Research Briefing: Citizen Engagement on the Environment

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The Government has committed itself to an ambitious environmental agenda in its 25 Year Environment Plan (25YEP), with a vision to 'help the natural world regain and retain good health'. Based on this work, the Government has also drafted its first Environment Bill in 20 years. These actions come at a moment in time when the UK also leaves the EU and gains more direct responsibilities for environmental policy. Developing environmental policy in this context is a complex task. However, these are also opportunities that would benefit from direct engagement with a range of stakeholders including citizens in navigating these challenges. In order to inform and achieve the Government's objectives, policy development, implementation and delivery will require good understanding of public attitudes, values and behaviours.

This study sought to explore and understand citizen's views and priorities in relation to the environment with reference the 25YEP as well as examine the evidence base on citizen engagement in environmental policy making in the UK.

Key findings

1. Our scoping review suggested that publics conceptualise the environment in multiple ways, rather than through a universal definition, and that people tend to prioritise environmental issues that are local to them rather than at larger spatial scales. There are of course exceptions to this, such as climate change which has a high profile among the public. It also identified a range of factors that influence peoples' environmental attitudes including: the information they have access to, their own personal experiences and the severity and proximity of an issue, levels of environmental concern and perceptions of personal efficacy, cost and convenience. What follows empirically demonstrates and adds to a number of these points.

2. Participants in all our fieldwork demonstrated awareness of a wide range of environmental issues and had a strong sense of current threats to the environment. Particular priorities emerged in the Public Dialogues on clean air and water, protecting ecosystems and natural spaces and reducing waste and carbon emissions.

3. The public also saw the environment as valuable: both in its own right (intrinsic value) and for the benefits it provides (functional value), including tangible services, such as air and water, and less tangible benefits for mental health and wellbeing.

4. In addition to themes of intrinsic value and function, many tended to view the environment through a harm reduction lens which often went hand in hand with no clear sense of what steps individuals could take to tackle issues. This indicates the importance of how issues and future actions are framed, and the need to emphasise the agency people can have in making positive impacts on the issues they care about.

5. The public is made up of a range of groups with different values and beliefs driving their environmental attitudes. Even where priorities may be similar, the framings beneath these differ. Factors including environmental worldviews, local and personal experiences, social norms and proximity to issues were all influential. The implications here include accepting that some policy decisions will not be compatible with all members of the public with differentiation likely to be required to speak across different values and beliefs. For example, participants who held an eco-centric worldview did not think we should prioritise human need for housing over the environment and saw natural habitats as of equal value to human homes.

6. The topics selected for our exercises on creating future visions for the environment were those relating to personal experience and context as well as concern for the severity of the issue. People were aware of the interrelationship between different issues and grappled with the some of the associated trade-offs. However, in some cases trade-offs were more restricted to general attitudes to an issue (e.g. simplifying the equation as investment in foreign aid not being investment in the environment) as they did not have specific policy propositions to consider. This suggests it would be valuable to design bespoke work on tangible options or anticipated trade-offs in order to build public input on acceptability or implementation.

7. In achieving change, participants wanted to see government play a leading role on securing environmental futures but were also looking for specific actions individuals could implement alongside greater public understanding. Regulatory or compliance based policy levers were favoured for business and other stakeholders, but that they should also be applied fairly and with transparency was important. There was also a call for greater public participation in decision-making.

8. From the fieldwork that occurred after March 2020, there was a sense that the circumstances of the pandemic had raised more opportunities than challenges for the environment itself. Participants thought changes to lifestyle, such as reduced travel, had led to positive environmental consequences such as improved air quality and the improved presence of wildlife. This demonstrated for some, that it is possible for individuals and businesses to change to more pro-environmental behaviours as well as for governments to encourage or enforce large scale behaviour change.

9. Our research has demonstrated that the public are willing to engage on environmental issues, are knowledgeable on, and care about, a wide range of topics. The proximity and localisation of issues was helpful in aiding discussion, but experts also helped to provide technical input and widen perspectives. Different engagement methods have been

important in enabling depth and breadth of discussion using non-talk and text-based formats to explore public priorities.

10. We have generated evidence that underscores the importance of dialogue between different kinds of stakeholders, with all benefitting from a better understanding of issues from others' perspectives. We have also identified alignment between citizen and governmental priorities on clean air and water, protecting ecosystems and natural spaces and reducing waste and carbon emissions make these good next candidates for further public engagement.

Background

This Defra funded study focused on public attitudes, values and priorities for environmental policy making with reference to the 25YEP, and the potential there could be for an ongoing or gradually expanding programme of citizen engagement in future implementation. This briefing is aimed primarily at national level governmental departments and bodies with responsibility for, or an interest in, the implementation of the 25YEP and how public participation can help achieve this. It is also of relevance to local government and many non-governmental organisations that wish to use participatory or deliberative methods to collaboratively identify issues and actions on a range of environmental issues.

The research consisted of a scoping review – which contained an evidence review and the results of two questions fielded on the NatCen panel in February/March 2019 - and a 12-month programme of citizen engagement using two methods, Distributed Dialogue and Public Dialogue.

A *Distributed Dialogue* is a decentralised approach to deliberation with the aim to develop dispersed ongoing, embedded discussions on a given policy issue. We held three Distributed Dialogues as part of three public events in Bristol, Liverpool and Plymouth, intended to support conversations on the environment with three target groups; young people, ethnic minority populations and people living in urban deprived areas respectively. Data was collected from 1500 members of the public through these events from July-September 2019, and two online workshops in August 2020.

A *Public Dialogue* is a format for members of the public to interact with subject matter specialists, stakeholders and policy makers, through a series of workshops over the course of at least two days. They provide in-depth insight into the views, concerns and aspirations of citizens on a given issue. We held three two day Public Dialogues with members of the public in London, Hull and Chesterfield in February and March 2020. We also reconvened 23 of these participants for a final online workshop in June 2020 where their findings were also discussed with government stakeholders.

We have produced a full report of the scoping review, one report on the fieldwork findings and developed a practice guide aimed at commissioners and policy makers outlining a range of dialogue based approaches suitable to policy development. This project was also evaluated, and a summary report produced for Defra.

Findings

The two methods we used for our qualitative work were shaped by the people we wanted to engage and the depth in which we wanted to explore their views. Overall, the research reached a group of citizens in England who were broadly reflective of the population, being selected through a robust sampling approach which prioritised the following demographic characteristics: age, gender and ethnicity. participants also reflected the wider population in terms of levels of interest on environmental issues.

Public Attitudes and Priorities on the Environment

Participants in this research demonstrated awareness of a wide range of environmental issues. The public also had a strong sense of current threats to the environment. People's top priorities for environmental issues in this context tended to be those that were well established threats (e.g. plastics and the need to reduce waste) and those considered wide-reaching and therefore of profound significance (such as climate change or preserving wildlife). In the Public Dialogues, participants were invited to identify specific areas of the environment they thought were most important and this included clean air and water, protecting ecosystems and natural spaces and reducing waste and carbon emissions.

Across our fieldwork, most of the goals in the 25YEP were covered by the top priorities that emerged, with only two exceptions: drought and coastal erosion and enhancing biosecurity and managing exposure to chemicals. Whilst this demonstrates broad awareness with the general public about environmental concerns, it raises questions about the things that matter to Defra that the public might not know about or be so well informed on. It also suggests there would be value in taking what we know from issues that are successfully in the public consciousness (e.g. plastics) and thinking about how to apply them to other issues.

We intended the research to include people with a range of levels of awareness and interest in environmental issues – and with the Public Dialogues used a screening questionnaire to capture this. Despite some instances where participants started from different points, our work demonstrates they did care profoundly about environmental issues. This potentially indicates that when given the opportunity to frame their views as place based and locally relevant, environmental issues and questions are more personal and levels of interest more thoughtful.

In addition, it may be that some participants did not initially consider some of the issues they care about to be environmental, without the opportunity to reflect and make connections through discussion There was also evidence of people discussing the environment in a more relational way, focusing on the intrinsic value of natural places and our responsibility to look after them.

Despite a mixture of discussion, it is clear from our findings that for many, the environment is commonly understood through a narrative of threat, issue or damage which appears overwhelming or too hard to tackle as individuals – or indeed the nature of the threat too abstract – to translate in to being a priority for action. This could be a useful focus for policy makers in terms of moving away from environmental issues through a concern frame to an action frame.

Factors influencing environmental attitudes

The public is made up of a range of groups with different values and beliefs. Our analysis suggests there are three broad groups based on our participants' underlying motivations for making changes in their behaviour in relation to the environment:

- making change now, driven by an urgency or perception that change needs to happen now for them to experience the benefits of it;
- making change for future generations, driven by the desire to leave the planet in a better place for their children or grandchildren;
- making changes for people you will never meet, motivated by more intrinsic values that making changes is the right thing to do particularly for those who are impacted by environmental issues at home and internationally.

Whilst this should not be read as a definitive segmentation, it does call attention to the need for differentiation in approaching policy development; even where priorities may be similar, the framings beneath these differ.

Our findings also highlight that the environment is fundamentally situated in the public's everyday lives. The role of local and personal experiences in influencing attitudes towards the environment suggests that this should be an important first focus for policy work. This may appear initially at odds with a global issue like climate change but taps directly into people's sense of self-efficacy and the extent to which they feel they can do something about environmental issues; this in turn varies according to factors like income levels, personal experience and how they understand the issues at hand. This means that many people are acutely aware of the need for change and are keen to do more – but don't always know what steps to take. Participants themselves identified the opportunity here for 'quick wins' in some areas based on small personal changes, such as reusable coffee cups.

Similarly, people demonstrated values – such as becoming a more sustainable society – as important to them. They were critical about wasteful behaviours (e.g. food, clothing and electronic devices) and in some cases showed awareness of how to behave in an environmentally friendly way. Social norms around sustainability for example, a collective dislike of waste and being critical of a 'throwaway' society, had a strong influence on participants at the Public Dialogues. This suggests that it may also be possible to raise support/action for other policy issues through appealing to norms like these.

Through our fieldwork we have been able to illuminate the importance of needing different approaches and messaging for different groups of publics as well as highlighting the prominence of personal or affective dimensions to their environmental attitudes. This was also a finding raised in our scoping review in which we pointed to the large body of quantitative and mixed method research that links people's attitudes about nature and the environment to theories about basic human values and worldviews[1]. We think bringing these together through work that can segment groups further on cultural value lines would be promising here.

Visions for 2045

In our Public Dialogues, participants chose policy areas from which to develop visions, which covered many of the areas of the 25YEP. These cut across four themes: public awareness and education, sustainability and preservation of the environment, environmental change and quality of the environment.

In the Distributed Dialogues, participants were given scenarios to explore in their 'future utopias'. In developing or exploring future visions, people demonstrated awareness of the complexity of different aspects of the environment and that what might be favourable for the climate (e.g. switching to renewables), might have negative consequences on plant and animal life.

With respect to the future prompted by the context of Covid-19, as with the above, participants across engagements were keen that this might be a moment of change and an opportunity for society to prioritise social and economic changes that are pro-environmental. More widely, lockdown demonstrated people's capacity to radically shift behaviour in the case of a perceived and real threat that was close to them and were accepting of government intervention to do so.

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[1] See p25 of our scoping review. Relevant references include Schwartz, Cieciuch et al., 2012; Rose, 2013; Braito, Böck, et al., 2017.

Achieving Change

In the creation or deliberation on future visions and scenarios, participants discussed who might need to act and in what ways to achieve change on the issues identified and policy levers available to government were a particular focus.

On the whole participants were not keen on bearing personal costs – such as increases to the cost of living - and had clear views on responsibility. As a result, there was clear appetite for government to take leadership on these areas and it was a feature of one strand of our dialogue work to explore what mechanisms government could use in shaping future policy. Whilst this could be a function of how the problem is designated by the public – with those issues seen as very large or complex perceived as too difficult for individuals to tackle, it also speaks to the view that systemic action is required. Whilst people were keen to see government take a leading role to help change happen, they also ascribed value to holistic and participatory processes of decision making and ensuring that the public get a say on the issues that affect them. Participants were also concerned that any policies should not have disproportionate impacts on lower income groups, and for sustainable lifestyles to be affordable and accessible to all groups in society.

Across the board in their discussions on policy levers, participants favoured legislation as it was perceived to be an effective tool in ensuring that change would happen. This was driven by the view that legislation can change behaviours as most people tend to follow laws. This assumption related to personal experience as participants referred to examples such as the plastic carrier bag charge. Participants also liked the fact that laws could be targeted i.e. introduced in relation to specific policy areas where change is needed. Participants were also reassured by the fact that compliance with legislation can be regulated by enforcement bodies.

Consequently, those approaches, such as policy statements, convening or voluntary agreements were viewed with more scepticism as, beyond a show of intention, participants felt without a mechanism to ensure compliance they might be limited in their effectiveness. In the main on these points, participants had most of their discussion on policy levers as they applied to business, industry and similar stakeholders, rather than themselves as subject to many of them. However, infrastructure stood out as an area that did speak to the public. Participants thought new technologies and changes in behaviour, for example the switch to electronic cars, were needed to make a difference.

Within these discussions there was some appreciation of the potential decisions and trade-offs required in any subsequent policy making and we learned that the public found some potential routes to change more acceptable than others. That decisions were fair was part of this, both in terms of those responsible playing their part, but also that inequalities weren't deepened as a result. Another important factor was transparency. When discussing the idea of a 'green tax' for example, participants were concerned that it should be clear how the income from the tax would be used to improve the environment.

We also sought to understand how the public could or would balance environmental issues when contrasted with other priorities. People's perspectives here were not uniform and there was a general level of understanding that many environmental issues are interlinked to other areas of policy. One area for discussion was the balance between preservation of green spaces and house building. People had split views over which should be prioritised, and it provoked much discussion. In contrast, people were more uniform in their view of the need to prioritise funding for health (the NHS), even it if meant reducing support for the environment. This view arose despite many

participants talking positively about the benefits between nature and health and wellbeing. This point was re-visited in discussions held during the pandemic, which is likely to have influenced views on short-term priorities and a narrower focus on the health service.

Future Engagement with the Public

This research has demonstrated people are willing to engage on environmental issues, are knowledgeable on and care about various topics. There is appetite for learning about and grappling with difficult issues and choices and the principles and approaches that people took in doing so here indicate how this can lead to useful policy insight.

Making use of a variety of engagement approaches has proved important in demonstrating that policy relevant public engagement can be achieved within different parameters of budget, timeline and scope. As always, these parameters should be selected to be purpose dependent.

Our first round of distributed dialogues had broad reach in terms of numbers and target groups. Our Public Dialogues generated depth and specificity and enabled participants to engage with experts and policy makers to help shape their views and inform their visions. The second round of distributed dialogues also helped to show that pre-designed tasks delivered in a modest timescale are an effective way to put people in control to respond to policy related questions, and there were overlaps in findings across these forms. We have also been able to use online methods, which now also offer further logistical opportunities to involving the public at scale.

Our methods have also allowed us to reflect on the role of expert knowledge in supporting citizens to engage with environmental issues. In the Public Dialogues in particular – as well as the question and answer sessions, there were informal interactions between experts and participants when developing 'visions' for the top priority areas. Here, experts' knowledge helped shaped participants' understanding of these priorities, and in some cases influenced what they decided to focus on. For example, one group chose to explore household emissions after learning they are one of the main causes of carbon emissions in the UK. These examples illuminate the fact that access to expert knowledge is important for ensuring that the public can develop well informed opinions and decisions in their everyday lives.   Engaging in discussions with other citizens also led participants to consider new perspectives.

We experienced some limitations with data capture in the trialling of Distributed Dialogues, but as we have demonstrated with this report – mixing engagement methods has been important in enabling depth and breadth of discussion and using non-talk and text based formats to explore public priorities. We saw a call from some participants in the distributed dialogues to use the arts and music for example to translate policy messages. This strand of work has also enabled a reach that would have been too costly to achieve using Public Dialogue on the same scale. Our mix of methods has also illustrated that where you ask the public to 'start' before they offer their views can be powerful and offer a range of entry points to dialogue.

We also heard from people that they want to see greater public participation in decision-making, and they are ready to get involved. Participants thought a wider diversity of voices was needed in these processes and government should give consideration as to how to make this easier for people. In one example, a participant shared their difficulty of trying to respond to a Defra consultation on a levy on cutlery, straws and stirrers and *"despite two degrees in science"* they found they couldn't complete their responses because the level was too expert.

On balance we believe our work has underscored the importance of dialogue between different kinds of stakeholders, with all benefitting from a better understanding of issues from others' perspectives.

Conclusions

The issues the public thought most important were **clean air and water, protecting ecosystems and natural spaces and reducing waste and carbon emissions**. The similarities between many of the visions created and 25YEP goal areas here suggest that the government and public's priorities on these topics can be closely aligned and they may be good next candidates for engagement.

Key considerations for future development include:

- Localising and contextualising issues to support changes in awareness as well as mobilising 'action' rather than 'concern' frames in giving agency to citizens to change behaviour.
- Increased attention to how messages, choices and interventions can be differentiated across publics. We have captured a range of factors that drive attitudes and beliefs and think bringing these together through work that can segment groups further on cultural values lines would be promising here.
- Responding to the appetite for government to drive change at a systemic level and make use of a range of policy levers with key stakeholders.
- Invest in public participation that might vary in breadth, time, and cost as a means of identifying public attitudes on specific policy areas and to ensure diverse perspectives in decision making. Designating specific policy options or pathways for such engagement will be helpful in exploring public perceptions and feasibility of future choices.

Significant in drawing conclusions for this project has been that the end of our fieldwork period overlapped with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which also intersected with the end of the UK's membership to the EU. As such, 2020/21 has been a threshold between two quite radically different eras with respect to environmental policy, and by extension, public attitudes. This work then provides a timely and important contribution to informing policy at this key juncture as we sit at the 'starting line' for the next 10-30 years. By the same token, this means that the views expressed by participants risk becoming out of date quickly as their views and awareness could change considerably given the level of activity and profile of agendas such as Net Zero. For example, increased know-how, use and financial support to move to electric vehicles, could prompt shifts in attitudes or thinking about what is important or the likelihood of specific actions on such topics.   We also know the same might be true for the policy and technological context.

Whilst the pace of change might accelerate over the next period, we also see the opportunities this moment presents for opening a sustained and informed conversation with the public on environmental issues. We think our work should encourage Defra to continue to have conversations with the public and offers an illustration of the promise of these processes as tools for engagement on specific policy developments. Even in the absence of this, the possibility of public engagement, even in exploratory forms, can meet changing needs and times.

About the project

Citizen Engagement on the Environment (CEE) was a two-year project of research and citizen engagement that aimed to understand public attitudes, values and priorities and how publics could be involved in informing environmental policy making and implementation in the future. We also explored where citizens saw responsibility for change to sit, as well as how people see the role of

government, and the extent to which they are prepared to change their own behaviours on these issues.

This project was delivered in partnership with a range of research, public engagement and environmental experts. The project used a range of methods to complete the work:

- A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) that systematically explored both public views and attitudes on the environment and approaches to public engagement on environmental issues.
- This REA formed part of a wider scoping review, which also incorporated responses to two questions fielded on the NatCen Panel in February/March 2019 and wider references our expert partnership held on some of the points that emerged.
- A programme of Public Engagement training with 48 academic, policy and practitioner stakeholders who work on a wide range of environmental issues. These trained experts created the data collection approaches used in half of our Distributed Dialogues.
- Distributed Dialogues involving data collected from 1500 members of the public through three public events and two online workshops. A distributed dialogue is a decentralised approach to deliberation with the aim to develop dispersed ongoing, embedded discussions around a given policy issue.
- Public Dialogues with 86 members of the public in three locations in England and a final online workshop. Public Dialogues provide in-depth insight into the views, concerns and aspirations of citizens. Members of the public interact with subject matter specialists, stakeholders and policy makers, through a series of workshops over the course of at least two days.