

NEW GAME-PLAN CASE STUDY

DEFRA: SUSTAINABLE FARMING AND FOOD RESEARCH PRIORITIES GROUP (RPG)

This case study summarises how we designed, facilitated, analysed and reported six 'Brain-Pool Workshops' for the Defra Sustainable Farming and Food Research Priorities Group. These Workshops brought together over 200 participants from 125 organisations to deliberate on future research priorities for farming and food.

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'*.

The Strategy recognised the need for 'coordination between the Government and industry on science and research'. Defra established the 'Sustainable Farming and Food Research Priorities Group' (RPG) in 2003 to advise it on 'the strategic research required to promote the sustainability of the farming and food industries in the future'. The RPG, which has now completed its work, brought together many interests - including research councils, levy bodies, industry, consumers, statutory advisers and Government.

Objective

New Game-Plan was engaged by the RPG to design, facilitate, analyse and report six 'Brain-Pool workshops' focusing on research priorities in different areas. The aim was for major stakeholders to identify and develop a shared understanding of the broad generic issues likely to influence the farming and food industries in 10-15 years time, and the research and development required to address these.

The themes of the six Brain-Pool workshops were:

- The impact of global and technological drivers on farming and food
- Satisfying consumer aspirations through sustainable delivery of food products
- Optimising profitability by means of new opportunities for agricultural land use
- Adding value across the food supply chain within a national framework
- Manipulating the environmental footprint of agriculture to achieve better management of the true costs and benefits
- Delivering landscape-scale benefits from farms whilst improving economic sustainability of UK agriculture

Each Workshop lasted one day, and was attended by 40-70 participants from different stakeholder organisations - over 200 stakeholders from 125 organisations attended the six Workshops. The stakeholders represented every step in the food chain, environmental organisations and government agencies.

The approach was **deliberative**: engaging stakeholders in a process of generating, sharing, discussing and crystallising diverse research ideas. It delivered far more than a simple '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, analysts, and staff managing the supporting technology.

Scoping and design

Pre-Workshop preparation included the design of the sessions and production of workbooks for participants. The RPG organised the selection and invitation of stakeholders, and the venue. A briefing pack was distributed beforehand. This included background information on strategic objectives and drivers relevant to the Workshop, and a copy of the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food. On the day itself, the different stakeholders were distributed among tables of 4-6 to maximise diversity and so enrich the discussion.

Facilitation

Participants received short presentations to set the scene, explain key concepts, establish desired outcomes and explain the Workshop process. Throughout the day, individuals input their contributions to special laptop computers, linked by a wireless network. Round-table discussions were also used to help individuals develop

and refine their individual contributions (but the aim was not to develop a group consensus). Participants were able to read and comment on the contributions made by others, and to respond to questions or comments posed by other participants, or by New Game-Plan analysts.

The Workshop was far removed from a loose brainstorm. Instead, it was carefully structured around a series of exercises designed to yield high-quality output. These exercises were supported by a clear agenda and a workbook containing background material and templates for jotting-down initial ideas and comments.

The initial exercises were designed to get participants thinking creatively. Putting themselves figuratively in the year 2020, they contributed a paragraph describing their aspirations, the actions taken to achieve them, and how constraints apparent now had been overcome. Having read, discussed and commented on these contributions, participants then commented on strategic objectives and drivers abstracted from the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food and from Government horizon-scanning work.

Next, participants jotted down their initial ideas for strategic research within the scope of the Workshop, also indicating what gaps in knowledge or capability these might fill. After round-table discussion, participants entered their own research ideas and then reviewed and commented on other contributions.

Our analysts then grouped the ideas under headings which had emerged during the day. The categorised ideas were printed out for participants, who then commented on any ideas of particular interest. Contributions included creative builds, linkages between different ideas, and references to research already in hand. This deliberative approach added refinements or new dimensions to virtually every initial research idea. In many cases a rich string of exchanges developed between the originator and diverse commentators.

Participants also contributed any ideas for research which they felt had not been captured earlier, and identified those ideas which they considered had the greatest merit. Finally, participants evaluated various aspects of the Workshop, and offered any final messages for the RPG. All contributions in all sessions were anonymous, giving everyone an opportunity to comment freely.

Analysis

After each Workshop, participants received a verbatim report, of some 70-80 pages, which set out all the Workshop contributions. This ensured full transparency, and gave everyone the ability to access and use the outputs. New Game-Plan analysts also prepared a synthesis report of some 20 pages. This included introductory comments, followed by a list of some 30-40 aggregate research ideas distilled from 100-120 'raw' ideas. Aggregate ideas were carried over from one Workshop to another, where appropriate, to capture further comments and builds. Overall, some 800 raw ideas were distilled down to 200 aggregate ideas.

Reporting and action planning

The six New Game-Plan Workshop reports were delivered to the RPG in full. In each case, the RPG created a short overview report in consultation with New Game-Plan. Once all the reports were available, the RPG pooled the 200 aggregate research ideas and assessed them against set criteria, including: their contribution to the aims of the Strategy; their fit with a time-frame looking 10-15 years ahead, and their risk-reward profile. This process enabled the RPG to focus on relevant ideas, analyse them further and determine its research priorities.

The 44-page RPG report, based on the output of these Brain-Pool Workshops, was published in March 2005 (see www.new-game-plan.co.uk/Papers/RPG_Report.pdf). A 16-page summary version of the Report is also available (see www.new-game-plan.co.uk/Papers/RPG_Summary.pdf).

The Report recommended seven priority research themes:

- Food safety and dietary information
- Quality and composition of food
- Disruption of the food supply and understanding sustainability
- Energy, water and waste
- Climate change
- Environmental and landscape research
- Socio-economics and policy analysis

This series of six Workshops was complemented by a further Brain-Pool Workshop, sponsored by Defra as a 'Science Communication' event. This was organised for a wide cross-section of interested (self-selected) members of the public at the British Association Festival of Science. Members of the public were asked to consider their aspirations and choices on issues related to food and farming. These aspirations were largely concordant with the research ideas generated by the RPG Workshops.

Learning points

Specific benefits from the approach adopted in the Workshops include:

- **Large volumes of information were captured and turned into knowledge of practical value to the RPG.** The deliberative approach yielded some 200 considered research ideas developed collaboratively by over 200 stakeholders from 125 organisations interested in sustainable farming and food.
- **The richness and quality of this output would have been almost impossible to achieve without the Brain-Pool approach.** It is unlikely that any other format could have delivered comparable output from only six one-day events involving such a wide range of stakeholders.
- **There was intense interaction and sharing of knowledge.** The Workshops broke the traditional mould of 'speakers and listeners' by offering a mix of short presentations, group discussions, and inputting and reviewing ideas via the mini laptops. Most participants were happy with the balance of activities.
- **All participants were talking the same language.** Care was taken to explain key concepts at the outset and to support these with written definitions in the workbook. Strategic objectives were abstracted from the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food to help participants who might not have read it to assimilate key points. A standardised format was used to express research ideas.
- **All contributions were captured simultaneously.** This meant that far greater progress could be made towards delivering the end product than if individuals had made their contributions orally in sequence.
- **Everyone had equal 'air-time'.** Even if table discussions were sometimes dominated by the 'loudest voices', everyone had an equal opportunity to make their views heard through their written contributions. Equally, no-one missed out on making a contribution because they failed to 'catch the Chair's eye'.
- **Contributions were made anonymously.** Anonymity contributed to honesty and openness. Views were expressed frankly (yet politely!). Those participants who, in a plenary discussion, might have been reluctant to question others, were able to do so effectively through their written contributions. They were also able to comment on contributions from anyone else in the room - not just those on their own table.
- **The contributions were reviewed, built upon, categorised and assessed within the Workshop.** The analysts ordered disparate inputs, so that participants could readily focus on areas of particular interest. The questioning, commenting and building process helped to turn raw ideas into well-considered propositions. Participants were also able to indicate ideas which they felt had particular merit.
- **The intensity of each Workshop resulted in real 'movement' of thinking.** Whilst the advent of internet platforms has made it possible to accumulate and share contributions between very large numbers of dispersed stakeholders, this same time/same place Workshop was special in the intensity of focus and interactivity which shifted and advanced thinking on research ideas.
- **There was no need to provide separate break-out rooms during the syndicate sessions.** At various times, groups were asked to review, discuss, and enter comments on, different sets of contributions. These syndicate sessions all took place in the one room, saving time and avoiding the inevitable disruption involved in splitting a large group between several different rooms.
- **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 highly-productive day. Many clearly enjoyed 'freeing their minds' in the early sessions, which were focused well into the future.

Many 'lateral' ideas resulted. Even those few who came to the Workshops to promote a predetermined position tended to engage constructively in the debate and to reflect on the comments made by others.

- **The Workshops were guided by independent, expert facilitators and analysts.** New Game-Plan's independence helped to ensure impartiality throughout. This avoided concern that the participants were being led to reach predetermined conclusions 'imposed' by the RPG or Defra.
- **A verbatim report was provided to participants soon after each Workshop.** This ensured 100% transparency - everyone could see all the contributions made in each session. It was evident to participants that raw contributions would pass from the Workshop to the RPG in full, without 'de-selection' or 'reinterpretation' (often the case with conventional workshops). The verbatim reports were also invaluable in enabling those RPG members who were not able to attend all the Workshops to get a real flavour of the contributions received, and the comments and builds collaboratively made on them. There was no need for participants to try to capture the outputs themselves by taking copious notes!
- **There was total knowledge capture.** All written inputs were captured. The round-table discussions, although not specifically recorded, also helped participants to articulate and refine their subsequent written inputs. The sheer size and content of the verbatim report amazed many participants. The Brain-Pool approach avoids the vulnerability of traditional approaches in which key nuances are lost at every stage: when facilitators transcribe points made in syndicate discussions into scribbles on flip-charts, when syndicate spokespersons present a further reinterpreted report to plenary sessions, and when yet another person transcribes these reports and any subsequent discussion into a further set of notes.
- **An expert synthesis report was provided with crisp recommendations.** New-Game-Plan analysts produced an independent synthesis report from the verbatim report within only a few more days. The analysts took account not only of inputs relating to specific research ideas but also of relevant ideas generated in other Workshop sessions. The synthesis drew solely on the contributions made by participants, with no pre-determination of 'desired' research themes.
- **The Workshops were effective with large groups (of 40-70 on average in this case).** All Workshops generated substantial verbatim and synthesised outputs. Those Workshops with a tighter focus tended to be easier to manage; participants in others sometimes 'drifted' off course. Participants quickly learnt how to make entries into the laptops and to review these and add questions, comments or builds.

Conclusion

This series of six Brain-Pool Workshops brought together over 200 stakeholders from 125 organisations with an interest in farming and food. They worked together in a deliberative process to develop over 800 raw research ideas, many of them genuinely novel. These raw ideas were faithfully distilled by New Game-Plan into some 200 aggregate research ideas suitable for further assessment and prioritisation by the RPG.

These Workshops set a new standard for engaging stakeholders in a serious deliberative process to set strategic research priorities in a challenging subject area. The Workshops genuinely enabled differing interests to collaborate in generating and refining raw research ideas. It is difficult to conceive of any other process which could have delivered such a wide, rich and well-considered range of ideas from six meetings.

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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