

# Evaluation: Citizen Engagement on the Environment

November 2020

The Citizen Engagement on the Environment (CEE) Consortium Team evaluated all aspects of the programme. The purpose was to reflect on the project as it developed, in order to make any necessary adjustments or improvements, and to contribute to the overall learning about the project which is captured in the final project report.

The evaluation specifically sought to address two overarching evaluation questions:

- How effective was the four-stage process in generating public insight?
- What was the impact of the programme on all involved?

Given the Coronavirus pandemic, and associated lock down restrictions, the evaluation also sought to reflect on if and how this had impacted the project, and the quality of data collected.

This document is a summary of the approach and findings from the evaluation. The lead authors are National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The project was viewed by Consortium Team members, 'expert' participants and publics as purposeful, well-executed and in various ways ground-breaking in its approach.

Whilst COVID-19 posed significant challenges, it also created the opportunity to experiment with new delivery methods, which enriched the overall learning, and the data gathered.

A great strength of the project was the consortium approach, drawing on different kinds of expertise and networks. This also posed challenges in maintaining communication and engagement across the large, distributed team.

The approach to 'opening up' the process of consultation and deliberation with the public allowed for innovative approaches to be tested. This experimental ethos resulted in rich learning for the individuals involved, as well as generating important findings captured in the final project report.

The project demonstrated the value of focusing on the professional development of policy makers and researchers, to build their confidence and professional competence in integrating 'engaged' practices into their work. Future investments in public dialogue could usefully factor in training and development for the policy makers and researchers involved.

DEFRA could usefully build on the findings of this project to develop a long term strategic approach to embedding a culture of openness and transparency across all of its work: in which public dialogues and consultations form one aspect of a broader programme of activity to support purposeful, ongoing and responsive engagement with the public. There is clearly an interest from the public to be involved in these

types of conversation, with a recognition that more holistic long term ways of working are needed to address the environmental challenges that we all face.

The focus on better understanding the process of prioritisation and environmental decision making made for very rich conversations with the public – but it wasn't always obvious how the outcomes from these conversations would influence specific policy choices.

There was significant value for participants in the Distributed Dialogue training events, enabling people to become more confident engaging with the public around their work, and more effective at understanding how to scaffold useful conversations with the public.

Clients who participated in the Public Dialogues found the experience really valuable, providing an opportunity to hear directly from the public, and see expert facilitation in action.

The Distributed Dialogues provided opportunities for larger numbers of people to be involved in the consultation, and to share their views. The links between the Distributed Dialogues and Public Dialogues was not as explicit as it could have been, however the data gathered in both was important to the final report.

Whilst public participants really appreciated the opportunity to participate in the dialogues, and felt that both types of dialogic activity were valuable, there was less confidence that the outcomes from the events would make a difference to policy making. Therefore it will be important to evidence the links between this kind of event based public consultation and recommendations for policy, including feeding this back to participants.

Public participants enjoyed participating in the programme, with many reflecting that they had learnt new things about the environment, DEFRA and environmental decision making.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

In order to address the evaluation questions above a mixed methods approach was agreed for the programme, incorporating the following elements:

1. **In depth interviews:** Interviews were held with key members of the programme steering group from DEFRA, Natural England, and Consortium Team members delivering the programme. These in-depth interviews were held in October 2020, and the reflections gained are reflected in this report.
2. **Self-reflection:** Participants in the training were offered the opportunity to participate in a self-evaluation task, and write a self-reflection piece, reflecting on their experiences of the Distributed Dialogues activity once complete.
3. **Focus groups:** Informal group conversations were held with participants in the Distributed Dialogues training and delivery, reflecting on the training and if and how it equipped participants to engage the public with their work, and gather useful data. A focus group was also held with the Consortium Team members to reflect on all aspects of the programme delivery.
4. **Pre and post questionnaires:** Participants in the public dialogues were asked to complete evaluation surveys as part of the Public Dialogues activity, one after the first day of the activity, and one after the second day of the activity. The surveys were done as part of the event, and therefore most of the participants completed both surveys.
5. Participants in the final online public dialogue workshops and the online Distributed Dialogues were asked to complete a questionnaire post dialogue. Not all participants chose to complete these forms as they were not part of the event on the day.
6. **Monitoring data:** Where possible demographic data relating to the participants in the Distributed Dialogues was collected.

The overall design of the evaluation was led by the NCCPE, with input from all of the Consortia Team. An evaluation specialist, Hugh Hopestone, was commissioned to undertake the in-depth interviews, in order to maintain independence, and provide a space for critical reflection.

The findings from the evaluation are summarised below. Unless otherwise stated, the findings are taken from the in-depth interviews with DEFRA, Natural England, and consortia members, drawing on an evaluation report by Hugh Hopestone Associates.

## 2. FINDINGS

### 2.1 How effective was the four-stage process in generating public insight?

#### Research Evidence Analysis

This element of the research was considered by interviewees (i.e. staff from DEFRA, Natural England, and the Consortium Team) to have been a valuable exercise in helping to frame the parameters and context for the consultation activities to follow. The process of review was deemed useful during the early steering group meetings and helped shape and clarify thinking for the subsequent Public Dialogues and in generating conversations to help evolve steering group thinking.

#### Training for Distributed Dialogues

DEFRA, Natural England staff, academics and others who received training in public engagement found the experience very rewarding and added value to their own skill set. It led to a greater appreciation of the value of having a direct dialogue with the public. In some cases, the learning from this training was subsequently cascaded within their own teams or departments. For some it was one of the few opportunities to share their knowledge and expertise outside of their work environment, leading to greater confidence in their own capacity and helped frame their work within a wider public context. It was also seen as providing real value to Natural England staff, equipping natural scientists with social science skills. The skills of how to talk to different people (rather than decision or policy makers as most are used to doing) and to pitch ideas to the public were seen as really valuable.

Where the training was felt to be less effective was in giving trainees the tools to gather data at the Distributed Dialogues. Whilst they increased their effectiveness in sharing their own knowledge and expertise, they did not always have the skills and capacity to gather consistent and insightful data at the events where the Distributed Dialogues were running. Whilst improvements were made in the final training workshops, engaging with the public in a festival style event, and gathering useful data simultaneously was challenging, and needed additional staff.

It was felt by some on the delivery team that because the Distributed Dialogues activities were, to a degree, led by participants, the data gathering tended to focus on their interests and needs. In part this was because of the open nature of the brief. In the future, more emphasis could be placed on developing a team skilled in not only raising issues with audiences but also to effectively understand and record what audiences were telling them.

49 people participated in the training, and 42 of these took part in the Distributed Dialogues. 26 participants completed a self-reflection piece after the Distributed Dialogues. Of these 20 participants reflected that they had learnt a lot about how people think, and what informs their opinions. Most referenced the values framework introduced in the training as a critical part of this. There were many positive comments about the training, including how interesting, useful, and enjoyable it was (17). Kris De Meyer was valued as an excellent facilitator, who created a safe place to explore concepts and put them

into practice (13). Many also referenced the input of other team members involved in the training, and the support offered in developing and delivering activities at the events (12).

### SOME EXEMPLAR QUOTES

*I believe that this training has led me to be a better practitioner – my work involves very delicate engagement on climate change with some of the UK's most vulnerable communities, so to be able to more readily understand their perspective is incredibly valuable.....*

(Plymouth)

*I think the biggest thing is to be more self-aware and spend more time listening.*

(Liverpool)

*The training has given me new skills and knowledge about environmental issues, useful networks of other people and organisations in the field, and highlighted the fact of not using scare tactics to get people engaged*

(Liverpool)

*The activities were fulfilling and fruitful, which made me keener than ever to develop similar initiatives involving literature and art related to environmental issues, both in and beyond the UK.*

(Bristol)

*The course was one of the most interesting and interactive I had ever done.*

(Bristol)

### Distributed Dialogues

Distributed Dialogues were the most innovative element of the research programme, with the objective of providing insight and feedback from a much wider and more diverse public than the more limited number engaged through the Public Dialogues. Phase one of the Distributed Dialogues took place at live events where audiences were potentially less engaged with environmental issues. While the nature of the interactions between the newly trained DEFRA and Natural England staff were shorter and less exploratory than those in the Public Dialogues, a far larger number of people provided their feedback.

It wasn't always clear what the Clients expected from the Distributed Dialogues in terms of data, only that the format would provide an opportunity for public engagement with new audiences. However, it was apparent from the conversations that not all Clients were that close to the Distributed Dialogue process and didn't feel sufficiently informed to comment in much detail. It was noted that there was more significant Client involvement in the Public Dialogues, which gave deeper insights into the effectiveness of that format, and greater confidence in the approach.

As a result of Covid-19 the phase two Distributed Dialogues were conducted online and recruited via social media. Feedback suggests that in some ways this was a benefit because the demographics of participants could be more accurately recorded, and the level of engagement was in far more depth. It was also felt that the revised methodology was highly effective in drawing on participants' practical experiences, having them imagine future scenarios and deliberate on trade-offs that might be necessary. This methodology could be rolled out with specific groups of people to good effect in the future.

While the Distributed Dialogues were felt by some Clients to provide valuable context to help frame the Public Dialogue discussions, others were unsure as to how they would feed into the process. One felt that participation in the Distributed Dialogues was more self-selecting than the Public Dialogues, citing for example, a far higher proportion of white participants despite taking place at an event primarily attended by BAME audiences. Additionally, it was recognised by consortia members that the online Distributed Dialogues, while reaching a geographically diverse participation, did not manage to provide sufficient socio-economic diversity. Whilst this could be addressed in the future by working with specific partners to develop an approach with specific participant groups, there was not the time or resource to do this within the programme.

8 people completed a post event survey for the online Distributed Dialogues. With such small numbers it is difficult to make any firm conclusions, however all 8 rated the event enjoyable (scoring 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5) and 7 rated the event easy to participate in (scoring 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5), one participant did not answer this question. Feedback at the event suggested the format worked well for people, and everyone contributed to the plenary and breakout sessions in some way. The use of padlet also facilitated participation by those who were less vocal.

#### EXEMPLAR QUOTE

*Be bold and don't underestimate the public - there are more people open to change as long as there is open and clear communication and useful, up to date information available. And to engage with the arts and heritage sector - they can help so much!*

(Participant in Distributed Dialogue)

#### Public Dialogues

The majority (pre-Covid) of the Public Dialogues comprised two-day face to face workshops that were specifically recruited for, with 'expert' witnesses from DEFRA, Natural England and academics, to provide stimulus for debate and discussion. There was a high level of Client satisfaction with these workshops, both from a logistics perspective and in terms of perceived value of insightful data being generated. This positive response was enhanced by Client presence at many of the workshops, both as observers and as expert witnesses. Indeed, one of the many positive outcomes of the project was the first-hand immersion that Clients experienced and enjoyed, hearing directly from the public their views and opinions. This was not always an opportunity they have as policy specialists, so the value added to their work through this process was highly appreciated.

There were elements that were felt by Clients and the Consortium Team to have been less successful than hoped for; where participants had to prioritise trade-offs between policy and spending it was felt that insufficient time was available for them to fully understand the challenges and respond to them in a meaningful way.

The role of expert witnesses was also seen as a very positive aspect to the consultation process, although there were some Client concerns that the Public Dialogues would be seen as 'the voice of the government'. Because the witnesses represented those in a decision making position, the research was perceived by participants to be of greater value and more meaningful and that some change might happen as a direct result. However, as one team member observed, this may have created a slightly misplaced belief that their input would directly contribute to government policy.

Both Client and Team feedback reported how pleased they were with the high level of engagement in the discussions by participants. This was especially so given recruitment was on the basis of not being particularly engaged with the topic beforehand.

Public participants in the Public Dialogues expressed high levels of enjoyment of the event, with very few suggestions for improvements. Delegates believed that they had enough information to make informed decisions, and on the whole had enough time to contribute to the discussion. Of the 79 people who fed back on the face to face workshops, 62 claimed to have learnt something new, referencing learning about the 25 year plan, the environment, and several stating that they had learnt lots.

96% of respondents rated the event as either 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent; 93% stated they had enough information to make decisions at the event (scoring either 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5), and 80% that the pace was right for them (scoring 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5). When asked to rate how confident they were that DEFRA and Natural England would listen to the findings from the research, 74% were confident or very confident (scoring 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5), but 11% were neither confident nor not confident (scoring 3), and 5% weren't confident (scoring 1 or 2). A couple of people suggested that they were confident the people at the workshops listened, but that they did not think that this would make any difference to policy.

Findings from the online dialogues was similar. There were 20 returned forms – of which 15 rated the event either 4 or 5; 19 stated they had enough information to participate in the discussion (scoring 4 or 5); and 18 stated the pace was ok for them (scoring 4 or 5). When comparing the online event with the event that they had participated in previously, which was face to face, delegates reflected that there were some benefits to working online including more managed discussion time; less travel time; and an opportunity to reflect on what you were hearing without distractions. Whilst some missed the face to face engagement with other delegates, overall there was a lot of support for an online approach including 19 people rating their comfort in contributing online as either 4 or 5 (from a scale of 1-5)

## 2.2 Value of the consortium approach

### Client feedback

Feedback from DEFRA and Natural England was overwhelmingly positive about the collaborative nature of the consortium approach, the way in which the project was managed, and the level and quality of communication for most of the project's duration. Those primarily responsible for the project's commission were keen to draw in a wide range of expertise, rather than expect just one supplier to be an expert in all the areas necessary to deliver the programme of work.

There were some concerns among Clients about the long wait after the bulk of the consultation had taken place before the report is due to be released. As mentioned previously, this raised concerns that internal interest may have waned, and moved on to other priorities. It was also felt that the regularity of communication declined in the second half of the project.

Clients spoke very positively about the quality of contact with the Delivery Team leaders (primarily NatCen) with particular praise given for the way the Team were able to adapt to change and be flexible in their approach. This was particularly appreciated when DEFRA occasionally was unsure of what it wanted to achieve. However, it was clear that for the most part, those on the Client-side had little or no contact with consortium partners other than NatCen and Involve. While this was fine for most, for others this was felt to have been a missed opportunity.

Some at DEFRA also felt that the Consortium Team could have been more engaged to help find suitable expert contributors, for example academics based locally to where dialogues were taking place, thus reducing the otherwise strong London bias towards contributors.

### **Consortium Team feedback**

Between Consortium Team members there was a belief that, despite occasional challenges, channels of communication were kept open even if getting the whole team together was difficult to achieve. There were also contractual issues between partners that some felt could have been better managed. Specifically, this came down to a need to cut some costs to match Client expectations. The redistribution of budgets wasn't always easy, with some partners feeling that they had insufficient funds for activities they had planned. This appeared to affect the Distributed Dialogues in particular. Additionally, some partners not in regular contact with DEFRA felt that they could be kept better in the loop on the progress of the project after their direct involvement ended, feeling that they could have made more contribution across the project.

While the relationship with DEFRA and Natural England was considered very good, the team felt that having more time to submit the original bid, and time to develop the project after being awarded the contract but before starting fieldwork, would have benefited its overall quality.

## **2.3 What has the impact of programme been on all involved?**

### **Impact on the public participating**

As mentioned previously, it was felt by those observing the research, and confirmed in conversations after the workshops, that most public participants both engaged with and enjoyed the discussions. One noticeable aspect was hearing the opinions of people they might not ordinarily have such a level of contact with. Other participants reported that they had shared the conversations and the things they had learnt as a result of taking part. It was felt by the Team that participants in the online Distributed Dialogues seemed to enjoy learning from each other, looking at future scenarios and having the sense that they were contributing something valid to DEFRA's work.

As detailed previously in this report, participants in the Public Dialogues were interested to have learnt more about the work of DEFRA, the 25 year plan, which some had not known about before, and some of the key facts that emerged from the discussions. They were pleased to see DEFRA reaching out to listen to public views and concerns.

Participants in the first wave of Distributed Dialogues enjoyed participating in the activities, and many had the opportunity to learn something new about the environment. People appreciated the opportunity to talk to a scientist or expert, and to engage with them.

Participants in the second wave of online Distributed Dialogues reflected that they learnt a lot from participating in the programme, and that this was as much from other participants, as it was from the facilitators. They appreciated the opportunity to think about the future, and explore holistic approaches to environmental decision making. Whilst few suggested that they had changed their views, many felt that they had learnt new perspectives that sharpened their thinking about the environment. There was a lot of enthusiasm that DEFRA were interested in bringing people together, and an interest in bringing even more diverse perspectives together in the future.

### **Impact on DEFRA and Natural England Clients**

Those closely involved with the project felt it had given them a greater understanding of both what publics think about the topics discussed and of the research and consultation process. For some this meant feeling more confident about talking about and promoting public engagement and consultation internally. This was

particularly so for the Public Dialogues, but also for the Distributed Dialogues when observed. It was felt to be important that they were able to have this hands-on experience, as it was so much more visceral than just reading a research report or hearing the findings 'second hand' in a debrief scenario.

Unusually for DEFRA, this piece of research did not focus on specific policy areas, rather it was a broad look at what the public think and feel and how they would prioritise future action. While there were some concerns that this meant detailed policy issues were not covered, on balance it was felt to be very worthwhile to explore decision making in this 'bigger picture' way. Indeed, it was felt by the Team that the project provided DEFRA with potential future tools for continuing similar engagement. The risk is that the approach doesn't necessarily provide easy answers that politicians, if not DEFRA personnel, might prefer.

DEFRA and Natural England Clients were also impressed with, and surprised at, the quality of conversations and level of understanding participants had in the topics.

### **Experts (including DD contributors)**

For DEFRA staff who provided expert input, the value in doing this and away from the London policy 'bubble' was felt to be highly beneficial. It helped them see what the 'wider world' is thinking. Feedback also suggested that they benefited from seeing how professional facilitators work with the public, talking with rather than at, audiences.

There was significant learning from those who participated in the Distributed Dialogues training, which informed their own approach to public engagement, and conversations with members of the public. For many this was really ground breaking, and there was a belief that this would lead to permanent changes in their practice. There was a deeper understanding of how people think, learn and make choices, and how to bring this knowledge into your engagement approach.

As mentioned earlier in the report, 26 participants in the training submitted self-reflection reports, which indicated improved knowledge, skills and professional practice. 10 people referenced that they would be taking the learning into their future work, and 4 that it had provided a useful framework to consolidate their practice. 4 specifically mentioned that they would be sharing it with colleagues.

### **Impact on the Consortium Team**

Despite some of the project's challenges, Consortium Team members saw real value for their organisations in collaborating on this piece of work. The importance of the environmental challenge and the value (and prestige) of working with DEFRA and Natural England were both important, but also mentioned was the adopting of new ways of conducting public consultation and engagement. Using engagement expertise to bring public views into policy making was really valued by the Team.

The project also provided evidence of how new approaches such as the Distributed Dialogues could work well. The online Distributed Dialogue approach was particularly valued by the Consortium Team members involved in its design and delivery, and will inform their future activity with specific audience groups.

### **Client-side**

DEFRA and Natural England participants spoke very positively about the potential value of this research. They stressed how it will be used to inform policy decisions both within the department and across departments where there was mutual interest in understanding the findings.

While the final report is eagerly anticipated (and will determine any final views on the project's value) some did feel that interim summary reports would have been helpful, to keep themselves informed on how the findings were shaping up and to maintain interest more widely within their departments. There was general enthusiasm for the approach that the project took, although (as a significant investment) not one to be repeated without a strong business case. That said, at least one interviewee reflected that taking the

public ‘temperature’ on a regular basis in this way is important to ensure that policy is aligned with people’s thinking and propensity to support change.

### Consortium feedback

The overall perspective from Consortium Team members has been that, if repeated, more time and thought could usefully be invested in ensuring the constituent parts meshed together well. Some members felt that more budget should have been allocated to enable this to happen, as the budget afforded to some aspects of the project, in particular the Distributed Dialogues, was relatively small.

## 3. IMPACT OF COVID-19

COVID-19 restrictions meant that the final Public Dialogue and the second phase of Distributed Dialogues had to move online. It also had some limited impact on the perceived level of communication, although being online meant that finding a suitable meeting times without the need to travel was easier. From a Client perspective the most negative impact was the hiatus it caused, with a loss of momentum that was felt to have led to drop in interest in the project from those internally not directly connected with it. It is hoped that this is only temporary and once the findings are released, interest will be rekindled.

The restrictions put in place to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic created logistical and continuity challenges for the project. It was also felt by the Team to reduce some opportunities for participant interaction, with the lack of face-to-face contact reducing research elements such as break out groups, and with participation from home leading to greater disengagement than if they were in the same room. However, it also brought some unplanned benefits, for example, convening both Distributed Dialogues and Public Dialogues online enabled those geographically dispersed to more easily participate as well as appealing more to those who prefer communicating online rather than face-to-face. This in itself was considered to have potentially brought in new audiences, particularly those recruited via social media for the online Distributed Dialogues. One Team member felt an opportunity was missed in recruitment during the COVID-19 period: rather than sticking to the same criteria used to recruit for face to face Public Dialogues.

There didn’t appear to be much evidence that COVID-19 changed the content of conversations significantly, although the value of green space and access to it had, in some cases, been given a higher profile than prior to the pandemic. It was also noted that working online felt more ‘second nature’ for many participants, given that so many had got used to communicating online in their personal and working lives as a result of the pandemic.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The Citizen Engagement on the Environment project was innovative and ambitious. The majority of the work went really well for all involved, including DEFRA, Natural England, Consortium Members, and publics. There was a significant appetite amongst those engaged to get involved in environmental decision making.

Learning from the evaluation suggests improvements could be made to the approach, but that these are relatively small adjustments to what has been a strong programme of activity. Whilst it is too early to say whether the resulting output from the programme will be useful to inform policy making in the future, the quality of engagement with the public, and data collected, lays strong foundations for DEFRA and Natural England to take forward their work.