

Case Study

Drugsfutures

A public dialogue on brain science, addiction and drugs

Vital statistics

Commissioning bodies:

Academy of Medical Sciences (AMS),
Department of Health

Duration of process:

6 months: October 2006 – March
2007

Number of public participants:

727

Number of experts/stakeholders involved:

Experts/stakeholders = 52

Working Group members: 10

Cost of project:

£300,000 total, Sciencewise-ERC
funding = £300,000

In 2006, the Academy of Medical Sciences (AMS) was invited by the Government to undertake an independent review of the societal, health, safety and environmental issues raised by scientific advances in brain science, addiction and drugs (BSAD). The AMS convened an expert Working Group to take this study forward. The 'Drugsfutures' project was commissioned to design and deliver public dialogue on the issues as part of the evidence base for the Working Group as it came to its conclusions and recommendations. The Drugsfutures project focused on three specific drug categories: recreational drugs, drugs for mental health and cognition enhancers.

Key messages from the public

On recreational drugs

- Questions were raised about the limits on the right to use these drugs, with the focus on minimising harms, education and prevention, and implications for mental health problems
- Future priorities focused on effective drugs education that starts at an early age, involves ex-users, and provides targeted information that is honest, open and clear about the benefits as well as the disadvantages of recreational drugs, and covers the effects of drug abuse on home, work and society
- Most participants supported continued prohibition, but favoured a more health-based approach with imprisonment only for dealers, a reduction of legal sanctions against drug users, acknowledging that it is impossible to eradicate the use of recreational drugs and exercise control over the quality of drugs.

On drugs for mental health

- Participants felt that decisions about the appropriate use of medicinal drugs for mental health should involve doctor and patient. Drugs should only be used if they have been successful and other approaches have been exhausted, and on-going support should be available to help people come off medication as early as possible
- Future priorities focused on a better understanding of the causes of mental illness, giving priority to research into dementia, depression, relationships between mental health problems and recreational drug use, whether any particular groups of people are prone to mental illness, and focusing on drugs that are effective and have minimal side effects. Drugs that will prevent the emergence or progression of Alzheimer's disease were seen as crucial, given our ageing population.

On cognition enhancers

- Participants identified two distinctions: treatment (for medical problems) versus enhancement (of a 'normal' state), and 'natural' enhancement (e.g. vitamin supplements as a good diet) versus 'unnatural' enhancement (e.g. pills to improve cognitive ability)
- Future priorities included the need for further research into the effects of cognition enhancers before policy decisions are made to allow or prohibit their use. The greatest concern was around use by young people whose brains are still developing. The priorities for research were seen to be the benefits of cognition enhancers for people with mental health, the effects on healthy people of use, the effects of abusive use, and the social and financial impact of widespread use.



Background

Following the publication in 2005 of the *Drugs Futures 2025?* report¹, the Government wished to see further investigation of these issues and asked the AMS to take this process forward. The AMS convened an expert Working Group with a remit to consider the societal, health, safety and environmental issues raised by *Drugs Futures 2025?*, in consultation with experts and the public. Therefore, a public engagement programme was an integral aspect of the Working Group's core activities.

The Drugsfutures project was established to provide an extensive public engagement programme to feed into the work of the Working Group, covering three specific drug categories: recreational drugs, drugs for mental health and cognition enhancers.

Policy influence

Policy influence included:

- One of the public priorities, on the need for research into addiction as a disease, was picked up by the AMS and new funding of £8 million has been made available from the Medical Research Council to do that research
- In July 2009, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (Home Office) launched a detailed review of the safety and regulation of cognition enhancers, which was raised as a research priority by public participants in its project
- The dialogue increased available intelligence on why some legal interventions on drug use do not work
- The dialogue directly influenced and improved the final AMS Brain Science, Addiction and Drugs (BSAD) report to Government. Public participants could trace their contribution in the final report.

The dialogue activities

The aim of the Drugsfutures project was to engage the public in a national conversation on the issues raised by the current and future use of drugs that affect mental wellbeing. The specific objectives of the dialogue were to:

- Provide opportunities for members of the public to discuss and explore their aspirations and concerns about current and future issues related to brain science, addiction and drugs
- Identify areas of consensus, disagreement or uncertainty on a broad range of issues raised by current and possible future scientific developments, and explore initial views and changes in opinion

- Inform the final recommendations made by the AMS Working Group for public policy and research needs.

An important secondary objective of the work was to:

- Enable the AMS and the wider science community to increase their knowledge and understanding of public engagement and its potential for future application.

The dialogue involved over 700 participants who were involved with the on-line consultation or as part of one of the face-to-face activities. Participants included a diverse cross-section of the population. For the 'outreach' workshops, participants were recruited on the basis of specific knowledge, experience or family situation. The face-to-face dialogue activities included:

- A public launch at the Science Museum's Dana Centre, attracting 113 participants
- The Brainbox – a deliberative workshop of 30 specially recruited public participants. The Brainbox met twice, for two days each time, with sessions at the start and end of the project
- Five regional one-day workshops on different topics: drugs and the law, young people, society, drugs for smarter brains, and drugs for mental health. A total of 180 participants attended these workshops
- 19 short (2-hour) 'outreach' meetings with specific key groups (e.g. teachers, ex-users). These events reached a total of 146 participants
- Workshops with hard-to-reach groups involved in previous engagement projects.

¹Drug Futures 2025? – for full report visit: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/files/file15385.pdf>

The face-to-face events were supplemented by an initial literature review to summarise previous public engagement on the issues. An on-line consultation was structured according to the five themes used in the face-to-face events, which used blogs and questions to stimulate responses. 125 responses were submitted on-line.

The public dialogue element of the project was integrated with separate stakeholder consultation and expert examination strands run by the AMS, so that all overall findings could be integrated in the final report. The dialogue activities became an integral element of the work.

The wide range of engagement events allowed for sensitive development across the programme and different levels of participation. Doing small group work and outreach groups helped to build trust and engage some of the more 'hard-to-reach' groups.

Summary of good practice and innovation

- The dialogue had a clear framework and expectations for working with the public. The AMS was not seeking consensus or expecting all conflicts to be resolved. Instead, it sought to understand where there could be consensus and where conflict remained
- The public dialogue element was integrated with separate stakeholder consultation and expert examination strands, so the findings from all strands of work could be integrated into the final report
- AMS Working Group members were fully involved in the public dialogue activities throughout, which resulted in greater trust in, and ownership of, the results, and also allowed the group members to hear public views first-hand
- A dedicated cross-Government advisory group, including representatives from the devolved administrations, Home Office and Department of Health, was convened to follow the progress and allow for policy implications to be identified throughout
- The final AMS report included reference to public participants' input and participants were able to trace their contribution in that final report
- The wide range of engagement events and methods was successful, and enabled sensitive issues to be discussed in depth
- The very broad range of scientific and other experts engaging with the public (including ex-drug users as well as academics and neuroscientists) provided a rich mix of views and knowledge to inform the public discussions
- Scientific knowledge and technical expertise became more accessible and valued by public participants
- The credibility of the results with the AMS was enhanced by recruiting participants for representation of the general public, and of relevant 'hard-to-reach' groups
- The AMS attended all workshops/sessions and explained the process and how the results would be used. This approach demonstrated commitment to the process and helped generate trust among participants.

Lessons for future practice include:

- It is important to go back to participants to explain how their input has influenced the final conclusions. This needs to be built into the planning for the dialogue so that specific input can be traced

- All those involved need to be clear that the process includes a responsibility for commissioning bodies to listen to, and take account of, the public views given, and for that to be made clear to public participants
- The public may sometimes find it easier to discuss existing issues than asking questions about the future
- It is vital to consider early on how to increase traffic to any on-line engagement.

Impacts

The influences on policy are outlined on the second page of this summary. This section covers the impacts on all those involved in the dialogue.

Influence on policy makers

- DrugsFutures was the first major public engagement the AMS had been involved in. Its strategic plan now includes a principle that public engagement should be integral to all new policy studies
- It helped AMS to make recommendations to Government on a contentious topic with a stronger evidence base
- The dialogue achieved inclusiveness with the participation of 'hard-to-reach groups', achieved a good range of views, and enhanced AMS's reputation as a result.

Impacts on public participants

- Participants reported that they had learnt a great deal, clarified their thinking and that taking part affected their views on the issues. Public participants also stated they had learnt new skills and gained confidence through their involvement
- Almost all interviewees said they had talked about the issues from the workshops with friends and family, thus making a wider audience aware of the issues
- The dialogue stimulated significant interest among participants about the content of the events. Almost all said they would like to know more about the project and future work in this area
- The dialogue raised awareness and understanding among public participants of policy making and the role of experts to help create a culture of trust in the public institutions
- The process resulted in high levels of trust that those who commissioned the process would take notice of what the public said. Participants felt their views were important and listened to.

Impacts on scientists/experts and other stakeholders

- It enriched academic understanding of policy-making and offered an opportunity for younger academics looking for career development
- Taking part resulted in experts feeling more positive about future public engagement activities
- The dialogue provided opportunities for experts to present their work and their organisations directly to the public, and to respond immediately to questions raised
- Expert speakers were able to learn about public engagement approaches and techniques, and how they might use them in the future.

“Public dialogue can be particularly valuable on controversial issues like drug use, where ‘tabloids can have huge influence’ and there can be greater difficulties and ‘quite troubled political waters’. This is where it is essential to get public engagement.”

Policy maker

“The amount of money being absorbed by crime associated with drugs is staggering. If you could spend a small amount of money on public dialogue to make changes that save more money in the long run then that is key.”

Policy maker

“You can’t expect any drugs policy to have long-term success unless you take people with you. If you cut across the grain of the public instinct it’s disastrous. This engaging with people should help us devise policies, which are acceptable and sustainable.”

AMS Working Group member

Wider impacts

- As a result of the dialogue, a number of Government departments worked together in this area, including the Department of Health, Home Office and devolved administrations.

Overall impacts

The project has had significant impact on the AMS recommendations for future national Government policy and helped lead to an £8 million grant to research addiction as a disease. The credibility of the design and delivery of the process created robust findings that policy makers took into account.

Overall, Drugsfutures was a highly sophisticated programme of public dialogue that used a wide variety of methods to involve the general public, as well as ‘hard-to-reach’ groups of relevance to the issues. It fully met all of its objectives and involved a very diverse range of participants and experts. The process also provided significant value to the public participants involved, to the expert speakers who contributed and to the AMS Working Group, which used the outputs of the process in coming to policy conclusions.

The process has increased public awareness of the issues, and the willingness of public participants, and others, to get more involved in public engagement programmes in the future. Therefore, the Drugsfutures project can be seen as a significant contribution to the future of public engagement on science and technology issues.

Contacts and links

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Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise-ERC on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/drugsfutures-2/