

## Case Study

# Significant Water Management Issues

## A public dialogue on the most important issues affecting the water environment

### Vital statistics

#### Commissioning body:

Environment Agency (EA)

#### Duration of process:

14 months: May 2013 - June 2014

#### Total public participants involved:

986 (119 in dialogue events, 867 in an online survey)

#### Total stakeholders involved:

Seven on the reference group

#### Total experts involved in events:

Up to three EA officers per event

**Cost of project:** £200,000 total,  
Sciencewise co-funding = £100,000

*This public dialogue on Significant Water Management Issues (SWMIs) was designed to enable public views, ideas and concerns to be fed into final plans and priorities for the Environment Agency's River Basin Management Plans to be published in 2015, and to inform its approach to meeting other Water Framework Directive commitments. The dialogue included seven public dialogue workshops, one in each of the English river basin districts (with Humber and Northumbria combined).*

*The public dialogue was designed to work alongside the Environment Agency's stakeholder engagement (with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), water companies, local authorities and others) and its formal Challenges and Choices consultation.*

*River Basin Management Plans are the cornerstone of the Water Framework Directive (WFD), which is an international agreement, which requires that we protect our water environment from deterioration and improve it where possible (so biodiversity, habitat, and water quantity and quality are all classed as 'good'). The WFD emphasises that citizen participation is a vital component of the approach 'in getting our waters clean, the role of citizens and citizens' groups will be crucial'.*

*SWMIs are the most significant issues affecting the water environment – as determined by the Environment Agency and others that use or care for the water environment. SWMIs include over-abstraction, chemical pollution, agricultural pollution and destruction of natural habitats. These issues will affect the benefits society gets from the water environment such as clean water, availability of water, amenity benefits, business benefits, fishing, recreation and biodiversity as well as the costs and sustainability of those benefits.*

### Policy maker view

“What we want from our land and water needs society's views, not just the views of an expert. In the first phase of River Basin Planning, we didn't write documents that connected with people at all. When we're writing consultation questions for the formal consultation on options over the summer [2014] it [the dialogue] will inform how we construct the consultation. Usually, the consultation would set

out a set of principles that the EA is going to use to manage the water environment. Now, we are able to say our weight of evidence suggests we should do it like this, we know you're concerned about that, therefore we think there are a couple of options. We will be able to talk more explicitly about what concerned the public – the feedback from these workshops.”

Project Planning Group member



## Background

The WFD is international legislation with the following key aims:

- Expanding the scope of water protection to all waters, surface waters and groundwater
- Achieving 'good status' for all waters by a set deadline
- Water management based on river basins
- 'Combined approach' of emission limit values and quality standards
- Getting the prices right
- Getting the citizen involved more closely
- Streamlining legislation.

In the UK, a number of actions have been taken to achieve those aims. River Basin Management Plans are the cornerstone of the WFD and set out how the EA and its partners will deliver against a shared ambition for the water environment in England and Wales. Updated plans will be published in 2015.

A river basin is the area of land that runs or drains down into a river. The management plan is a detailed account of how the objectives set for the river basin are to be reached in the timescale required. It includes the analysis of the river basin's characteristics, a review of the impact of human activity on the status of waters in the basin, an estimation of the effect of existing legislation and the remaining 'gap' to meeting these objectives; and a set of measures designed to fill the gap as well as an economic analysis of water use within the river basin.

The decisions on the most appropriate measures to achieve the objectives in the River Basin Management Plan involve balancing the interests of various groups. Therefore, it is considered essential that all interested parties are fully involved in this discussion and, indeed, in the preparation of the River Basin Management Plan as a whole. An economic analysis underpins the plans, but it is also considered essential that the process is open to the scrutiny of those who will be affected, which includes the public.

## Influence on policy and policy makers

It is not yet possible to fully assess the impact of the dialogue on the EA's decision-making. Dialogue results are already being used effectively in the EA at strategic and catchment levels, and have been disseminated through briefings to key teams and initiatives. There is also an action plan for wider dissemination to appropriate parts of the EA that would benefit from hearing about the findings and appreciating the potential and approach to public dialogue. The results have also fed into the design of the draft River Basin Management Plans consultation in September 2014 by informing the language used in communicating issues to the public, and in supporting the framing of issues and options.

However, the impacts of the dialogue have, to date, been more focused on improving public engagement processes than on the content of policies – although feedback is helping to enrich planning and deliberations within some catchment partnerships. A major, unplanned and unexpected impact from the dialogue was on EA staff as a result of the enthusiasm and good will of the public to engage positively in deliberations about water management. An appreciation that a well-planned and facilitated process can create constructive debate with the public has been an extremely positive experience for staff involved, opening up new ways for them to 'road test' options and plans. The process has instilled significantly more confidence in the EA to work with the public in future as water management policy and practice develops at national and catchment levels.

It has also been interesting to see the extent to which participants have taken what they have learnt and discussed in the workshops further in terms of personal research, discussing water management issues with others, and changes in the way they use water and products that affect water quality.

*“One clear thing is .... we really need to get a plan in place to work out how we pick up and integrate this into what we do. I can think and use the feedback much wider than just river basin planning. The work done by the project group was very powerful and we need to make sure we maximise the value/learning from this work. We got value for money out of it, but there's a lot more value we could take out of it.”*

Project Planning Group member.

### Key messages from the participants:

Participants responded enthusiastically to the information provided during the workshops and were keen to express their views. Having learned more, many were surprised at their previous lack of awareness and felt that members of the public should be more aware of the issues and, consequently, would be more likely to support or take action.

*“If people knew more, they might make more changes. It all comes down to information – the more you tell them, the more incentive you give them to change.”*

Public participant.

Participants identified some SWMI challenges as being of greater interest than others – notably chemicals, faecal indicator organisms and sanitary pollutants, but also phosphates and nitrates – broadly acknowledging that this reflected personal fears or interests.

When considering the fairest way to pay the cost of meeting the SWMI challenges, participants considered general taxation, water bills or increased cost of food/goods as the essential choices we face as a society. Participants acknowledged that, as consumers, they will pay the additional price one way or the other.

*“We might be more happy to pay if we see what it's going to achieve, what the benefits are. You wouldn't hand over £70 in a supermarket without seeing what was in your shopping trolley, why would you do that on your water bill?”*

Public participant.

When presented with typical dilemmas that the EA faces in managing the SWMI challenges, participants generally favoured spreading resource across areas, in recognition of the need for action everywhere, while seeking the most benefit for the resource they had to allocate. This was mirrored in the accompanying

survey, in which over half of respondents indicated that the same level of protection should be given to all water environments. However, participants were very averse to those measures that presented any threat to employment.

### The dialogue activities

The key objectives of this project were to:

- Allow a sample of the public to engage on, deliberate and, alongside other evidence (such as environmental, technical and economic), feed into key decisions within plans for the water environment
- Demonstrate an open and objective approach to river basin planning, which can help create greater commitment to actions from business and other stakeholders
- Encourage frank and evidence-based dialogue with the public on the cost and benefits provided by our water environment, and how best to manage this environment into the future
- Link across various water planning cycles (such as abstraction plans and flood risk plans) to ensure the Environment Agency has a customer focus and avoids 'silo' mentality.

At the start of the project, a Project Planning Group was formed, which included members of the Environment Agency, Sciencewise and the delivery teams. This group met four times to advise on issues that could most usefully be discussed through the dialogue and the most useful outputs for the development of the Environment Agency's work. They also advised on workshop design, scheduling and dissemination.

In addition, a Reference Group, which acted in an independent advisory capacity, was set up. It included a number of external stakeholder organisations, including Angling Trust, Association of Drainage Authorities (ADA), Consumer Council for Water, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Highways Agency, Natural England and Thames Estuary Partnership. This Group reviewed and commented on the emerging workshop plans and proposed stimulus materials. In addition, the Group advised and commented on questions to go into the online omnibus survey.

The full-day public dialogue workshops were held in seven river basin districts. Twenty members of the public were recruited 'on street' with quotas set for gender, age and social grade. Between 15 and 18 public participants attended each workshop giving a total of 119 across the seven workshops.

The morning workshop session was designed to help people think about the water environment, what they valued personally and what benefits they individually and collectively derived from it. After the significant water management issues were introduced, participants were given a chance to reflect and ask questions of Environment Agency staff. Following the lunch break, participants reconvened in two groups where each issue was discussed in turn, with time for reflection and additional input from the Environment Agency. Participants were then asked to indicate their level of interest in the different issues in a 'prioritisation exercise'. The workshops concluded with four small group discussions to cover reflections on the discussion, to elicit initial thoughts from participants about ways to pay for necessary measures to address the water management issues and to think about willingness to consider 'lifestyle choices' in the light of the issues considered.

Following the initial workshop sessions, there was a final re-convened workshop with a representative sample of 16 public participants from across all the river basin districts. This was designed to enable participants to build on their thinking and knowledge from the first workshop session to deliberate further about:

- What they considered to be priorities in terms of water management
- The trade-offs and complexities involved in decision-making
- Possible measures to address different water management issues and their comparative costs
- What drives local and national priorities.

In addition, an omnibus survey was conducted to add context to, and aid interpretation of, the qualitative findings produced through the SWMI public dialogue. The survey was carried out in February 2014. 867 panellists from Ipsos MORI's Online Access Panel were surveyed, with the results weighted to the known England population offline.

### What worked especially well

Environment Agency staff who attended the workshops consistently commented that it was good to be engaging with the public on these issues in a constructive, informed and well-designed and facilitated environment (see Impacts section for more on this).

“*In terms of projects I've been involved in, this is one of those projects that has made me feel good and motivated throughout. I really enjoyed being part of it. It was intellectually stimulating, an avenue of work we should do more of in all aspects of our business, not just river basin planning, but also with flood risk for example. I can't sing its praises enough. I reported back to our liaison panel locally and explained my passion for this sort of work. It's enriched our understanding about what the public think of the wider water environment and given us another string to our bow when we go to talk to government.*”

Project Planning Group member.

### Contact Details

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#### Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/significant-water-management-issues-engaging-the-public-on-the-big-issues-affecting-the-water-environment/](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/significant-water-management-issues-engaging-the-public-on-the-big-issues-affecting-the-water-environment/)