

NEW GAME-PLAN CASE STUDY

SUSTAINABLE FARMING AND FOOD...OUR ASPIRATIONS AND PRACTICAL CHOICES

This case study summarises how we designed, facilitated, analysed and reported two 'Dialogue Workshops' for the Defra Science Communication Programme at the British Association Festival of Science in Exeter in 2004. These workshops were specifically aimed at the public, rather than representatives of institutional stakeholders.

Background

The Defra 'Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food' was published in 2002 (see www.new-game-plan.co.uk/Papers/SFFS.pdf). It built on the earlier report of the Independent Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, which had concluded that: '*The key objective of public policy should be to reconnect our food and farming industry: to reconnect farming with its market and the rest of the food chain; to reconnect the food chain and the countryside; and to reconnect consumers with what they eat and how it is produced*'.

One of the recommendations of the Strategy was reflected in the establishment of the 'Sustainable Farming and Food Research Priorities Group' (RPG) by Defra in 2003. We provided six stakeholder workshops to inform the RPG's work in advising on future research priorities. These workshops are described in a separate case study.

Defra's commitment to greater public involvement in science is reflected in its Science Communication Programme (see www.defra.gov.uk/science/how/communications.htm). This 'aims to help build a more robust organisation by encouraging openness and improving access to science information for the public, as well as encouraging two-way communication, so that wider views of society are taken into account during policymaking'. The programme 'is constantly developing to increase the opportunities...to engage with Defra Science'.

Objective

Two identical half-day workshops were held on Saturday 4 September 2004 with different groups. The workshops were designed to stimulate debate and provide feedback about the broad generic issues likely to influence the farming and food industries by 2020. The findings were reported to the RPG, to offer a complementary perspective to that obtained from the RPG workshops. They were acknowledged in the RPG's First Report (see page 25, at www.new-game-plan.co.uk/Papers/RPG_Report.pdf).

Each workshop was attended by two dozen participants from a variety of backgrounds and age groups, including many retired people. The workshops were publicised by notices distributed to a wide range of community organisations in the Exeter area. The participants were self-selected, having applied to take part, presumably because they had a particular interest in the subject. The sample was accordingly not representative of the public at large. Nevertheless, participants made wide-ranging contributions.

The approach was *deliberative*: engaging participants in expressing their aspirations for the future, considering barriers to those aspirations, considering potential solutions to overcome the barriers, and working through some difficult choices on controversial issues surrounding farming and food. Participants shared and commented on each other's ideas throughout the workshops. This interactivity, always a key feature of Brain-Pool workshops, delivered far more than the conventional 'focus group' snapshot of views.

The Process

The New Game-Plan Brain-Pool workshop service involves four stages: scoping and design; facilitation on the day; analysis, both on the day and subsequently; then reporting and action planning. Our team included a project manager, facilitators, an analyst, and staff managing the supporting technology. New Game-Plan worked jointly, throughout the process, with members of Defra Science.

Scoping and design

Pre-workshop preparation included designing the sessions and producing workbooks which provided practical guidelines for participants. Promotional and registration work was handled by the British Association and Defra. On the day itself, the participants were seated at tables of 4-6 to facilitate discussion in small groups.

Facilitation

The workshops were far removed from a loose brainstorm. Instead, they were carefully structured around a series of exercises, supported by a clear agenda and by the workbook. Individuals input their contributions to special laptop computers, linked by a wireless network. Participants were able to read, comment on, and respond to, the contributions made by others. Round-table discussions were also used to help individuals develop and refine their contributions (but with no attempt to develop a group consensus).

Participants first received short presentations, based around visual images and narrative explanations, to set the scene, explain key concepts, establish desired outcomes and explain the workshop process.

The first exercise focused on personal aspirations for food, farming and the countryside. Participants jotted down their aspirations, and then articulated and refined these through round-table discussion, before entering them into the laptop computers. The aspirations were made available on screen to all participants for review and comment. Some 450 aspirations and comments were captured in this way.

Next, participants selected two or three aspirational themes of particular interest, and jotted down barriers to realising those aspirations, and possible solutions to overcome the barriers. Again, individual contributions were entered and then made available for comment. Some 100 suggestions for policy action resulted.

The next exercise focused on two sets of three questions:

- Deciding what food to buy; how to obtain it; and how to decide what to eat, and when, outside the home.
- Encouraging specific land uses; reacting to development proposals close to home; and determining how farmers could farm in a sustainable way.

The questions were designed intentionally to force participants to make difficult choices. This process helped to expose how individuals rationalise their decisions. Importantly, the emphasis was placed on developing a narrative to describe reasoning, not on simple 'voting'.

Finally, participants evaluated various aspects of the workshop, and offered any final messages for Defra. All contributions in all sessions were anonymous, giving everyone an opportunity to comment freely.

In all the sessions, much use was made of visual images to bring issues to life. For example, putting a picture of a bowl of strawberries alongside a picture of the polytunnels now widely used to grow them, in exploring the implications of promoting new land uses to meet consumer demand for year-round supplies.

Analysis

After the workshops, participants received a verbatim report, of 20-30 pages, which set out all their contributions. This ensured full transparency. New Game-Plan analysts also prepared a synthesis report of some 20 pages, bringing together the outputs of both workshops. This included an executive summary and chapters covering the different sessions: aspirations, barriers and solutions, the six difficult choices, and the workshop review.

Reporting and action planning

New Game-Plan always provides an independent, impartial synthesis report based on the verbatim output of Brain-Pool workshops. This draws out the key learning points and includes crisp recommendations.

The Exeter synthesis reported in detail on over a dozen issues which were aired and debated during the workshops in relation to food, farming and the countryside: food quality, local sourcing, home-grown food, health and diet; fair trade, prosperous farming, animal welfare and disease; and countryside access, diversification, landscapes and wildlife, housing, energy, rural transport, waste, and education and skills.

Defra made the synthesis report available to the RPG and to officials responsible for policy development in this area. The RPG Report mentions the workshops, noting that 'there is a striking degree of concordance' between the topics raised in the workshops and those identified during the RPG stakeholder workshops. The report also confirms that 'We have been mindful of the outputs from the public consultation in developing the research priorities presented in our report' (see www.new-game-plan.co.uk/Papers/RPG_Report.pdf).

Learning points

The workshops generated a remarkable volume of comment from a relatively small group of people. The richness and quality of this output would have been almost impossible to achieve, from only two half-day events, without the Brain-Pool approach. The specific benefits included:

- **The approach taken was highly effective in engaging a ‘citizen’s group of ‘non-experts’:** Participants were able to express their views freely, in their own terms, rather than having to respond to a pre-determined ‘expert’ view of the world, such as would underlie any questionnaire survey; the interactivity between participants also helped them to refine and explain their ideas more fully.
- **Intense interaction and sharing of knowledge.** The workshops broke the workshop mould of ‘speakers and listeners’ by mixing short presentations, group discussion and individual inputting of written contributions. Participants appreciated the efficiency of the laptops in capturing contributions quickly and effectively: ‘no time wasted in arguing – we can all just express our opinions’.
- **All participants were talking the same language.** Care was taken to define and explain key concepts. A standardised format was used to express aspiration themes, barriers and solutions.
- **All contributions were captured simultaneously.** This enabled rapid capture of information. As one participant commented: ‘How much more efficient it is when people don’t speak one at a time’.
- **Everyone had equal ‘air-time’.** Participants noted that process of capturing written contributions through the laptops delivered ‘everyone’s opinion not just the loudest’. One felt that the technology was a good way to communicate when the issues were ‘too contentious for open discussion’.
- **Contributions were made anonymously.** Anonymity contributed to greater honesty and openness. Participants were frank and even ‘politically incorrect’. Some participants enjoyed being able ‘to comment freely without being involved in a discussion’. Comments did seem to ‘come from the heart’, and not to have been ‘filtered’, in contrast to contributions from formal stakeholder groups.
- **The contributions were reviewed and built upon within the workshop.** The deliberative approach of stimulating contributions, articulating and refining these through discussion, and giving everyone an opportunity to comment, helped to turn raw ideas into well considered propositions.
- **The intensity of each workshop resulted in real ‘movement’ of thinking.** While the advent of internet platforms has made it possible to accumulate and share contributions between large numbers of people, these ‘same time/same place’ workshops generated a high intensity of focus and interactivity. Participants enjoyed learning from the diverse prompts, ideas and prejudices of others.
- **There was no need to provide separate break-out rooms during the syndicate sessions.** At various times, each table reviewed, discussed, and entered comments on, different sets of contributions. These sessions all took place in the one room, saving time and avoiding disruption.
- **The sessions were highly focused and stimulating.** The use of a clear structure, based around tackling different questions in discrete sessions, made for an interesting and productive event. Many clearly enjoyed ‘freeing their minds’. One said: ‘It’s been good to let off steam’. Another commented: ‘The afternoon has gone by so quickly I must have really been enjoying what I was doing.’
- **The workshops were guided by independent, expert facilitators and analysts.** New Game-Plan’s independence helped to ensure impartiality throughout. This avoided any concern that the participants were being led to reach predetermined conclusions ‘imposed’ by Defra.
- **A verbatim report was provided to participants soon after each workshop.** This ensured 100% transparency - everyone could see all the contributions made. There was no need for participants to try to capture the outputs themselves by taking copious notes!

- **There was total knowledge capture.** Several participants were impressed by 'so much information gleaned from so many in a short time'. The Brain-Pool approach, which captures every written contribution, avoids the vulnerability of traditional approaches in which key nuances are often lost when oral discussions are being noted down on flip-charts, reported back, and finally written up.
- **An expert synthesis report was provided with crisp recommendations.** Our analysts produced an independent synthesis report from the verbatim report within only a few more days. The synthesis drew solely on the contributions made by participants. The synthesis report used verbatim quotes from participants liberally to illustrate the themes emerging from the workshops.
- **The workshops were effective with members of the public of varying ages.** The workshops included schoolchildren and pensioners (six were over 70). Yet all quickly learnt how to make entries into the laptops, to review these and to add comments. One noted: 'If this is the future learning experience I wish I was 60 years younger. I found the whole experience fascinating'.
- **There is a demand from the public for similar workshops of this type.** Nearly all the participants considered that the Government should engage the public through similar workshops on varied issues, both nationally and locally. One commented: 'It is a good and enjoyable way of engaging the public'. Notably, the use of a deliberative approach, with a strong technology element, was viewed as a real advantage, not an impediment, in consulting and engaging with the general public.
- **The value of public views on policy and research issues should not be under-estimated.** While the participants all had an interest in the subject matter, the honesty, freshness and sophistication of their arguments provided a welcome antidote to the prevailing 'expert view'! Far from avoiding difficult challenges, many participants developed constructive approaches to solve them.

Conclusion

These Brain-Pool workshops brought together some 50 members of the public with an interest in farming and food. They worked together in a deliberative process to generate and review several hundred ideas on the future for food, farming and the countryside, including many ideas for policy action and research. These raw contributions were faithfully distilled by New Game-Plan into a detailed report for Defra.

These workshops set a new standard for engaging members of the public in a serious deliberative process - going far beyond mere opinion-polling - in a challenging area for policy and research. The workshops successfully piloted a new approach, which the participants themselves enthusiastically endorsed as an effective model for engagement. For example, there were suggestions that workshops should be held on sustainable farming and food in both urban and rural areas and with groups such as Women's Institutes.

The Brain-Pool approach is suitable for use with larger numbers of participants, at a variety of scales, with specific 'target' populations, and with randomly-selected participants (which would deliver findings which are representative of the population as a whole, or of specific target groups).

Further Information

New Game-Plan is a specialist company which catalyses strategic change for leading global companies, public bodies and cross-sector groups. Our approach is innovative and distinctive, fusing Knowledge, Facilitation Services, a Practical Toolkit, and Supporting Technology. Our expertise and experience is broad, across many sectors. We have particular strengths in research and innovation. For further information, contact Dr Ray Smith: Telephone: 01428 661517. E-mail: info@new-game-plan.co.uk. Web: www.new-game-plan.co.uk.

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