



Evaluation of the Sounding Board dialogue on low-carbon heat technologies

Summary Report

March 2016

Diane Warburton
Sciencewise Evaluation Manager

SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction

In February 2016, Sciencewise ran a second pilot project to test an online Sounding Board model of public dialogue that could be established more quickly than the usual face-to-face workshop approach. This project was undertaken in partnership with the Committee on Climate Change (CCC), an independent statutory body tasked with advising the government on how to reduce carbon emissions.

The Sounding Board process

The Sounding Board in this case involved 17 participants in two separate online sessions – an initial information and introduction session on two weekday evenings for 45 – 60 minutes on 3rd and 4th February, followed by another session for 90 minutes on Saturday 6th February which was designed to enable more substantive deliberative discussions. The participants worked in two separate online groups for each session. Two analysts from the CCC attended each session to present information to support discussions, and to answer questions. Sciencewise designed, organised and facilitated the sessions and the project overall.

Recruitment of the public participants was limited to those living in urban, suburban or metropolitan areas (relevant to the technologies being discussed), and included a large proportion of homeowners (around half of the entire sample). The two groups of participants were drawn from two sources – half were drawn from past participants in dialogue projects supported by Sciencewise who had given their contact details; half were recruited by an external recruitment company. All but one of the past participants attended the two sessions (11 out of 12); only half of the specially recruited people attended either session (6 out of 12).

Participants were asked about the non-financial barriers that may affect the uptake of low-carbon heat technologies, such as heat pumps and heat networks, as well as what they thought some of the solutions to those barriers might be. This was explored in two sets of online sessions a week apart which used scenarios, participant polling, questions and answers, discussion and reflections.

The project started in mid-December 2015; headline findings were reported on 12 February (nine weeks after the start). The full report was drafted and completed by end of March 2016, with full details on the points raised by participants. The total budget was £27,791 including £2,875 for participant recruitment, £1,020 for incentives for participants (£60 each) and £868 for online platform costs.

The Sounding Board results

Generally, the CCC felt that the Sounding Board had not identified any big issues that they had missed before, but there were a number of useful insights from the sessions including:

- engaging with a cross-section of people and seeing how reactions changed and developed with additional information
- people generally wanted more communication of the direction of travel from Government, and for Government to lead by example
- more emphasis than expected on the practicalities of the technologies, including maintenance (who would do it etc) and disruption – and how important it was to have a whole package around the technology;
- what kind of information people want and need when considering taking up a low carbon technology;

- a divergence of views on the benefits and disadvantages of collective neighbourhood schemes: some were very positive about the benefits including lower costs, others distrusted centralised schemes and were reluctant to give up personal choice even if there was a cost saving.

Evaluation findings

A light touch evaluation included a survey with all participants (9 responses from 17 participants; 53%), as well as follow-up interviews with key stakeholders.

The feedback on the value and impacts of the project from the CCC analysts involved was generally positive, but with caveats about the small number of participants. It is still too early to identify specific policy impacts, although the CCC were clear about how they would use the results:

“The value will be in feeding into our thinking over the next nine months on the policy recommendations we are making to DECC later in the year on what needs to be taken forward to increase the take-up of energy efficiency options and low carbon heat options. Hopefully we will make better recommendations as a result and hopefully that will inform DECC and others in government. This will feed into that process and will help ensure that we have identified correctly the right issues and the relative strengths and importance of the issues for members of the public.” (CCC analyst)

“The key issue is that this is only a small number of people. You just have to accept that is a limitation of this kind of approach. It means that we will be very careful with the way we use the results. For us internally it is more useful for checking that we are considering the right kinds of issues as we develop the work in future.” (CCC analyst)

Impacts were felt to be most likely to be *“around shaping thinking and feeding into ideas generation ... to test out some of our thinking and also to ensure that we haven’t missed out anything obvious” (CCC analyst).*

The evaluation tested the different responses to the process from past participants (PP) and newly recruited (NR). Feedback from participants was largely very positive:

- Most PP respondents found the information provided sufficient, useful, fair and balanced; NR respondents struggled a little more with the information
- All felt they could contribute their views and have their say although, again, the NR respondents were less likely to agree ‘strongly’
- Most ‘strongly agreed’ that they were satisfied with the sessions: PP - 78%; NR 100%
- All said they were likely to get involved in these sorts of activities in future: 89% PP ‘agreed strongly’; 60% NR. However, 100% NR agreed strongly that they were more likely to get involved in online activities like this in future – they liked being able to get involved from home, without travel.

There were less positive responses around the likely influence of the sessions. Few expected, or in one or two cases wanted, their input to the sessions to make a difference to policy in this area:

- Although most felt their input *should* make a difference, not everyone agreed. One said: *“I would urge you to review the questions more thoroughly in future. I would be disturbed to think that the responses we gave to those questions would influence policy-making in any significant way”*. None ‘strongly agreed’ their input *would* make a difference (almost the only question to which none of the respondents ‘agreed strongly’).

- Several people said they looked forward to knowing what happened as a result: *"I look forward to hearing if our contributions have been of use"*. For example: *"Will be interested to read the report and see whether any of the suggestions we made get well promoted"*.
- All agreed that they had learnt something new as a result of taking part – both about the technology and about other people's views. One said they had learnt *"That there are a lot of diverse views on the subject that differ from mine for rational reasons."* Another said *"Hearing the diversity of other opinions on the subject made me reconsider my views on it."*
- Most said that taking part had affected their views, again on the technology and on hearing other people talk about the issues. Some had become more positive about the technological approach as a result, one or two were more negative.

Both CCC analysts involved said they would use the Sounding Board approach again, although both identified that the online process had less depth and was less flowing than it would have been in a room together. There was less interaction between the CCC analysts and the participants than there would have been in the same place.

"You would probably get to a greater level of depth and people feeding of one another if they were all sitting in the same room than this achieved; this was a notably lower level of engagement."

It was also more work than expected to really focus the questions for the sessions, and produce the information materials. On the plus side, there was genuinely useful input from participants, and attending the sessions took far less time than travelling.

"It must be a lot cheaper and lower cost to run and set up. It was also probably easier from the point of view of just the logistics which all seemed to work fairly well - rather than having to get everybody to a particular location and prepare presentations in advance."