

Case Study

Babraham Institute

A public dialogue on future strategy

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

Babraham Institute and the
Biotechnology and Biological
Sciences Research Council

Duration of process:

May 2015 – November 2015
(7 months)

Total public participants involved:

43

Total stakeholders involved:

24

Total experts involved in events:

14

Cost of project:

£98,000 total
Sciencewise funding = £44,028

The Babraham Institute (BI) is a world leader in life science research, generating new knowledge about the biological mechanisms underpinning ageing, development, and the maintenance of health and wellbeing. The research at BI addresses fundamental questions about how cells and organisms develop and respond to the environment, including innovative research into the molecular mechanisms that underlie normal cellular processes. BI is one of eight institutes that receive strategic funding from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), within the Healthy Ageing research strand.

BI's vision is to be an open, transparent and accountable organisation that is leading in its contribution of science to society, economic development and growth. Embedded within BI's research is a public engagement programme that aims to bring scientists closer to society and to allow researchers to listen, understand and value the societal context of their research. BI considers it vital that its researchers engage with different public groups and vice versa. In May 2015, BI launched a public dialogue project to feed into its scientific and public engagement strategies for 2017-22.

Policy maker view

“The scientific principles will be of most use and can certainly inform BI at a strategic level.”

BI project lead

“The public dialogue project has given BI an insight into the differences between public dialogue and science communications.”

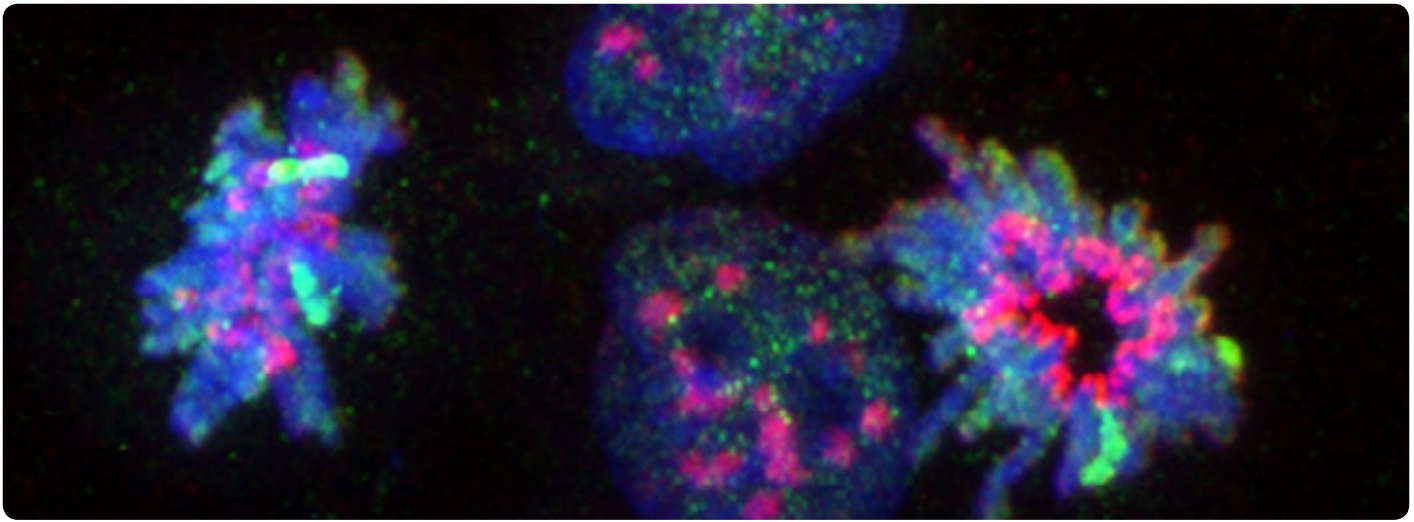
BI project team member

Influence on policy and policy makers

The most immediate impact from this dialogue project was that the new draft of BI's public engagement strategy incorporates recommendations from the dialogue process at three levels – communication, consultation and participation. This is in contrast to BI's approach in the past that focused predominantly on one-way communication with the public. The new public engagement strategy is expected to be published in 2016.

This dialogue project was expected to have limited short-term potential to influence the detailed content of BI's scientific strategy. However, the genuine interest from the public participants and their support for curiosity-driven research, such as that undertaken at BI, are expected to influence BI's decision-making processes more widely, including underpinning discussions with third parties and funders. In particular, the six scientific principles and two governance principles developed during the dialogue workshops were expected to be of most use to BI at a strategic level.

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Background

BI is one of eight institutes that receive strategic funding from BBSRC. The innovative, world-leading life science research that is carried out by BI generates new knowledge of the biological mechanisms underpinning ageing, development, and the maintenance of health and wellbeing. It also supports the BBSRC's mission to drive advances in fundamental bioscience, such as how cells and organisms develop and respond to the environment. A particular focus is how we age and studying the underlying mechanisms controlling this process (e.g. the differences between how older and younger people respond to infection).

The output from BI has major economic impact through fundamental research underpinning actual and potential health gain. As part of the Babraham Research Campus, a colocation of BI's academic research and commercial life science companies and through its other collaborations, BI contributes to the development of innovative interventions and supporting 'strong and sustained' growth of bio-industry in the UK. World-class research by the BI and a culture that encourages innovation, enterprise and private sector investment on the Babraham Research Campus, has led to high-quality business investments by global biopharmaceutical companies, medium-sized biologics companies and start-ups.

BI already had a strong programme and history of science communication through regularly engaging in outreach activities targeted at diverse audiences including schools, families and local community groups. Activities included science festival exhibitions, schools visits, and community group tours and talks. BI wanted to increase its two-way engagement with the public and stakeholders, enabling it to develop mechanisms so that it could make decisions informed by a wider range of views and values. As a publicly funded organisation, BI felt it was vital that its researchers engage with different public groups and vice versa.

The findings have also started to inform the policies and work of other organisations. For example:

- Representatives from 10 organisations, including BBSRC and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), attended a special event in November 2015 to launch the final report. Stakeholders were engaged in deliberations about the findings from the project, including consideration of the implications for their own work
- The British Society for Immunology (BSI) is interested in the work and sees the opportunity for the dialogue results to inform its work in a number of ways – public engagement; ageing, which is a key interest for BSI; and its newly created Policy Department, particularly around the important message about public support for fundamental research

As the BI's priorities are strongly influenced by wider strategic frameworks, the findings also have the potential to influence wider strategic thinking in BIS and BBSRC.

Key messages from the participants

Participants identified six scientific principles that they felt should inform the science strategy at BI. By the end of the dialogue, most participants wanted to protect and support the function of fundamental bioscience research (as in the first principle below). They felt that research should:

1. Be fundamental, in-depth and a 'building block' with potential for greatest increase in knowledge

“If you have a better idea of how something works, you have a better idea of how to prevent [illness].”
2. Be fair, helping the greatest number and/or the most vulnerable, and provide outcomes which are distributed fairly

“[Babraham should] unbiasedly aim to help everybody. And everybody is in the game and not only a few.”
3. Enable collaborations from internal to global and deliver good value for money by engaging the scientific community and the public

“Collaboration brings faster, deeper and better quality research. This is because different departments have different areas of expertise.”

- Help people to control their health by giving them understanding/tools to help future generations too

“Giving people the opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive. Giving you more knowledge about how your body works, what you’re eating what you’re drinking, the kind of effects it has on your system. The more you can do to help yourself in the long term.”

- Work to increase quality of life and healthy ageing through life

“Fight these diseases and enhance people’s lives.”

- Bring commercial benefits to the BI to enable more research to be conducted

“Commercial benefits... yes... if you don’t have commercial benefits you don’t get funding and you can’t do more research.”

These principles are presented in order of strength of feeling from participants, with the strongest feeling for 1 and 2. The final principle tended to polarise views – it was supported by some and contested by others.

Participants also identified two key principles for governance:

- They wanted BI to support projects that are in the public interest and most likely to deliver on the priorities identified above, when applying for grants
- If BI is committed to accountability, it needs to enable scrutiny to make this commitment credible. This could involve taking account of a number of different voices (academia, media, lay and external experts) to bring a wider discussion of the interests of different stakeholders into setting strategies

The dialogue events explored participants’ views on selected areas of BI’s work and the context in which sits. The implications of these discussions for BI’s scientific strategy were seen to be:

- BI to work to combat inequalities in health outcomes because participants felt that illnesses and diseases are inherently unfair in their effects. They wanted this even though they understood that fundamental science is not the same as medical research
- Focusing on epigenetics was seen as a priority for participants
- BI could consider research into ageing in its social context (i.e. not simply as a biological process)

The implications for BI’s public engagement strategy are based on the framing of ageing research to the public – in a way that is most likely to interest them and help them understand the concepts:

- Consulting the public about delaying illness and increasing resilience, not reversing or stopping ageing

- Consulting the public about ageing of people, not of cells; even when the project is at a very early stage
- Consulting the public about equipping people with the information they need to make good choices and increase their own wellbeing

The dialogue activities

The aim of the project was to carry out a public dialogue to feed into BI’s science and public engagement strategies 2017-22. Key objectives for this dialogue project were:

- To engage in dialogue with civil society and other stakeholders and a balanced recruited sample of lay public about the challenges and big questions relevant to BI
- To gain insight and understanding from the public and civil society that will inform and influence both scientific and public engagement strategies
- To raise awareness and highlight the importance of BI and its science with stakeholders
- To gain an understanding of how the public and stakeholders view BI’s work
- To demonstrate best practice in openness/responsiveness and social responsibility

The dialogue project gained and maintained senior support within BI from the start. The BI Director was directly involved throughout and a high-level planning meeting, facilitated by Sciencewise, was held to help scope out the dialogue needs. The project content and design was developed using input from an Advisory Group and a broad range of stakeholders. The Advisory Group role was to advise BI on the dialogue project process and materials. It comprised representatives from eight organisations (including BBSRC) already known to BI. The Advisory Group met twice during the project and attended the dissemination event. The role of an External Stakeholder Group (ESG) was to comment on the stimulus materials for the public workshops. In total, 14 people from a wide range of organisations that had not previously worked with BI were invited to join the ESG; 14 took part – eight attended a stakeholder workshop in July 2015 and six were consulted by phone. The involvement of all these stakeholders from a range of technical disciplines was of significant value to the dialogue and to BI.

The core of the dialogue consisted of two rounds of one-day workshops with public participants. Event 1 workshops took place in Birmingham and Cambridge in July 2015. Across the two locations, 43 members of the public attended. All participants were invited back to a reconvened day-long event held in Cambridge in September 2015, which 41 participants attended.



Participants were recruited to reflect the spread of ages, gender, life stages, socio-demographic segments and ethnicity of Birmingham and Cambridge respectively.

Event 1 was designed to inform participants about the nature of BI's work and begin discussion, and debate around key issues facing the bioscience community today. In particular:

- Public principles and values when it comes to fundamental bioscience
- Priorities around approaches to research into ageing
- Moral and social conundrums that members of the public feel impact on research in these areas

The key question for Event 1 was 'How can BI's fundamental bioscience research help people lead long and healthy lives?'. To engage participants with BI's work, a selection of case studies covering examples of projects across its four strategic programmes were presented, as was information about the basic molecular and cellular processes underlying ageing and disease.

The information materials for these sessions were produced with input from the BI project team, external stakeholders and the Advisory Group. At the end of Event 1, participants were set a 'homework task' to complete.

At the day-long reconvened Event 2, participants again discussed case studies, but related the work to overarching issues relevant to basic bioscience. In particular:

- The experiences of a scientist, including motivation, career path and funding structures
- Principles drawn out from response to the case studies that BI should consider in its science strategy
- The funding of basic bioscience research
- BI's use of animals in research
- Different aspects of public involvement, discussing ideas for different types of engagement from informing the public about BI's work through to co-developing strategy

A total of 14 BI scientists were involved in the workshops– five at the Birmingham workshop, six at the Cambridge workshop and seven at the reconvened workshop. All were given verbal and written briefs beforehand so they were clear about their role. The involvement of the scientists proved beneficial from two perspectives – the public appreciated meeting them and hearing from them directly about their work, and scientists enjoyed taking part and engaging with members of the public.

A dissemination event was held in London in November 2015 to launch the dialogue project report and to discuss the findings with key stakeholders. Representatives from 10 organisations attended the dissemination event.

“What was reported back at the meeting was fascinating and insightful.”

External Stakeholder Group member

What worked especially well

External stakeholders, BI scientists and Advisory Group members all helped frame the stimulus material and workshop design. There were challenges in capturing everyone's insights and the final decisions about the shape of the design were taken by BI's project team working alongside the dialogue contractor.

Considerable effort was made within the project to develop the stimulus materials for the workshops – the case studies, slide sets, handouts and task descriptions. The materials stimulated interest in the topic and helped to keep discussions focused. The materials supported the learning and deliberations, and were of interest to the participants.

The content of the public workshops was pitched at a level that a significant majority of participants could understand. As a result, they felt able to participate in the deliberations during the initial workshops and could build on this to start reaching conclusions about BI's work in the reconvened workshop. The 'translation' from scientific language into a form that was understandable by those encountering it for the first time was largely extremely effective, and the quality of the conversational contributions from BI's scientists was generally accessible and engaging.

What worked less well

Establishing a key question that summarises the public dialogue objectives in an understandable format is a key step. The core purpose of the dialogue activity was crystallised into a format that was easily understood by the public participants and which provided a focus for the workshop design process – it helped keep the process designers on track. However, some concerns were raised about whether this question needed further refinement to ensure it reflected BI's core activity in basic science (rather than translational research) and could, therefore, produce results that would be better aligned with BI's science strategy.

There were noticeable differences in the baseline scientific/research knowledge between the participants at the two locations – overall, those from Cambridge were more knowledgeable. The recruitment used a purposive sampling methodology and was intended to be reflective of the local population. Had the intention been to reflect the UK population as a whole, then this approach to recruitment and sampling would not have been appropriate.

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Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/public-dialogue-about-the-future-strategy-of-the-babraham-institute/