

Evaluation of a public dialogue to inform the National Food Strategy

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

This short summary presents the findings of an independent evaluation of a public dialogue on the National Food Strategy (NFS). The dialogue was commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Agriculture (Defra) and co-funded by Sciencewise¹, a programme led by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) which helps to ensure that policy is informed by the public. The public dialogue process was designed and delivered by independent public engagement specialists, Hopkins Van Mil (HVM) and has been evaluated by URSUS Consulting.

2. Policy context

In June 2019, the Rt. Hon. Michael Gove MP, then Secretary of State for Defra, commissioned

Henry Dimbleby to conduct an independent review to inform the first new food strategy in England for 75 years. The purpose of the review was to address the environmental and health problems caused by the food system, to ensure the security of food supply and to maximise the benefits of the coming revolution in agricultural technology. The NFS review was carried out by a small independent temporary task force comprising Defra staff and external experts sitting outside normal departmental structures.

The NFS team commissioned a public dialogue as one of several other evidence gathering activities. The public dialogue was to provide a bottom-up, in-depth understanding of public views on the food system and the values that underlie them. Initial plans to involve 180 participants in face-to-face events were forestalled by the Covid 19 pandemic. A first round was carried out face-to-face, during February and March 2020, but the remainder of the dialogue was held online. Participants were drawn from Kendal, Grimsby, Norwich, Bristol and South London. The pandemic also affected the planned contribution of findings from the public dialogue into the formal NFS reports.

3. The public dialogue objectives

The initial objectives for the public dialogue, set for the dialogue in 2019 and approved by an Oversight Group (OG) made up of 18 individuals representing perspectives across the food system, were typical of a Sciencewise public dialogue. The objectives included a normative exploration of the underlying values, principles and expectations of a diverse group of participants in their role of citizens, and understanding how these evolved as they explored the complexities of the food system and were able to discuss this with specialists and each other.

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Sciencewise is funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The Sciencewise programme 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 to ensure public views are considered as part of the evidence base. It provides a wide range of information, advice, guidance, and support services aimed at policy makers and the different stakeholders involved in science and technology policy making, including the public. Sciencewise also provides co-funding to Government departments and agencies to develop and commission public dialogue activities.

The initial objectives were the following:

- To engage a diverse and inclusive group of the public in deliberation on the desired outcomes of the proposed NFS.
- To explore and understand participants' priorities and values in their relationship to the food they eat, how it is grown and produced, and the impact it has.
- To explore and understand participants' views on the role of existing and emerging technologies in meeting those priorities.
- To encourage discussion of and explore the trade-offs and outcomes, and how these might be resolved.
- To use the outputs from the dialogue to inform the next steps in the development of the NFS.

The pandemic brought food system issues into sharp focus nationally, with food security and poverty issues coming to the fore. At the same time the BREXIT trade negotiations highlighted the urgency of establishing food safety and quality standards. These changes, and other factors, informed slightly revised objectives for the second phase of the dialogue.

4. Challenges for this public dialogue

We all have a relationship with food. However, the food system is complex, and participants in the dialogue were asked to approach the environmental and societal issues it raises from the perspective of citizens, rather than as consumers. This demanded careful design, thoughtful stimulus materials and engaging conversations with specialists and each other.

The COVID pandemic brought additional challenges. Whilst there was little prior experience of online dialogue to draw on, this large and complex process moved online successfully, using tools such as Zoom and the online platform Recollective. The project team worked hard to retain and engage the participants over 15 months rather than the planned four, and redesigned the project process.

When the project resumed in full, after a summer of engagement through the Recollective platform, the new design was matched with new content too. They had also picked up the skills necessary for a full move online during Round 2.

5. Objectives were mostly achieved

- **A diverse and inclusive mix of participants were engaged throughout.** The care and attention to supporting participants meant that nearly three quarters successfully moved online despite the change in format, timeframe and the challenging circumstances. The efforts to keep participants engaged over the summer pause and give them the skills they needed to meet online was a key contributor to success.
- **A rich understanding of participants' priorities and values in their relationship to food quickly emerged.** Trade-offs resonated with past research during Round 1, and illustrated the paradigm shift in views about the central role of food during the pandemic. In depth discussions about meat and dairy during Round 2 surfaced some differences in views between urban and more rural locations.
- **Participants' expectations of the food system evolved over the course of the dialogue.** During Round 2 a consensus emerged on the need for radical change to "*an*

upside-down food system” so it can deliver healthy, environmentally sustainable food, that contributes to climate goals and is affordable for all.

- **Participants proposed ‘criteria’ for policy interventions that would be acceptable to help address the challenges.** They showed a “*higher-than-expected tolerance for state intervention*” but also saw roles for the food industry and the general public in delivering solutions. Many participants felt prompted to change their own behaviours: they variously talked of buying local, reducing waste, and preparing healthier meals including eating less, or no, meat.
- **The role of existing and emerging technologies was discussed but with much less emphasis than other potential solutions** such as information and labelling, bans, subsidies and taxes.

6. Impact of the dialogue on public participants

Participants really enjoyed and valued being part of the process and the chance to stay connected over the summer pause: many became very invested in the topic and by the end saw themselves as champions for food system change. By the final stages participants felt:

- **That the public really needs to be involved in this type of policy decision.**
- **Sufficiently well-informed** through their conversations with specialists and each other to make useful recommendations to the NFS team.
- **That they had been heard.** The high visibility of the NFS team throughout the process gave them confidence that their recommendations would be reflected in NFS Part 2. Most expected, in turn, to see the NFS’s recommendations taken up in the Government’s White Paper response.

7. Impacts of the dialogue on NFS process and policy

The NFS Part 2 reports ([the Plan](#), [the Recommendations in Full](#) and [supporting evidence](#)) were published on 15th July 2021. The online launch showcased the public dialogue process and a handful of participants through a high-quality [mini documentary](#). Each participant shared their thoughts on the importance of public dialogue, their experience of taking part, their aspirations, and how they planned to do their part to change the food system.

The NFS Part 2 report (the Plan) draws on the dialogue findings in the following ways:

- **The foreword** highlights the importance of the public dialogue and its role in helping strengthen the recommendations.
- **The overall message** for radical change achieved in a balanced, proportionate and fair way resonates throughout.
- **Chapter 13: the Protein Transition** describes the dialogue process and cites public participants’ attitudes to reducing meat intake, and mixed reactions to potential solutions such as a meat tax. Partly based on these findings, the NFS team went on to commission further research in the form of a large public opinion survey.
- **12 individuals from across all five locations are directly quoted** in support of points made about the impacts of the food system on health, climate and the environment.

The link to NFS Part 2 Recommendations is more tenuous:

- The handful of recommendations to help break the junk food cycle and protect the NHS loosely reflect the dialogue's suggested criteria for acceptable policy interventions.
- The recommendation for a sugar and salt reformulation tax loosely reflects the finding that some taxes on unhealthy food would be acceptable, but that a meat tax might not be widely supported.

The ultimate impact of the dialogue findings will only be clear once the Government Food Strategy White Paper has been through the fully policy process.

8. Costs and benefits

This large and complex public dialogue cost £414K (excluding VAT) to design, deliver and evaluate. This total included a ten per cent extension to cover costs of developing and running an online research space between Rounds 1 and 2. Estimated in-kind time contributions (by the NFS core team, oversight group members, specialists, and Defra observers) probably added about a third on top of the financial costs. Online delivery resulted in some savings (venue, catering, travel time and expenses) but once the additional costs of subscriptions and staff time (for redesign, tech support, curating the online space and lower facilitator: participant ratios) were factored cost about the same as a face-to-face process.

9. Lessons for delivering a high-quality online process

The successful shift to online generated a number of useful lessons as follows:

- Technical support before and during online sessions is crucial in helping prepare participants and make sure they get the most out of online tools. Many participants and specialists found they actually preferred the convenience of taking part from home.
- A mix of weeknight and weekend sessions work well for most participants. Slightly longer (3-hour) sessions could help simplify logistics and the 'ask' of participants and specialists.
- Fairly simple workshop structures work best online, including a mix of short films, PowerPoints, Q+A sessions with specialists and small group discussions.
- Pre-filmed / recorded contributions from specialists can be helpful in managing timings and allowing everyone, in all locations, to hear similar information which they can review in their own time if they want to.
- Getting specialists to answer questions identified by small groups, but answered in plenary sessions, works well to make sure everyone gets to hear the same answers, but should be mixed with specialists moving between small groups to answer questions.
- Group sizes of six participants to one facilitator feel about right. This allows facilitators to create a warm atmosphere, making sure everyone is heard and that any limitations of online communication (body language/eye contact/turn taking) can be addressed.
- Recollective (or similar platforms) can add real value for collecting individual reflections and evaluation feedback. This added layer of rich evidence can strengthen analysis of differences and help counterbalance any tendency for participants to challenge each other's views less than they might in the room.
- Visible simultaneous notetaking by facilitators (e.g. in share screen mode) can work well to capture participant inputs and help them build on each other's points. Ideally this should be mixed with less formal notetaking or participant-led methods.

- ‘Community voice’ short films, audio clips and pen portraits can add diversity and bring in lived experience, helping participants to think as citizens.
- Reconvened or summative events should be planned and designed in time to make a real contribution to the findings. Online events have the advantage of being able to bring back more participants than would be possible face-to-face.
- Commissioning a high-quality mini documentary film of the process can be a really useful resource to showcase the dialogue messages and participant voices at launch events. In this case the quality of the film warranted wider dissemination efforts.
- The volume of material generated via multiple online platforms and smaller groups can be far greater than from the equivalent face-to-face process. Budgets and timeframes for analysis and reporting need to take this into account.

10. Recommendations for Commissioners

- Think about the sequencing of the policy making process and when public dialogue findings can most usefully feed in. Get in touch with Sciencewise as early as possible.
- Recognised that good online or blended public dialogues are likely to cost at least as much as face-to-face processes.
- Ensure that timeframes for public dialogue deliverables are realistic and the sign-off process is clear. Factor in time to recruit specialists, for design and review of stimulus materials (including by the Oversight Group), and for analysis of the findings.
- Set expectations of a co-production style of working and communication within the core team from the outset.
- Provide clarity on the expected structure, format and design style of the final dialogue report and outputs and agree the process and timings for review, sharing comments and sign-off to help avoid delays in report publication.
- Maintain regular communication with the Oversight Group members, even if the reporting schedule slips, so that they can help to disseminate findings and maximise the dialogue impact.