

The Government is making positive steps towards direct citizen engagement with policy-making, but careful reflection on participation techniques is needed

By Democratic Audit

*For just under a decade, a significant experiment in citizen participation in government has been taking place in the shape of Sciencewise. In recent years, the agency has not only survived a change of Government, but – according to **Helen Pallett** - has increased its impact on policy. But though there are encouraging signs, more needs to be done if the Government is serious about participation.*

Sciencewise was created in 2004 as part of the Science and Society Unit (in the then Department for Trade and Industry). It was intended as a body which could respond to the call in the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee's landmark Science and Society report from 2000 to make public dialogue an integral part of science policy-making, rather than merely an add on.

It was the culmination of several important trends and pressures, including: the desire to avoid repeats of the costly government science controversies of the 1990s, from [Mad Cow disease](#) to the [MMR vaccine](#); the politics of New Labour and the Third Way (which emphasised the need for consensus and the incorporation of the public voice); and the advocacy work of academics in disciplines such as science and technology studies, which highlighted the need to involve citizens in science policies made in the face of inevitable uncertainty, complexity and indeterminacy.

This new object of 'public dialogue' was defined as bringing together a relatively small group of citizens to deliberatively engage with a particular policy issue with the assistance of academic experts and relevant information. Public dialogues differ from public opinion polling in that they are about giving participants time to develop an understanding of an issue and an appreciation of those who hold opposing views, rather than taking a snap decision. Between 2007 and 2010 the programme oversaw public dialogue projects influencing behaviour-focused climate change policies in the Department for Energy and Climate Change and a significant dialogue around the funding and regulation of stem cell science with the Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council, amongst other projects.

The latest form of the experiment has involved a significant expansion in the scale of the Sciencewise programme with the incorporation of the non-profit organisation [Involve](#) and the [British Science Association](#), and also through increasing the range and quantity of its public dialogue projects with government, research councils and local authorities. There are also signs that Sciencewise is being more creative about the projects it supervises and funds, allowing for novel partnerships to emerge and helping to foster the development of more responsive, context specific methods of citizen engagement. Current projects range from the regulation of animal research, to government wellbeing policies, dealing with flooding and the decision about whether to carry on using leap seconds to account for the earth's irregular orbit.

So, almost 10 years in, how is the experiment going? Sciencewise managed to survive the change of government in 2010, despite having been a Labour government initiative and in contrast to the scaling back of many other arms-length government bodies. The volume of projects and government departments involved has also greatly increased over the past two years, linked to the expansion of the programme and the greater emphasis put on networking across government. There is a sense that Sciencewise is experiencing greater visibility and recognition in Government, especially in key groupings such as the Cabinet Office. This is in part due to the dovetailing of Sciencewise aims with recent high profile government agendas, such as the push for open policy and the crowdsourcing of policy making pushed by the Cabinet Office and the civil service reform plan, and also the new Government Chief Scientist Mark Walport's interest in exploring policy decisions through multiple lenses.

But ultimately it is very difficult to concretely trace Sciencewise's influence on policy and/or to measure the government's ability to genuinely listen to and take on board citizen voices. Policy decisions are inevitably complex so it is difficult to pin down the role played by a single public dialogue project. Recent high profile controversies around [fracking](#) and the [badger cull](#), suggest that even if the Government is taking public participation more seriously it is not doing enough early on in policy development and it is not always prepared to listen to what citizens say.

The increasing institutionalisation of public participation has also been met with robust critiques from many of the original academic advocates of increased public involvement. Such critiques have highlighted, amongst other things, the significance of the framing of a particular issue in delimiting the possible discussions in and outcomes of any given public participation event, the power of expert mediators to shape and report on such events, and the apparent lack of learning about publics and public engagement in key government and public bodies.

So, to look to the future, I would suggest the next stage of this experiment in more direct forms of democracy is to look beyond 'public dialogue', as Sciencewise is already doing. Public dialogue is one amongst many potential methods of engaging with citizens around important policy issues. Yet there are other well-developed formal techniques available, not to mention the multiple instances where government might be required to listen and respond where citizens are trying to make their voices heard through social protest and other forms of activism. In seeking to productively engage with citizens, an awareness is needed of how different modes of engagement can momentarily fix a particular aspect of the public voice.

There is no true, singular and static public out there for government to access and speak to, whether this is through public opinion polling, the ballot box or through Sciencewise's public dialogue. Any public input in policy-making is inescapably contingent and dependent on the methods used to engage citizens and the way policy questions are framed. This realisation should not undermine the project of seeking to find ways to include citizen voices in the heart of policy-making, especially in the face of uncertainty and divergent values, rather it highlights the need to reflect on the methods used to elicit citizen voices and the contexts in which they emerge and are used in policy. Viewing this task as an iterative experiment might help those involved to get to grips the constantly shifting terrain of policy and its publics.

Note: this view represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/1iKdoPt>

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