

## Case Study

# Science, Policy Making and Public Dialogue: New and emerging issues

## Public dialogue as part of a Sciencewise horizon scanning exercise

### Vital statistics

#### Commissioning body:

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills for Sciencewise

#### Duration of process:

15 months: February 2013 – April 2014

#### Number of public participants:

43

#### Total stakeholders involved:

388 stakeholders contributed to identifying emerging policy and science and technology issues, and 54 attended the Cambridge workshop to identify the 30 topics covered in the public dialogue

#### Cost of project:

Sciencewise funding = £50,000

*The Sciencewise programme is funded by the Science and Society Team of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). It aims to improve policy-making involving science and technology across Government by increasing the effectiveness with which public dialogue is used, and encouraging its wider use where appropriate.*

*In 2013, Sciencewise supported a Horizon Scanning process and workshop run by the Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP) at the University of Cambridge to identify relevant policy areas that could be informed by public dialogue. This was to inform the strategic direction of the Sciencewise programme and the planning of future activities.*

*The public dialogue reviewed the top 30 priority policy issues that involve science and technology, as identified at the Cambridge workshop by policy makers, scientists and technologists. It also identified the potential aspirations and concerns of the public in these policy areas.*

*The dialogue demonstrated that, with good materials and effective facilitation, public participants can provide informed and valuable insights on a broad range of complex policy areas related to science and technology topics during a one-day session.*

### Policy maker view

“ The Sciencewise project was able to make sense of the horizon-scanning event and brought the findings of that to a usable point ... Ipsos was successful in corraling a lot of information from quite a complex process. ”

**BIS representative.**

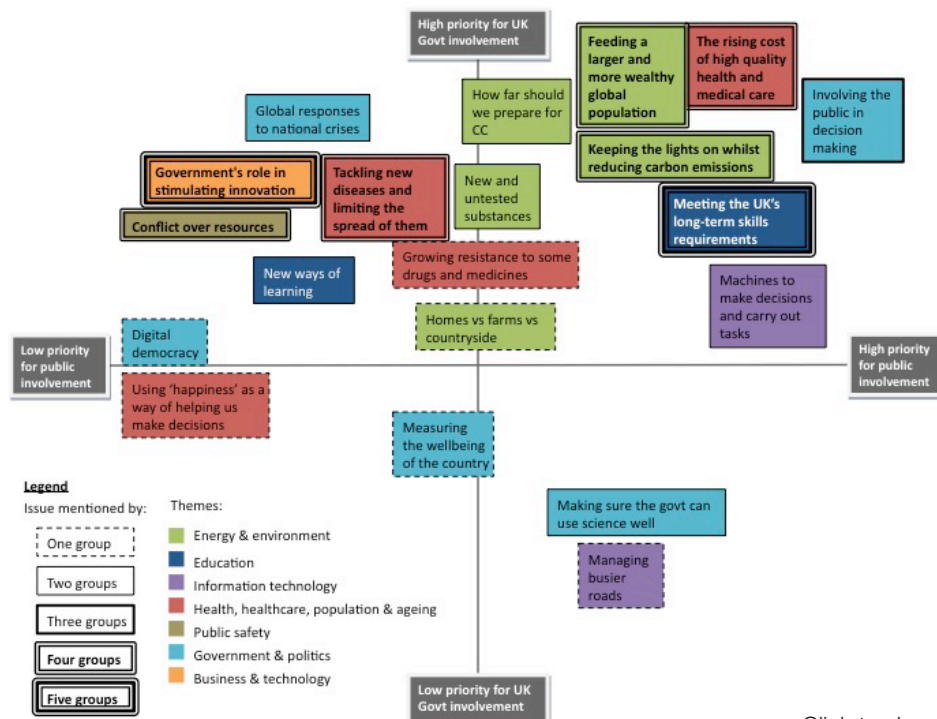
### Influence on policy and policy makers

It is too early to assess the long-term policy impacts of the horizon scanning public dialogue. However, in the short term, the output from the dialogue has helped Sciencewise and BIS to develop a list of:

- Policy issues likely to face the UK Government in the next five to 10 years
- Scientific and technological developments likely to intersect with those issues
- Public questions and concerns that might be raised on the basis of those intersections.

The output and list will inform strategic priorities for the Sciencewise programme and will enable it to initiate informed discussions across Government departments on those emerging policy areas identified as priorities by the public.

The findings were also shared with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) in October 2013. An internal paper by POST concluded that:



[Click to view full size grid diagram](#)

## Background

As part of the Sciencewise programme for 2012 to 2015, a horizon scanning workshop was run by the CSaP at the University of Cambridge to help Sciencewise and BIS develop a list of: policy issues that are likely to face the UK Government in the next five to 10 years; of scientific and technological developments that are likely to intersect with those issues; and of public questions and concerns that might be raised on the basis of those intersections. This list was to inform the strategic direction of the Sciencewise programme and planning of future activities.

CSaP used a three-stage process to identify a list of potential issues that could be discussed and prioritised during the actual workshop. The three stages were:

- Stage 1 (November 2012 to December 2012) – identifying emerging policy challenges facing the UK in the next five to 10 years through consultation with policy makers
- Stage 2 (December 2012 to the end of January 2013) – identifying scientific and technological developments that are likely to intersect with the issues identified in stage 1 through consultation with scientists and technologists
- Stage 3 (February 2013 to March 2013) – identifying public questions and concerns based on feedback from potential workshop participants – policy makers, scientists and technologists.

The workshop was held in Cambridge in March 2013, and was attended by 54 senior policy and decisions makers including from UK Government departments, the research councils, the Royal Society, the Technology Strategy Board and from other members of CSaP's network. The workshop concluded by identifying a list of 30 priorities in emerging areas of policy involving science and technology.

The public dialogue, which took place in April and May 2013, then considered these 30 priority areas and identified public concerns, questions and priorities.

*“The joint exercise with Sciencewise and CSaP was the first step in considering how horizon scanning could be best incorporated into existing parliamentary structures and procedures as well as a means of forging links with the futures community.”*

**POST (2014) Horizon Scanning Exercise.**

The independent evaluation concluded that this dialogue:

- Generated important new learning about public attitudes to public dialogue and ideas for co-ordinating future dialogue exercises
- Generated new evidence furthering the claims of public dialogue as an important, if not essential, aspect of science governance

- Set a precedent for public dialogue within policy horizon-scanning and established a need for more frequent horizon-scanning activity more generally.

*“It’s provided evidence with which to engage Government divisions. It’s given us evidence of the demand among the public. It’s also become a significant tool for advocating for engagement.”*

**Sciencewise representative.**

## Key messages from the participants

The Participants at the workshops were clear that being involved in policy-making, at least in some areas, was very important to them. Key to their willingness to engage and give their views was the assurance that their views would be listened to, and that these views would be given realistic weight in the decision-making process.

There was a high degree of agreement among participants about the issues that **were both most important for the UK Government and were priorities for public involvement** as shown in the grid.

Priority issues were: feeding a larger and more wealthy global population; the rising cost of high quality health and medical care; keeping the lights on whilst reducing carbon emissions; meeting the UK’s long term skills requirements; and machines to make decisions and carry out tasks.

*“Opened my eyes to a lot of things going on in the world ... thinking more on these things”*

**Participant, London (reconvened).**

Overall, participants prioritised issues that:

- Were urgent
- Could be seen to have specific outcomes for people
- Were multi-faceted, so could tackle several problems at once
- Were the Government’s job – rather than being issues of personal responsibility
- Had a moral or ethical dimension, such as fairness.

There were also particular types of issue and policy area that were felt to be very suitable for public involvement, namely where there is a need for:

- **Informing.** The public needs to understand the policy and to buy-in to make it work. Policy makers need to understand behaviour to best design policy
- **Deliberating.** Where the timeframe, intensity and location of impacts are uncertain and decisions must be made about investment
- **Counteracting other vested interests.** For instance, where the public interest might conflict with the needs of business
- **Accessing a range of views.** For example, on controversial and emotive issues where different publics have different views.

*“The most interesting thing about the workshop was the contrasting views”*

**Participant, London (reconvened).**

The findings from this dialogue are positive about the public’s appetite for engagement with many areas of science and technology. Points to consider in planning future dialogues include:

- Government stakeholders should work together, beyond departmental silos, to engage the public in issues that are multifaceted, multidimensional and have a bearing on many policy areas
- Issues in dialogues must be framed so they are relevant to the public, without oversimplification
- The public could be engaged fruitfully with the idea of risk, uncertainty and ‘wicked’ problems
- Find out more about underlying public values, for example individual rights versus collective responsibilities, and how these bear on attitudes to science
- Ensure dialogue takes place at the best time in the policy cycle for maximum credibility with participants
- Ensure a structure is in place for feeding back to the public so that participants feel comfortable that their voices will not be outweighed in decision making by other vested interests, such as business or political voices.

## The dialogue activities

### Specific objectives

The key objectives for the public dialogue were to explore which emerging areas of policy involving science and technology the public thought should be priorities for the UK Government, and which they felt were priorities for further public involvement beyond the normal democratic process. The project aimed to explore the spontaneous views of participants and their more specific reactions to emerging areas of policy that were selected as priorities by the CSaP workshop participants.

### The dialogue process

Three six-hour public dialogue workshops, each involving 12 to 16 participants, were conducted in London, Manchester and Cambridge in April and May 2013. A total of 43 public participants attended the three workshops.

Participants were recruited on the street. Quotas for gender, age, socio-economic group and ethnicity were set to ensure participation of individuals from a range of backgrounds. ‘Soft’ quotas based on level of interest in science were also set as it was hypothesised that general attitudes to science might impact on the views expressed in the workshops.

Each workshop started with eliciting spontaneous views on seven policy areas (created by categorising the 30 issues that the CSaP workshop had developed), as well as giving participants an opportunity to create their own issues if they thought any were missing. The seven policy areas were:

- Education
- Health, healthcare, population and ageing

- Energy and environment
- Public safety
- Government and politics
- Information technology
- Business and technology

This approach allowed identification of how the public's spontaneous language on these policy areas reflects, or differs from, the ways the experts conceptualised and discussed the issues.

Participants were then presented with stimulus materials that had been developed based on the 30 priorities from the CSaP workshop. Care was taken to design the stimulus so that it reflected the discussions of experts at the CSaP workshop as well as the final wording they settled on for their issues.

Participants discussed each issue in a policy area in turn, with facilitators probing on whether they thought the issues were likely to occur and how they felt about them. After every issue in a policy area had been discussed, participants were asked to select the one or two issues they thought should be priorities for the UK Government.

Each workshop was split into two sub-groups, and each subgroup looked at between four and six policy areas. This meant that not every participant discussed every one of the 30 issues. However, in each workshop, every issue was discussed and plenary sessions allowed the sub-groups to look at and comment on each other's choices.

A final three-hour workshop was conducted in May 2013 in London. The aim of the final workshop was to involve 10 participants (six from Cambridge and four from London) in the analysis of the findings from all three earlier workshops. Participants were chosen for their active engagement at the initial workshop and to ensure a range of views on the issues were reflected.

## What worked especially well

Unlike some other public dialogues, which take one issue and go into depth, this dialogue covered a plurality of topics, and looked at the surface of the issues to identify which would bear future public involvement. This meant that, every few minutes, participants were presented with a new set of ideas and dilemmas. This new information had to be quickly absorbed, and participants tried to link it up to their existing assumptions and knowledge. Three important learnings emerged from this:

- What the public might say when presented with similar information. Participants quickly revealed 'sticking points', myths, misconceptions or 'cultural baggage' which tended to come up immediately when an issue was introduced. When government or others need to communicate on these emergent issues, they can learn something of the expected start points of the public from the responses of participants in this dialogue.
- The role of images and particular words is very important. Participants focused on pictures to give them a strong emotional steer as to what the idea was all about.

- Going through a lot of different areas meant that participants made bridges between the areas themselves. Participants started to learn about the process of decision-making around uncertain issues. This enriched their ability to reflect on the role for public involvement in different decisions.

This particular dialogue structure with a quick-fire look at a lot of different issues can provide a good way to gather spontaneous views on a wide range of subjects and to engage participants in thinking about the process of dialogue itself.

The dialogue also provided a good example of the use of reconvened meetings, not so much as the second instalment of a dialogue exercise, but as an opportunity for public participants to engage in critical reflection and deeper engagement in framing the results of earlier discussions.

## Contact Details

### Commissioning body

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

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### Reports

Full project and evaluation reports are available from Sciencewise on [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/dialogue-on-outputs-from-a-workshop-on-science-policy-making-and-public-dialogue-new-and-emerging-issues-in-the-uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/dialogue-on-outputs-from-a-workshop-on-science-policy-making-and-public-dialogue-new-and-emerging-issues-in-the-uk)