



Tracing the impacts of public dialogue projects supported by Sciencewise:

Public engagement in shale gas and oil developments

March 2016

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Key facts

Date

October 2013 - December 2014 (15 months)

Costs

- Total cost of project: £122,172
- Sciencewise funding: £50,000
- Evaluation budget: £10,000

Commissioned by

DECC Office of Unconventional Gas and Oil (OUGO)

Delivery

TNS-BMRB

Evaluation

Icaro Consulting

Sciencewise Dialogue and Engagement Specialist (DES)

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Introduction

The UK Government has been encouraging the exploration of unconventional gas and oil to determine its potential to contribute to the UK's energy security, provide economic growth and determine what part it can play in the transition to a low carbon future. To this end, the Government established the Office of Unconventional Gas and Oil (OUGO) within the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) to facilitate this development, ensure communities benefit, support public and community engagement and build a knowledge base for development. Public opinion is seen as one of the key challenges for unconventional gas and oil development.

The dialogue project in summary

DECC identified a gap in understanding of how the public engage with issues around unconventional gas and oil, and the best approaches to public engagement in areas where shale gas and oil were to be explored and may be developed – a gap this public dialogue aimed to help fill.

The objectives of the dialogue were:

- To understand how to engage the public most effectively in unconventional gas and oil developments in their area
- To understand how the public engage with issues around unconventional gas and oil, practically and cognitively
- To identify any gaps where
 - further policy or materials are needed to help the public understand unconventional gas and oil; or
 - the regulatory arrangements are less able to inspire public confidence, even where objectively robust, as this will be an important element of DECC's consideration of the necessary regulatory regime, and how it is communicated, going forward into a potential production phase
- To explore public understanding and acceptability of the recently published industry community benefit package proposals.

February and March 2014. Dialogue workshops were held in three locations (Winchester, Northampton and Liverpool) in February and March 2014, engaging a total of 71 people. The three locations were chosen to provide a range of demographic, geological and licensing factors, covering areas that were both prospective and not prospective for shale gas and oil.

The dialogue report provided details on all the discussions and conclusions from the deliberative discussions, covering a wide range of issues. The dialogue also identified a number of key principles as important (e.g. transparency, empowerment, accessibility, independence, accountability). In addition, the dialogue participants considered a number of engagement processes, based on the existing regulatory frameworks and consultation opportunities with a series of common themes (e.g. a period of information provision, a chance for the public to be involved, continued involvement once exploration goes ahead, and monitoring and oversight from regulatory bodies). Finally participants considered who were the most trusted messengers on these topics, and identified four stages needed for engagement in future: a national debate, during the pre-planning application stage, the planning application stage, and activities once exploration has begun.

- **3 December 2014.** The dialogue report¹ and evaluation report² were published at the same time, in December 2014.

¹ <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Publicengagementwithshalegasandoil.pdf>

² <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Evaluatingshalegaspublicdialogue.pdf>

Impacts on policy

There was no specific policy decision being taken that the dialogue results fed into. However, there were two developments which may have been influenced by the dialogue as they cover similar territory (although there is no evidence available of direct cause and effect):

- **8 September 2014.** The 'Let's talk about shale' initiative was launched by UKOOG (the representative body for the UK Onshore Oil and Gas industry). Part of the focus of the dialogue was on the industry community benefit package, co-ordinated by UKOOG. The initiative (supported by academics from universities of Chester and Nottingham) is an engagement programme designed to "give people the chance to ask the questions they would like to have answered" (press release from UKOOG, 8 .9.14). The aim has been "to collate questions and have them answered by third party experts, including leading academics", and includes promotional events in town centres, and offers to "local clubs and community groups to discuss the subject and ask questions of independent local speakers". These priorities reflect the priorities that came out of the dialogue (independence, etc). The UKOOG was involved in giving evidence on the Infrastructure Bill, and was referred to directly by Amber Rudd in the House of Commons debate on the Infrastructure Bill in January 2015 (below).
- **26 January 2015.** The Infrastructure Bill was debated in the House of Commons, with input from Amber Rudd, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at DECC. The Bill as passed included a clause (19) (introduced by the Shadow Energy Minister and accepted by the Government) which included that "Any hydraulic fracturing activity can not take place:
 - (i) unless a provision is made for community benefit schemes to be provided by companies engaged in the extraction of gas and oil rock;
 - (j) unless residents in the affected area are notified on an individual basis.

Community benefit, information and engagement were key issues considered in the dialogue.

Evidence from evaluations etc on impacts on DECC

- **The independent evaluation of the dialogue project.** The evaluation was completed in July 2014, which was very soon after the end of the project (although it was not published until December 2014). The evaluation report identified the following:

"One of the key strengths of the project was the fact that it was designed to address a particular gap in the evidence base and satisfy a specific policy need. In one of the DECC team's own words, it "*hit a gap and hit it very well in terms of informing policy*". DECC's view is that, while there may be lots of theory about what public engagement should be like, this work has cut through that and given important insights about what the public want to see with regards to shale gas and oil." (p26)

DECC felt "that they have learnt a great deal from the process, especially the direct feedback from having attended the sessions in person. DECC report that they are considering some internal lunchtime seminars to feed back to colleagues in the Department on the use of dialogue approaches. DECC also report that they will continue to work with the Oversight Group when considering how best to implement the findings." (p26)

DECC felt "that it [the dialogue] definitely has provided value for money, by providing them with important detail and direction and generally adding value over and above what could be achieved through some of the more traditional social research methods (e.g. quantitative surveys or focus groups)." (p26)
- DECC has also provided information that:
 - The staff most closely involved in the project have promoted public dialogue as an effective method for DECC at various events, including lunchtime seminars within DECC.
 - The findings have been used by DECC to develop thinking around public engagement on shale gas and oil. They have learnt much from the process.
 - The dialogue has informed the design of local events around shale gas and oil.