



What the public say

Public engagement in national
decision-making

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What the public say

Public engagement in national decision-making

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A Sciencewise-ERC insight paper written by Involve

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About Involve

Involve is a not-for-profit organisation specialising in understanding public engagement in all its forms. The organisation was set up by a number of leading practitioners and researchers in the public participation field and is a well-respected contributor to new thinking and insights on innovative citizen engagement. Involve provides advice, training, research, events and networking services to organisations and individuals interested in public participation. The organisation focuses on the practical reality of public participation and has four core activities:

- advocacy – building the case for genuine citizen empowerment
 - new thinking – improving understanding of what works in public engagement
 - better practice – supporting institutions and citizens to engage effectively
 - networking – bringing people from the participation and empowerment field together.
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Table 1: Reference codes of public dialogue projects reviewed for this paper.

Reference Code	Title	Commissioning Organisation	Area of dialogue
BES	Big Energy Shift	Sciencewise-ERC	Community explorations of level carbon and energy saving technologies
DF	drugsfutures	Sciencewise-ERC	Future of brain science, including treatments and policies for addiction, dementia and cognitive enhancement
DM	Democs	Sciencewise-ERC	Card games in schools on vaccinations, animal experimentation and climate change
DNA	Forensic use of DNA	Sciencewise-ERC	Use of forensic DNA in judicial process and creation of a DNA database
EN RES	UK energy research	Research Councils UK (RCUK)	A major public engagement exercise to elicit and understand the public's priorities for energy research
HY	Hybrid and Chimera	Sciencewise-ERC	Regulation and legislation of hybrid cells in medical research and treatment
IB	Industrial biotechnology	Sciencewise-ERC	Use of GM and other biotech in industrial, environmental and agricultural processes, including for energy and food
ND/NEG	Nanodialogues and Nanodialogue Engagement Group	Sciencewise-ERC	Four dialogues to assess attitudes to environmental applications of nanotechnology (e.g. land remediation) Review of over ten nanotech engagement projects, including environmental and medical applications
NUC	The future of civil nuclear power	BERR, later passed to the new DECC	Nine deliberative events with a demographically representative sample of the UK population. The aim of the events was to help the Government understand what people thought of its preliminary view on the future of nuclear power
RB	Risky Business	Sciencewise-ERC	Attitudes to climate change and technology with young people
SCWL	Community Exchange	Sciencewise-ERC	Community discussion of science issues with their MP
SH	<i>sciencehorizons</i>	Sciencewise-ERC	Eight science themes: advanced materials and robotics, body and mind sciences, energy, information handling & knowledge management, nanotechnologies, network interactions, security, sensors & tracking
ST	Stem Cell	Sciencewise-ERC	Regulation and legislation of stem cells in medical research and treatment
TG	Trustguide	Sciencewise-ERC	Perceptions of risk, security and trust on the internet
TIDAL	Turning the Tide. Tidal Power	Sustainable Development Commission	A research project on tidal power in the UK. The project comprised a detailed initial desk research exercise, followed by a public and stakeholder engagement programme.
YHCYS	Your Health, Your Care, Your Say	Department of Health	The Your Health, Your Care, Your Say listening exercise, informed the development of the White Paper on Care Outside Hospitals. This was one of the largest research-based listening exercises ever to take place in England.

Introduction

This paper considers what citizens who participate in public dialogue events have said about public engagement and how it can – and should – be incorporated into governance structures. It identifies a number of key insights from these citizen views, showing how public engagement in national decision-making can support the coalition’s move towards a more open, transparent and accountable way of governing. It also explores the implications of these views for the Big Society.

The current Government is focused on two commitments with regards to public engagement in national decision-making.

- Firstly, the restructuring of governance processes so that the public can hold government to account. This is taking place through three core mechanisms: the opening up of data; increased transparency; and greater individual access to budgets. Important to this agenda are reforms such as, for example, the proposed move toward the Alternative Vote system, and initiatives such as ‘Your Freedom’ which aims to abolish “intrusive and unnecessary” laws restricting the liberties of individuals. These reforms are aimed at giving individuals more power and a greater say.
- Secondly, the new Government’s ambition focuses on the strengthening of society by getting more people working together to identify and solve problems locally. Through encouraging the ‘Big Society’, the coalition hopes to ‘roll back big government’. By supporting citizens to take an independent and active role in their communities in this way, the Government is offering an alternative to action typically taken by state institutions.

Since 2005, Sciencewise-ERC has catalysed and supported dialogues with the public, running 13 to date. These show how individuals have the ability to engage in complex issues, to absorb difficult information, and to provide considered advice that helps to make better decisions, specifically around policies involving science and technology.

This paper draws on evaluations of a sample of dialogue and engagement processes commissioned by Sciencewise-ERC and other Government departments. It focuses in particular on what participants have said about these processes. It uses these views to explore whether such processes have a role in the agenda highlighted above. The paper is structured around the nine recommendations we draw from these evaluations.

Engagement and governance

Engagement of the public in national decision-making has traditionally been a reactive process, commissioned by Government as a result of public dissatisfaction or the failure of a national policy. Engagement occurred late in the policy cycle and was primarily a way of rebuilding trust in a discredited decision-making process. Sciencewise-ERC was established as part of the move towards ‘upstream’, or earlier engagement with citizens. This is an important change, because engaging with the public in this way is an attempt to shape better policy decisions and to prevent the loss of public trust, rather than trying to rebuild it after policy failure.¹

¹Andersson, Burall, and Fennell (2010) p21.

Governance can be defined as the processes and structures that determine how power is exercised, how stakeholders have their say, how decisions are taken and how decision makers are held to account. Previous research that has focused on engaging the public in decision-making processes emphasises that effective governance requires more than just top-down structures. The report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution on 'Novel Materials in the Environment: The case for nanotechnology', states that '*effective and trustworthy governance arrangements must ... have at least four key qualities. They must be informed, transparent, prospective and adaptive*'. Further, these qualities must be supported by a system that is inclusive, responsible, technically competent and based on trust.² The evidence presented here concerning what citizens involved in structured public dialogues think about public engagement in the national decision-making process supports these conclusions; in particular that policy decisions and broader governance structures must be *informed* by public opinion, be *transparent* in their objectives for public engagement and be supported by a system that is *responsible* and based on *trust*.

Summary of recommendations

The evidence reviewed throughout this paper suggests that inviting members of the public into structured spaces for holding dialogue around complex and technical policy issues is an important contribution to the coalition Government's move towards a more transparent and open way of governing, and the Big Society. The evidence shows that members of the public have the ability to engage with and contemplate large quantities of complex information, and to provide detailed responses that enhance governmental decisions. Thus, holding dialogue on difficult and controversial issues with the public in 'invited' spaces is a fundamental enabler for decision makers to feel confident in the public's ability to hold the Government to account.

Less directly, the process of public dialogue is an important part of the new Government's steps towards a Big Society. Members of the public who have participated in pre-organised public dialogues consistently comment that they see a high level of value in the processes and the opportunity to influence national decision-making. Implicit in the notion of the Big Society is a substantive consideration of what shape the public would like society to take. If the Government is looking to place greater trust in the public to make decisions through the Big Society, then the involvement of citizens in national decision-making through more formal public dialogue processes is an essential element. Importantly, deliberative processes can also help to achieve the wider objectives of the Big Society, namely a move towards far more autonomous citizen action. This is because they provide an opportunity to support the development of democratic capabilities in the citizens involved and increase the likelihood of the public getting involved in future policy discussions.

While engaging the public in national decision-making processes can open up benefits to Government, this is only true under certain circumstances. This paper draws out key recommendations if these benefits are to be realised. These recommendations are focused on the 'how' of making deliberative public engagement more open and accountable to those citizens involved. What we will see throughout is that dialogue and deliberation give the Government the opportunity to ensure maximum support, confidence and buy-in from public participants, but only if the process, design and mechanisms through which engagement is delivered are in line with public aspirations.

² RCEP (2008).

The nine recommendations are summarised below and described in more detail in the next section. Quotes from participants and experts are used to illustrate the points made.

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- 1. Engaging the public (and other stakeholders) in critical, potentially controversial issues could be a core part of delivering the Government's agenda of openness and transparency.** The public have shown that understanding complex information is not a problem and that they are willing and excited to be involved in deeper levels of debate.
 - 2. Developing a culture and working practices that are open at all levels - engaging participants in important issues at national as well as local level - will help to support a move towards the Big Society.** National level engagement encourages active citizenship as a means to build the democratic capabilities of the public.
 - 3. Enabling the public and stakeholders to set the frame and terms of debate whenever possible will further demonstrate a commitment to the Big Society.** This will help avoid debates and deliberative processes being too tightly framed on particular risks or outcomes that are predefined by particular stakeholders.
 - 4. There is an opportunity to involve the public more often in informing decision-making through new and different mechanisms for interaction, communication and engagement.** There is an appetite for the involvement of public participants to move from one-off events towards more ongoing engagement.
 - 5. Providing feedback to the public on the results of decision-making (and how public/stakeholder views have or have not been taken on board) will strengthen the understanding and legitimacy of policies in contentious areas.** Effective feedback helps the public to understand the impact they are having on policy which in turn builds trust.
 - 6. Government could usefully engage the public in more dialogue and engagement which focuses on the social good. The Government faces challenges from the public around its ability to achieve firm governance for social good (rather than private interests).** Flexible and adaptive governance will help to build public trust in Government's decisions.
 - 7. Public and stakeholder engagement in future decision-making processes should involve a range of actors, and be a part of an informed engagement and communication strategy by Government.** Participants of public dialogue appreciate a balanced and holistic process.
 - 8. Government must take final responsibility for making fair and balanced policy decisions that are informed by dialogue with the public.** The public see decision-making as a complex process that requires a wide range of inputs, and do not want to have the final decision in complex technical areas of public policy.
 - 9. The Government must work to make the process of deliberation responsive and meaningful when opening up public services to greater citizen control.** Dialogue-based events can help ensure maximum support, confidence and buy-in from future participants and are valued highly by public participants.
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Recommendations

Engaging the public (and other stakeholders) in critical, potentially controversial issues could be a core part of delivering the Government's agenda of openness and transparency. The public have shown that understanding complex information is not a problem and that they are willing and excited to be involved in deeper levels of debate.

In order to rebuild public confidence in politics and politicians, the new coalition Government has set out a very extensive programme of change. Central to this is a drive for transparency, open data and clean politics. As Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office explained, *'we want transparency to become an absolutely core part of every bit of government business'*.³ Encouraging the disclosure of information will help to promote a more informed debate of the issues under consideration by the Government, and has the opportunity to further participation in public debate across the country.

With regards to contested research and policy development, the Government understands the importance of being open and transparent with the public. Some critical of this agenda are worried that the public is not in a position to understand and use complex data. However, the views of the public who have taken part in engagement processes demonstrate that complex information is not an issue in the context of a well designed dialogue or deliberation process.

"This engagement has shown that, given adequate resources and access to expertise, publics can not only take on difficult issues, but work with them in ways which provide meaningful contributions to governance."(From Evaluation report of ND/NEG, cited by Sciencewise-ERC Evaluation Report, p30)

"Our experiment showed that it is possible to develop a dialogue about a complex environmental issue with a group of people who initially know very little about it. The nature of the questions asked by the panel and their focus on uncertainties and risks, the need for contextual research, openness, accountability and education shows that their input has been not only meaningful, but valuable". (Environment Agency response to the People's Panel, quoted in Demos booklet, p31, ND/NEG)

Public dialogue processes can also reveal views and attitudes that perhaps would not be expected by policy makers. Contact with the public can be positive and constructive, and as such confidence on the part of Government in their ability to share and discuss difficult issues can be increased. Experts involved in these processes agree that public deliberation on contentious issues can help Government to be more transparent and ultimately trust in it can be strengthened.

"[The main benefit was] ... our confidence to be more transparent. It can take you down new directions ... it is pointing us in directions we hadn't thought of. Climate change is so complex that you can only start talking about it from where people are at."(Expert interview for Sciencewise-ERC evaluation, p5 ,BES)

"The IB [Industrial Biotechnology] subject is all about GM [Genetic Modification] – being more open about things like that can only be a good thing. The report showed that people don't trust the Government on things like GM so just having these conversations helped transparency from that point of view."(Expert interview for Sciencewise-ERC evaluation, p27 ,IB)

The public dialogues reviewed for this paper also demonstrate that those citizens involved hold a nuanced understanding of costs. This supports the Government's commitment to transparency, for example, publishing all public sector contracts over £25,000. In addition, the finding opens up

³ www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2010/100625-board.aspx

opportunities to hold further conversations with the public, as they understand that difficult decisions need to be made around public sector expenditure.

"I think it is a very small amount of money if what we asked for is done. Because they are acting on what the public want, this whole thing should save the Government money in the long run."(Citizens' Panel member, YHYCYS Evaluation, p59)

"There was a general feeling that this consultation (and consultation in general) was money well spent if, and often only if, Government listened, took notice and what the public said made a difference". (Evaluator Comment, NUC Deliberative Public Event Evaluation, p259)

What is important to note here is that for the members of the public who have experienced the public dialogue process, the costs are only justified if the process has integrity and the contribution that the public has made is meaningfully recognised. The Government can take heart from this and should feel confident in engaging the public in these difficult discussions. It is up to the Government to decide when it needs to proactively take the lead in structuring these discussions, and when it is more beneficial to the public to organise the information themselves.

Developing a culture and working practices that are open at all levels - engaging participants in important issues at national as well as local level - will help to support a move towards the Big Society. National level engagement encourages active citizenship as a means to build the democratic capabilities of the public.

Participants of public dialogues think that citizens have a role in national as well as local level decisions. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that participants value being involved in upstream engagement and are keen to be involved in the national decision-making process.

"Asked if they preferred to be involved in local or national issues in future, a surprising 78% said both: the expectation would normally be that people want to be more involved in local issues, especially on services such as health". (Evaluator Comment, YHYCYS Evaluation, p67)

Therefore, a Government culture is needed that is open at all levels and engages participants in important issues including both at the national and local levels. The public understands that some issues require action at local and some at national level. It is clear from those involved in these dialogues that members of the public appreciate a structured environment, where they are invited to discuss interesting policy issues when it comes to their involvement in national decision-making.

Public engagement in national decision-making through public deliberation processes creates opportunities for the public to enhance their democratic capabilities.

"More generally, the deliberative public events provided an opportunity for Government to support the development of the democratic capabilities of nearly 1,000 UK citizens. Many of those involved learnt new skills in public participation: the participants, policy makers, observers and everyone else involved". (Evaluator Comment, NUC Deliberative Public Event Evaluation, p269).

In addition, a positive experience of engagement encourages a greater willingness to get more actively involved and engaged in future policy discussions.

"As a result of being involved in this process, participants were more willing to get involved in discussions on policy issues in future. They particularly enjoyed and valued the workshop process, where everyone had a chance to speak in small groups and there was a good mix of participants and a diversity of views". (Evaluator Comment, TIDAL Evaluation, p41)

That structured public dialogue focused on national decision-making can encourage active citizenship has implications for the development of the Big Society. Proponents of deliberation understand the process as a powerful socialisation experience that reminds participants what it means to be a citizen in a democratic society. This is because deliberation allows citizens to see things from different points of view; it enables those participating to see each other as equal members in a shared political life.⁴ As such, in line with the aspirations of the Big Society, deliberative public engagement is an opportunity to support and promote the conditions for civic actors and a civic culture to be reignited.

Enabling the public and stakeholders to set the frame and terms of debate whenever possible will further demonstrate a commitment to the Big Society. This will help avoid debates and deliberative processes being too tightly framed on particular risks or outcomes that are predefined by particular stakeholders.

By designing public engagement that moves 'upstream', before the parameters for debate have been decided upon, policy makers will learn how the public frame and interpret issues. This will help Government to ensure that the debate is framed in a way that the public accepts and recognises. Upstream public engagement needs to be non-prescriptive and allow for wider societal, economic, cultural and ethical issues to be considered alongside the desired outcomes of decision-makers.⁵

"Upstream, where policy options have not been laid out, let alone chosen, engagement provides no easy answers. But it can ask some deep questions about how we do policy and who we involve" (Demos report, p3, cited in Sciencewise-ERC evaluation, p30, ND/NEG)

"The challenge for government is to trust the public's ability to understand and contribute meaningfully to such policy discussions, and to find ways to incorporate members of the public directly in them... for making possible such government-led pursuits in upstream public engagement in future."(Involve, p49, ND/NEG)

Decision-makers need to raise debate with the public consciously and proactively. When this is not done, or when it is done poorly, public interest falls and dissatisfaction rises. The relevance of the engagement therefore decreases. This can impact negatively on the relationship between the Government and the public.

"I felt like at the end there was a bit of an overload where I felt like everyone had been rounded up and directed towards a resolution that would please the Government. I felt the whole day was designed to do that"(Participant interviewee, Edinburgh, NUC Deliberative Public Events Evaluation, p216)

"The substantive question for the public deliberative event was very complex and included so many sub-clauses that participants felt rather 'herded' towards a particular answer. Keeping consultation questions as simple and direct as possible reduces pressure on participants to grapple with such complex choices in a single answer, and thus reduces unease and distrust". (Evaluator comment, NUC Deliberative Public Events Evaluation, p270)

Involving members of the public in the initial framing of the policy questions is an important means by which to ensure that participants feel confident that the engagement process is framed in an open way, and that they have a genuine input into policy.

"Having a serious policy question you want answered - a purpose. Which is not that common. You need a good vision for doing it, not just do it because it's nice"(Expert interview for Sciencewise-ERC evaluation, p2, BES)

More practically, involving the public in defining the techniques for recording and capturing information is a critical part of ensuring the debate is open, adaptive and less prescribed. The public need to feel confident that the information they are contributing impacts on the debate in a way

⁴ Button and Ryfe (2005) p30.

⁵ The Royal Academy of Engineering (2009) p48.

that they accept and understand.

"We all found that trying to categorise our opinions into 'like or dislike' was extremely limiting. We would have preferred 'approve/disapprove' or 'acceptable/unacceptable' to offer us more scope for moral judgements" (Strand 3 respondent, ND/NEG evaluation report, p59)

There is an opportunity to involve the public more often in informing decision-making through new and different mechanisms for interaction, communication and engagement. There is an appetite for the involvement of public participants to move from one-off events towards more ongoing engagement.

The public see their role in dialogue as having critical importance and want to be involved more often.

"For participant questionnaire respondents ... the two main points in their feedback were ... that they would have liked more information on alternatives and opposing views ... and that there should be more events like this one ... The most frequent comment ... said that the main lesson was to do it more often."(Evaluator Comment NUC Deliberative Public Event Evaluation, p264)

This does not necessarily mean many more set piece events. Alternatively, a change in the culture resulting in a change in the way the institutions of Government interact, communicate and engage with the public would also be in-line with what the public are suggesting. This would entail engaging the public on a more ongoing basis, at all levels of the policy cycle, in an iterative process. Policy-making in this way is a continual process of making decisions, trying them out, finding out what works and where feasible changing decisions in the light of new evidence, which should include evolving public views. However, as we highlight below, this will require clarity and openness about how the public's views will feed back into decision-making at all levels.

"Public engagement should not be seen as a set of one-off discussions. Instead dialogue needs to permeate research culture, rather than being done by special people in special places. Whilst formal exercises undoubtedly have a role to play, running another big event is perhaps not the most crucial issue. Rather it is imbuing professional culture and practice with the spirit of open discussion. This in turn implies creating wider cultural shifts in how institutions relate to the public, and to public scrutiny" (Report comment, Sciencewise Ethics Digest, p29, ST).

"The final conclusion relates to wider relationship between science and the public. It refers to the soft infrastructure of governance... - the social relations, informal networks and professional cultures which also act to shape and control the field."(Report Comment, Sciencewise-ERC Ethics Digest, p29, ST)

Taking a more distributed and devolved approach to public engagement would help the Government to implement this recommendation. Facilitating communities and networks to feed into the engagement process through more organic and informal mechanisms represents an important development in this field. There are numerous entry points for public engagement processes within the policy cycle. What is clear from the evaluations reviewed here is that the public want to be involved from the beginning, when the debate is being opened up so that they have a substantive opportunity to influence the ideas and terms that are being discussed.

Providing feedback to the public on the results of decision-making (and how public/stakeholder views have or have not been taken on board) will strengthen the understanding and legitimacy of policies in contentious areas. Effective feedback helps the public to understand the impact they are having on policy which in turn builds trust.

Individuals who participate in an engagement process want to be given clear information before, during and after the process about how their contribution will feed into the decision-making process; transparent feedback to participants about how decisions were taken is therefore important. This is essential as the public can view a public engagement exercise negatively if it is

seen as gathering data into public attitudes that is then used to justify a particular policy decision. However, if the public understands the influence the engagement process will have, or experience this firsthand, greater public confidence in Government is likely to result.

“just the feeling that people actually took notice of what we said and did go to the trouble of putting it all in a report” (Participant comment from IB evaluation report, cited in Sciencewise-ERC evaluation report, p26, IB)
“It was better than my initial expectations because it made me think that the Government actually do care. After the event things actually started happening and appearing in the news, for example longer GP opening hours. That was good to see.” (Participant comment, Birmingham, YHYCYS Evaluation, p53)

Feedback can happen throughout the engagement process. Delivering feedback to those members of the public involved enables decision makers to actively consider how the views of the public are to be integrated into policy-making in an ongoing way. Responding to the public at an earlier stage helps Government to define policies better and instil greater legitimacy in the final output.

“Some participants... met with key policy makers to submit their recommendations. Policy makers provided early feedback about the value of the [participants] contribution and how their recommendations might be dealt with.” (Evaluator Comment in Sciencewise-ERC Evaluation p30, ND/NEG)

“This provided a useful first step in engaging with the participants' recommendations and challenged government to actively think about how it could incorporate the knowledge produced through the engagement in policy-making” (Jones and Irwin evaluation, p56, cited in Sciencewise-ERC evaluation, p30, ND/NEG)

Consequently public dialogues must be connected to the wider process, if this is not the case public confidence in the process and in Government will be undermined.

“Participants described the process as very informative, constructive and enjoyable – however, its ultimate value would be if researchers, the research councils and others involved in the governance of the science took account of the findings in meaningful ways”. (Expert comment, Synthetic Biology Dialogue Report, p64)

“I really think when they do consultations like this, which is a good thing to do, they ought to be prepared to seriously consider what people have to say and take account of it in policy making” (participant interviewee, Norwich NUC Deliberative Public Events Evaluation, p247)

An example of good practice in this area is the Sciencewise-ERC and Department for Energy and Climate Change project: the Low Carbon Communities Challenge (LCCC). The LCCC is focusing on the experiences and challenges communities encounter when seeking to implement low carbon initiatives and technologies. With regards to community dialogue specifically, one of the key objectives is to design public engagement and co-inquiry into the programme to inform policy development and delivery. While it is too early to evaluate the success of this programme, it is important to note that it is committed to learning about what works, and feeding this back into the policy process. This is essential to identifying lasting policy solutions which the UK public can feel ownership over.⁶

Government could usefully engage the public in more dialogue and engagement which focuses on the social good. The Government faces challenges from the public around its ability to achieve firm governance for social good (rather than private interests). Flexible and adaptive governance will help to build public trust in Government's decisions.

Regulation is an important governance consideration for the new Government's openness and transparency agenda. Throughout the processes reviewed in this paper (particularly those focused

⁶ Low Carbon Communities Challenge: Background. www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/low-carbon-communities-challenge-background-and-key-impacts/

on science and technology) the public reflect a fear that profit motives and vested interests in industry 'would compromise public safety, firm governance and social good'⁷ with regards to the policy decisions being made. The Government must consider seriously this trust deficit when thinking about governance structures.

"Many of the dialogues revealed a striking trust deficit. Great value was placed in perceived (or not) independence of organisations, and the default attitude to Government and business tended to be one of suspicion or outright mistrust." (Report Comment, Sciencewise-ERC Ethics Digest, p17, SH)

The Sciencewise-ERC Nanotechnology Engagement Group dialogues highlight the importance of the Government being more open about the constraints facing science governance.

"If the public continues to raise concerns that seem unrealistic or beyond the remit of decision-making institutions, then government needs to make clear why it is unable to address those concerns. An important function of public engagement ... should be to raise awareness of how science decision-making works, and to clarify what levers of change ... exist". (Report Comment, Sciencewise-ERC Ethics Digest, p25, ND/NEG)

Effective dialogue can help increase trust in the ability of public bodies to govern effectively.

"To have been involved in the process reassures me and enables me to reassure others that our opinions can make a difference and that public bodies such as HFEA are interested in public opinion and do react to it. They are not autonomous megalomaniacs who make up rules and regulations for the hell of it. They are responsible and accountable." (Participant quoted in evaluation report cited in Sciencewise-ERC evaluation, p20 ,HY)

One of the biggest challenges that the Government faces is that adequate processes are not in place to deal with concerns over governance with particular reference to science and technology; new developments tend to move faster than Government.

"While the idea of regulation proceeding stepwise was valued, the institutional capacity to imagine the future and keep up with advances was questioned". (Expert Comment, Synthetic Biology Public Dialogue Report, p87)
"how would they know how to regulate it considering they don't have a knowledge field of what is actually going on" (Participant comment, Synthetic Biology Dialogue Report, p43)

Importantly, participants in Sciencewise-ERC's dialogue on synthetic biology highlighted this issue, and alongside experts recognised that a more adaptive form of Government is critical. Thus, a more adaptive governance regime that is capable of monitoring technologies and materials as they are developed and incorporated into processes and products, has the potential to start dealing with these concerns and to build trust in governance.⁸

"The idea of adaptive governance, grounded in reflective and informed technical and social intelligence, and including robust arrangements for environmental monitoring, will be important in this regard."⁹ (Expert Comment, Synthetic Biology Public Dialogue Report, p87)

Public and stakeholder engagement in future decision-making processes should involve a range of actors, and be a part of an informed engagement and communication strategy by Government. Participants of public dialogue appreciate a balanced and holistic process.

It is important to bring stakeholder and public engagement processes together, the process should be run in a more holistic way. The participants involved in the dialogues reviewed for this paper emphasise that public and stakeholder engagement in future decision-making processes should be a part of a balanced and informed communication strategy involving a range of actors. This is an

⁷ Start (2010) p17.

⁸ RCEP (2008), see in particular pages 21-22 for discussion.

⁹ The idea of adaptive governance here is from RCEP (2008); see in particular pages 21-22 for discussion.

important reflection for the new Government when considering future public engagement processes, as this indicates that the public appreciate a balanced and deliberative engagement process when involved in national decision-making as opposed to solely individual action.

The results of the Sciencewise-ERC public Dialogue on Industrial Biotechnology informed the IB-IGT (Industrial Biotechnology – Innovation and Growth Team) action plan for the industry to 2021, and led to a specific recommendation for further public and stakeholder engagement to work together in the future.

"Recommendation 21: The IB-IGT recommends that Government, industry, Research Councils, NGOs, and professional institutions should develop an effective, balanced and informative communication strategy, including stakeholder and public engagement, for IB. The strategy should utilise academic scientists to provide factual information on IB processes, regulations and fit to daily life; [and] involve the environmental NGOs in the process. (Quote from IB-IGT Steering Group report; via interview for Sciencewise-ERC evaluation, p27, IB).

It is also important for the public that there are a range of actors including stakeholders and experts involved in the dialogue in order for the process to be deemed balanced and not predetermined.

"Why didn't Greenpeace accept the invitation or why didn't the Government accommodate them or other organisations? It's a shame there wasn't an alternative forum, for example half a day on nuclear power, half a day on the alternatives. A lot of the questions felt like they were forcing us into the positive"(participant interviewee, Exeter NUC Deliberative Public Event, p216)

Government must take final responsibility for making fair and balanced policy decisions that are informed by dialogue with the public. The public see decision-making as a complex process that requires a wide range of inputs, and do not want to have the final decision in complex technical areas of public policy.

Citizens who have taken part in an engagement process do not expect to be the only party involved in decision-making if the area is complex and highly technical. Importantly, the public would prefer a process of decision-making that includes as many voices as possible at the different stages.

"The majority believe that decisions should not be made by any one party but that it should be a 'three-way dialogue' between the public, the decision-maker and the experts (for example in NEG this was referring to Scientists)."
(Participant Comment, Sciencewise Ethics Digest, p27, ND/NEG)

In addition, citizens do not expect or want to make the final decisions in complex technical areas of public policy-making. The public expect ultimate responsibility to lie with Government in these areas, because the issues are complex, and the potential for individual action to make a difference to the issues is limited.

"I know there are experts out there who are concerned about nanotechnologies as well, and if our group adds to that sense of caution then that's a good thing. But for us to want to take the decision ourselves would be a step too far."
(Participant Comment, Sciencewise-ERC Ethics Digest, p28, ND/NEG)

Speaking in relation to behaviour change policy around energy savings, "Eventually the government has got to say - we think this is the best way forward. We as individuals can't make that decision, as we don't know what it is." (Participant Comment, BES report, p23).

This is a critical consideration for the Government with regards to the development of the Big Society. With regards to national decision-making, although the public involved in these dialogues want to be handed increased levels of power by being involved in the decision-making process, ultimate responsibility remains with the state. Devolution of power is an intrinsic part of the Big Society and as such it is important that the Government considers where accountability and

responsibility lie with particular regard to citizen involvement in national decision-making, but also at the local level.

The Government must work to make the process of deliberation responsive and meaningful when opening up public services to greater citizen control. Dialogue-based events can help ensure maximum support, confidence and buy-in from future participants and are valued highly by public participants.

As demonstrated by the information reviewed in this paper, it is important to understand that, for the public, process is integral to a legitimate and meaningful public dialogue or deliberation.

Public dialogue is defined by Sciencewise-ERC as a ‘two-way’ conversation between policy makers and experts on the one hand, and the public on the other. The general approach to dialogue is to create an environment that is conducive to honest self-expression, thoughtful probing and perspective-taking. Participants value this process of learning about one another through what can be described as ‘mutual questioning and reflection sessions’. It enables them to prepare for the challenging process of making common decisions together.¹⁰ It is important for the Government to consider this process of deliberation when opening up public services to greater citizen control. As we have seen throughout this paper, the opportunity for the public to openly and transparently discuss complex issues with Government increases confidence and trust, and builds a more collaborative relationship between citizen and state. Importantly, people who have taken part in this kind of process place a high value on it.

“In this case, the value of hearing the views of other participants in affecting their own views was ranked ahead of the value of the written information. In addition, it powerfully affects the extent to which participants judge the process as a success.” (Evaluator Comment, Sciencewise-ERC Evaluation, p43, ST)

“There was great appreciation from participants in the deliberative work and the public meeting for being consulted and a strong desire from people to continue to learn about issues such as this.”(Participant comment, Sciencewise-ERC Ethics Digest, p29, HY)

As such it is important that the Government considers the type and design of the public engagement process it delivers. Initiatives such as ‘Your Freedom’ or the ‘Spending Challenge’ budgetary consultation are integral to the Government’s ambition of opening up society and handing power to the people. However, it is important that it learns from what the public have said in this review about process. Participants of public dialogues have made clear that structured spaces and a balanced presentation of facts are of central importance when complex information is required for decisions to be made.

This paper has shown that public dialogue can support the new Government in setting precedents of openness and transparency and moving toward the Big Society. However, the process by which the public dialogue feeds into the wider political process is integral to making the benefits of engagement trusted, legitimate and meaningful. In summary: the public must be involved in setting the terms of the debate; the public needs to be continually involved in the decision-making process; decision-makers must feed-back to the public so they understand their influence; governance and regulation need to be more adaptive; a range of actors, including the public, need to be involved in decision-making; and ultimate responsibility for decisions needs to remain with Government.

¹⁰ Levine, Fung and Gastil (2005), p283.

Conclusion

The public's views that are presented here all relate to what we refer to early in the paper as 'invited spaces'; spaces which the Government has created and invited the public into. However, the Big Society, with its move towards far more autonomous citizen action, suggests that there will be a growth in 'uninvited spaces'; spaces that citizens create themselves.¹¹ Understanding how to listen in to these spaces, and engage with them will be a new departure for most of Government. We believe that the lessons we draw here are of relevance nonetheless.

This paper reveals that the public appreciate structured public engagement processes that are open and transparent about how they feed into Government policy. The Government needs to be aware of this when it is developing the means by which it will listen to the uninvited spaces that develop. It will need to ensure it is being open and transparent with the selection process of who gets heard and how those voices are feeding into policy. If this is not achieved there is a risk that trust in Government, and ultimately the 'Big Society' will be undermined.

¹¹ This understanding of 'invited' and 'uninvited' spaces has grown out of Chilvers (2010) report of Sustainable Participation. Chilvers defines, "*Invited' micro public dialogue - where members of the public are invited to participate in highly managed dialogue organised by a host decision-making institution. In comparison to 'Uninvited' public engagement - organic, spontaneous forms of public engagement initiated and organised by citizens themselves rather than decision institutions*".

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