

Key criteria to consider when selecting platforms and tools for use in an online Sciencewise dialogue

July 2020

Introduction

Covid-19 lockdown and continued social distancing measures are likely to require that at least some aspects of Sciencewise dialogues will need to be run online, rather than face to face. There are a number of platforms and tools available online which offer various functions that could be useful for running SW dialogues. This might be done as part of a dialogue run wholly online, or as part of an approach which blends online and offline. Some of the different ways in which tools could be used for a dialogue are: using an online whiteboard to generate ideas, a small group video call to deliberate, a recorded video to hear from experts, or an online form for participants to provide feedback.

This working paper is intended to support both commissioners and contractors to explore which platforms to consider during the commissioning and design phases of a dialogue. It highlights key criteria on which to assess the value and usefulness of the various platforms available.

These criteria, found on the next page, are intended as a starting point to be added to as learning develops. Sciencewise contractors are invited to suggest additions to this google document, including extra criteria that should guide the selection of platforms and tools for use in an online Sciencewise dialogue.

Thinking about the purpose of a tool or platform

As with face to face dialogue, when designing online dialogue it is helpful to consider the nine steps to getting public engagement right¹. Thinking through these steps will help identify what sort of platform or tool is required:

1. Scope
2. Purpose
3. Outcomes
4. Outputs
5. Participants
6. Budget
7. Timescales
8. Institutional response
9. Monitoring and evaluation

Once a clear use for an online tool or platform has been established, it is then important to assess which of a range of tools or platforms are most suitable for different elements in your dialogue. This paper offers criteria to consider and questions to ask when assessing which online platforms or tools to use in a Sciencewise dialogue.

Criteria

This list was compiled by the Sciencewise team, drawing on their experience of online dialogue and by exploring the functionality of platforms and tools that are currently available to use. It aims to highlight the questions to answer when deciding which platform or tool to use.

¹ Allan, S. 2016. 9 steps to getting public engagement right. URL: <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/9-steps-getting-public-engagement-right>

Accessibility

- Can the tool or platform be used by people with physical impairments?
 - E.g. is there a captioning function or audio-description mode?
- What sort of technology does the platform require for participants to use?
 - Do they need a laptop, or will a smartphone or tablet be sufficient?
 - Do tablets or smartphones offer reduced functionality with the platform or tool?
- Will the chosen tools require strong internet connection to function properly, and how will that impact participants' ability to participate?
- Do these accessibility standards meet the requirements of the commissioning body?

Ease of use

- How user friendly is the platform or tool?
- Is it possible to edit the tool or platform to best meet the needs of the dialogue?
- What training / tutorials will be required for both facilitators and participants?
 - Are the tutorials provided with the platform or tool sufficient, or will you need to develop your own?
- What sort of staffing capacity will be required to facilitate using these platforms?
 - How many staff will be needed to facilitate, or to provide tech support both in the lead up to and during the event?
- Will users need to register an account?
 - Who can give them access if they forget their account password?
- Are participants required to identify themselves or can they be anonymous to other participants or everyone?

Generation of personal data

- What personal data is collected about the participants?
 - Who are the data owners and controllers?
- Is it GDPR compliant?
- Will the commissioning body require a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) to be conducted?

Capturing participant deliberation

- Does the platform or tool capture the data you require to do the analysis of participant perspectives after the dialogue?
- Will the platform automatically generate this data, or will it be hard for you to access?
- Does the platform or tool generate this data in a plain text format (e.g. .txt or .csv) so that it is easy to analyse, combine with other datasets or import into a data analysis tool?

Open source or proprietary

- Have you met point 3 of the Government Digital Service Technology Code of Practice by showing you have considered using open source and publishing your code openly?

Cost

- How much will this cost?
- Is the tool/platform flexible to the needs of the project – can you buy modules to suit the purpose and buy those as supplements?

Adaptability to participants' lives

- Can some tasks be completed in participants' own time, e.g. listening to expert informants?
- If the platform or tool allows participants to share ideas in a forum or chat in their own time, how might these be kept track of and combined with dialogue activities?

Security

- Are accounts, whiteboards, meetings, spaces etc password protected?
- Can users be kicked out, and by who?
- Can certain functions, such as private chats or screen sharing be restricted to ensure participant security?

Building a deliberative culture

- Often in face to face dialogues participants are able to bond during tea breaks etc. How might the tool be able to replicate this online?
- Are there opportunities to make the dialogue fun using the tool?

Other considerations

- What are the available tools for facilitation / moderation? E.g. screen sharing, muting participants, editing shared documents
- If you will be using multiple platforms together, will they work well alongside each other?