



Valuing dialogue: economic benefits and social impacts

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Executive summary

Deliberative public dialogue¹ is increasingly accepted and valued as an important component of policy and decision-making, but it largely remains a niche activity among some public bodies. Rather than asking the question “*are there any reasons we should not engage in public dialogue on this issue?*” many policy and decision-makers often fail to ask whether it should be used at all. From a risk perspective people often appear unaware of the potential costs of not including a public dialogue, or doing it badly.

Part of the reason for not including public dialogue as part of the policy making toolkit is because formally measuring the value of public dialogue is fraught with difficulty. While it can give deep insights, from people and perspectives not generally accessed by traditional consultations and stakeholder engagement, the evidence that emerges is primarily qualitative. It is challenging to assess the significance of the insights obtained and to weigh them alongside other forms of evidence.

Quantitative evidence, especially if it can also be monetised, has long carried a higher status in policy and decision-making circles, particularly in cost-benefit analyses². However, the limitations of quantitative data are rarely highlighted and considered.

This paper has a different focus. We look at the question of ‘valuing dialogue’ from two perspectives.

The first is the cost of *not* doing dialogue. We describe a series of case studies which demonstrate the dangers and costs of failure to engage properly. Damaging outcomes, such as judicial reviews, social protests and U-turns or costly revisions that might have been avoided are outlined. We present five case studies to demonstrate these costs:

- **Radioactive Waste Management:** Over 15 years the Nuclear Industry Radioactive Waste Executive (Nirex) spent £200 million to examine the options and make recommendations for a deep geological disposal facility for radioactive waste. After the process was abandoned Nirex carried out a review of it with one of the main conclusions being that the work had been carried out in secret and did not involve stakeholders and therefore was not legitimate. It said a future process need to be open transparent and involve stakeholders, the public and experts. In response to this a new approach was launched with an emphasis on collaboration and voluntarism. Although, how to manage radioactive waste has not been solved this approach has progressed much further and at a much lower cost.
- **Judicial Review of the Government’s Energy Review:** After the 2006 Energy Review was published the Government lost a Judicial Review on the grounds that the consultation report that informed that report was procedurally flawed. An outcome of this decision was that the Government had to go through the consultation process again spending £2.4 million on the implementation and analysis stages of this. The Government accepted that it should have conducted a public consultation prior to reaching a policy decision on the future of nuclear power. The re-run of the consultation process included a good mix of processes including a written consultation process, a website for online responses, stakeholder events, and deliberative public dialogue events.
- **Judicial Review of the Feed-in Tariff consultation:** In this instance the Government sort to decrease the tariff rate for people who had installed solar panels. The problem was that it wanted to introduce this new tariff policy 2 weeks before the closing date of the consultation about the tariff rate. A Judicial Review ruled against the Government, and this decision was subsequently upheld by the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court. This is another example of not treating a public consultation seriously enough and the consequent costs of doing this not being identified.
- **Fracking protests in Balcombe:** The cost of policing the Balcombe protests was close to £4 million. There was criticism about how the public consultation over proposed shale gas exploration had been handled. It was felt that the system in place allowed operators to meet all of their statutory requirements without factoring into their activities the views of local communities. Post-Balcombe

¹ We mainly use the term ‘dialogue’ in this paper to describe a two-way conversation between the public and public bodies. While much dialogue, particularly the type supported by Sciencewise is deliberative in nature there are many other forms of public engagement. The findings in this paper are also relevant to these other public engagement approaches.

² The cost of carrying out public dialogue can be also assessed, including through a cost-benefit analysis approach, but it would likely be too expensive and probably of limited use.

Sciencewise supported a dialogue to explore people's views about how the public should be engaged when it comes to fracking. If this type of engagement had been in place at the outset then it is reasonable to think that the scale of the protests might not have been so large and cost incurred by the police lower.

- **Department of Health's 'Ways to Wellbeing' project:** In contrast to the previous example this one shows how public dialogue can add new knowledge to the evidence base and avoid money being wasted. This dialogue informed thinking about a set of public health messages which were to be part of a messaging campaign. Participants in the dialogue were very clear about what they felt were the weaknesses in the intended approach. The dialogue outcomes supported policy decision to avoid the launch of the campaign. If it had gone ahead it would likely have been along similar lines to an earlier healthier lifestyle campaign that cost £10 million.

The second part of this paper looks at the challenge of assessing the value of activities that are not monetisable, and often unquantifiable, and the impact this has on the perceived validity of public dialogue for policy making. This is tied up with the question of assessing the social impact of policies and decisions, and it raises this wider issue with which assessment of the value of public dialogue is caught up. Two case studies are presented to illustrate current thinking in this area:

- **Framework for understanding the social impacts of policy and their effects on wellbeing – for Defra:** This highlights that while there are many benefits that can to some extent be measured in market prices, there are also many that cannot. An example of the former would be the benefit that education can have on earning potential, and the latter would be the effects of education on reducing crime. The Social Impacts Taskforce specifically sought to address the inclusion of non-market impacts, particularly their effects on wellbeing, such as changes to attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviour.
- **An overview of social impact assessment – for Marine Scotland:** This draws on the Defra work but says it does not represent the full spectrum of social impact. What is missing are factors like the importance of culture, history, tradition and '*sense of place*'. In a dialogue like the Marine Scotland one where what is being discussed is the development of renewable energy people's sense of place is likely to be something which local communities will prioritise as an important aspect of value as well as the usual, and also high priority, measures such as employment.

Public dialogue may help policy making by breaking the deadlock of vested interests among stakeholders and bringing important new evidence to inform decisions. It also brings openness, transparency and more democracy to decision-making and can save significant amounts of money. But if it is to achieve this, policy makers need to recognise, understand and value the importance of factoring social impacts into policy considerations and the role of public dialogue in identifying those social impacts.

Introduction

The use of public dialogue in policy development by public bodies may have become more commonplace in recent years, but it has not reached anything like its potential. It is still not a default component of policy making in instances where public input can and should add important evidence, or where there is considerable public interest in an issue. Growth in its use continues to face barriers, including the view that dialogue involves a significant upfront investment of time and money for sometimes intangible benefits. A result of this is that dialogue can be seen as an optional extra rather than a core ingredient of how good policy in many instances should be made.

Partly this is because it is often difficult to isolate exactly what the dialogue brought to the policy making process. There is often a view that the value of dialogue is diminished because the policies and decisions might well have been the same if dialogue was not one of the ingredients. One of the aims of this paper is to challenge that thinking and to assert that dialogue can be a key ingredient to good policy making. If it is missing the costs can be very high. Where dialogue does not happen, or is badly executed, the result is often poorer quality decisions, expensive protests and legal challenges. In an era of open policy, public dialogue should be front and centre, of equal billing to other evidence gathering processes, not an occasional special guest. This is not to say that every policy making activity should include public dialogue, but that it should be considered and used more than is currently the case. Where the public have a strong interest in a policy or where the public voice can bring something extra to the evidence base is when dialogue should be considered.

This paper will therefore focus on the costs of *not* doing dialogue, or of doing dialogue badly. It will highlight instances when this has resulted in challenges such as Judicial Reviews (JRs) and protests. Where comparable examples are available it will set out the difference that dialogue might have made to a particular policy. Nevertheless, while good dialogue may help to avoid costs resulting from legal challenge or protests it cannot claim to eliminate the risk of such costs entirely. Amongst these case studies is an example of where a public dialogue clearly saved the commissioning body money. If this dialogue had not happened it is evident that a large sum would have been spent on a policy which probably would not have achieved its objectives.

The second part of this paper will examine the related challenge of identifying and weighting social impacts that cannot be easily quantified or 'monetised', a particular challenge for public dialogue. It will explore what is meant by social impacts and how these can be assessed. When it comes to informing policy development or evaluating post-implementation impact, it should be imperative that all aspects of impact are identified and included in both the assessment of policy options and evaluation of outcomes. If what is included is only that which can be quantified, and preferably monetised then the policy is unlikely to truly reflect what is valued by all those who have a stake in the policy. The resulting policy choice has the risk of being suboptimal and when it is implemented it may have unanticipated and unwelcome consequences.

Background

Before embarking on the journey through a range of costly policy mistakes, it is worthwhile setting out why the first part of this paper focuses on what happens when dialogue is missing or of poor quality, rather than the more usual approach of trying to pin down what impact dialogue has on policy making. Rather than starting with cause and seeing what effect it had, this paper does the reverse – it takes the effect and traces it back to see whether no dialogue, or poor dialogue might be a contributory factor.

Approaches to evaluating public dialogue have, in the past, mainly focused on looking at the dialogue process itself. They have sought to capture an accurate description of what happened and identify the benefits and impacts of that engagement for different audiences (such as the public, policy makers and other stakeholders). Finally, they identify what worked, what didn't, and the lessons for future practice. This type of process evaluation is essential, but it is only a part of the picture of assessing the value of public dialogue.

More recently, evaluations had increasingly also examined whether the outcomes from the dialogue had an impact on the policy making process and the final decisions that were made. One way of doing this is to identify whether themes from the dialogue are clearly reflected in the final policy. Although, it should be noted that the dialogue might primarily confirm what policy makers were already thinking and not contribute substantial new knowledge. Nevertheless, a dialogue which confirms existing or emergent thinking can be extremely valuable in giving policy and decision-makers the confidence to move forward.

In her paper Evidence Counts³ Diane Warburton helpfully suggests a range of impacts that should be looked for when seeking to identify if dialogue was an active ingredient in the policy making process. Has dialogue resulted in:

- Anything new being **added**?
- Anything being **removed**?
- Anything being **raised in priority**?
- Anything being **lowered in priority**?
- **Greater confidence** in specific proposals that were contentious, and thus going ahead?
- **Less confidence** in specific proposals that were contentious, and thus not going ahead?

A third role for evaluation is to follow the policy process further and examine policy implementation. Did the policy achieve what was intended? How far did it manage to reach its potential? Did the dialogue ingredient of the policy making process improve the quality of the final policy outcome once implemented? To answer these questions we need to know: (i) that dialogue did inform the shape of the final policy; and (ii) that we can contrast the final policy which includes an impactful dialogue ingredient with a similar policy from which it was missing.

Therefore, the first part of this paper does not try to trace the dialogue journey from the public initially discussing an issue, through tracking its impact in the latter stages of the policy making process and then to implementation. Instead it concentrates on policies that have already been implemented, focusing on examples in which the dialogue ingredient was either missing or of poor quality. It then identifies the potential and actual costs of not including that deliberative public voice.

The paper then covers a closely related missing piece of the jigsaw that covers the policy options assessment process and the evaluation of implementation outcomes. We need to try to gain a full understanding not just of the likely economic impacts of the policy and other outcomes that are easily measurable or 'monetisable', but also of its softer and often more elusive social impacts. These social impacts are often long term whereas the economic ones may be of shorter duration. Understanding the likely impact of a policy in which dialogue has been an element needs to cover both monetisable and non-monetisable values, as the real value of public dialogue is often to be found in its 'softer' qualitative outcomes. This paper explores what is meant by the non-monetisable aspects of social impact and whether there are approaches and measures we can use to capture it.

The difficulty of measuring value

The further away one moves from the point at which public dialogue happened the harder it usually is to measure the value and impact of that dialogue activity. Partly this is because so many other ingredients come into the policy making process and then into implementation. In parallel, the passage of time makes it hard to be sure about any cause and effect relationships. When the National Institute for Clinical Excellence tried to apply a cost effectiveness model to evaluate community engagement activities they found that it is very difficult to know what role engagement played in any benefits accrued, and this was further muddled by the length of time between engagement and observable impacts.

When reviewing the range of existing economic evaluation models Diane Warburton said:

*"We can conclude from this analysis that there is no existing economic analysis tool that will work to create a simple cost effectiveness model that will assign monetary values to the benefits of public engagement so that such benefits can be compared to actual costs and come to conclusions about value in any meaningful way."*⁴

Part of the problem with trying to quantify data, and the mindset that only values what can be accurately quantified, is that qualitative data gets deprioritised or ignored. Real value may lie in unquantifiable, non-monetisable impacts on, for example, distributional fairness and community relationships. The result is that

³ Warburton, D 'Evidence Counts: Understanding the Value of Public Dialogue', (Sciencewise), p11 (2010) Available at <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Strategic-Research-documents/Evidence-CountsFull-report.pdf>

⁴ Evidence Counts ibid p36

something gets measured but that something is often not where the real or total value of the activity being assessed lies. Often it is deliberation that can reveal these ‘softer’ impacts that are the missing elements of what is valued by some stakeholders in a policy.

Keeping an eye on what is harder to measure and/or monetise is picked up in more detail in the ‘social impacts of dialogue’ section of this paper. But first this paper focuses on looking at trying to pin down costs in a different way, by asking whether there are examples of costs being incurred because dialogue was missing or was of poor quality. In other words, what costs might delivering a high quality dialogue help a public body avoid? But before we address that, we give a brief restatement of what the benefits of dialogue can be.

A reminder about why public dialogue matters

A brief (re)statement of why public dialogue matters is necessary before exploring what can happen if it is missing. We need to understand its potential. In the literature discussing the value of public dialogue, three types of value are commonly cited:

- **Instrumental value:** where dialogue is a means to an end e.g. for policy makers the outcomes of a dialogue can help test current thinking and build buy-in;
- **Substantive value:** where dialogue helps achieve the ‘best’ outcome by reflecting shared public values e.g. the public may bring a different type of evidence to policy making, thereby adding to the evidence base. This knowledge can help develop or change the thinking on a policy; and
- **Normative value:** where dialogue is a ‘good thing’ and the activity of participating in a dialogue is both good for individuals involved and for the health of democracy.

For policy makers instrumental value means a number of things. A dialogue which, for example, endorses what policy makers were already thinking can provide them with more confidence that they have weighed all the evidence available and the direction they feel policy should take in the light of that. Putting policy up for public challenge can give the ‘political’ confidence to move forward in appropriate ways. This is very different to carrying out a dialogue as a tick-box activity when a decision has already been made. Being open to challenge is about being prepared to change tack if needs be, for example, by highlighting potential risks. The ‘Ways to Wellbeing’ case study later in this paper is a good example of this. From Sciencewise evaluations we know that this transparency and openness to challenge and willingness to change tack can build public trust in the organisation commissioning the dialogue and can give a policy more legitimacy.

The substantive value of dialogue for policy is that it can result in better policy. The public may generate new ideas, options or sources of evidence to add to those which policy makers are already considering. Through engaging in a dialogue with the public a fuller understanding of their views, values, concerns and priorities can be surfaced, explored and factored in to decision-making. These views often highlight social and ethical values, rather than the economic ones that are frequently the focus of policy makers and many other stakeholders. But the qualitative nature of the outputs from public dialogue are both its strength, and for many its weakness. It can help broaden our understanding of what matters to the public and why, but alongside the ‘hard’ data of other forms of evidence, qualitative data can seem ‘soft’ and fuzzy – quantitative data can appear to be more black and white.

The effects of the normative value of opening up policy making are less tangible. While there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that people who have been involved in a dialogue process become more active citizens, we don’t really know whether this activism is maintained, or how widespread it is amongst each dialogue’s participants. It should also be borne in mind that the total number of people who have taken part in dialogues in the UK is a very small percentage of the UK population, and therefore their direct contribution to the overall health of our democracy is negligible. But the existence of this strand of participatory democracy is itself valuable in that it demonstrates that increasingly at least some citizens are actively involved in policy making.

Also, we know from survey evidence that while not all people want to take part in deliberative engagement, they want to know that others are and that the opportunity exists. For example in the most recent Public Attitudes to Science survey⁵ 69% of respondents said they think that *‘scientists should listen more to what ordinary people*

⁵ This is a regular survey commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The full findings for 2014 can be found here <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/pas-2014-main-report.pdf>

think’ with 75% saying that the Government should act in line with public concerns about science. However, this does not mean that people are necessarily willing to get involved themselves with only 29% saying they would like to be personally involved. But, 43% said that they would like to know that the public are involved in the decisions made about science issues, even though they do not want to be involved personally. Therefore, a dialogue approach is seen as important in that it demonstrates a more open, transparent, inclusive and accountable way of making policy.

All of these elements of value are important, but of most relevance to this research paper is the assertion that well planned and delivered dialogue can also save time and money. On the face of it this may seem counter intuitive as dialogue can take a considerable length of time to plan, deliver and analyse. High quality dialogues may also seem expensive when not benchmarked against other costs.

In contrast, not having a dialogue or delivering a poor quality one can be much more costly in terms of time and money. Dialogue can help in developing policy and can highlight weaknesses in a policy at an early stage. These can then be tackled as part of the policy development and before the policy is implemented. A policy based on evidence including that arising from public dialogue at an early stage can also mean that there is more trust and buy-in to that policy. This is critical if friction between decision makers and the public is to be avoided. The outcome of planning a dialogue stage can often be a policy that is more fit for purpose, easier to implement and more likely to realise its potential.

The next section of this paper presents examples of where dialogue was either missing or of poor quality. It includes cases in which policies faced legal challenges and protests, and one in which two different approaches to the same issue incurred very different financial costs. It concludes with an example of a near miss, when a policy was almost ready to go, but a public dialogue helped persuade policy makers to postpone its implementation.

The costs of not doing dialogue

Before exploring the case studies, it is helpful to remind ourselves what good consultation is meant to look like. While consultation is not the same thing as dialogue the government often uses it as an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of approaches. From central government’s perspective the Cabinet Office has produced guidance in the form of Consultation Principles⁶ that were an update of 2008’s Code of Practice on Consultation. The principles are clear that consultation is not just a case of procedural box ticking.

The main principle is that the scale and type of consultation should be proportional to the potential impacts of the proposal or decision being taken. It also says *‘thought should be given to achieving real engagement rather than merely following bureaucratic process. Consultation forms part of wider engagement and decisions on whether and how to consult should in part depend on the wider scheme of engagement.’* The guidance highlights the importance of open policy making principles throughout the process, advocating *‘real discussion’* with affected parties and experts. We can interpret *‘real discussion’* as meaning dialogue rather than consultation.

The Consultation Principles state that engagement should begin at an early stage of the policy making process, so that there is time for people’s views to be taken into account. Different types of engagement might be appropriate at different stages. The information provided to help inform the issue people are being asked for their views on should be accessible and useful. It should use plain language and clarify the key issues, particularly if the subject matter is complex. This part of the guidance is very much in line with principles which guide Sciencewise-supported dialogues⁷.

When the potential impacts of a proposal or decision being taken are significant, engagement should be at the forefront of the responsible body’s mind. It should be aware of the Cabinet’s Office’s Consultation Principles, but also have a keen eye on the risks of not getting it right. Good engagement can build legitimacy, trust, buy-in from the public and ensure that the final decision is based on a fuller evidence base. From a risk perspective, effective engagement can help avoid the danger of Judicial Reviews, protests, reputational risk with consequential loss of

⁶ The principles are available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/255180/Consultation-Principles-Oct-2013.pdf

⁷ The Sciencewise Guiding Principles can be found at <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/guiding-principles/>

trust and legitimacy, and policy under-performance. Having a public dialogue element may be a small price to pay compared to the costs of not having it, if these risks do become active and manifest themselves as costs.

This section now discusses a small number of case studies for which we suggest that well planned and delivered public dialogue, often alongside other consultation activities might have delivered different outcomes to those described.

Case study 1: Radioactive waste management

In 1982 the Nuclear Industry Radioactive Waste Executive (Nirex) was established. Its remit was to examine the options, and make recommendations, for the deep geological disposal of radioactive waste. In 1985 Nirex, aided by the British Geological Survey (BGS), began the site selection process. The initial list included 537 potential sites, and public opposition led to many of the possible sites being abandoned. A short list of 12 sites were assessed against a set of criteria⁸. This whittled the list down to 2 – Sellafield and Dounreay.

In 1991 Nirex said that it would concentrate its efforts on Sellafield, and in 1992 announced plans to build a rock characterisation facility (RCF) there. Plans for the RCF continued to progress until the end of 1994. But at that point Cumbria County Council rejected the application for planning permission. Nirex launched an appeal against this decision, which led to a public inquiry between 1995 and 1996. Shortly before the 1997 general election the then Secretary of State for the Environment rejected Nirex's application on the grounds that Nirex's scientific knowledge was insufficient to guarantee that the site was safe. By the time it was abandoned £200 million had been spent over the 15 years since Nirex had begun its search for an RCF⁹.

In 2005 Nirex carried out a review¹⁰ of what had happened. Although there had been a national consultation in 1987 ('The Way Forward') the review reported:

'We believe that the process used was technically sound, but it was conducted in secret and did not involve stakeholders, therefore it was not a legitimate process.'

Emphasising openness, its main conclusions were:

- *'The whole process must be open and transparent and facilitate the involvement of stakeholders, the public and experts. This is key;*
- *The site selection process, the criteria used to evaluate sites and the relative weight attached to each must be developed through national debate before any sites are looked at;*
- *Any possible constraints on the sites to be considered should be identified at the outset and discussed openly with stakeholders and the public so that they can be considered as part of the definition of site evaluation criteria;*
- *The role in the decision-making process of local communities in the areas being considered must be defined clearly at the beginning of the process, including rights such as veto and volunteerism;*
- *Community benefits should be discussed and agreed including measures to enable communities to engage in the decision-making process;*
- *The views of stakeholders on the important issues and quantity of research undertaken on them must be taken into account; and*
- *There must be a clear decision-making process with clear reporting points to give stakeholders and the public access to the process and the research being undertaken.'*

In 2001 the government launched a new decision-making process on 'Managing Radioactive Waste Safely'. The Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM) was established in 2003 to take forward a national dialogue on the issue. In 2005 it worked with PublicSpace¹¹ to write the 2005 public and stakeholder consultation

⁸ The way the evaluation criteria were used was not discussed with stakeholders, the process was carried out in secret

⁹ <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg15320740.200-editorial--time-to-bury-nirex.html>

¹⁰ Nirex, (June 2005), 'Review of 1987-1991 Site Selection'. This is available at <http://www.davidmythe.org/nuclear/nirex%202005%20review%20of%201987-91%20site%20selection.pdf>

¹¹ PublicSpace says it 'works with university research teams to bring research findings alive for those who could use them or benefit from them.'

document on radioactive waste management. As well as the consultation document there were also several deliberative dialogue events with members of the public and stakeholders.

In 2006 CoRWM presented its conclusions to the government. In short, it recommended that there should be a geological disposal facility but there should be a new approach to implementation, based on the willingness of local communities to take part. Any approach to radioactive waste management had to be not only technically achievable but also publicly acceptable.

The new approach was called Managing Radioactive Waste Safely (MRWS). A West Cumbria Managing Radioactive Waste Safely Partnership was established, consisting of the 3 local authorities and many other stakeholders. At a crucial point 4 years into the process Copeland and Allerdale Borough Councils voted in favour of the next phase of the research into locating the facility at Sellafield, but on January 30th 2013 Cumbria County Council voted against it.

The government reviewed the process and launched a new Sciencewise-supported dialogue in 2013 on the revised proposed process. The dialogue conclusions fed directly into the White Paper 'Implementing Geological Disposal' (July 2014). Under the new approach communities would be given more information at an earlier stage in the process. There would also be a requirement for communities to demonstrate widespread support before they could host a Geological Disposal Facility. Communities would also have an on-going right to withdraw from the process.

Although the issue of how to manage radioactive waste has not yet been solved the new collaborative approach with its emphasis on voluntarism and veto has progressed much further than previously and at a much lower cost. To give an example of the costs of this collaborative approach, in 2011-12 the Engagement Package agreed by the Government for the West Cumbria MRWS Partnership was £1.255 million. In 2010-11 the Engagement Package was £987k and in 2009-10 £533k. In the first half of 2012-13 its Engagement Package spend was £473k. The partnership completed its work in July 2012. The Sciencewise-supported public and stakeholder dialogue project in 2013 cost a total of £440,600, which included 10 deliberative events around the country. There can be many further attempts at finding a solution using such a public dialogue approach before it comes anywhere near the money previously spent.

Case study 2: Greenpeace's Judicial Review of the 2006 Energy Review

This case study presents a clear example of the costs of what can happen when consultation best practice is not adhered to and dialogue is absent. If the Government had adopted a dialogue mindset then the outcome described below might never have happened.

When the Government published 'The Energy Challenge - Energy Review Report 2006', Greenpeace applied for a Judicial Review of the government's decisions set out in that report. The grounds for its appeal was that the decisions were unlawful because the consultation process which informed that report was procedurally flawed.

In the 2003 White Paper the Government said there would be '*the fullest public consultation*' before any decision was taken to change its policy not to support the building of new nuclear power stations. However, the Energy Review stated '*that nuclear has a role to play in the future UK generating mix.*' Greenpeace said there had not been a full public consultation prior to this change in policy. It said the Government had not presented clear proposals and information on key issues such as the disposal of radioactive waste and the financial cost of building new nuclear power stations.

Two main criticisms were levelled at the consultation document 'Our Energy Challenge: securing clean, affordable energy for the long term':

1. It either was, or had the appearance of being, an issues paper which was seeking views about which issues should be looked at by the government when deciding whether the option of building of new nuclear power stations, which had been left open, should now be taken up. It did not look like a consultation paper asking the fundamental question of whether new nuclear build should be taken up.
2. But if it was not an issues paper and was a consultation on the main issue of whether or not there should be nuclear new build, then the consultation process was unfair because it was unclear to consultees what they were being asked to respond to. They were also not provided with enough information to help inform their response. And, on issues such as the cost of building new nuclear power stations and waste disposal they were not given the opportunity to make any meaningful

response because the information they required to inform this discussion was not provided until after the consultation had closed.

In his judgement Mr Justice Sullivan agreed with Greenpeace saying that the Government had breached procedural rules¹². He said the Government had not made it clear to consultees that it was inviting comments; the language used in the review had created an expectation that the Government would consult fully at a later stage.

As a result of this debacle the Government had to go through the consultation process again, spending £2.4 million on the implementation and analysis of the consultation alone. In The Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform's (BERR) analysis of this new consultation 'Meeting the Energy Challenge - The Future of Nuclear Power: Analysis of consultation responses' it says: *'In response to the ruling, the Government accepted that it should conduct a public consultation before reaching a final view on the future of nuclear power. It therefore launched a new consultation on 23 May 2007 setting out the Government's preliminary view on nuclear power.'*

The Government accepted that in such a consultation there must be clarity about its purpose. For this consultation re-run it clarified that this was a consultation about the possible role of nuclear power within its energy policy framework. It also made it clear that the Government had reached a preliminary view about the desirability of nuclear new build. The document then states: *"this consultation was about the Government's initial view and was designed to test the view and its underlying reasoning with the public and stakeholders."*

The new consultation had the four components which could have been in place in the initial consultation:

- A written consultation process;
- A website for online responses;
- Stakeholder events with interested parties; and
- Deliberative public dialogue events with a representative sample.

The Government followed the consultation with a formal response to the issues raised, alongside 'Meeting the Energy Challenge – A White Paper on Nuclear Power' in January 2008. The failure to run the consultation well in the first instance not only cost at least £2.4 million (excluding legal and initial consultation costs among others), but also delayed the final decisions by around 2 years.

Case study 3: Friends of the Earth Judicial Review of DECC's Feed-in Tariff consultation

In October 2011 the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) published a consultation document to seek views about its proposals to reduce tariff rates for solar panel projects. A driver for DECC's proposals was that falling costs of solar panel installation meant that the returns available to households with solar panels were higher than expected. DECC was concerned that the Feed-in Tariff (FIT) budget would run out – the scheme was proving too successful.

The consultation proposed that for the scheme to continue new tariff rates would need to be introduced. The new reduced tariff rates (from 43p per kilowatt-hour to 21p) should take effect from April 1st 2012, but would apply to new solar panel installations installed on or after December 12th 2011.

Friends of the Earth and solar companies Solarcentury and HomeSun argued that the December 12th cut-off date, which was 2 weeks before the consultation period closed was unlawful. They applied for a Judicial Review and in December 2011, the case was heard in the High Court. The judge, Mr Justice Mitting concluded that the minister's proposal was unlawful and any new eligibility date for received the reduced tariff could only lawfully take effect from the date the new tariff rate came into effect.

The Government was worried that this ruling would mean that there would be sudden rush to install panels before the new tariff rates came into effect. The Secretary of State sought permission from Court of Appeal to

¹² The full text of Justice Sullivan's judgement is available here <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/MultimediaFiles/Live/FullReport/ERJRSullivanJudgement.pdf>

appeal against the decision. The appeal's focus was on whether the Secretary of State had been acting beyond the limits of his powers. The Court of Appeal reaffirmed the decision of the High Court.

The Secretary of State then appealed to the Supreme Court. It also rejected the Government's case. The result of this is that the 30,735 homeowners and businesses who installed solar panels after the December 12th cut-off date and before March 3rd were eligible for the previous higher feed-in tariff rate.

By seeking to change the tariff policy before the close of the consultation date the Government incurred the costs of 3 successive legal defeats. While this case study is not specifically about a dialogue approach, we have included it as it highlights costs of a procedural failure when consultation is part of the policy making process. Like Greenpeace's Judicial Review against the building of new nuclear power stations this is another example of public consultation not being treated seriously and the costs of doing so not being given serious consideration. This failure to deliver an effective consultation process was the basis for Friends of the Earth and others to launch legal action.

Case study 4: Fracking protests

In the summer of 2013 anti-fracking activists staged an ongoing protest outside the exploratory drilling operation in Balcombe in West Sussex. The Reclaim the Power protest camp was organised by a group called No Dash for Gas. The protests saw over 30 people arrested, including the MP Caroline Lucas.

The vast majority of local people (82%) were against the exploratory drilling according to a poll conducted by Balcombe Parish Council. But 60 villagers put their name to a letter saying that despite the '*relentless propaganda*' exploratory drilling and properly regulated exploitation will not '*unduly damage*' the environment.

Protesters also targeted the headquarters of the Cuadrilla, the fracking company, and its PR Company, Bell Pottinger. The homes of Lord Howell and local MP Francis Maude were also targeted.

The costs to taxpayer for the policing operation in response to the protests cost £3.985 million. More than £1.6 million of the policing bill went on mutual aid costs¹³. Police overtime came in at £335,519 and rest day working £830,137. 'Consequential divisional overtime' was £209,139. Accommodation, subsistence and vehicle costs totalled £259,517, and supplies and services cost £43,507. Normal police salaries amount to £621,860¹⁴.

Police and Crime Commissioner for Sussex Katy Bourne said¹⁵:

"The additional, unforeseen cost of policing this operation has put pressure on the police budget at a time when considerable savings are being delivered in Sussex. Last summer Sussex Police were required to provide a policing response to a national issue, which is at the forefront of the Government's energy security policy. What happened here in Sussex may determine what will play out across police force areas in the future."

Commenting on how the public had been engaged in areas where fracking is being considered Lord Smith said¹⁶:

"Public consultation over proposed shale gas exploration and development sites has not been wholly effective and the systems put in place for public consultation are not seen by communities as serving the interests of the public. The current system effectively allows operators to meet all of their statutory requirements – and more – without adequately addressing the concerns of local communities."

¹³ Mutual aid costs are the costs of providing policing assistance from one force to another

¹⁴ Quoted in a Daily Telegraph article: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/energy/fracking/10586964/Fracking-protests-in-Sussex-cost-taxpayer-4m-to-police.html>

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/25/lord-smith-hugely-sceptical-of-fracking-for-shale-oil-in-the-uk>

In 2013 Sciencewise supported a dialogue to explore people's views about how the public should be engaged when it comes to fracking¹⁷. This dialogue produced a list of principles that participants felt should be part of an engagement process:

- **Proactivity:** relevant bodies taking the lead on engagement, rather than waiting to be asked;
- **Framing the engagement:** directly addressing existing public concerns e.g. providing the rationale for shale, including affordability, energy security and sustainability;
- **Empowerment:** using information throughout the process, supporting the public to influence decision-making, giving time for people to consider their views;
- **Transparency:** being clear about what is known about shale gas and what is not; what the public can and cannot influence; as well as clarity about operations, regulatory decisions and progress;
- **Accessibility:** using a variety of channels and forums to make engagement as inclusive as possible, and explaining the risks and impacts in terms of how local people might experience them in their daily life;
- **Independence:** providing unbiased, balanced information and offering an independently managed engagement process; and
- **Accountability:** providing clarity on the stringency of regulation and its enforcement.

They also said there should be a proactive approach to notify people about proposals through an 'all channels open' approach including leaflet drops, social media, travelling displays and door knocking. There should also be face-to-face meetings where operators and experts could be asked direct questions, and interactive exhibits to bring issues to life. The public should have the opportunity to be involved in shaping the plans and that this should be continue once exploration goes ahead.

If there had been a national dialogue about the rationale for fracking and then local engagement at the pre-application stage, planning application and permitting stage, and the drilling stage then what happened at Balcombe might have been quite different and the cost might have been considerably less. Undoubtedly there would still have been protests from people who are against fracking on principle, but the scale of local involvement in those protests might have been quite different. Fracking now has a strongly negative image. This provides a clear example of how a poorly designed engagement approach on a contentious issue can have wider and long-standing ramifications for public opinion.

Case study 5: Ways to Wellbeing

To provide an uplifting contrast with the case studies above where dialogue was missing or of poor quality a recent Sciencewise-supported dialogue, Ways to Wellbeing, provides a good example of how dialogue can add new knowledge to policy making and avoid money being wasted. In this instance the waste avoided was not that which would have been incurred by losing a Judicial Review or policing protests, but money saved by putting the brakes on a well-intentioned policy which probably would not have met its objectives.

In 2008, the Government Office for Science published results from the Foresight project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing. Part of this project included the New Economics Foundation (nef) developing a set of simple public health messages to promote key findings about the type of activities that can promote positive mental health and wellbeing. The 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' messages were: Connect; Be Active; Take Notice; Keep Learning; and Give.

The purpose of the Sciencewise-supported Ways of Well Being dialogue was to build on nef's messages and deepen knowledge of the extent to which people understand and feel able to make the kinds of changes in their lives that the evidence suggests would lead to increased wellbeing.

Participants in the dialogue had a very mixed response to the term 'wellbeing'. Some felt it was abstract, others equated it with 'feel-good' products and services (skin care, aromatherapy); while others linked it to mental health problems. The 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' also raised mixed positive and negative opinions. Rather than being motivating, framing wellbeing as a scientific issue seemed unnecessary and unwelcome by many. Common sense or personal experience was more convincing than the science.

Participants concluded that social marketing messages to improve wellbeing should:

¹⁷ Details of the dialogue are available here <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/public-engagement-in-shale-gas-and-oil-developments>

- Ensure that the messages do not appear to come from ‘the Government’;
- Use messages that are very clear about the suggested activity or action, for example, ‘walk in the park’, ‘phone a friend’ or ‘lend a hand’; and
- Avoid framing messages as ‘scientific’. It was seen as unnecessary and for some people aroused suspicion.

They also suggested that messaging should go beyond merely providing information about wellbeing and should instead:

- Work to create a new common language for positive mental health and wellbeing that make it seems desirable and attainable. The term ‘wellbeing’ was felt to lack resonance;
- The messaging should come from trusted individuals e.g. healthcare professionals rather than government;
- Raise awareness of opportunities for engaging in wellbeing activities; and
- Focus on ‘giving permission’ for people to make different choices, by supporting and encouraging existing individual choices and making activities seem commonplace among people ‘like them’.

The most striking impact of this dialogue, and the one which is most pertinent to this research paper, is that it supported policy makers in the decision to avoid the launch of an expensive and, quite likely, ineffective messaging campaign. If it had gone ahead, it was likely to be along the lines of an earlier healthier lifestyle campaign that cost around £10 million in a single year; the public dialogue cost a total of £264,000. Dialogue therefore enabled government to save a significant amount of money.

Very soon after the dialogue concluded it was clear that the outcomes were influencing policy in a number of ways:

- A tailored dissemination plan was developed. This saw nef and the Department of Health working with various groups across government to co-develop recommendations for policy change as a result of the dialogue results;
- A briefing paper was circulated among stakeholders at the Department of Health. This was followed up by a meeting with people from different policy teams, including mental health, public health, health improvement, substance misuse, children, and older people; and
- Three further meetings were held to discuss the findings senior government officials. Two of the meetings were with Department of Health teams and one with the Department of Work and Pensions.

Concluding thoughts on *not* doing dialogue

One doesn’t have to look far to find a policy that cries out for good quality dialogue to help improve the quality of the final decision, and through doing so help mitigate risks.

For around 20 years there have been discussions about the siting of a third runway at Heathrow. The Airports Commission was established in November 2012 by the Government and was provided with a broader and more open brief than just yes or no to the third runway. It was tasked with identifying and recommending options for maintaining the UK’s position as an international aviation hub, and to look at what could be done to improve the use of existing runway capacity in the next 5 years. The Commission has recently published its final report¹⁸ concluding that a new runway at Heathrow should be built.

Its website states that 2 of its 3 main priorities were to:

1. *‘provide interested parties and members of the public with opportunities to submit evidence and proposals and to set out views relevant to our work’; and*
2. *‘build a consensus in support of our approach and recommendations.’*

However, at the time of writing the Commission had used a very traditional approach to public consultation. It held open discussion sessions (public meetings) at Heathrow and Gatwick, had meetings with other stakeholders and published a consultation document with a 12 week response window. It is possible that the process would

¹⁸ The report can be found here https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/440316/airports-commission-final-report.pdf

have benefitted from a public dialogue process as well. This would have allowed a sample of the public to explore the issues and in-depth and provide informed insights on public concerns and aspirations on the topic. Such a dialogue would have been a valuable addition to the evidence base.

In contrast the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority's (HFEA) recent debate on new mitochondrial transfer techniques used a multi-method approach (including dialogue) to explore a controversial issue and build a consensus on how to proceed. Like the Airports Commission it included public meetings and an open consultation, but crucially added to the mix was public dialogue. An opinion piece in The Economist magazine praised the HFEA's thorough approach to gathering the scientific evidence and gauging public opinion saying that this helped its smooth passage through both Houses of Parliament¹⁹.

Social impact and the role of dialogue

"Not everything that counts can be measured. Not everything that can be measured counts." Albert Einstein

The section above discussed the value of the social impacts of dialogue itself, particularly what the costs are of not having a dialogue, or not doing it well. This section covers a related but subtly different issue – the value that dialogue can play in identifying the social impacts of policy and how these need to be captured and factored into policy making.

There are well-described frameworks within Government for assessing the impacts, benefits and costs of particular policy options or of specific programmes. In general, the emphasis is on those that can be quantified, and 'monetised'. Yet public dialogue tends to identify 'softer' desired outcomes and potential impacts that are difficult to quantify and to monetise. These social impacts, which often surface in public dialogues, include qualities such as natural justice (winners, losers and acceptable trade-offs) and distributional fairness (for example how wellbeing is distributed across society).

The Treasury's Green Book²⁰ recommends that for those impacts for which market prices are available, those prices should be employed to represent the opportunity cost of the resource employed. It also briefly mentions the need to consider unvalued costs and benefits saying:

'Costs and benefits that have not been valued should also be appraised; they should not be ignored simply because they cannot easily be valued. All costs and benefits must therefore be clearly described in an appraisal and should be quantified where this is possible and meaningful.'

It proceeds to say that research might be required to identify the best unit of measurement where monetary ones are unavailable. But it then says an aggregate monetary value should be attached to the data.

Annex 2 of the Green Book outlines Social Cost Benefit Analysis as a tool for assessing the net value of a policy to society as a whole. It says that although the valuation of non-market impacts is challenging it should be attempted 'wherever feasible' and 'we should not neglect...important social impacts in policy making.'

It explains that economists seek to attach a monetary value to non-monetary goods by looking at how they affect utility – the satisfaction that a person gets from the consumption of a good, or how it impacts on their wellbeing. However, the Green Book is very cautious about the robustness of subjective wellbeing measures and recommends that, although non-market and market goods can be used together to help assess policy impact, they should not be compared.

The Green Book also mentions the multi-criteria analysis approach as a technique to compare unvalued costs and benefits. This assigns weights to criteria and then scores options in terms of how well they perform against the weighted criteria. Helpfully it says that the weight given to different criteria cannot be decided by 'experts' as 'they inevitably incorporate the judgements of stakeholders and decision makers.' Multi-criteria mapping

¹⁹ The Economist opinion piece can be found here <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21642167-britains-approval-babies-three-genetic-parents-offers-lessons-other-countries-oh>

²⁰ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220541/green_book_complete.pdf

(MCM)²¹ is an approach developed by Professor Andy Stirling of Sussex University. It is a software based appraisal tool that seeks to ‘open up’ technical assessment by mapping the practical implications of alternative options, knowledge, framings and values. There are 4 main principles underpinning MCM:

1. **Inclusion:** it aims to provide an inclusive, equitable and accessible approach to appraisal. It seeks to include the diversity of perspectives on an issue, ensuring that those of the marginalised are part of an appraisal;
2. **Opening up:** MCM gives balanced attention to contending views;
3. **Agency:** an MCM project seeks to maximise the agency of participants over the ways in which their own perspectives are represented; and
4. **Transparency:** depending on the context the full results are published, giving interested parties access to full range of perspectives on an issue.

We would argue that the judgements and advice of public, acquired through deliberative dialogue, may be equally useful and offer robustness and resilience to weightings of such an approach.

Seemingly in parallel to what is discussed above a whole industry around Social Impact Assessment (SIA) has developed. This approach is a spin-off from Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) that were designed in the 1970s to inform overseas development, particularly infrastructure projects.

The starting point for an SIA is that development plans have social effects that need to be fully surfaced, explored and then understood by policy makers. The social effects are often long lasting and may remain after the economic benefits of development have been realised. The aim is to ensure that at the policy appraisal stage the likely social impacts of different options are taken on board and that policy is responsive to the needs of those who are likely to be affected by any final decision. The type of impacts that an SIA identifies include²²:

- **Lifestyle impacts** – on how people behave and relate to family, friends etc.,
- **Cultural impacts** – on shared customs, obligations, values language etc.,
- **Community impacts** – on infrastructure, services, voluntary organisations, networks, cohesion etc.,
- **Quality of life impacts** – sense of place, aesthetics, heritage, liveability etc.,
- **Health impacts** – mental, physical and social wellbeing

One of the main advantages of an SIA is that it:

‘Builds the trust and cooperation between the community and stakeholders that is necessary for the successful implementation of the project.’²³

The two case studies below describe some of the latest thinking on how to understand the social impact of policy in the UK.

Case study 1: Framework for understanding the social impacts of policy and their effects on wellbeing – for Defra

In 2011 Defra published the Social Impacts Taskforce framework²⁴ for understanding the social impacts of policy and their effects on wellbeing. This document stated that *‘we recognise that social costs and benefits might not always be readily monetised or quantified and that some social impacts may rely on qualitative assessment’*. It highlights that while there are many benefits that can to some extent be measured in market prices, there are also many that cannot. An example of the former would be the benefit that education can have on earning potential, and the latter would be the effects of education on reducing crime.

The Social Impacts Taskforce specifically sought to address the inclusion of non-market impacts, particularly their effects on wellbeing, such as changes to attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviour.

²¹ Further details about multicriteria mapping can be found here <http://www.multicriteriamapping.com/>

²² Centre for Good Governance (2006), A Comprehensive Guide for Social Impact Assessment

²³ Ibid

²⁴ The Framework can be found at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69196/pb13467-social-impacts-wellbeing-110403.pdf

This issue of wellbeing and how to measure it has been the focus of many countries over the past 5 years or so. The report of the Stiglitz Commission²⁵ in 2009 was a key driver for this. This report recommended that governments should measure people's perceptions of their own wellbeing alongside other existing objective measures.

The Defra Social Impacts Taskforce developed a framework based on a 'capitals approach'. This emphasises sustainability so that the analysis identifies whether the stocks of capital (produced, human, social, and natural) that will be passed on to future generations are better or worse than they are today. Understanding the stocks of capital, and the flows of goods and services enables us to see how they affect wellbeing.

Focusing on wellbeing, it says that it is multi-dimensional and may reflect contributions of:

- Material living standards;
- Health;
- Education;
- Personal activities;
- Political voice;
- Social connections;
- The environment;
- A sense of security;
- A sense of freedom; and
- The opportunity to engage effectively with others, especially for a good purpose.

Since the Taskforce published its framework the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has identified a set of wellbeing indicators and publishes an annual Life in the UK Report²⁶. This report measures wellbeing across 10 'domains':

- Personal wellbeing;
- Our relationships;
- Health;
- What we do;
- Where we live;
- Personal finance;
- Economy;
- Education and skills;
- Governance; and
- Natural environment.

Case study 2: An overview of social impact assessment - for Marine Scotland

A current Sciencewise-supported project for Marine Scotland is looking at the question of social impacts. This project draws on the Defra work and posits that socio-economic focussed assessments look at social and economic impact in terms of marketed and non-marketed goods and services, but this does not represent the full spectrum of social impact. What is missing are factors like the importance of culture, history, tradition and '*sense of place*'. In a dialogue like the Marine Scotland one where what is being discussed is the development of renewable energy people's sense of place is likely to be something which local communities will prioritise as an important aspect of value as well as the usual, and also high priority, measures such as employment.

To inform Marine Scotland's thinking Rhys Howell and Claire Haggett of the University of Edinburgh were commissioned to produce a paper setting out an overview of social impact assessment²⁷. More specifically their

²⁵ Stiglitz, J., Sen, A., Fitoussi, J-P. (2009), 'Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.' This is available at

<http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr>

²⁶ http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171766_352740.pdf

²⁷ Rhys Howell and Claire Haggett, (2013) 'An overview of social impact assessment: Working paper to inform Marine Scotland Work on social impacts' School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh

paper sought to identify the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches and explain why assessing social impact is important.

This review concludes that current approaches to measuring social impact use economic criteria, such as the number of jobs created, and use a cost-benefit framework to do so. Defra's framework also seeks to promote a cost-benefit approach to understand the relationships between the social impacts of policies and their effects on the UK's stocks of capital. This capitals approach aims to '*ensure that stocks of capital (produced, human, social, natural) are maintained so that the potential for wellbeing is non-declining over time.*'

Howell and Haggett feel that this conceptualisation of impact and capital is very narrow and would not be meaningful to the communities it is meant to be considering. Furthermore, Defra's understanding of social capital uses an economic sense of capital and then applies this to the 'social'. Howell and Haggett assert that a wider understanding of social capital would highlight factors such as community strength, social cohesion and resilience. As well as familiar and relevant measures such as jobs, education and health, impact also needs to consider people, place and community. Thinking about the Marine Scotland dialogue they say that:

'These socio-economic focussed assessments ignore the importance of culture, history, tradition and 'sense of place' in the lives of communities, as it is difficult to place an economic value on the sense of worth that people place on marine environments or the loss of amenity/way of life.'

Rather than just focusing on the impact on the fishers there in terms of the potential to reskill or change jobs, there is a need for a deeper and broader understanding assessing what the impact will be at the lifestyle, cultural and community levels. Howell and Haggett acknowledge that Defra was aware of the limitations of its framework in that it said it excludes an assessment of winners and losers, and of distributional fairness.

In a separate paper Haggett²⁸ examined the importance of social value and why a lack of identifying and considering it as a part of policy making might result in opposition to a particular policy. The paper identified 5 key reasons for support or opposition:

1. The public may see an aesthetic value in the area where the development is planned;
2. The social, political and historical context of the area is important;
3. The relationship between immediate local impacts and the global impacts of climate change;
4. The relationship between the project developers and the public; and
5. The trust in the decision-makers and the decision-making process.

Howell and Haggett concluded that:

'There is a social dimension to all of these factors which are very personal and affect people on an individual level.'

From their paper there are some clear implications for how public dialogue is delivered and how its outcomes are used. In line with Sciencewise's guiding principles dialogues should aim to surface the social aspects of the issue being discussed. Once identified and included in any reporting to the commissioning body these social aspects should be given an appropriate weighting in policy development and decision-making.

Concluding thoughts on social impact

Ensuring that the outcomes from public dialogue are trusted by policy makers and are actively factored into decision-making will continue to be difficult as long as they continue to place a higher value on what can be quantified, and preferably monetised. The downside of this is that we end up making decisions and evaluating outcomes based on only some of the evidence. We are, therefore, not looking at the full impact of policy and are missing out on what is really valued by many stakeholders and the public. If we are not assessing the total impact and are skewing what is valued what does this mean for the quality of the policy and the trust that end users, stakeholders and citizens have in policy making and decision-makers?

²⁸ Haggett, C (2011) Understanding Public Responses to Offshore Wind Power, Energy Policy, 39 (2), 503-510

Peter Thompson (Chief Executive, HFEA) commenting on the issue of trust in qualitative data, from processes such as public dialogue, said in his experience *“with so many checks and balances in the system why would you not treat the results seriously?”* For example, The HFEA’s Sciencewise-supported dialogue included robust tendering, proposals from very experienced dialogue practitioners, an oversight group of diverse and independent stakeholders advising on the project and a very thorough independent evaluation. Peter Thompson feels that policy makers take hard numbers with a seriousness that they don’t with qualitative data, but *“sometimes in policy making we need to accept that some things are measurable and some things aren’t, we need to puncture policy making by algorithm.”* This also means that we shouldn’t try to measure the unmeasurable. *“Policy makers need to get better at handling qualitative evidence. They need to be more comfortable with it”* and know how to handle it alongside quantitative data. Sciencewise has now produced an initial formal framework to assess the quality of public dialogue to help build confidence in the processes by which dialogue evidence is produced²⁹. It might be that the Social Impact Assessment model could provide a parallel framework which could be adapted to fit the faster timescales of UK policy making and provide a basis for building trust in the qualitative data from public dialogues.

Valuing public dialogue

The use of public dialogue has become a more regular fixture in policy making over the last few years, but its value is still not properly understood. The first part of this paper has highlighted the value of understanding the possible social impacts of policies and then factoring the public’s views into policy making. The result is better quality decisions, and avoidance of potential costs such as Judicial Reviews, protests, U-turns or the need for significant policy revision. Public dialogue can appear to be an unnecessary and significant cost if it is looked at in isolation, but once the costs of getting policy wrong are considered its value is much more obvious.

The second part of this paper has set out some of the current thinking about social impacts, particularly the need to ensure that these are not downplayed or ignored when it comes to formulating policy. Qualitative evidence needs to be given a higher billing and be trusted more by policy makers. While quantitative evidence is important and will always be a key ingredient of good quality policy making, by itself it often presents a partial picture of all the information available to inform a decision policy. If relied on solely it may skew the decision and have an adverse effect on the quality of that decision. We need to get better at, and more comfortable with, working with both qualitative and quantitative data at the same time, and with the role of public dialogue in contributing to those data.

²⁹ <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/quality-in-public-dialogue-a-framework-for-assessing-the-quality-of-public-dialogue/>