

Case Study

Water catchment planning

A national pilot with public and community dialogues on water quality and sustainability

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra)
Environment Agency
Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)
Living with Environmental Change (LWEC) programme

Duration of process:

15 months: January 2012 – March 2013

Number of involved:

A range of activities across 13 pilot catchments with over 650 participants – about 100 involved in public workshops, around 400 in open surveys and approximately 180 stakeholders at events)

Cost of project:

£2,098,000 total – for support to and evaluation of pilot catchments, Sciencewise funding = £218,277

Increasing water demand due to population growth, urbanisation, agricultural intensification and the effects of a changing climate is now recognised as one of the greatest challenges facing the globe. The UK is relatively well endowed with rainfall. However, its ageing water infrastructure and intensive land-management practices mean the problems of dwindling supply, diffuse pollution, chemical contaminants and increasing consumer demand are laying the ground for a potential crisis of water quality and security. This could impact on national finances, natural ecosystems and public health.

The key legislation in achieving water quality and security is the Water Framework Directive (WFD). The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) ran 25 community pilots from 2011 to 2013 that were designed to feed into the policy for delivering the WFD through water-catchment-based planning and actions.

The WFD requires public bodies to engage with community stakeholders, and Defra recognised the need to improve and widen engagement in future WFD planning. The public dialogue project was designed to test ways of enhancing community participation using conceptual models from public dialogue.

The project helped Defra and the Environment Agency to develop a new policy framework to manage water quality and water resources. The framework has built in mechanisms for drawing on public and community knowledge that was previously excluded, and strengthened the role of public and community involvement in new approaches to water management and planning in England.

Policy maker views

“The project has fed into the handbook that will guide future local catchment partnerships, to include mechanisms for public engagement.”

Defra.

“The project provided greater confidence that resulting River Basin Management Plans will reflect local needs and, therefore, be more likely to attract funding.”

Defra.

“Silo working doesn’t identify opportunities for synergies and multiple benefits, but this project identified an approach that could do that.”

Environment Agency.



Background

In general, the quality of water in UK rivers, lakes and streams is improving. For example, between 1990 and 2006, the percentage of rivers of good biological quality in England rose from 60% to 71%. However, these data hide extreme variability. The national picture of water quality is subject to regional variation and has actually shown a decline in some places. This has a heavy cost on ecosystems, soil fertility and enjoyment of the countryside. The main sources of degradation come from pollutants such as nitrates, phosphates, pesticides.

Dealing with this water pollution is not easy. A number of new approaches are being tested and implemented including catchment management where the catchment is the area from which rainfall flows into a river, lake or other water body.

In March 2011, Richard Benyon, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Natural Environment and Fisheries, [announced](#) that Defra would enter a pilot phase for the development of new approaches to the Water Framework Directive. This centred on 25 community pilots based on catchment areas. These pilots were designed to inform policy and process for the remainder of the country, and Defra's water quality policy leading up to the European negotiations for the second cycle WFD in 2015.

Resources were provided for public dialogue in 13 of the 25 pilot areas, feeding into the development of local water-catchment-based management plans and informing new policy solutions related to water quality. Facilitator time was invested in engagement planning, training, steering group development, one-to-one mentoring and facilitation of public events in each pilot area. These local activities were supported by a learning framework to identify the role that public dialogue could play in future catchment based management planning.

Influence on policy and policy makers

The outcomes from the public dialogue project fed into Defra's policy framework "[Catchment Based Approach: Improving the quality of our water environment – A policy framework to encourage the wider adoption of an integrated Catchment Based Approach to improving the quality of our water environment](#)", which was published in May 2013. This is an initial framework to facilitate different ways of working towards a better water environment. It sets out a range of ideas about some of the opportunities Defra sees for such ways of working. The framework is designed to support local action. Much of what is described sets out the 'bridge' between local actions and the much larger scale actions described in River Basin Management Plans. The project fed in ideas and experience on engaging stakeholders and the public, and these are reflected in the framework which includes, among the key ways of working:

- Using expert facilitation to help catchment partnerships address a range of issues for collaborative working including stakeholder identification and analysis, and engaging with members of the public.

- Engaging with members of the public around strategic (e.g. plan making) and local activities (e.g. sampling) as appropriate to objectives.

Influence on catchment pilots

Public engagement was carried out, to varying degrees, by the majority of catchment pilots and other catchment initiatives. Where carried out, its influence was positive and its impact varied from peripheral to being viewed as central to catchment-based working. Pilot hosts have identified this as a process that will require continued support. Comments from individual pilots included:

"Had identified what people value about the river, what issues are important to them, how they would like to be involved in future projects."

"Had guided the development of projects that are included in the Catchment Plan."

Had "been helpful in shaping and prioritising all aspects of the plan."

“Large influence. A whole new slant on the plan – access to the river was reinforced as a priority that had come up. Stakeholders had put flow and abstraction. What came up from the community was flooding and draining and access (educational access for children and others).”

Overall impact

The Catchment Based Approach was launched as a wider national programme by Defra on 3 June 2013, building on the experience and learning from the pilot projects. The experience from the pilots provided the evidence to support the focus of the approach on ‘working together to agree common objectives and implement solutions’ and recognising that ‘it is important that those involved establish structures and processes that support collaborative working, ensure all voices are heard and help to build trust’.

The project built on previous guidance for water-catchment-based management that framed public engagement largely in terms of consultation. The new policy framework and guidance following this project provides a much wider range of activities and experiences to more deeply involve the public in the development of plans and prioritisation of issues for implementation.

The project “did change the way in which policy is implemented, but didn’t throw up anything that needed a new policy.” Defra.

It also had “implications for how the Environment Agency might involve the public in future ... this gave a sense of where consensus is and where the difficulties are.” Environment Agency.

There was also value “in helping Defra learn about the mechanisms for debate – especially support for involving people beyond the ‘usual suspects.’” Defra.

Key messages from the public

There were examples where individual dialogue activities at pilot level fed into the catchment plans for the area. For example, two public workshops in the Bradford Beck area provided an opportunity for a total of 28 participants to vote for (or not) each of the six themes proposed by the pilot steering group. More generally, public interest was highest for issues that were relevant to them and locally focused, which led some pilots to rethink early drafts of plans which were considered too strategic and ‘nebulous’.

“As a policy maker, you can sit in a bit of a tower, and it was really good to see what people thought.”

Environment Agency.

The most significant role played by public dialogue was in the identification and prioritisation of issues. The list of possible river-related issues that could be tackled within catchments was often overwhelming and public opinion could provide a useful steer in terms of areas for focus. Where core stakeholders did early work on drafting themes or key issues to address through the catchment management plan, workshops with wider stakeholders and members of the public were used as a forum to test their assumptions and to add to their work. Early work that was directly with the public could also provide information to give a useful starting point for wider planning, providing a neutral ‘outside opinion’ that stakeholders with different priorities could agree upon.

However, the main focus of the project was learning about the relevance of the public dialogue approach in catchment-based

management planning, rather than gaining direct public and community input on the topics of water quality and management.

The dialogue activities

The objectives of this public dialogue included to:

- Deliberate the range of technologies and options for improving water quality and sustainability using the catchment as a decision-making lens.
- Debate and consider trade-offs and issues related to improving water quality and sustainability.
- Support the generation of catchment plans by the end of 2012, which will determine local and national water quality policy.
- Provide facilitation and support resources for deep, deliberative dialogues in a number of pilots and lighter facilitation support to further pilots.

The project involved three main levels of activity:

1. Individual support to pilot areas.

The project involved work at a range of levels with 13 of the 25 pilots over a 12-month period. The focus of the work with the 13 pilots was to help them understand how public dialogue could enhance their catchment management plan, and to provide advice and support to help them do this. In practice, there were three main stages at which public dialogue activities linked with catchment management planning – information gathering to identify issues, testing early work by stakeholders, and prioritisation of issues and actions. The latter, for instance, was carried out mainly in a workshop setting or, in one case, using a mobile gaming approach.

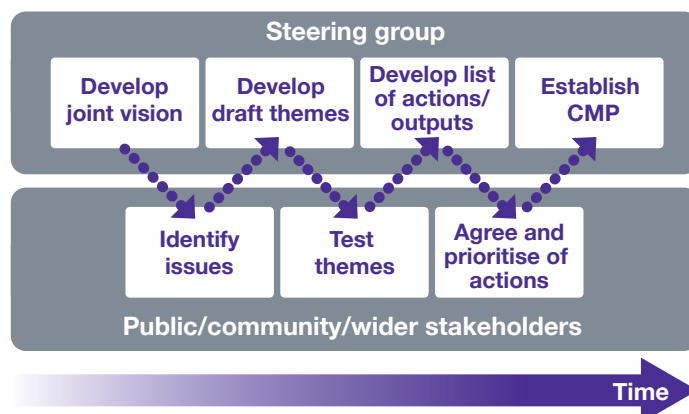
2. Sharing experience and learning across the pilots.

For instance, the facilitator team met at regular intervals to share and reflect on experience and support each other in their work on the ground.

3. Input to the Defra new policy framework and the development of good practice guidance.

The report from the dialogue activities was used alongside the report of the major evaluation of the whole programme of the 25 pilots. Learning fed into the [Guide](#) to Collaborative Catchment Management, which was published in August 2013.

The project developed good practice guidance for an approach to catchment-management planning enhanced through public dialogue. A diagram illustrating the proposed sequence of activities is shown below.



The guidance suggests a staged decision-making process that sees an increasing level of interaction between a steering group (responsible for managing the process), wider stakeholders and the public.

What worked especially well

Most pilots involved some public engagement and there was a wide range of activities completed including workshops, social media, pop-up events, online surveys and questionnaires, films, catchment walkovers, consultation and work with local schools. Pop-up workshops by Tidal Thames, the River Story project by the Bristol and Avon catchment, and Agreement meetings in Bradford Beck were all especially good.

Positive aspects of the public engagement in the pilots included the extent of public engagement, the wide range of activities undertaken, good examples of innovation and best practice, and some examples of public engagement having significant influence.

One example of innovation was the development, by the Douglas catchment pilot, of a gaming approach that could be taken around a variety of venues such as pubs, community events and supermarkets. This fun, highly visual approach allowed the pilot to hold short, focused discussions with many small groups and individuals by presenting issues and asking participants to prioritise them using a mobile board with moveable cards.

More generally, the public dialogue work was seen to have contributed to improving the design and delivery of engagement events (which were better structured and organised, and pilots got more out of them), ensuring outputs from the engagement (e.g. terms of reference and the catchment plan), understanding of the issues in the catchment and providing an independent voice (to provide perspective and bounce ideas off).

What worked less well

The level of public response was often lower than hoped for, partly due to a lack of focus in some engagement activities. There was also sometimes a lack of clarity about the objectives and purpose of public engagement, including who to engage with. Generally, public engagement was limited because of lack of time and (less so) lack of money, the size of the areas and populations covered by the pilots, and difficulties in reaching certain publics.

There was relatively little (although some) influence on plans, although there were other benefits such as volunteering, transparency, awareness and the potential for later influence. The low level of influence may have been because, although a wide range of public engagement activities were undertaken, only a relatively small minority involved deliberation. Others tended to be information provision through activities such as stalls at events, site visits and river walkovers.

There were also challenges of using public knowledge in WFD processes, partly because there was a lack of correlation between the focus and design of public engagement and the specifics of the WFD. The ability of the pilots and catchment initiatives to address this was limited, reflecting the relatively low level of capacity for public engagement in many pilots.

Some pilots did not feel that public engagement was a priority – and that the focus should be on institutional stakeholders in the initial parts of the process. The successes of some pilots and catchment initiatives indicate that the two are complementary.

Contact details

Commissioning body

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

Environment Agency

Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)

Sciencewise contacts:

Daniel Start, (Dialogue and Engagement Specialist)
Email: daniel.start@sciencewise-erc.org.uk

James Tweed, (Projects Manager)
Email: james.tweed@sciencewise-erc.org.uk

Delivery contractor

Dialogue by Design
Email: facilitators@dialoguebydesign.com

Project evaluator

Cascade Consulting
Email: enquiries@cascadeconsulting.co.uk

Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/water-quality-and-sustainability/>