

Case study: Drone usage

A public dialogue to establish the current level of understanding of the use of, and attitudes towards drones. This will inform how government should respond to the emergence of drones as an issue of public interest.

1. Background:

In recent years, commercial and recreational use of remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS) and small drones has increased in the UK due to technological advances and wider availability. Unmanned aircraft systems are no longer confined to military use and are becoming a reliable technology for civil and individual uses. Often, this wider use is by individuals with no training or knowledge of the regulations and permissions set out by the Civil Aviation Authority.



In April 2014, responding to the economic growth opportunities of the technology, the European Commission committed Europe to being a leader in the field whilst ensuring safe integration and sufficient public debate around the societal impact of their use.¹ In March 2015, the House of Lords' European Union Committee² endorsed the recommendation for public consultation and, in keeping with the recommendations of the EC and the European Union Committee, the Minister for Aviation at the DfT committed to a series of public dialogue events to help inform government policy.

The public dialogue applied to all forms of unmanned aircraft use in the UK (including by the military), but not to their military use overseas. The dialogue brought together five groups of between 25-30 people at workshops in Aberystwyth, Manchester, Newry, Salisbury and Stirling. They explored what the public participants knew and understood about drones and their current uses; expectations, hopes and fears about future use, with a particular focus on privacy, data protection and safety, and; what, if anything, the public would like to see done to respond to the issues raised. It did this through three facilitated workshops around the UK.

2. Impact

The public dialogue was evaluated as having had a positive impact on policy. It informed the Department for Transport's consultation on drones³. The consultation put forward a number of proposals, including some to develop a policy and regulatory framework to address the safety, security and privacy challenges and concerns that drones present⁴. On 22nd July

¹ European Commission. 2014. A new era for aviation opening the aviation market to the civil use of remotely piloted aircraft systems in a safe and sustainable manner.

² House of Lords European Union Committee. Civilian Use of Drones in the EU.

³ Department for Transport. 2016. Benefits of Drones to the UK economy.

⁴ Post-dialogue interview conducted with DfT Project Manager on 04/08/2017.

2017, the Government announced new regulations on the safe use of drones which required users to register themselves and sit a safety awareness test⁵.

The public dialogue also had wider impacts on stakeholders⁶. In post-dialogue interviews, commercial operators emphasized a major takeaway was the need for all operators to comply with current regulatory requirements and training needs. They also strengthened their commitment to be part of the Association of Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (ARPAS) and institute continued professional development. Police representatives suggested to evaluators that they now had more confidence in communicating with the public about their use of drones given the level of understanding established by the dialogue. The Insurance industry suggested that they would begin to work with other parties to begin to tackle some of the issues raised by the dialogue, including identification of operators and risk transfer. Research groups and universities suggested that the results of the public dialogue would inform future research areas into drone use, for instance in the tension between individual rights and the security benefits of drone use. Another wider impact was how it informed Nesta's workshops on city visions for drones, with Nesta Foresight Researcher, Richard Duffy saying this public dialogue was "A very informative study, the most thorough investigation of the public perception of drones I've seen to date."



Reflecting on the value of the dialogue, a DfT official commented "The public dialogue on drones was a valuable piece of research that helped us to understand public attitudes towards this emerging technology. Its findings were particularly useful in shaping the Department's 2016 consultation on drones."

3. Vital Statistics:

Commissioning body	Department for Transport, Ministry of Defence
Duration of process	December 2015 – February 2016
Number of public participants	118
Dialogue delivery contractor	TNS BMRB (now Kantar Public UK)
Evaluation contractor	White Ox

⁵ 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/drones-to-be-registered-and-users-to-sit-safety-tests-under-new-government-rules>

⁶ WhiteOx. 2016. Public Dialogue on Drones in the UK. Evaluation Report. Pg25.