



Public dialogue on UK energy research

In March 2007, Research Councils UK (RCUK) launched a public dialogue to elicit and understand the public's priorities for energy research. This summary report identifies the main findings from the evaluation study of the dialogue. 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 dialogue process, 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, the project Advisory Group, Research Councils UK decision-makers, expert speakers and those involved in commissioning and delivering the process, followed by qualitative and quantitative analysis of all data collected.

Context

The Research Councils are interested in a wide range of energy issues including research on social and behavioural as well as technical and scientific issues. The specific context for this dialogue was the interest of Research Councils UK's Energy Programme in identifying public priorities for energy research to inform their strategic decision-making. The Programme was due to make decisions about the funding of research areas for the next three years in autumn 2007. The aim was for information on public views to be provided to these decision-makers alongside academic, industry and government views, to help them shape their thinking and decisions on future energy research priorities.

There was also a more general interest within Research Councils UK in the use of public dialogue in their work. Research Councils UK generally consult widely with government, business and industry, academics and NGOs, but explicitly including public views in this process is not routine. They decided to focus a public engagement project around energy research because they felt this was an area of science and technology where research is addressing a significant societal challenge - the secure supply of affordable, sustainable power. Although work had previously been done on public attitudes to specific energy technologies, there had not been any work that covered energy issues overall, and that focused on energy research.

Stakeholder engagement

The process was guided by a project Advisory Group which was made up of Research Councils UK staff and external advisers. These seven individuals provided a mix of expertise on energy research and public engagement processes. The Group met formally twice but also contributed to the design of the process and the materials used with the public participants through email, telephone, etc.

This provided Research Councils UK with access to significant expertise, and also to a level of external legitimacy for the materials and process.

The nature of the public dialogue

The dialogue process was designed and delivered by Ipsos MORI, in full consultation with Research Councils UK staff and the project Advisory Group. The process consisted of three one-day workshops held in Birmingham, Oxford and Cardiff on Saturdays in June 2007, attended by between 25 and 32 people each. These workshops were followed by a reconvened two-day Summit workshop over the weekend of 30 June - 1 July 2007, held at Warwick University, which was attended by 30 people who had also attended regional workshops. A tasking pack was given to all participants as an additional resource and as a bridge between the workshops and the Summit for those attending both events. A full report on the findings from the dialogue was produced for Research Councils UK, which was also circulated to all participants in October 2007.

The two main stages of the process worked well to introduce a significant amount of information to participants, including from a diverse range of expert speakers at the Summit, and to give them opportunities to discuss the issues among themselves and come to considered views.

The formal aim of the process was stated by Research Councils UK to be as follows:

To identify public priorities for energy research to inform the Research Councils' strategic decision-making. This addition to the current stakeholder input streams will increase accountability for the direction of Research Council-funded energy research.

The evaluation assessed the overall process and showed how the activities did fully achieve this aim.

What worked well

The evaluation identified several aspects of good practice:

The process worked well for participants. Overall the participants were very satisfied with the process and the way it was run. It engaged people effectively overall and the participants felt the process was enjoyable, educational and worthwhile. Participants particularly enjoyed and valued talking to and listening to each other, as well as hearing from specific 'expert' speakers.

Recording participant views. Overall, the process for recording the views of participants during the two stages of the process (the regional workshops and the Summit) worked well. A mix of flip charts, note takers who were separate from the facilitators (so that note taking did not disrupt the facilitation of the participants' discussions), and audio recording of both plenary and small groups discussions provided a very thorough record of the participants' deliberations.

Informal and relaxed atmosphere. Participants commented on the ability of the facilitators to make the public feel relaxed and able to express their views in a safe environment.

Specific group activity to develop criteria and to allocate budgets. At the Summit and the regional workshops, exercises were used to provide information and then support small groups of participants to develop their own criteria for deciding on energy research priorities and then to allocate a given research budget. This budget allocation work was the most popular activity among participants, and provided clear outputs for the final report and for decision-makers attending the events.

Input from experts. The involvement of experts from a range of specialist subjects at the Summit was highly valued by participants, and worked very well to open up and stimulate debate. The plenary open question and report and for decision-makers attending the events.

Learning. There are two aspects to this:

- Learning among participants. Participants provided feedback that they had learned a great deal from the process, especially about energy research and the levels of funding for that research.
- Learning among other stakeholders. Feedback from expert speakers and members of the Advisory Group who attended the Summit clearly indicated that they felt they had learned some significant lessons about public engagement from the process.

Feedback to participants. Participants highly valued being sent the final report by Ipsos MORI on the results of the public discussions. Interviewees saw receipt of the report as fulfilling a promise that had been made, and this clearly contributed to their positive views about the process overall.

Contribution to decision making. There were few significant new ideas or insights from the process, other than the importance of ethical, particularly equity, issues for the public participants in developing their criteria for assessing energy research projects.

More significantly, the process did clearly provide useful underpinning evidence that confirmed existing knowledge, and contributed to the existing checks and balances used by the Research Councils in its decision-making. This public involvement was therefore seen as providing legitimacy, by asking the public what they thought of the issues the Research Councils are grappling with in making decisions, and helped decision-makers have more confidence in the decisions they make.

What worked less well

Representation and diversity. The regional workshops largely met their targets overall in terms of overall numbers and gender balance, although there was a slight under representation of people over 60 and those from social groups C2DE. The Summit had less diversity, with twice as many men as women, and only 30 participants from a target of 45. This may have been because it was held over a whole weekend. While the aim of the recruitment was never to obtain a demographically representative sample of the UK population as a whole, it was intended to bring together a diverse group of people from a range of backgrounds, and this was not entirely achieved at the Summit. The group of public participants at the Summit was diverse, but not as diverse or as large as had been expected.

Appropriate information. Public participants at the workshops appreciated the presentations of information that were made by facilitators but also said they would have liked more information in advance, and more information that was directly relevant to the activities and discussions they were undertaking. They also wanted more simple basic handouts that they could refer to throughout their discussions.

Balance between information input and deliberative discussions. Deliberative public engagement is designed to allow for the introduction of sufficient information to support the discussions among the public participants. In this case, there was perhaps too much information for the public participants to absorb and use in the deliberative discussions, and too much time was taken up delivering this information which reduced the time available for deliberative discussions.

Variable quality of facilitation. Some facilitators were excellent, but some lacked the full range of skills and experience to focus the small group discussions sufficiently clearly. Energy research was recognised to be a highly complex and very broad subject area, and perhaps required an even higher than usual level of facilitation skill to enable effective discussions among ordinary members of the public.

Lack of clarity about the links between some activities within the process. The logical progression of how the different activities within the workshops, and particularly at the Summit, related to each other was not always clear to participants. Also, some activities (e.g. the use of scenarios) did not entirely work to stimulate effective discussions, and created some confusion. Clearer signposting in plenary sessions and small group discussions by facilitators may have overcome these problems.

Value for those involved

The process had value for the public participants, other stakeholders and Research Councils UK's decision makers:

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 very positive feedback.
- **Influence.** The other key benefit that participants felt the process could provide was influence on final decisions. Participants were realistic about levels of influence but did expect that their views would be listened to, considered and taken into account in decision-making.

For other stakeholders. The two main benefits identified by other stakeholders were:

- **Learning.** Several expert speakers and Advisory Group members said they had learned about public engagement from being involved in this process. The learning was about specific activities and methods for working effectively with the public, and also about the enthusiasm and quality of the discussions among the public themselves even on very complex issues.
- **Opportunities for dialogue.** Expert speakers and Advisory Group members clearly valued the opportunities for talking to and listening to members of the public. It was also noted that some energy researchers may have few opportunities to discuss the social and ethical dimensions of their work, and this provided a valuable opportunity to discuss these issues in direct dialogue with the public.

For Research Councils UK's decision makers. The main value of the consultation process for those responsible for Research Councils UK decision making on future priorities for funding was providing some guidance on public opinion on issues of energy research policy. This provided two specific benefits in terms of increasing the quality of their decision:

- **Confidence.** The consultation process and its outputs increased the confidence with which they could take future decisions, as they were reassured that they understood public opinion more fully and were clear that these views did not contradict their own existing views and expectations. The value to decision makers was therefore in providing underpinning evidence, checks and balances to their own existing and developing views.
- **Legitimacy and accountability.** The willingness of Research Councils UK to open up their decision-making processes to include feedback on public opinion was designed to provide an additional level of legitimacy and accountability, to complement their work with institutional and academic stakeholders.

Lessons for the future

From the points above, the process provides some overall lessons for public engagement processes in similar circumstances in future:

Ensure that the methods used overall, and the specific activities, are designed to achieve clear and specific aims and objectives. Develop a detailed design for the process, and specific methods and activities, which enable the purpose to be achieved (whether that is public engagement, public education achieved (whether that is public engagement, public education or a mix of the two). In particular, it is important to find the right balance between information input and time for deliberative discussions among public participants to enable them to come to their own considered views.

Ensure that the process design and delivery makes best use of the public, experts and other stakeholders attending engagement events, and uses these resources effectively so that the public can make the most effective contribution possible. This requires intense collaboration and constant communication both between internal and external staff (including within the commissioning organisation), and with stakeholders. In this case, the involvement of the project Advisory Group (which included some key decision-makers), helped link the design and desired outcomes well. Also, the input of experts to the Summit, and the dialogue they developed with the public participants, worked very well.

Provide sufficient different opportunities for public participation to meet the aims and objectives. A single public engagement process may not provide all the input that is needed to support decision-making. In some cases, a range of methods and approaches may be needed to get the maximum diversity of views from different constituencies. In this case, the mix of regional workshops and a reconvened summit worked well; the tasking pack in between was a good idea for bridging the two main elements of the process.

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Early and full feedback to participants helps build support for the process, and trust in engagement processes generally. That worked very well in this case.

Final conclusions

Developing effective public engagement processes on a very broad, technical and complex topic such as energy research was expected and proved to be a major challenge. Unlike topics such as health or diet, public participants cannot easily draw on their own personal knowledge and experience and thus rely more on information provision, which needs to be balanced with time and opportunities for them to explore their thinking together.

Overall, this process met the aims set for it. It has provided a good learning opportunity for all involved, and has delivered some useful outputs on public views on the future of energy research investment, particularly some thoughts on the criteria on which such future decisions could be made that would make them more acceptable in terms of public opinion.

There were some problems with the design and delivery of the process, but also some useful innovative approaches were developed that provided findings of real value to Research Councils UK's decision-making processes. Overall, the process delivered good value to participants, other stakeholders and policy makers.

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