

Case Study

Living With Environmental Change

A Citizens' Advisory Forum

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

LWEC Partnership (through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC))

Duration of process:

15 months: May 2010 – July 2011

Number of public participants:

18 Forum members

Number of experts/stakeholders involved:

Experts = 7

Cost of project:

£30,450 total

Sciencewise-ERC funding = £17,625

Living With Environmental Change (LWEC) is a ten-year Partnership, which seeks to link policy with research in the area of environmental change. The Partnership consists of 22 different organisations, eight of which are from policy developing bodies¹. The LWEC Partners include Research Councils, national, devolved and local government bodies and Government agencies. Their collective aim is to connect world-leading natural, engineering, economic, social, medical, cultural, arts and humanities researchers with policy makers, business, the public and other key stakeholders in the area of environmental change.

In 2010, LWEC established a small Citizens' Advisory Forum as an experiment to pilot an in-depth, while cost effective, approach to public engagement that could feed public attitudes and values into the LWEC strategic decision-making process.

Key messages from the public

Three Forum sessions focused on different issues: i) Research into flood risk management ii) Research into adaptation to environmental change iii) Decision-making and governance in response to environmental change challenges. The key issues raised by the public included the following:

- The majority of Forum members became more convinced that environmental change was a real problem to which serious attention needed to be given
- Research into environmental change should be part of the solution to problems caused by climate change. That research needs to be action-orientated and value for money, creating new information and cost-effective new solutions
- The priority for research should be on prevention, particularly on preventing disasters caused by climate and environmental change
- It was crucial for the findings from environmental research to be properly considered by those who have the power to take decisions that will impact on environmental change
- There is a desire from the public for more information and engagement about environmental change with researchers and Government bodies.
- Some LWEC Partners had already used the results of the Forum discussions in their work or had clear plans to do so
- There were several specific areas identified where LWEC Partners expected there to be influence on future research policies: around governance and regulation, the Water Strategy and flooding
- Some LWEC Partners suggested that the influence of the Forum was less direct, influencing the broader context for research rather than having direct influence on specific decisions
- The Forum was also expected to have an impact on the development of LWEC's public engagement strategy by showcasing the value of engaging with the public.

Influence on research policies

It is early to identify influence on future research policies at this stage. However, strong indications have been identified from evaluation interviews with LWEC Partners about where the Forum's findings would be going, who to and how they might be used in the future. These indications include:

¹ See www.lwec.org.uk/partners



Background

Knowledge exchange and public engagement are priorities for LWEC, to ensure that the questions being researched take into account the public's and other decision-makers views. LWEC established a Public Engagement Strategic Advisory Group (PE SAG) to advise on how public engagement should be embedded into its strategic decision-making processes. After considering various options for an experiment to pilot a new approach to public engagement, a small-scale panel allowing in-depth discussions was considered a good starting point. This approach was developed into plans to form the Citizens Advisory Forum.

The Forum was intended to provide for the involvement of a broad cross section of individuals within a small group. Eighteen Forum members were recruited from the Bristol area according to a recruitment specification designed to ensure that the membership was inclusive of key social groups rather than being fully demographically representative of the general public.

The expectation was that the Forum would pass its observations to the different LWEC governance groups so that public views would reach the highest levels within LWEC and its partner organisations, enabling a two-way method of information sharing and dissemination.

The dialogue activities

The aim of the Citizens' Advisory Forum was to bring public attitudes and values into LWEC's strategic decision-making processes. The Forum was intended to demonstrate not just that the public voice is important and should be heard alongside the voices of other stakeholders, but also how the public voice could be included. The Forum was also designed to provide a space in which members of the public could deliberate on some of the issues that the LWEC Partnership is seeking to address.

The specific objectives of the Forum were to:

- Inform the strategic developments of the LWEC Partners' research by helping to identify research priorities and comment on strategic aims for the Partnership
- Identify areas of particular public concern about environmental change, so that the commissioning and communication of research by the LWEC Partnership, and the Partners, can take account of the needs and concerns of society.

Each of the three Forum meetings was slightly different in design, but all were facilitated by the delivery contractors and had input from expert speakers. The Forum sessions were designed to be deliberative, enabling members to engage with the information

provided in writing and by experts, and to discuss the issues in-depth among themselves. Although the overall issues for each session were identified by the LWEC Partnership, the detailed content for the sessions was developed in discussion with the expert speakers.

The three Forum sessions were as follows:

- 16 October 2010: research into flood risk management, with speakers from the Environment Agency
- 27 November 2010: research into adaption to environmental change, with speakers from the UK Climate Impacts Programme
- 5 February 2011: governance and decision-making in response to major environmental change challenges, with input from the ESRC.

Each session was held on a Saturday usually from 11am to 4pm. Reports summarising the Forum discussions were circulated to participants, and communications between the contractors and Forum participants were continued between sessions by email and post, including answering questions and requests for more information from participants. A final report summarised the underlying drivers and values that emerged from the public discussions across all three Forum meetings. All reports were also circulated to relevant LWEC Partners.

Summary of good practice and innovation

- Forum members were clear about the purpose of the Forum and how, and if, the results would be used
- Forum members felt the Forum had a good mix of people
- Reports following each of the Forum meetings were promptly circulated to all participants, which encouraged openness and transparency
- The competence in the design and delivery of the sessions was held in high regard by the commissioning body, partly due to the contractors' flexibility in responding to changing demands
- Extensive and ongoing communications throughout the process allowed for all relationships involved in the pilot to remain very positive throughout
- Participants highly valued the contribution of the experts involved as well as valuing talking to other Forum members
- Within the Forum activities, some techniques worked particularly well, such as a priority-setting exercise which enabled participants to identify relative priorities for future research funding. Another successful technique, in terms of getting information across quickly and easily to participants, was an exercise led by one expert speaker on the seriousness of climate change using visual images. An image of a spanner and a metaphor of 'we just need to tinker to adapt' was powerful in demonstrating the need for adaptation and action at different levels.

Lessons for future practice include:

- A little additional budget could have solved many of the practical problems that arose including time for initial planning, more facilitators at meetings and fees to expert speakers. Also, slightly longer Forum sessions and one additional Forum meeting could have enabled Forum members to more fully explore priorities and agendas for environmental research
- Longer term monitoring of the dissemination, and use and impacts of the results of the Forum will more fully demonstrate the effectiveness and value of the Forum to LWEC Partners and other funders, the Forum members and other interested parties
- There needs to be clarity about the purpose and potential of a public dialogue project to get early buy-in to the process (including commitment from Partners to contribute) and to the use of the results by decision makers
- There needs to be clarity about how the project fits into the wider context and longer term, so that it is clear how it relates to future planning
- Close links need to be established between the design of the Forum sessions and the potential for influence on future decision-making on research policies. The people who will use the results of public dialogue must be involved in the identification and framing of topics for the Forum to discuss, and in the design and drafting of questions for the public, from the start and extensively throughout. Planning needs to bring together those with knowledge of the subject areas to be covered ('content'), and knowledge and experience of public engagement ('process') so that an effective process can be designed to answer the questions that need to be addressed
- Information provision, through written materials and expert speakers, needs to be carefully managed so that the

appropriate information is provided in ways that enable public participants to use it. Managing input from expert speakers is always challenging especially when they are not employed by the commissioning body

- Governance arrangements need to be clear from the start, with clear lines of decision-making on planning. Ideally, a small project team is established at the start and continues throughout the project to be responsible for detailed design and delivery of the project, plus an oversight or steering group that focuses on content priorities and on the implications and targets for influencing research policies
- The credibility of the results can be undermined if those using them feel the number of public participants is too small. However, if the aim of the process is to provide information and inspiration to decision makers, rather than detailed research evidence, small numbers appear to be less of a barrier
- It is far more effective if those using the results of public dialogue can attend and observe public discussions first hand, as well as receiving reports of results. Public participants also value meeting decision makers face to face.

Impacts

Influence on future research policies is covered in the summary on the front page. This section describes the impacts of the Forum on all those involved.

Impacts on LWEC and its partner organisations

- Getting information on public views and values through in-depth discussions meant that the LWEC Partnership had first-hand exposure to the issues from members of the public. Historically, LWEC had gained public views through intermediaries such as local authorities
- LWEC Partners felt the Forum had increased understanding and awareness of the potential for future public engagement activities. Partners were pleasantly surprised at the levels of interest, capability and pragmatism of the public participants.

Impacts on public participants

- The most valuable impact for the Forum members was the learning. Almost all agreed that they had learnt something new and that the Forum had helped them think more clearly about some new issues for the first time
- Participants reported that taking part had affected their views and their behaviour in relation to tackling environmental change
- Almost all the respondents said they were more likely to get involved in public engagement activities in the future as a result of taking part in the Forum. This suggests their experience had been a positive one and could lead to greater enthusiasm for future engagement
- All respondents believed the Forum would (and should) influence LWEC's future priorities for research, demonstrating significant trust in the process and the organisations involved.

“ This was a trial, the first time this has ever happened in this way for a multi-partnered organisation and on the level we need. It is proof that this sort of thing can work... It has been shown to some key high-level people within LWEC who were sceptical, but willing to see what it can do. I think it has started to show them what it can do. I think the Forum has been a success. It is a model – it got people thinking and understanding that engagement is not just about information giving or changing public opinions. ”

LWEC interviewee

“ I am very impressed that LWEC was compelled to seek the opinions of the public in such important issues. ”

Forum member

“ Strength came from the depth of the discussion – it seemed to open up the deep and personal views of attendees who had, through exposure to the issues, begun to explore what the issues meant to them. ”

LWEC interviewee

“ [The Forum] opened my eyes to the fact that people at high level do actually want to know what the man on the street thinks. ”

Forum member

Overall impacts

- The Forum was a cost-effective approach to public dialogue. It demonstrated that valuable public dialogue on complex technical issues could be undertaken on a small scale and with a small budget
- The Forum was completed quickly and effectively, the public participants were satisfied, it addressed all its objectives and provided valuable results to LWEC. These achievements were particularly impressive given the tight timescale, LWEC's complex organisational context and the complexity of the issues being discussed
- The Forum model had particular strengths. A group of the public working together over a period of time gets to know each other and gets used to the process, and so becomes able to grapple quickly and effectively with new issues.

Contact Details

Commissioning body

Living with Environmental Change

Melanie Knetsch ESRC

Email: Melanie.Knetsch@esrc.ac.uk, office@lwec.org.uk

Sciencewise contacts

Lynn Wetenhall (Dialogue and Engagement Specialist)

Email: lynn@wetenhallassociates.co.uk

James Tweed (Projects Manager)

Email: james.tweed@aeat.co.uk

Delivery contractor

Sarah Holloway Office for Public Management (OPM)

Email: info@opm.co.uk

Project evaluator

Diane Warburton

Email: Diane@sharedpractice.org.uk

Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from

Sciencewise-ERC on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/citizens-advisory-forum-for-living-with-environmental-change-lwec