

Case Study

Bovine TB Citizen Dialogue

A public dialogue to engage citizens and stakeholders in the future strategic direction of bovine tuberculosis policy

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

Duration of process:

12 months: May 2013 to April 2014

Total public participants involved:

176 (111 public participants in face-to-face dialogue events for two days in three locations, 65 online public participants)

Total stakeholders and experts involved:

258 across 10 events

Cost of project:

£375,655 (total cost),
Sciencewise co-funding = £184,021

In July 2013, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) published its draft Strategy for achieving 'Officially Bovine Tuberculosis-Free' (OTF) status for England. The aim of the Strategy was 'to eradicate bovine tuberculosis (bTB), achieving OTF status for England incrementally, while maintaining a sustainable livestock industry'. The draft Strategy set out how the aim was to be achieved through greater partnership working, increasingly industry-led implementation and fair sharing of the associated costs.

An online public consultation was run in 2013 from 4 July to 26 September to seek views on Defra's draft Strategy document.

This dialogue project on the future strategic direction of bovine TB was commissioned by Defra to engage a broad range of publics and stakeholders in the debate about bovine TB control measures and the future bTB eradication Strategy.

The Strategy for achieving Officially Bovine Tuberculosis Free status for England was published on 3rd April 2014.

Commissioning body view

“ [The dialogue] has in particular balanced the views of those in the high risk areas (which we hear frequently already) with those in the low risk areas which have previously been under-represented: this has been really valuable. ”

“ The findings of the dialogue have enabled us to address misunderstandings and expand on them in the strategy document, for example to explain carefully why things take so long to implement and what the challenges are. ”

Influence on policy and policy makers

The results of the dialogue were shared very quickly with the key policy and decision makers. The then Secretary of State received a briefing on the dialogue process and results towards the end of the process.

In addition, the Bovine TB Eradication Advisory Group for England (TBEAG) was informed of the results of the dialogue. TBEAG is an expert group with responsibility for advising the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England (AHWBE) and Defra ministers on the development and implementation of the Strategy for eradicating bovine TB. The TBEAG was consulted during the initial planning for the project and received a verbal update at the start of the citizen dialogue, as well as being informed about the final dialogue results.



Background

In July 2013, Defra published its draft Strategy for achieving Officially Bovine Tuberculosis Free status for England. This built upon the high profile 'Call for views on strengthening our TB eradication programme and new ways of working', carried out in Autumn 2012 on behalf of the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England. The draft Strategy set out policy options for addressing and eradicating bovine TB in both cattle and wildlife.

In August/September 2013, licensed badger culls began to pilot and assess the effectiveness, humaneness and safety of controlled shooting of free-ranging badgers (alongside the cage-trapping and shooting method). Badger cull policy was covered extensively in the mainstream media and political debate, with vocal opposition from sections of the scientific community, campaign groups and a public e-petition gathering over 300,000 signatures. The debate around the badger cull was therefore a focus for participants and was raised at every workshop. However, the focus of this project was on the raft of measures outlined in the draft Strategy for the eradication of bTB, in which badger control measures – including culling – are only one element.

The dialogue results were publicly recognised as a useful part of Defra's evidence base for the new bTB Strategy. When the bTB Strategy was published on 3 April 2014, the cross-cutting report of the dialogue findings was published alongside the summary of consultation responses. This is an important public statement of credibility for the dialogue because the implication is that both sources of evidence are being given a similar order of weighting. Additionally, the video animation used in the public workshops caught the attention of the Secretary of State. As a result, the tool was refreshed prior to the Strategy launch and **published** alongside it. As a result of the bTB animation, Defra has used a **similar approach** for promoting understanding and debate around other key policy areas such as pollinators.

The impacts on the Strategy were more about increasing the levels of confidence that Defra had in particular measures and how they should be explained and presented, rather than introducing new ideas or changing the proposed mix of measures in the Strategy. Nevertheless, the consultation/dialogue did influence specific new initiatives announced with the Strategy – for example, the Badger Edge Vaccination Scheme and the farm-level risk-management advice in the cull areas.

The independent evaluation also identified two other achievements for the project:

- Enhancing the consultation. Instead of a straightforward and rather traditional paper-based exercise, the citizen dialogue enabled the review of the draft bTB Strategy to be open to discussion by stakeholders at 10 workshops around the country, six public workshops and a separate online research process. This made for a more well-rounded input to Defra's thinking when compared to the more familiar paper-based consultation
- Holding discussion across the whole strategy, not just culling. Media coverage in the run up to and during the first year of the licensed badger culls in Somerset and Gloucestershire was predominantly focused on the rights and wrongs of culling badgers. However, this is only one of the various measures being deployed by Defra to manage the disease. Part of the framing at the start of the dialogue was to consciously focus discussion across all parts of the strategy, including the different control measures. Although not easy, this was effective due to consistent efforts of the facilitators and Defra staff during the events.

Key messages from the public participants

Participants discussed the nature of bTB and levels of risk to human health, actions by other countries, bTB in badgers, timescales and costs. They considered five different control measures – cattle testing and surveillance, on-farm biosecurity, compensation for farmers, controlling the risk from badgers and cattle vaccination. They also discussed roles and responsibilities of the Government, farmers and the farming industry, the food industry, wildlife organisations and the public, including how responsibilities should be shared between these groups. They considered what should be communicated to the public about bTB and identified the main themes to be the epidemiology of bTB, impact on animals, role of badgers, control measures, finance and costs, and responsibility.

The main messages from discussions at the public workshops relating to the bTB Strategy were:

Learn from other countries

“ Learn from other countries – not all of it, take the good bits from other countries – if other countries can reduce it why can't we? ”

Public participant, Newcastle

Establish multi-stakeholder governance arrangements.

Shared responsibility for managing bTB was seen by participants as a way of removing political interests from the problem and helping to ensure that the strategic direction of the control programme did not shift with changing governments.

Communicate better with the public.

Information provided by the Government should be balanced, evidence should not be interpreted or communicated through a political lens and, where there is informed debate about the reliability or weight of the evidence, this should be acknowledged.

Base actions on evidence.

All participants thought that the actions taken to control bTB should be based on evidence – the emphasis on learning from others is one indication of this.

Explore the role and responsibilities of farmers more fully.

The discussion on shared responsibility made clear that participants felt that farmers have an important role to play and that they should be involved in any multi-stakeholder body set up to manage the implementation of the Strategy in the future.

Tighten up testing and surveillance.

This issue was raised by only a few participants, who recommended some specific changes.

Badger control and culling.

This was a consistent theme throughout the dialogue, but no clear message emerged. Participants had mixed and often strongly held views on whether or not culling should be one of the tools included in the Strategy.

The dialogue activities

The overall objectives of the public dialogue were:

- To engage the general public and stakeholders in understanding, deliberating on and contributing to the future strategic development of England's bTB policy and strategy
- To inform Defra's development of a comprehensive bTB eradication strategy
- To develop and appraise opportunities to build a trust relationship between the general public, stakeholders and government in developing policy options for animal disease control.

Six public dialogue workshops. Workshops were held in three locations across England (Birmingham, Exeter and Newcastle), which were selected to reflect the three types of risk area for bTB – high risk, edge (of high risk) and low risk. The workshops took place in September and October 2013. Groups in each location met twice (on Saturdays two weeks apart) for a full day (10am to 4pm). A total of 111 public participants were involved (between 30 and 40 in each location). Participants were formally recruited to ensure a spread of gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic status and employment, with further attitudinal screening. Each workshop was attended by representatives from Defra; the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA), an executive agency of Defra (now part of the Animal and Plant Health Agency); and one academic specialist at each of the second round of workshops, primarily observing and listening, but also available to answer questions.

There were also two additional strands of engagement:

Ten stakeholder workshops. These workshops aimed to explore stakeholder views on Defra's draft Strategy and were held in locations in each of the types of risk area for bTB (as above). The workshops were attended by 258 stakeholders from farming and veterinary organisations, wildlife and environmental organisations, local authorities, supply chain representatives and academics. Workshops were attended by officials from Defra and the AHVLA to present information, answer questions, observe and listen.

Online engagement with recruited members of the public.

The online engagement, which used an online research tool called Vizzata™, took place from 28 November until 9 December 2013. The online engagement was designed to complement the reconvened workshops process, using similar materials to those used in the workshops, and broadly mirroring the workshop process. The online engagement aimed to triangulate the findings from the public workshops and to assess the feasibility of using an online platform to interact with and gain feedback from a recruited sample of the public. Overall, 65 members of the general public were recruited to take part in the formal process.

An Oversight Group was set up for the dialogue project with representatives from the National Trust, Defra, TBEAG/AHWBE, Sciencewise and an independent academic as chair.

What worked especially well

The main achievements of the dialogue were enhancing the consultation beyond a paper-based exercise, holding discussion across the full range of measures (not just badger culling) and being publicly recognised as a part of Defra's evidence base.

There was a very clear policy hook for this dialogue. Defra's strategy for bTB eradication in England was launched for consultation shortly after the dialogue was commissioned. This allowed the findings of the dialogue to be taken on board during the period of finalising the draft strategy. From one perspective, this was ideal because the dialogue could be framed directly around the draft Strategy and the dialogue findings could be directly incorporated into the final Strategy. On the other hand, timescales were very short to incorporate the dialogue findings into the Strategy in a meaningful way. However, a key policy maker was involved throughout the dialogue project and was able to consider the findings as they emerged. Nevertheless, this raises the question of the extent to which policy makers were able to formally take the findings fully on board in the Strategy.

In addition, policy makers were very engaged in the actual dialogue delivery. This was evident from the amount of staff time given by the policy and evidence teams in Defra attending the stakeholder workshops, the public workshops and writing or signing off answers to questions raised in the online engagement. In addition, the initial plan was to hold only two stakeholder workshops, but this was increased to ten soon after the start of the dialogue, as they were considered so important. Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Veterinary Officer were aware of the dialogue and the Secretary of State was briefed on the dialogue outcomes as one part of the evidence base informing the development of the strategy.

At the time of the dialogue, the first year of the licensed badger culls in Somerset and Gloucestershire began. As well as an increased level of associated policy work, this caused a significant amount of media coverage that focused almost solely on the polarised debate about whether or not to cull badgers. The effect of this was evident in most of the workshops, where some participants had seen the media coverage. In turn, there was a natural focus towards discussing the rights and wrongs of culling badgers, rather than the wider raft of measures and controls Defra was proposing. A significant effort was consistently made to hold the focus on the wider frame, to good effect.

What worked less well

External stakeholders were involved in the governance of the project via the Oversight Group, but not to the degree that would have made full use of the wider perspectives that they could have brought to choices about framing, balance of materials and providing information. The Oversight Group operated more as an internal management group between Defra, Sciencewise and the contractor, rather than an external group.

Attempts were made to get independent scientists to attend the public workshops to answer questions and act as a resource for participants. Finding individuals who could provide independent input was problematic because almost all external stakeholders who had specialist knowledge on the topic also had a view. This difficulty was compounded by the lack of time. In the end, the first round of events had no specialist input beyond Defra or AHVLA. The second round of events had an academic specialist whose

role was to discuss the socio-economic factors surrounding bTB and give an overview of alternative governance models (e.g. in New Zealand) rather than putting across a diversity of viewpoints. While Defra/AHVLA representatives did make efforts to put across the range of views, and other perspectives were brought into the room through quote cards and filmed interviews, the lack of alternative specialist input in person did introduce the danger that the alternative views to those of Defra were not well represented at the workshops.

The process of developing the online engagement was not given the same priority as that of the stakeholder or public workshops. There was then little time or flexibility to discuss openly the expectations for this strand of work, but everyone recognised the online process was a trial and, therefore, valuable. While some useful views emerged from it, including some points that the participants felt more strongly about in the online engagement than they did in the other strands (for example, support for a badger vaccination), the overall view was that the online tool provided less value than the other methods in enabling deliberative dialogue and had not met its objectives as well.

The independent evaluation identified two overarching lessons from the project:

- the value of involving a diverse stakeholder group in informing Defra's choices about the framing and design of the dialogue, as a demonstrable safeguard against potential bias
- the value of exploring, early on, the expectations that the commissioning body, Sciencewise and delivery contractor have about the status of public dialogue in relation to other research or methods employed. This would allow explicit discussions and agreements from the start about the way the dialogue is delivered and reported on.

Contact Details

Commissioning body

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Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/citizen-dialogue-on-bovine-tb