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R E P O R T

Talking Policy

An examination of public dialogue
in science and technology policy

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Prepared for the Council for Science and Technology

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Executive Summary

This report makes recommendations for how public consultation can be fed into policy debates in science and technology; it draws these lessons from four UK case studies and a twenty-two respondent web survey.

Engaging the public in a dialogue about the future of science has been seen as increasingly important (House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, 2000). This concern with dialogue about science has gone hand-in-hand with an increasing emphasis on consultation from government (Cabinet Office, 2000). How the outputs of these consultation activities are used, and can be shaped to be of use, to inform and shape policy is a key issue in both areas. The Science and Society Subgroup of the Council for Science and Technology (CST) commissioned RAND Europe to examine the links between consultation processes and policy-making. The CST is the UK Government's top-level advisory body on science and technology and is composed of respected senior figures from across the field of science, engineering and technology.

Approach

This report presents four case studies of consultation processes and the results of a twenty-two respondent web survey carried out in the UK. The case study consultation processes were selected, in consultation with the CST, to contain a variety of areas of science and commissioning organisations, but to focus on processes generally considered to be successful. Case studies were based desk-based research and one or two key informant interviews. By analysing these case studies using an analysis workshop we identified a number of important themes. We then carried out a web-based survey to test these themes with a wider range of projects. An initial list of participants for the survey was provided by the CST, and additional participants were nominated by those completing the survey. The survey was completed by 9 funders, 10 contractors, and 3 evaluators. In this Executive Summary we introduce the case studies (see Box S.1) and discuss the lessons for policy that emerge from our analysis. In the area of public engagement with science the term “dialogue” has a variety of interpretations (see Box 1.1).

Emerging Lessons for Policy

There are four areas where we feel this study should inform policy.

Preserving capacity

Capacity is important in relation to the public's willingness to engage and those carrying out the dialogue processes. A number of case studies raise the concern that the public may begin to suffer from "consultation fatigue". Such disillusion with consultation could be bought on by a lack of clarity in how the public's input is used in policy-making, or an apparent lack of influence of public consultation. In the two case studies the results of the consultation or policy process were fed back to participants. In contrast all the survey respondents answering about feedback, said the results of the process had been fed back to the participants. A written report was the form of feedback used by both the case studies and by a majority of survey projects. Work needs to be done to establish whether this is the most appropriate form of feedback to maintain public interest in consultation.

All except one of the case study organisations made use of contractors to shape and run their consultation exercises. In the survey two-thirds of the respondents, who were not themselves contractors, used contractors in their projects. This suggests it is important to ensure that capacity exists within the supplier community to deliver any increase in the volume of consultations. The survey suggests that there is potential for problems in this area as although seven out of nine respondents were satisfied with the performance of their contractor(s), half felt that the good choice of good quality contractors was limited.

It may be necessary also to ensure that the supplier base has the skills to deliver consultation processes that approach the ideal of a two-way dialogue between policymakers or scientists and the public. Finally, although the contractor model relieves organisations of the need to have internal skills to deliver consultations, they still require the expertise to act as intelligent customers. The survey responses of the ten contractors suggest that this expertise is present with a sizable majority of contractors feeling that their clients clearly communicated their needs; had a clear idea of the outputs they needed; and appreciated the limitations of consultation methods.

2003 Energy White Paper

The Energy White Paper: “Our Energy Future – Creating a Low Carbon Economy” (DTI, 2003), was published by the Government in February 2003. The White Paper laid out an overall strategy for government energy policy through to 2050. Prior to this, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) engaged in an extensive round of consultations, including a number of public dialogue activities: focus groups, deliberative workshops and web-based questionnaires. The process grew out of a royal commission in 2000 and the subsequent Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) Energy Review Report in 2002.

Sex Selection

In 2000 the Department of Health (DH) asked the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) to advise on whether newly-perfected techniques of sperm sorting for selecting the sex of babies should be licensed for use in the UK. The HFEA commissioned research into the scientific and ethical issues surrounding the question and carried out a three-round public consultation: focus groups, followed by a written consultation and a nationally representative opinion poll. The findings of the opinion poll – that the public were heavily against allowing selection for family balancing – were strikingly at odds with expert opinion. After almost 10 months of deliberation, the HFEA advised in line with public opinion.

UK BioBank

Initially conceived in 1999, but only formally launched in 2004, UK BioBank aims to collect genetic, health and lifestyle data on around 500,000 45–69-year-olds and to use this data to tease apart the genetic and environmental influences on common diseases. The project is funded as a partnership between the Wellcome Trust, the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the DH. Although UK BioBank is now an independent organisation, much of the initial consultation was carried out under the auspices of the funders. A series of public and stakeholder consultations have been carried out in parallel with the development of the UK BioBank project. Initially the details of UK BioBank were unclear and consultations focused on general issues of biological sample collection, but as the project developed the consultations have become steadily more specific.

Food Standards Agency

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) was set up in 2000 with the aim of restoring confidence in food, after the BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) crisis and a number of other food safety scandals. We examined three consultation processes carried out by the agency:

- the issue of BSE in sheep was raised by the possibility that the national flock might have been infected with BSE by contaminated feed in the late 1980s. The particular consultation we examined was precipitated by the realisation in 2001 that research into the problem was seriously flawed;
- the issue of water in chicken was the bulking up of chicken, primarily in the restaurant trade, by the injection of water or a dilute solution of hydrolysed beef protein. The surprising extent of this issue was identified by FSA research in 2000 and led to a consultation process about how to address the issue;
- the controversy over the relative nutritional merits of organic and conventionally-produced food. Activities included a stakeholder workshop and written consultation.

Box 5.1: Descriptions of the four case studies

Clarity and planning

The second aspect that emerges strongly from our work concerns clarity and planning. It is important to make clear to participants how their input will be used. This includes explaining the constraints on the policy processes that may limit the impact of their views. A sizable majority of survey respondents felt their projects achieved this. Managing expectations is also an aspect that is likely to be important in the success of future projects and avoiding “consultation fatigue”. In this context it is interesting to note that there was no particular agreement among respondents about how important participant feedback was to the success of the current project.

This need for clarity balances against the strength of using an iterative process of consultation; a process where one stage feeds into and shapes subsequent ones. A consequence of iteration is that a consultation process may have no clear endpoint at the outset; UK BioBank is an example of this. In these cases it is important to give participants in each stage a clear idea of what the next steps might be and how their input will influence them.

An important aspect of planning is consideration of the likely outputs from the consultation process. Considering how discord between the public and other stakeholders – or within the public itself – will be dealt with at the beginning can shape the consultation process itself. This issue was highlighted in one of the case studies. Survey respondents were approximately evenly divided over whether possible outcomes were considered, with slightly more saying they had been.

Synthesis of policy

All of the case studies used relatively informal processes to combine different inputs into policy. These inputs might include a number of public consultations, stakeholder written response, interest group lobbying and political concerns. Organisations should be encouraged to reflect on how their policy-making processes operate and whether they could be made more open or transparent. However, given the complexity of combining such diverse sources of information, it is not clear that this is possible.

Although we did not explicitly address this issue in the questionnaire, a number of the respondents commented that the effect of the consultation project on policy was difficult to determine given the wide range of other influences on policy.

Evaluation and learning

The issues surrounding public consultation are numerous and complex. In this context it was striking that none of the case studies examined had been explicitly evaluated. There was more evaluation in the survey sample. Over half the respondents indicated that an informal internal evaluation had been carried out. In addition, about a quarter of respondents indicated a formal evaluation had taken place, with external evaluators carrying out around half of these evaluations. Three quarters of the survey respondents felt that the learning from the process had been effectively captured, none explicitly suggested that it had not. This raises the question of whether there is a demand for more formal evaluations, although such evaluations could also provide concise summaries of the consultation process, and hence improve transparency.

Almost all respondents to the survey thought that they had learnt lessons that could be useful in other consultation projects. If a central archive of evaluations could be established, this would provide an opportunity for sharing learning and experience between organisations. A majority of those funding engagement activities suggested that they would like to be supplied with such information via a website. However, even more suggested that contact with someone who had carried out a similar project would be the most valuable source of advice. Half had sought such advice for their current project. These findings strongly suggest that a central archive, of project summaries or evaluations, would be far more valuable if it contained up-to-date contact information for the individuals involved in running each consultation project.

If consultations are to be improved, it is vital to learn from what has gone before. From our experience of examining these case studies, we suspect that evaluating such activities will be a difficult task and that valuable assistance could be provided to develop evaluation frameworks and tools that could be used either in-house or by contractors.

Caveats and Context

It should be borne in mind that this work only encompassed four case studies and a twenty-two respondent survey. Furthermore, all of the case studies were considered successful by the organisation concerned and the survey participants were not selected to be a representative sample. Because of this the work is exploratory in nature and our conclusions are necessarily tentative. In addition to the policy relevant themes there are other strongly emerging themes from the case studies – such as the nuanced understanding by all the organisations of diverse nature of the public – but these were not explored in more detail in the survey.