



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement

How to... ...facilitate deliberative engagement

Introduction

In deliberative engagement processes the participants are given the opportunity to consider an issue in-depth. Made up of peers and experts, deliberative engagement groups come together to discuss information new to them and to develop an informed view. Deliberative engagement methods are different from other more “traditional” tools, such as opinion polls that measure more immediate views on an issue.

By using deliberative methods, you can engage with the public, who hold valuable knowledge. These methods can provide you with much richer data on attitudes and values, and offer opportunities to explore more fully why people feel the way they do. They can also help the emergence of a new consensus about a controversial issue as participants – both experts and lay – move towards deeper understandings. It can take place on any scale; from 10 participants to thousands.

There are several types of deliberative engagement that can cross-over from informing to consulting and collaborating depending on how the methodology chosen is used. For example:

- Deliberative research, builds on more traditional market research techniques
- Deliberative dialogue which builds on dialogue and consensus building techniques enabling participants to work together (often with expert input) to develop an agreed view or set of recommendations
- Deliberative decision-making which builds on partnership and joint decision making, for example in institutional reorganisation or collaboration between universities and communities in urban regeneration projects.

Deliberation can be hugely beneficial if you are developing new technology or a controversial research project.

So-called “upstream” engagement is becoming more prevalent in the science and society sphere. Fuelled by controversies around GM crops, BSE and nanotechnologies people are questioning scientists more and trusting them less. This has meant that scientists, academics and political decision makers are trying to find ways to engage the public meaningfully in very early stages of research and development. When new technologies with potentially great impact on society emerge, such as geo-engineering, biosynthesis and artificial intelligence, it can be beneficial to discuss ethical and social dilemmas with members of the public. Whilst it can help shape peoples views and understandings, more importantly it enables more thoughtful consideration of the directions and impact of research developments. These issues can then be taken into account in further funding and development of the technology.

A report on [engaging the public in discussions about the governance and development of nanotechnologies](#) is available online. [Other examples of public dialogue around science and technology](#) can be found on the ScienceWise-ERC website.

Getting started

- What is the purpose of the deliberation? What are you looking to get out of it? Who do you want to get involved?
- Think about how you will recruit your participants. Based on demographics, interest group or random selection? All choices are valid as long as they allow you to meet your purpose, and you are clear about your selection processes
- Are you inviting an appropriate mix of experts and participants?
- Make sure the information you provide the participants with is balanced. If the subject is controversial you will want to present opposing expert opinions. This may mean more than opposing views within the discipline; your deliberation could be enhanced by drawing in the views of economists, political scientists, anthropologists as well as philosophers and religious leaders to help participants explore the ethical and moral dimensions more deeply
- Have you taken the ethical considerations into account? It is important that if you decide to progress with this type of engagement that you consider the ethical implications of doing so
- Is there a logical path through learning and discussion? You will need to allow participants to build on and use the information and knowledge they acquire as the process develops
- Are you going to engage participants in a meaningful way? If not – why are you considering engaging with them at all?

Examples of deliberative methods:

Deliberative mapping

You can use this method for mapping out a range of values and priorities held by public and “expert” individuals towards a particular controversy or series of policy options. The emphasis is not on consensus building, but understanding the different perspectives each offer to an issue or process. The groups themselves will determine the criteria they will use to score the options. Deliberative mapping includes both qualitative and quantitative methods. Fundamental is the involvement of both “specialists” and members of the public. You could do a Deliberative exercise with a group of, for example, 40 participants recruited for a Citizen Panel and get 20 experts involved to reflect the full spectrum of specialist knowledge in an area.

Deliberative workshops

Deliberative workshops are a form of facilitated group discussion that provide participants with the opportunity to consider an issue in depth, challenge each other’s opinions and develop their views/arguments to reach an informed end position. They can take anything from a few hours to several days to conduct. Deliberative workshops typically involve between 8 to 16 participants. Who is involved will depend on the issue at stake; participants could be selected on the basis of demographics, interest group, or random selection.

What it can be used for

Deliberative engagement can be used to:

- Understand how people's views about a controversial scientific research or university policy change as they are given new information or deliberate an issue
- Explore how university policies, or new activities, would impact public communities and stakeholders and develop alternatives that result in better-informed decisions
- Consult on conflicting beliefs or values around a certain university policy
- Stimulate interest in specific scientific or societal issues among participants. After the event you can encourage participants to stay in touch with each other or give participants information to help them stay involved with the university
- Provide valuable insight and input into the concerns of peers and the wider public about an emerging, controversial research agenda which may have impacts on wider society years down the line
- Enhance understanding and the relationship between science and wider society

Things to bear in mind

There are various considerations to make in advance of a deliberative process:

- Have the crucial decisions already been taken? Is there a possibility the engagement process can influence decisions? If not then you should not proceed: tokenistic deliberation will probably do more harm than good by reducing the trust of participants in those taking the decisions
- Ensure all your participants are clear about their role, and how the process will work
- If you are inviting experts to present or observe, brief them beforehand so they clearly understand their role
- Make sure the time allocated to participants' discussions is maximised. Provide a safe environment in which they can express themselves freely.
- Recognise the value of expertise from all participants not just your 'experts' – and ensure you provide enough time for everyone to share their views
- Ensure the discussions are carefully recorded
- Vary the ways in which participants can express their views throughout the process – collectively in group discussions and individually through other methods such as voting, postcards, flipcharts and post-it notes
- Be prepared to be flexible both in timing and in having to change a process as it is running in case it takes an unexpected direction or unanticipated conflict arises
- Allow for time for plenary feedback and summing up so that participants can check and validate points that are being interpreted as the main results. Don't feel however that all groups always need to feedback to the whole group; the learning in the small groups may be adequate and allow you to carry-on to the next stage of the process
- Keep the participants informed after the event. Provide a summary of the views and clarify how their input has made a difference.

- The participant's views are developed through deliberation and the processing of new information and arguments. This may mean they are not representative of the views of the wider public, so be wary of making false claims of representativeness
- Have you built in review and evaluation? This can help you assess what has been achieved and improve future practice

Cost and time requirements

Example costs

Depending on the purpose, scale and method of your deliberative engagement process, costs may vary.

For example, a deliberative workshop can be relatively low-cost. However, costs usually add-up through recruiting participants, promoting the event, possibly contracting external facilitators and note takers. An incentive may have to be offered to citizens in order to get them to participate. Additional costs include venue hire, catering and supporting arrangements such as childcare. If you are reconvening on several occasions this will add to the cost (and time) requirements.

Example timings

This depends on the nature of the deliberative process. For a one off workshop your time requirements would be low, however, if you are reconvening you need to account for extra time. Take into account time for developing background materials, like information sheets, presentations or videos. You should plan on taking at least twice the amount of time to plan the event as you will on delivering it in addition to preparing the materials. For complex events with multiple stakeholders this could be much more.

Leave enough time between the end of the deliberation and issuing a response to consider what has been said. Producing a report immediately after the deliberation has closed can give the impression that you had already made your mind up, however waiting too long to respond may mean people lose interest.

Resources

Public involvement exercises are now built into all levels of local democracy. There are no simple formulae or 'off the shelf' solutions to improving participation, but there is a wealth of experience to draw upon for guidance on which methods work best for different situations. Many of these resources can be applied in the Higher Education sector. Here we offer a selection of practical guides that can be used as handbooks in the planning and design of projects to involve the public in decision making and policy development.

[DIALOGUE DESIGNER](#)

A free online tool published in 2008 by public engagement consultants [Dialogue by Design](#) to help you choose and design the best engagement process to suit your needs. The [Dialogue by Design Handbook](#) complements the online system but can also stand alone as a detailed, clearly-written guidebook for people in the public, private and voluntary sectors undertaking any size of engagement exercise. Written in an engaging style, the Who, Why and How factors of the design process are explored, followed by a review of the main engagement methods, including advantages and disadvantages of each, their resource requirements, and how to initiate and use them. Also contains useful guidance on working with stakeholders.

[PEOPLE AND PARTICIPATION](#)

Well researched report by the participation organisation [Involve](#) (2005), with a particular focus on involving citizens in decision-making. Using case studies to illustrate, the report examines the issues and pitfalls of participation, and guides the reader through the purposes, planning process, a range of methods, and evaluation process to help promote wider understanding of participatory processes. See also Involve's [People and Participation.net](#) site, which provides information, advice, case studies and opportunities to share experiences with others, including interactive tools for designing and planning a participatory process to suit your own situation and links to a huge array of useful practical resources.

[THE GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION](#)

Partnership expert David Wilcox builds on his 1994 guide for community activists and public service providers to offer a comprehensive toolkit of techniques and principles for participation. The guide gives a lot of theoretical detail about the different types and levels of participation, with practical advice on choosing the most appropriate method for your situation. The pitfalls of some of the common participation "quick fixes" are discussed. The A-Z of Effective Participation is a useful dictionary of participation terminology to help build up your understanding of the field.

[CITIZENS AS PARTNERS: OECD HANDBOOK ON INFORMATION, CONSULTATION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN POLICY-MAKING](#)

Published in 2001, this handbook offers government officials at all levels practical assistance in strengthening relations between government and citizens. It combines a brief review of basic concepts, principles, concrete examples of good practice, tools (including new information and communication technologies) as well as tips from practice. The approach and activities shown in this handbook support and complement formal institutions of democracy, and strengthen the democratic process.

[BEYOND THE BALLOT. 57 DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD](#)

Graham Smith's report for The POWER Inquiry (2005) examines formal methods for involving citizens in the political decision-making process. Selected from democratic practices in use around the world, the innovations are usefully categorised into six areas: electoral, consultative, deliberative, co-governance, direct democracy and e-democracy innovations. Case studies illustrate the best of the innovations evaluated on the basis of them increasing and deepening citizen participation in the political decision-making process.

[AN INTRODUCTION TO CONSULTATION METHODS](#)

Fife Council has produced this clear document outlining 19 different methods for consulting and engaging people in decision-making activities. Each method is categorised and described in terms of its purpose and appropriateness for different levels of engagement. The document is written for a public services context.

[DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: NINE PRINCIPLES](#)

Participation experts Involve and the National Consumer Council (2008) present a set of specific, evidence-based principles for achieving effective deliberative public engagement (DPE). This discussion and dialogue-based approach values participant input and shows how this can be harnessed to deliver changes in public policy. The benefits of this method are summarised in Appendix 1.

[SAY&PLAY: A REPORT AND TOOLKIT FOR IMPROVING LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION](#)

The Say&Play approach (2008) is a creative solution to the problem of how to get people, and young people in particular, involved in consultation exercises. It is a useful way of engaging with large groups of people who have not traditionally participated by taking consultation out to the public to spaces in which they feel comfortable. This Toolkit gives practical guidance to those in local authorities or the public sector wishing to set up their own Say&Play consultation event. It is packed full of creative ideas and information, and draws on the lessons learned from the trial of Say&[Play@Schools](#) in the London Borough of Lambeth.

[PARTICIPATION WORKS!: TWENTY-ONE TECHNIQUES OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY](#)

Published by the New Economics Foundation (1998), Participation Works! contains 21 proven techniques from around the world. For each technique, expert practitioners have provided detailed descriptions of the method, its uses and the resources needed, with case studies to

illustrate. Before you dive in, you are encouraged to define your criteria - what it is you want to get from the participation exercise - so that you can then evaluate each of the 21 techniques presented. It shows how to choose between them, how to use them properly and where to go for more information. A user-friendly PDF version of these techniques is available at

<http://www.preval.org/documentos/00482.pdf>.



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