

Science for Environment Policy

Citizen engagement with national policy: energy project shares its experiences

Ensuring successful public engagement in policy can be difficult. Four key challenges – communicating complexity, providing balanced information, creating space for deliberation and accessing broader values – are highlighted by a new study. Its authors show how they dealt with these challenges in a UK programme, designed to gather public views on the future of national energy policy.

Engaging the public in policy development is seen as an important way of empowering communities and improving policy design. Even when the policies concern highly technical science, as often occurs in the environmental domain, experiences show that ordinary members of the public are capable of debating these unfamiliar issues, if they have the right tools and opportunities.

This study focused on an energy system project. This public consultation programme regarding UK energy policy involved discussion workshops with small groups of citizens and an online survey completed by 2441 people from a cross-section of the population. The researchers used this case study to identify four key challenges, and explore how they were met.

1) *Communicating complexity*

National policy issues are likely to be more complex than local issues; deciding a country's future [energy](#) mix is more complicated than deciding where to place a local wind farm, the study suggests. Public deliberation needs to effectively manage this complexity.

This energy system project used an online interactive tool, [my2050](#), to communicate the complexities of energy system change, in both the workshops and via the survey. The tool allows the user to manipulate sources and demands for energy and to see the effects of these changes on CO₂ emissions, energy security, their home, city and country. It illustrates energy systems in a simple way that is relevant to daily lives. Each user creates an ideal energy scenario for 2050 that programme leaders can analyse.

2) *Providing balanced information*

New information typically needs to be presented to participants in these events, but it must be balanced and allow participants to bring their own understanding and views to the process.

The programme leaders consulted a wide range of energy experts prior to the workshops and survey, which helped provide balanced scientific views. They also assembled a project advisory panel comprising academics, energy industry representatives, regulators, NGOs and government staff.

Different policymakers' views on energy were also presented. This allowed participants to understand different policy approaches, as well as react to the policymakers' views.

3) *Creating space for deliberation*

Simply providing information is not enough to enable deep engagement with the issues. The workshops involved various formats for deliberation, including talking through different future scenarios, the my2050 tool and small group '[World Café](#)' style discussions. Small groups gave people more freedom to develop and express their views.

4) *Accessing broader values*

Understanding the participants' values can help reveal *why* they hold specific preferences. To draw out these values, the workshop leaders deliberately countered participants' views to provoke discussion. This enabled the participants to reflect on how they formed their views. The online survey also included open-ended questions, and the responses across the different datasets (both quantitative and qualitative) were analysed for reoccurring themes to clarify key values.

The researchers say that this project could help inform other similar engagement programmes, which also deal with complex technical issues.



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