



Widening Public Involvement in Dialogue – Report

Introduction

The Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre (Sciencewise-ERC) aims to create excellence in public dialogue and to inspire and inform better policy in science and technology by helping policy makers commission and use public dialogue in emerging areas of science and technology. The Sciencewise-ERC is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Sciencewise-ERC provides practical support to policy makers and over the past year has undertaken innovative research into six key strategic issues in public dialogue.

This report is one of a series of six covering research undertaken by Sciencewise-ERC. The research was carried out by Pippa Hyam, a member of the Sciencewise-ERC Dialogue and Engagement Specialist team.

Others in the series:

- Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement (Diane Beddoes)
- Evidence Counts - Understanding the Value of Public Dialogue (Diane Warburton)
- The Use of Experts in Public Dialogue (Suzannah Lansdell)
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Widening Public Involvement in Dialogue

- Up-scaling Public Involvement Processes

by Pippa Hyam

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1. Introduction

'Up-scaling public involvement processes' is one of six different workstreams carried out by members of the Dialogue and Engagement Specialists (DES) Team of the Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre. The workstreams aim to explore specific aspects of public and stakeholder engagement resulting in guidance for policymakers who want to engage people within their policy area.

The 'up-scaling' workstream developed around the issue of large scale engagement. The explorative research addresses the questions why policymakers tend to favour processes that involve large numbers of people and how such processes can achieve better outcomes.

This short paper summarises the findings from the workstream. It aims to help policymakers think about whether, why and how they should involve larger numbers of people in the discussion of policy and policy-making. It provides:

- summary descriptions of three types of process that involve contact between government and citizens regarding policy that are commonly described as 'engagement';
- an overview of the motivations that lead policy makers to decide that these processes need to be scaled up; and
- conclusions and recommendations on when and how up-scaling can improve engagement and deliver value for money.

We do not prescribe specific methodologies for large scale public involvement, partly because all such processes should be individually designed around their specific purposes, and partly because we do not want to limit innovation and experimentation.

In writing this document we have drawn heavily on desk research and on the results of interviews with policymakers; this data is available on request. We have also drawn on our many years of experience as practitioners, and on the anecdotal evidence provided by colleagues and participants.

2. Involving citizens

2.1 Types of involvement

For the purposes of this paper we are going to argue that there are three types of process during which government and citizens interact in relation to the formulation of policy:

- *Communications or campaigning*: for government to influence citizens
- *Research*: for government to find out what citizens think
- *Upstream dialogue or 'true engagement'*: for citizens and government to influence each other.

All three types of process are valuable, legitimate and indeed essential to the effective functioning of a mature democracy.

Currently all three types of process are often called ‘engagement’ or ‘dialogue’. While we acknowledge that this is unlikely to change in the immediate future, we think this risks confusing both their purposes and the methods they employ and, again for the purposes of this paper, we are going to use ‘true engagement’ to describe a type of process that is different from either ‘research’ or ‘communications’.

This is not to imply that research or communications cannot be ‘engaging’, or that ‘engagement’ methods cannot be used to undertake research or as communications vehicles: clearly they can. When it comes to thinking about up-scaling them, however, we believe it is essential to begin by differentiating between top-down processes that serve the purposes of the government, and processes that either enable citizens to try to influence government, or that play a mediating role between citizens and government.

2.2 Characteristics of the three types of involvement

The following table (table 1, page 3) sets out the key differences and offers recent examples.

Table 1 Characteristics of the three types of involvement

Type	Purposes	Characteristics and methodologies	Examples
Communications or campaigning	For government to influence what citizens think or how they behave.	These are generally processes using marketing, public relations or campaigning methods to reach large numbers of people. They may include interactive methods that provide citizens with opportunities to consider complex issues and express their views. They do not need to be representative because their primary purpose is to influence, not to be influenced.	Sciencehorizons, GM Nation, Jamie's School Dinners, Citizens' Summit on Climate Change.
Research	For government to find out what citizens think about a policy or aspects of a policy.	Quantitative and qualitative processes that ask usually representative groups of people (often incentivised to attend) to respond to specific questions or prompts. Methods range from large deliberative events designed to elicit informed views to surveys and questionnaires.	Pensions Debate, Tidal Power, CaliforniaSpeaks.
Upstream dialogue or 'true engagement'	For citizens and government to influence each other.	The key characteristics of true engagement processes are that their focus, scope and results are to some extent negotiable among the participants, and that the methods used enable full engagement with the complexity of policy making.	Your Health Your Care Your Say, European Citizens' Consultation, European Citizens' Forum, Citizens' Forum on Electoral Reform (NL).

2.3 Timing and types of involvement

Each of the types of engagement distinguished above has its own place on a typical policy development timeline.

In the earliest stages of the process, when the issue still needs framing and no clearly defined options have yet emerged, it makes sense to organise an upstream dialogue process. This will enable participants and policymakers to identify issues, targets and possible solutions based on shared values and mutual understanding.

Once the scope of the policy is set and a comprehensive set of alternatives and possible trade-offs has been determined, policymakers can use deliberative research or some form of consultation to understand people's preferences or concerns about various options. This will help them to decide the way forward with more confidence both about the advantages and disadvantages of each option, and about likely public and stakeholder reaction to eventual decisions.

The communications or campaigning type of involvement is especially suitable when policy making evolves into implementation. Having made the strategic decisions with the contribution of public and stakeholders' views, government can use engaging campaigns or communications to secure broad(er) understanding of their aims and decisions, and seek support for them.

3. Motivations for large scale involvement

Research with policymakers and practitioners reveals a number of motivations for involving larger numbers of people. These can be loosely divided into the *presenting or explicit* and the *underlying or supplemental*.

3.1 Presenting or explicit motivations

We have identified four primary motivations:

1. To inform policy through more detailed analysis of the interests and concerns of a wider range and greater number of people;
2. To identify aspects of the policy that need further work, or to investigate areas of uncertainty and to anticipate and manage risks associated with them; again, casting the net wider is perceived to reduce the chances of missing any;
3. To use the involvement process to increase understanding of the policy among as many people as possible, and thereby to secure a mandate for it, particularly if it is potentially controversial;
4. To provide an opportunity for citizens to participate in this dimension of the democratic process, thus strengthening the basis for engagement in general.

3.2 Underlying or supplemental motivations

Closer investigation often reveals a range of motivations that are complementary to those above but are less usually made explicit. These are that involving more people is perceived to:

- Make the results more likely to be *credible* with political decision makers and more *legitimate* among citizens;
- Provide a platform for politicians and later *rhetorical* benefits to policymakers and politicians should there be criticism of their decisions;

- Turn understanding into *influence* by creating a crowd effect;
- Improve *trust* in the leading policy department or in government generally;
- Allow people who feel disappointed to let off steam and *restore* disturbed relationships;
- Make the process more *searching* and more evidence-based;
- Make a process more defensible in the case of later *legal* challenge;
- Ensure the process is demonstrably more *representative* by including grassroots views from as large and diverse (culture, language, country) a cross-section of the population as possible;
- Contribute to mutual understanding and cohesion within a *community*; and
- Provide opportunities to *experiment* with methods and approaches to public engagement and dialogue.

Reviewing these, our perception is that the motivations underlying the demand for larger numbers of people to be involved are a mixture of the positive and the defensive. The former stem from a genuine if unquestioning belief that more is better; the latter aim to fend off the common criticism that all such processes are no more than exercises designed to tick boxes and provide a smokescreen of legitimacy for decisions already made.

Our first recommendation is that all forms of public involvement should be approached positively and the public and stakeholders' views welcomed as a valuable contribution to policy-making. The earlier in the policy-making process public involvement begins, the more likely this is both to be true and credible.

Our second recommendation is the proactive management of expectations by being explicit about the motivations for involving people. There is no shame in admitting that policy-making will benefit from wider input and experience, or that there are uncertainties needing to be navigated, or that experts are divided about the wisdom of different ways forward, or that an issue has given rise to conflict in the past.

Our experience, and that of many policymakers, is that the public welcomes above all honesty and plain dealing. There is particularly no point in trying to conceal issues that are already widely known or suspected: this merely serves to breed further rumour and suspicion.

3.3 Changing motivations during the process

Our research reveals a tendency for policymakers to change their motivations once the process is running, especially in large scale processes. The fact of having a giant pool of participants or respondents is often regarded as a valuable resource, and tempts policymakers into adopting new or extended purposes. This happened with the *Citizens' Summit on Climate Change* process. Different policymakers tried to achieve mutually conflicting results from one single process and as a direct result many were disappointed.

We accept that there can be valid reasons for altering or extending motivations as a result of changing circumstances. An ad-hoc opportunity to use the process to test an idea or collect data only remotely related to the original purpose of the engagement, however, is generally not a good idea and should be avoided. Changing the purposes or motivations of a process, especially one that is already designed and operational, will at the very least confuse the participants and may even prevent the original, or indeed any, objectives being achieved. While the urge to get more bang for the buck is perfectly understandable, this is not the way to do it.

4. Motivations and scale

In this section we look at the four main motivations emerging from our research into large scale involvement processes, and then the broader underlying themes, and consider the relationship between them and the question of scale.

4.1 Presenting or explicit motivations

1. *To inform policy through more detailed analysis of the interests and concerns of a wider range and greater number of people.*

Most large scale involvement processes state in their objectives the desire to use the information obtained in decision-making about policy but there is not always a clear link between this objective and the scale chosen.

When the results of engagement processes are analysed it rapidly becomes apparent that the same few points are made by most of those involved. It is true that the more people there are, the greater the fine variations on those points, and it may be that a few hundred people will raise a small number of points that a few tens of people, however broadly selected, might overlook. But the difference in the scope of points raised between a few hundred and a few thousand is negligible. It is therefore unlikely that, above a certain number, the expense of involving more people is justified by the greater depth and breadth of responses received.

This does not apply, however, if the process is deliberately seeking the views of distinct groups of people, or for example from a range of countries or regions. The *European Citizens' Consultation* required views from citizens from all 27 EU member states and subsequently organised deliberative events in each member state. *Your Health Your Care Your Say* was keen to involve as many 'seldom heard' groups as possible and had separate events for children, asylum seekers, people with learning difficulties and several other groups.

Our experience is that simply involving a larger number of people does not in and of itself guarantee a greater diversity of views: it depends who they are.

2. *To identify aspects of the policy that need further work, or to investigate areas of uncertainty and to anticipate and manage risks associated with them; again, casting the net wider is perceived to reduce the chances of missing any.*

The relation between scale and investigating uncertainties is similar to the relation between scale and informing policy. It is worth noting, however, that on the whole people's response to requests to express their interests tend to be fairly general, they tend to be more specific when it comes to concerns, risks and criticisms.

This could suggest that the more uncertainty an issue involves or the more risks it entails, the more important it is to involve a larger number of people – because this increases the chances of identifying aspects that may have been overlooked, and it also demonstrates a greater willingness to address possible problems associated with a policy.

3. *To use the involvement process to increase understanding of the policy among as many people as possible, and thereby to secure a mandate for it, particularly if it is potentially controversial*

This motivation is not served equally by all three types of involvement process. We know that ‘true engagement’ type processes lead to an increase in participants’ levels of understanding, and providing the process is well run, then buy-in will follow. The *Unified New Orleans Plan* process reduced dissent among New Orleans citizens and turned it into approval. *Your Health Your Care Your Say* left people very confident about the policy they proposed in the White Paper that was drafted after the engagement process. The greater the number of people involved in engagement processes, the more people will buy into the outcomes.

We know much less, however, about the extent to which such processes can increase buy-in from those not directly involved in the process. The *Unified New Orleans Plan* might be the exception, thanks to the controversy surrounding its history and the efforts made to reverse that; other examples show little effect beyond participants and those immediately around them. The 150 participants in the *Citizens’ Summit on Climate Change* have apparently spoken to 4,500 people about what they learned, but it is impossible to know the degree of buy-in this has really generated.

Research processes are much less likely to have the same effect, even if people appreciate being asked their opinion: their involvement is rarely deep enough to have a major impact on their thinking or behaviour unless they use engagement methods. The same applies to communications and public relations campaigns that use engagement methods.

In summary, the extent of understanding created and buy-in generated depends on the methods used rather than the fact of involvement *per se*.

4. *To provide an opportunity for citizens to participate in this dimension of the democratic process.*

When the principal motivation is to emphasise the value or importance of public involvement in itself, up-scaling can prove helpful to raise the profile of the process. Size alone, however, is no guarantee of success: good process management and useful outcomes are still important.

The *European Citizens’ Consultation* and the *European Citizens’ Panel* were both initiated by non-governmental organisations that raised funds to carry out engagement processes on a European level. Both processes were intended to raise interest in European citizen involvement and were held around relevant policy topics: the future of the EU and rural areas respectively. A large scale was required in both processes to support the claim that the engagement was genuinely European.

4.2 Underlying or supplemental motivations

Credibility and legitimacy

There seems to be an unspoken belief among many policymakers that scale automatically confers credibility and therefore legitimacy. This is in part down to the importance of ensuring any process is sufficiently diverse and its conclusions can genuinely be said to represent those of the wider population. But there are other reasons, also associated with legitimacy and credibility, for policymakers favouring larger scale processes.

First, numerous process evaluations show that participants appreciate being part of ‘something big’. They tend to feel that a deliberative event is more important if it includes more people; whether this affects their motivation and the quality of their

participation is unclear, but it seems possible. Using this as an argument for or against large processes depends whether you believe in the wisdom of crowds or the dangers of crowds.

Secondly, policymakers and politicians are often most concerned about how the outcomes of a process (or the policy being discussed) can be 'sold' to other politicians and the media. They tend to feel more comfortable as the number of people involved increases, as large numbers can support the credibility of their arguments and thus provide a certain amount of rhetorical power. Of course, large numbers alone will not always prove helpful, as shown by the *GM Nation* process.

Thirdly, scale is also often a crucial factor when it comes to gaining the media's attention and therefore some notice among the wider public. Pictures of a thousand people in one room make good television and may persuade the national media to cover an event more fully; credibility in this context may well be synonym for 'important enough not to be ignored'. Experience from AmericaSpeaks suggests that the media are more easily attracted to large one-off events than to a series of smaller events, even if the latter are part of a larger process. The exception to this is when any size of event provides a platform for a high profile politician and a policy announcement is trailed.

In summary, up-scaling can increase the chances of any type of process attracting attention and therefore being considered more meaningful, and this can apply to any type of involvement process.

Inclusion, diversity and representativeness

It is entirely proper that elected politicians in a parliamentary democracy should want, wherever possible, to advance policies that reflect the interests and concerns of the nation, and to ensure that decisions are based, as far as possible, on a thorough understanding of them. This is surely why policymakers emphasise the importance of inclusion, diversity and representativeness.

This much is simple, but from here on it gets more complicated. For a start, we need to unpack what we mean by *inclusive*, *diverse*, and *representative* in relation to scale.

Is representativeness increased by involving large numbers of people?

Representativeness requires a sample of the population whose views are to be represented which reflects statistically the composition of that population. To be representative of a million people or more the sample needs to be of at least 1,000 to achieve an accuracy of within 3%; and samples of about this size are regularly used by opinion research organisations to ensure an accurate representation of national opinion on any issue. Involving 10,000 or even 100,000 people may fractionally reduce the margin of error, but it is unlikely to make a research process significantly more representative.

While it is very costly to gather a representative sample of a wider population in a room for a deliberative event, the added value of the representativeness is limited. There may be 1,000 individuals present, but as soon as the event starts they are likely to influence each other and they cease being 1,000 isolated individuals with separate opinions, thus undermining the assumption on which representative opinion research is founded.

The desire to involve more people in research processes reflects motivations other than achieving greater representativeness.

What about diversity and inclusion? Many policymakers emphasise the importance of recruiting for diversity to ensure that people of different ages, social groups, ethnicity and so on are included; this is often allied to seeking out the 'hard to hear' whom efforts at involvement have sometimes excluded, inadvertently or otherwise.

It is important to remember amidst this that a process that is diverse and inclusive is not necessarily representative, and what is representative is not necessarily diverse or inclusive – it depends on the composition of the population of whom the sample is designed to be representative. Representativeness is determined by meeting a statistical standard; the meaning of diversity is often determined by the purpose of the process. Involving larger numbers of people, meanwhile, does by definition make processes more inclusive; it may or may not make them more diverse, depending on who is being included. We hasten to add that up-scaling a process to enable greater diversity can be valuable, whereas up-scaling in the quest for greater representativeness is very unlikely to bring value for money.

Trust

Where failed or flawed processes damage confidence in the results, a bigger and better process may do something to restore trust; the *Unified New Orleans Plan* process certainly suggests this. A renewed process offers those who have been disappointed a fresh opportunity to get involved and, particularly if it gives people an opportunity to contrast it with what went before, can demonstrate the willingness of those in power to respond to public criticism. As every salesperson knows, unhappy customers who are then properly treated become more loyal than those who were originally well treated.

Up-scaling in isolation, however, is in our judgment extremely unlikely to generate trust. Trust in others is a consequence of relationships built on personal experience over time; 'true engagement' processes rather than research or communications processes are more likely to generate real trust.

Influence and behaviour change

Making public involvement more influential and more likely to generate buy-in are major motivations for many policymakers to involve larger numbers of people. Communications and campaigning has successfully galvanised public support to effect shifts in government policy since the abolition of slavery, and the modern combination of celebrity, television and grassroots action can be extremely effective at stimulating debate, facilitating policy innovations and changing public behaviour.

We believe that the motivation to influence behaviour is one of the most powerful arguments for up-scaling. We believe, furthermore, that large-scale engagement processes may be the best way to influence people when the purpose is to change people's behaviour, and particularly when behaviour change may be costly, unpleasant or uncomfortable¹.

This is slightly paradoxical because, as we said above, the purpose of engagement is for citizens and government to influence each other rather than just for government to influence citizens. But we believe the urgency of encouraging behaviour change in response to issues such as global warming means that the deliberate use of engagement for this purpose should not be overlooked.

¹See for example Bull, R., Petts, J. and Evans, J. (2008) 'Social learning from public engagement: dreaming the impossible?' in *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, Vol 51, No 5, September 2008, 701-716.

We believe engagement is best understood and used as a process of mediation between citizens and government, with the purpose of helping government to develop policies that are necessary and encouraging citizens to accept the need for them, however unpopular they are.

Engagement is potentially a mechanism through which government can deliver difficult solutions with greater confidence that they will be understood and supported, but it is essential that the impetus for such engagement is seen to come as much from citizens as it is from government – or it will be perceived as manipulative and self-serving.

Why does engagement offer a means to influence behaviour? Our experience indicates that engagement processes create communities of people who, having argued out the issues, reach conclusions based on reason and evidence more than assumption or prejudice. In the process of doing this and creating this community - the word is used deliberately - people build relationships and mutual trust, even when they disagree. Influence is a consequence of trust: human beings are mostly influenced by those to whom they feel closest or by the people, such as their peers, with whom they most identify.

If there is a need to influence people profoundly enough to change their behaviour, the process needs to do more than ask their opinion or communicate a message: it needs to engage them in a way that enables them to reach their own conclusions in concert with others of like mind.

As regards the scale of such processes, the more people involved, the more people will be influenced.

5. Up-scaling public involvement: conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The main conclusions of this workstream are:

1. It is important to differentiate between involvement that is really communications or campaigning, involvement that is really research, and involvement that enables public and policymakers to engage with and influence each other. All these are legitimate exercises for government but only processes that enable the public and policy makers to influence each other can really be called engagement.
2. When the purpose of involvement is research, there is no point in involving more people beyond the necessary minimum to make the research more accurate, but it may help to make the results more credible or to attract greater attention. The great majority of large scale government funded engagement processes that have been run over the past few years fall into this category. The increased costs of up-scaled research processes suggests that the need for credibility must be very strong for them to be justified.
3. When the purpose of involvement is communication, campaigning, calls to action or public relations, then effectiveness will always be measured to some extent by the number of people touched by the process. Actual numbers will be more important than representativeness.

4. When the purpose of involvement is to enable citizens and government to influence each other, in content terms, through an engagement process, increasing the numbers involved leads to corresponding increases in the time and resources required, and because of this there is a danger that up-scaling engagement processes will mean defaulting to involvement that is really research or communications because it is cheaper and easier. This would also mean losing the ancillary benefits of engagement processes, such as increased trust and willingness to change behaviour.
5. If the purpose of involving people is sustained behaviour change, 'true engagement' is a good way to do it. The more people who are involved in such processes, the more people are likely to change their behaviour as a result.

5.2 Recommendations

In formulating some recommendations we have tried to look forward rather than back:

1. We recommend that policymakers always identify positive (rather than defensive) reasons for involving the public in policy-making.
2. We recommend that upstream dialogue or 'true engagement' processes should be up-scaled to enable more citizens to have direct opportunities to become involved in government policy-making.
3. We recommend that policymakers consider whether their purposes can be served by small scale engagement, before turning to large scale.
4. We recommend that research involvement should not be up-scaled as long as the principal purpose is to inform policy. Likewise, large scale processes with other purposes should resist defaulting to research because it is the easiest and cheapest form of public involvement.
5. We recommend that policymakers use engagement methods that enable scale to become a strength by, for example, encouraging large numbers of people to understand complex dilemmas and trade-offs, enabling policymakers to appreciate the range of values that influence the acceptability of policy, and preparing the wider population to implement unpopular but essential decisions.
6. We recommend that such processes should always be complemented by subsequent communication and campaigning to ensure their conclusions, and the process through which they are achieved, reach wider audiences.
7. We recommend that government invests in up-scaled engagement processes to help develop a culture of citizenship that includes a willingness to discuss in depth the challenges that face our society, and to take personal action based on the conclusions.
8. We recommend that the participation in such processes should be presented as similar to any other voluntary activity that involves accepting individual responsibility for, and committing personal resources to, addressing collective problems, but it should also be presented as fun, creative and life-enhancing. (This is in contrast to processes where financial incentives are used to ensure participation, which in our view encourages participants to see consequent action as the responsibility of 'them' rather than 'us'.)

9. We recommend that further research is undertaken in order to identify to what extent varying the scale of a process will improve its outcomes, in particular with regard to research type involvement processes.

Sciencewise-ERC Research reports

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Contacts and links

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