

# Revisiting past participants

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How do experiences of public dialogues affect people's motivations to participate in future?

The aim of this project was to begin to develop a better understanding of whether and how public dialogues (and public participation more broadly) affect people's motivations to participate in the future and in turn what this means for policy makers and practitioners.

The project set out to explore two questions: What would the likely response rate be when re-contacting past participants after some years? And, what are the longer term impacts of participating in a public dialogue? Specifically, how does an individual's experience affect their willingness to participate in public policy and decision-making in the future?

## 01. Introduction

One of the key reasons why government undertakes public dialogue is to explore shifts in public perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. The shifts have been theorised by many academics and there is anecdotal evidence of such shifts as a result of participation in public dialogue. However gathering evidence of longer term shifts of public behaviour and attitudes is complex and challenging.

This small pilot project, funded by Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre (Sciencewise-ERC)<sup>1</sup> and carried out by Involve, has started the process of exploring some of these longer term shifts through researching the impacts of taking part in dialogue on people's willingness to participate in future.

Recent research<sup>2</sup> into individuals' experiences and perceptions of participation suggests that this is an important area for future work. It shows that experiences (personal and those of others known to an individual) are critical to determining whether people are willing to start and continue participating. However, while that research pointed towards the damaging effects of bad engagement it did not find whether the contrary is true – that a good experience will necessarily lead to more involvement.

The findings from this small pilot research project suggest that a positive experience of dialogue can create more trust and optimism about past and future participation, and a greater willingness to participate in future.

The most important elements attracting people to take part in future dialogues are around the importance of the topic, the opportunity to influence government, knowing how government has used the results of public input and what difference their input has made to government decisions. Getting good information and simply learning about the topic are also important motivators. We also found that participants share stories of their experience with others, and talk about the issues they discussed, making them important in widening awareness of public dialogue as well as of policy involving science and technology issues.

This short report summarises the pilot project, carried out with past participants of several Sciencewise-ERC funded dialogue projects. It concludes with some lessons for working with public participants in future dialogue projects and some thoughts about future research in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> Sciencewise-ERC is the UK's national centre for public dialogue in policy making involving science and technology issues. See <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> NCVO, IVR and Involve (2011) *Pathways through Participation*. London: NCVO, IVR and Involve. Available from: <http://www.pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/resources>

## 02. Background to this pilot project

Sciencewise-ERC has supported and co-funded over twenty public dialogue projects on areas of national Government policy making involving science and technology issues. These projects have usually involved short term contact with public participants; Sciencewise-ERC has not generally maintained contact with participants beyond the lifespan of the individual project in which they took part. However, during this time, past participants have been increasingly regarded as key stakeholders for Sciencewise-ERC and there is now interest in establishing ongoing contact with those who are interested in staying involved and in touch.

There is significant evidence from Sciencewise-ERC funded and other evaluations of public dialogue and engagement exercises that a large majority of public participants say the experience has made them more likely to get involved in the same sorts of events in future<sup>3</sup> (e.g. 95% of participants in the Drugs futures project and 92% of those involved in the Stem Cell dialogue<sup>4</sup>). Evaluations tend to be completed relatively soon after the end of dialogue projects, although there are some longer term studies<sup>5</sup>. In general, therefore, the

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<sup>3</sup> Involve (2010) *What the public say: Public engagement in national decision making*. London: Sciencewise. Available from: <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/What-the-public-say-report-FINAL-v4.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Warburton, Diane (2011). *Evaluation of Sciencewise-ERC. Final report*. London: BIS / Sciencewise-ERC. Available from [need to add weblink]

<sup>5</sup> Such as Bull, Richard, Petts, Judith and Evans, James (2008) 'Social learning from

longer term impacts of the experience of public dialogue on public participants is less well understood than the immediate impacts. In particular there is no comprehensive evidence of:

- How long this effect lasts; does it wear off and do people convert it into action?
- How broad the effect is; does it just apply to a specific issue and/or organisation?
- How multiple good experiences affect motivation; does it create a larger or longer lasting effect, and what happens to an individual's motivation if they have a subsequent bad experience?
- How people define a good experience; what ingredients need to be present for them to see the benefits and want to come back again?
- If people share the experience with others; does the old adage that 'a customer who gets good service will tell one person yet a customer who gets bad service will tell 10 people' apply to public engagement as well?

This small pilot project was established to begin to develop a better understanding of whether and how public dialogues (and public participation more broadly) affect people's motivations to participate in the future and in turn what this means for policy makers and practitioners. It set out to explore two questions:

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public engagement: dreaming the impossible?', in *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, Vol 51, No 5, September 2008.

1. What would the likely response rate be when re-contacting past participants after some years?
2. What are the longer term impacts of participating in a public dialogue? Specifically, how does an individuals' experience affect their willingness to participate in public policy and decision-making in the future?

### 03. Methodology

Participants from three public dialogues co-funded by Sciencewise-ERC, who had agreed to be contacted again as part of the original evaluation process, were re-contacted and asked to complete a short survey.

Before re-contacting the participants, the data protection implications of doing so were reviewed. It was determined that the research was consistent with data protection legislation, because:

- The data was originally collected for a legitimate reason (i.e. following up the evaluation of the dialogue projects).
- Only those participants who had explicitly consented to further contact as part of the evaluation of the dialogue projects were re-contacted.
- The research constituted a long-term evaluation of the dialogue projects and was therefore consistent with the reason individuals provided their data.

The three dialogue projects took place in 2007 and were:

- Drugsfutures – on issues around brain science, addiction and drugs.
- Dialogue on hybrid and chimera embryos for research – on the use

of human / animal embryos for research

- ScienceHorizons – on a range of potential future scientific and technological developments.

Evaluation questionnaires from these events requested permission for further contact and contact details. A total of 487 questionnaires were reviewed in order to collect the contact details of those who had agreed to further contact from Diane Warburton, the projects' original evaluator and now Sciencewise-ERC Evaluation Manager.

310 people in total had agreed on their evaluation questionnaires to being contacted again, with 195 providing email addresses. An email was sent to each of these 195 past participants inviting them to complete a short survey to follow up on the original evaluation. To encourage completion, the survey was kept short in length (with just 8 mostly tick box questions) and was online, allowing participants to submit responses with minimal time and effort required.

77 of the 195 invitation emails failed to be delivered on the first attempt. The evaluation forms of each of these were rechecked to identify possible mistakes or different interpretations of individuals' handwriting. Subsequently, a further 19 invitation emails were sent, of which 14 failed to be delivered.

In total, 123 invitation emails were successfully sent to (though not necessarily received or read by) past participants. A second reminder email was circulated a week after the first round of emails to maximise responses. The survey was open for responses for approximately three weeks in total.

## 04. Findings

### 3.1. Re-contacting past participants

The findings of the research suggest that a significant majority of participants will agree to further contact, at least for the purposes of evaluation. In total, 487 evaluation questionnaires were returned from the three public dialogue projects. Of these, it seemed initially that 71% (347) of the questionnaires included permission from the participant to being re-contacted by the evaluator. However, as some individuals took part in more than one event for a project (i.e. they were involved in outreach or reconvened events), and so returned more than one evaluation form, the number of different individuals who agreed to being re-contacted by the evaluator was 310 (about 64%)<sup>6</sup>.

During this project, we have identified several challenges associated with re-contacting past participants of public dialogues after five years. Only 5% of past participants (16) who agreed to be re-contacted were successfully re-contacted *and* went on to complete the survey. *Table 1* sets out the attrition rate at each stage of the process of re-contacting the past participants. It shows that 60% of

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<sup>6</sup>This figure is an estimate as participants who did not agree to being re-contacted by the evaluator did not give their names on their evaluation forms. It is therefore not possible to know exactly how many of these participants returned more than one evaluation form and, consequently, it is not possible to determine accurately the total number of individual people who returned evaluation forms and so determine a percentage of those who agreed to further contact.

those who agreed to further contact for evaluation purposes at the end of their active involvement in a dialogue project could not be contacted for the purposes of this pilot project, either due to an email address not being provided or emails failing to deliver.

Possible reasons for invitation emails failing to deliver include:

- The email account being closed.
- A mistake in the email address provided.
- A mistake in the interpretation of the email address (questionnaires were handwritten and the writing was not always clear).

Invitation emails were successfully delivered to – though not necessarily received or read by – 123 past participants, of whom 13% (16) completed the survey. This response rate is low but not surprising, particularly considering it was five years since they took part in the project.

In addition, successful delivery of an invitation email does not guarantee that the email account continues to be in use or is checked regularly. Plus a number of individuals provided work or education email addresses which may no longer be current.

Finally, individuals may have received the email (and possibly even have been willing to stay in touch with Sciencewise-ERC in future), but were not willing or able to complete the survey. Indeed, emails were received from a further two individuals commenting that they could not remember participating well enough to complete the survey.

<b>Table 1. Rate of attrition at each stage of the process of re-contacting</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage of previous stage</b>	<b>Percentage of total</b>
Individuals who agreed to further contact (Total)	310		
Individuals who agreed to further contact and provided an email address	195	63%	63%
Invitation emails successfully delivered	123	63%	40%
Responses to survey	16	13%	5%

Of those who completed the survey, there was a relatively strong appetite for ongoing contact and involvement. 14 of the 16 respondents said that they were happy to be contacted by Sciencewise-ERC again in the future and, when asked what would encourage them to take part in a dialogue in the future, 13 signalled that ‘The opportunity to take part in follow-on discussions’ would be important to them. A few of the respondents also made use of the any other comments box to signal that they would be keen to be involved again (see *box 1*)

However, it is difficult to assess the extent of this appetite beyond the group who responded to the survey because, as the respondents were self-selecting (i.e. they chose to give permission to be re-contacted and completed the survey), it may be that they are more inclined towards ongoing participation than other participants.

**Box 1**

*“I have not been contacted about more surveys, I was interested for all the reasons above. Happy to be contacted again.”*

*“I run a public science group and would welcome contacts/speakers to come and speak to us. Maybe alongside a current debate or another issue. Then maybe one person could represent us at a discussion/panel/event.”*

*“Thanks for the opportunity. I would love to take part again if possible.”*

### 3.2. Individuals' experiences of public dialogues and the effect on their future participation

The low number of responses to the survey compared to the total number of participants means that the findings from the survey cannot be taken as representative of all participants in, or beyond, the three public dialogue projects. That said, the responses may still provide a useful insight into how

the experience of participating in a public dialogue can affect an individual's future participation.

The results show that the respondents enjoyed the experience of taking part in the public dialogue. To the question, 'Did you enjoy taking part in the Dialogue?', 9 out of 16 responded 'Very much so', with a further 6 responding 'Somewhat' (see *table 2*).

Table 2. Did you enjoy taking part in the dialogue?	Number of respondents
Very much so	9
Somewhat	6
A little	1
Not at all	0

Significantly, 14 out of 16 of the respondents said that the experience had made them more likely to take part in a similar activity in the future, with the remaining two respondents saying they were no more or less likely

because they are already involved (see *table 3*). This echoes previous research into participation which suggests that a good experience is critical to sustained involvement.

Table 3. Has your experience of taking part in this dialogue made you more or less likely to take part in a similar activity in the future?	Number of respondents
Significantly more likely	6
More likely	8
No more or less likely - I am already involved	2
No more or less likely - I am not interested	0
Less likely	0
Significantly less likely	0

The survey results also reinforce the importance of story-telling – the sharing of experiences – to participation. All of the respondents reported that they had spoken to other people about their experience of taking part, with 7 out of 16 reporting

they had told more than 5 people (see *table 4*). This suggests that an individual’s experience of taking part could also influence the propensity of their social network to take part in future activities.

<b>Table 4. Did you tell other people about your experience of taking part in the dialogue?</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
No	0
Yes, 1 or 2 people	3
Yes, 3 to 5 people	6
Yes, more than 5 people	7

The findings show that participating in the dialogues did lead some on to other activities (*see table 5*), with 8 saying they had spoken to others about the issue after the dialogue, and 4 saying they had found out more about the issue afterwards. However,

only two respondents reported having looked for other opportunities to get involved in other ways on the same issue, and only one sought opportunities to participate on other issues.

<b>Table 5. Did taking part lead you to do other things?</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
No	5
Yes, I found out more about the issue after the dialogue	4
Yes, I spoke to others about the issue after the dialogue	8
Yes, I looked for other opportunities to get involved in other ways on the same issue	2
Yes, I looked for other opportunities to get involved on other issues	1
Yes, I kept in touch with somebody I met while taking part	1

Several parts of the dialogue experience emerged as having been particularly important for the respondents (see *table 6*). Giving, hearing and sharing opinions and ideas with other participants and government came out particularly

strongly: ‘Hearing other people’s opinions’ and ‘Discussing my ideas with others’ were both selected by 11 respondents, while ‘Being able to give your opinion’ was selected by 10. By contrast, ‘Being paid the fee’ was only selected by 2 respondents.

<b>Table 6. What were the most important parts of the experience for you?</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
Learning about the issue	9
Meeting new people	1
Being paid the fee	2
Being able to give your opinion	10
Hearing other people’s opinions	11
Discussing my ideas with others	11
Feeling able to have an influence on Government policy	10
Taking part in an important national debate	11

As well as the opportunity to share opinions with others, the topic of the dialogue and the impact on government policy emerged as important aspects of participants’ experience. ‘Taking part in an important national debate’ and ‘Feeling able to have an influence on Government policy’ were selected by 11 and 10 respondents respectively.

These aspects also emerged as important factors in whether the respondents would take part in a dialogue in the future (see *table 7*). 14 said that a dialogue ‘being on an important subject’ would encourage them to take part in the future. Knowing ‘what difference the public input made to what the Government decided’ and ‘exactly how the Government used what the public said’ also emerged as particularly

critical, with 11 and 10 signalling these to be ‘very important’ respectively, which also reflects the findings of previous research<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> For example: NCVO, IVR and Involve (2011) *Pathways through Participation*. London: NCVO, IVR and Involve. Available from: <http://www.pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/resources>; and, Involve (2010) *What the public say: Public engagement in national decision making*. London: Sciencewise. Available from: <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/What-the-public-say-report-FINAL-v4.pdf>.

<b>Table 7. What would encourage you to take part in a dialogue in the future?</b>	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Very important or important</b>
It being on an important subject	7	7	14
Already having knowledge of the subject	2	7	9
Being given good information and briefing at the start	8	3	11
The opportunity to find out more about the subject	7	7	14
Getting paid a small fee and expenses	3	5	8
Minimal demands on your time (e.g. just 1 or 2 days of events)	5	7	12
Holding the events at the weekend	3	5	8
Afterwards, knowing exactly how the Government used what the public said	10	3	13
Afterwards, knowing exactly what difference the public input made to what the Government decided	11	3	14
The opportunity to take part in follow-on discussions	5	8	13

These responses demonstrate a much lower level of distrust and cynicism with these public dialogues than has been found with other public consultations<sup>8</sup>, suggesting that the positive experience of these public dialogues did have an effect on their willingness to trust past and future dialogues. However, some cynicism

was still apparent, with one respondent commenting:

*'It was nice to be asked my opinion although I have little faith in government taking any notice of anyone. They always do what they want to do anyway.'*

<sup>8</sup>Pathways through Participation (2011) *Local engagement in democracy*. London: NCVO, IVR and Involve.

The desire to learn was also a strong motivation, with 14 identifying 'The opportunity to find out more about the subject' as important, and 11 seeing 'Being given good information and briefing at the start' as important. By comparison, practical and logistical arrangements such as paying fees and expenses, or holding events at weekend (each seen by 8 as important) were the motivating factors for the lowest numbers of respondents. More important for this survey, 13 said 'The opportunity to take part in follow-on discussions' was important in encouraging them to take part in a dialogue in future.

## 05. Conclusions

The findings of this pilot project suggest that there is an appetite from some participants in these dialogues to maintain contact, and potentially to participate again. However, it has also uncovered some challenges associated with re-contacting participants, particularly after five years.

These findings do have some clear lessons for working with public participants in future dialogue projects, including:

- Giving all public participants in public dialogue projects funded by Sciencewise-ERC the opportunity to agree to continuing contact with Sciencewise-ERC after the project is completed.
- Encouraging participants to give their email address, as well as other contact details.
- Asking participants to write their contact details in block capitals.
- Adopting a one-letter-per-box entry field for contact details.
- Encouraging participants to give their personal email address, rather than a work or school one.

- Making contact as soon as possible after the dialogue, and giving participants an option to update their contact details.
- Providing participants with opportunities to join a group via a social network.
- Developing an ongoing relationship with people who agree to be re-contacted.

While the results of the survey cannot be taken as representative of the views of all participants in public dialogue projects, the findings do support previous research in a number of areas and provoke some interesting questions.

The findings show that, for these respondents:

- A positive experience of dialogue can create more trust and optimism about past and future participation activities and greater willingness to participate in future;
- Participants share stories of their experience with others, and talk to others about the issues they discussed, making them important in widening awareness of public dialogue as well as of the policy related to science and technology issues;
- The most important elements encouraging people to take part in future dialogues are around the importance of the topic, the opportunity to influence Government, knowing how Government has used the results of public input and what difference their input has made to Government decisions. In addition, getting good information and opportunities for learning more about the topic are important motivators.

Questions raised by the findings, that could be the focus of future research, include:

- Are intrinsic motivations (internal drivers) more powerful than extrinsic motivations (external drivers) in a) encouraging individuals to start participation, and b) encouraging them to keep participating?<sup>9</sup>
- Could or should the format of public dialogues be altered to encourage sustained participant interest and participation in an issue?
- Are these findings representative of the wider views of public participants in public dialogue projects? It would be very valuable to survey all public participants in public dialogue projects supported by Sciencewise-ERC after a period of time to further test these results and build up an evidence base of the longer term and wider impacts of these dialogues.

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[www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)

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<sup>9</sup> As discussed, for example, in Pink, D. (2011) *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books