



Wise up! Engaging the public in science and technology

*What links nanotechnology, climate change and hybrid embryos?
Penny Walker finds out about Sciencewise's public dialogues*

These diverse topics have all been explored in depth by the public, in conversation with scientists, as part of innovative 'public dialogue' projects funded by Sciencewise.

Sciencewise is an expert resource centre – funded by the UK Government's business ministry, BIS – providing funding and expert support to policy-makers and government-funded researchers who want to engage the public to inform and guide their work in emerging areas of science and technology. Involving luminaries such as Professor Kathy Sykes and Lord Robert Winston, it's increasingly influential in getting scientists and government to engage with the public more profoundly than through opinion polls or petitions.

At the time of writing, Sciencewise has helped to fund 18 dialogues, which enable scientists and the public to talk together about what excites and worries them in relation to a specific area of technology or science, what they'd like to see happening,

and what they'd like policy-makers and researchers to prioritise or do next.

What's a public dialogue?

Each dialogue looks different: some have big events involving hundreds of people; others are run with a small group over a number of sessions. It always includes some face-to-face element, sometimes coupled with other communication channels. Drama, short films, podcasts, community-organised meetings and interviews have also been used.

The crucial point is that in a public dialogue, members of the public interact with scientists, policy-makers and other stakeholders. It involves multi-directional communication: not the experts 'telling' and public views being 'researched', but in-depth exploratory conversations – deliberations, not debates. The decisions rest with the organisation which instigates the dialogue: but it must be prepared to change its mind – whether it is about research priorities or on a point of policy.

The Big Energy Shift

The Big Energy Shift is one example of a dialogue supported by Sciencewise. For six months in 2008/9, 250 people from nine towns and cities across the UK met together to discuss energy saving and low-carbon generation in their homes and communities. The Government's aim was to understand people's views on community-level carbon and energy savings, especially in the context of the Climate Change Bill (now Act). There were nine citizens' forums, each one involving around 20 people. Each forum met three times during the dialogue, learning about new energy technologies from experts and considering how they might be used successfully – or not – in their own homes. Having looked at the practical possibilities, the public discussed policy options with experts and other stakeholders like environment groups.

There was also a website with polling, videos and interactive discussions. Site visits were organised to power stations and

high-efficiency buildings.

Finally, a central workshop in London brought people from all nine communities together, feeding back the findings and providing an opportunity for further reflection. The public came up with recommendations to put to policy-makers.

The dialogue showed that there is a very positive underlying feeling about energy efficiency, and that the best way to translate this into changed behaviour is to provide community-wide approaches which bring together householders, businesses and different parts of government.

As one participant said: "We need knowledge and faith in the technologies. If someone like Dave, the expert here today,

facilitators will also run learning and review workshops, to ensure that the people closely involved and others in the communities can share what they've learnt and discuss what the Government could do differently, to make these initiatives possible in more communities.

Members of the public, politicians and policy-makers all spoke highly of the process.

Joan Ruddock, at the time Minister for Energy and Climate Change, said: "When we set our plan as a Government ... we will know that we're getting it right because we'll have properly consulted the public – that's the importance of this exercise and why we'll be taking it forward in all our thinking."

Civil servant Simon Virley of DECC said the Big Energy Shift had provided "some real insights from real people which actually makes our job in government much easier".

And a participant said: "The whole process of soliciting people's opinions is ... reassuring, to think the opinions of the average person in the street could carry some weight."

Sciencewise principles

There is a detailed set of guiding principles; this is a summary:

1. Context – a clear purpose which is early enough to feed into a public policy decision and commitment from the policy-makers to take account of the outcomes. Time and resources to do it properly.
2. Scope – cover the things that the public, scientists and policy-makers are interested in. Wide enough scope to encourage in-depth discussion, eg asking "how do we provide for our energy needs in the future?" rather than "should we build new nuclear power stations?"
3. Delivery – the dialogue process itself represents best practice in design and execution, involving experts in the science and policy, as well as experts in dialogue and engagement. Accessible, fair and non-confrontational, with all participants treated respectfully.
4. Impact – the outputs of dialogue are available to all, and show how participants' views have been taken into account in policy and decision-making. Collaboration and networking is encouraged, and the dialogue influences the knowledge and attitudes of all involved.

5. Evaluation – the process is shown to be robust and contributes to learning through an independent evaluation which relates to the original objectives and draws on participants' views.

Lessons for us all

Sciencewise has pioneered some best practice which we can all learn from.

Make sure the dialogue is linked to a specific policy decision, and hold the engagement process early enough that the discoveries you make have time to influence your activities and decisions.

The events or communication channels need to be genuinely two-way, so that the professional scientists and policy-makers listen to the public and each other. Conversations work best when there's a chance to explore each other's views, assumptions, knowledge and experiences in depth. This takes time and a commitment to listening without judging, which is hugely helped by expert 'process design' and independent facilitators.

When deciding on the scope of the dialogue, be clear about what you're interested in having a conversation about, and also be flexible enough to allow the public to take the conversation into an area they find interesting.

Make sure that you give feedback to everyone who's been involved: on what's changed as a result, what hasn't and why.

Interested?

If your area of work is research or policy-making on science or technology and has a clear policy 'hook', and your organisation is a government department, agency or Executive non-Departmental Public Body, it may be eligible to get support and funding from Sciencewise for a public dialogue project. See below for contact details. ■

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came to our village and educated people it would make a difference and give us more confidence."

One practical outcome of the Big Energy Shift is the £10 million of grant funding available to communities to test out some of the ideas, through DECC's Low Carbon Communities Challenge. The research and evaluation element of this programme is being part-funded by Sciencewise.

After open competition, 20 communities have been awarded around £500,000 each to pay for things like solar panels, micro-hydro, insulation, electric vehicles and other bits of kit. What's unusual is that the grants are going to community organisations or local authorities, and include finance for rolling loan funds owned by social enterprises. Another important feature is the emphasis on engagement and learning. Sciencewise is funding facilitators to work with the communities to help them engage with people beyond the usual suspects: using some of the approaches outlined in previous 'Engaging People' columns. The

www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk
Big Energy Shift
www.bigenergyshift.org.uk
Low Carbon Communities Challenge
<http://ow.ly/1FBek>

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