the written and online consultation) being open to anyone who wanted to take part. More specifically, all research reports on the consultation were published prior to the Authority's decision, including full details of all the processes of consultation, who had responded, the questions they considered and a summary of their responses. All this was very clearly and fully documented, and published widely. In addition, the meeting at which the Authority actually took the final decision was open to the public.

The open and transparent approach, with public participants and stakeholders being able to access relevant information, is likely to have helped to reduce cynicism and distrust of a consultation on a highly contentious issue.

Impact on the final decision. It is rare to be able to show a clear line from the beginning of a consultation, through deliberative engagement with the public, to a final decision by the policy maker that actually reflects the conclusions of the public. In this case, the final HFEA decision did fully reflect the conclusions of the public in the deliberative events, as outlined above.

What worked less well

Two elements worked less well:

Clarity about the role of the Stakeholder Advisory Group. Although the Stakeholder Advisory Group did operate well to review and input to the design of various parts of the process, and the materials, there was a lack of clarity about the Group's role and tasks. It was also felt that it started operation too late in the process to have any significant impact on the overall process, which created frustration among some stakeholders involved.

Feedback to public participants after the consultation activities. The biggest single missing aspect of the process was any feedback to participants after the reconvened event, or after the open public meeting, or to tell those people who had been involved what the final decision was. Although all participants were contacted as this report was being written, this was a long time after the event for most of them and many respondents said they would have liked feedback before.

Lessons for the future

From the points above, the HFEA consultation provides some overall lessons for the future which can be summarised as:

- A mix of methods can be particularly valuable in gaining the maximum diversity of views from different constituencies.
- Deliberative public engagement can deliver particular value in terms of public education through engagement even on a complex, highly technical and highly controversial scientific topic, as well as outputs that are of great value to decision-makers.

- It is essential that the team delivering the process has the skills and experience to create consultation activities that are appropriate to the objectives, and to the participants being sought. This requires intense collaboration and constant communication both between internal and external staff, and with stakeholders.
- There are significant advantages in being open and transparent about the process, and keeping as much information as possible in the public domain, to help reduce cynicism and distrust of the process.
- Effective involvement of stakeholders in providing advice on the process and materials requires clarity about their exact role and tasks, and should start as early as possible in the planning process.
- Feedback to participants should take place as soon as possible after their involvement. Ideally, feedback should provide a summary of the conclusions that resulted from their involvement, what was provided to the decision makers based on their input, and what the final decision is - when that happens.
- There should be a clear line from the outputs from the public events to the final decision being made, so that the influence of public views can easily be shown. This influence is vital to the public assessment of the value of the exercise and to trust in public engagement generally.

Final conclusions

This exercise has been a remarkably successful public consultation, and has met all the objectives set and all the agreed standards of good practice identified by Government for these sorts of dialogue processes on science and technology.

It has provided significant value to the public participants involved, the stakeholders involved, and the HFEA themselves. It has also been a significant success as a public education project on a complex scientific issue. As one expert speaker said in interview for the evaluation: "it was a very good model for doing public engagement on these sorts of issues". It is hoped that future public engagement exercises of this sort can build on the success of this initiative.

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¹ Office of Science and Innovation. The Government's Approach to Public Dialogue on Science and Technology. Guiding Principles for Public Dialogue. September 2006.