Dialogue in Public Engagement:
A Handbook
The Edinburgh Beltane – Beacon for Public Engagement is a four year programme delivered by a partnership of nineteen organisations, led by the University of Edinburgh. We are one of six UK Beacons for Public Engagement funded by RCUK, established in 2008 to bridge the gap between researchers working at the cutting edge and the people their research will affect.

Inspired by the proximity of Holyrood, the Edinburgh Beltane has adopted the theme of enabling access to research relevant to public policy. With a Scottish Parliament which prides itself on accessibility, we are well placed to support people when they engage with the research which affects devolved issues.

This handbook is based on a training programme on Dialogue in PE developed through Edinburgh Beltane. It aims to enable researchers to communicate with other groups in ways which genuinely enhance mutual understanding around their work and around any policy issues it may pertain to.

We welcome feedback on any of the material in this Handbook. Please email any comments to: info@edinburghbeltane.net.

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1.1 Introducing The Training Programme And Handbook

1.2 What Do You And Your Publics Want From Public Engagement?

1.3 What Is ‘Dialogue’ And What Can It Achieve?

1.4 How Can Dialogue Be Useful In Public Engagement?

2. Facilitation Skills: How To Nurture Dialogue

2.1 Effective Communication

2.2 Facilitating Dialogue In Group Discussions

2.3 Recording People’s Contributions

2.4 Handling Lay-Expert Encounters And Diverse Groups

3. Choosing Specific Techniques: Which To Use For What Purposes

3.1 Overview Of Techniques

3.2 Large And Small Group Formats

3.3 Moving Towards Deliberation

4. Process Planning: How To Design A Dialogic Public Engagement Activity

4.1 Understanding The Situation

4.2 Designing And Planning

4.3 On The Day

4.4 Evaluating Your Efforts

Annex 1: Summary Of Good Practice

Annex 2: Experiences Of Dialogue In Public Engagement Around A Controversial Field

Annex 3: Selected Bibliography

Annex 4: Useful Techniques And Approaches For Dialogue In Public Engagement

1.1.1 Aims and format of the training

Dialogue is a collaborative communication process which prizes mutual listening, understanding and respect. It has proven a powerful approach for helping people to learn from and understand others, even when they come from very different perspectives or backgrounds, and for enabling people to work together to solve difficult problems. Increasingly, researchers doing public engagement (PE) are gravitating to the language and tools of dialogue—precisely because they want more meaningful and productive conversations with their stakeholders and wider publics.

For this reason, the Edinburgh Beltane network offers a two-day course, Dialogue in Public Engagement, as part of its efforts to enhance capacity building across member organisations. This is a structured programme, designed to help you to learn about and practice dialogic approaches to PE (also applicable to knowledge exchange activities).

It aims to do the following:

• introduce you to the principles of dialogue and explore how dialogic approaches can be useful for PE;

• give you practice in some of the techniques used to nurture dialogue, and help you think about what techniques to choose for which purposes and groups;

• build your skills in facilitating dialogue and in designing dialogic PE activities; and

• encourage you to reflect constructively on your own PE practices and agendas, and to be responsive to your experiences and concerns on this topic.

The training programme encompasses four sessions:

1. Scene Setting: Why Dialogue in Public Engagement?

2. Facilitation skills: How to nurture dialogue

3. Choosing specific techniques: Which techniques to use for specific purposes and groups

4. Process planning: How to design dialogic PE activities

Hands-on experience of and training in specific techniques is integrated into all four sessions of the programme.

1.1.2 Aims and format of the Handbook

This Handbook has been compiled as a practical aid and supplement to the training programme, for participants to take away and refer to as needed. It expands on presentations in the course and on lessons we seek to draw from the practical exercises. The structure loosely follows that of the programme. The Handbook has several annexes including a summary of good practice and a description of the various techniques and approaches used or referred to on the course.

1.1.3 Acknowledgements

This handbook was written by Wendy Faulkner. The course on which it is based was developed by her in collaboration with Heather Rea and has involved Heather and Oliver Escobar as facilitators. Wendy retired from the University of Edinburgh in 2009 after a career of researching and teaching social aspects of science and technology. Amongst other things, she was latterly involved in a project doing and researching PE around stem cell research (with Sarah Parry and Sarah Cunningham-Burley). In addition to this experience, she herself had been on two training courses on dialogic approaches—one run by Diana Pounds of Dialogue Matters, the other run by Oliver Escobar (then) at Queen Margaret University—plus a course on public participation run by Vikki Hilton of the International Association on Public Participation (IAP2). The design of the training programme was informed by all three courses; this Handbook draws heavily on the training manual produced by Diana Pounds. Warm thanks to all.
1.2 What do you and your publics want from public engagement (PE)?

1.2.1 The policy context

PE is now widely seen as a necessary part of the business of doing research. In the social sciences, the very conduct of research involves interaction with non-academic groups as research subjects and/or potential audiences. Similarly, researchers in engineering and health related fields often need to find out about users’ interests and needs, sometimes involving them in developing products and policies. But in the UK, it is the natural sciences which have prompted the most governmental interest behind what gets called ‘public engagement’.

From the late 1990s, science was seen as suffering from a crisis in public trust and confidence, following controversies over BSE, GM and the like. It was argued that public mistrust of science could be remedied with greater effort to increase public understanding of science. Subsequent social scientific research debunked the presumption that lack of support for science is linked to scientific ignorance—the so-called deficit model. This in turn led to a shift in the way publics were seen. The shift revealed the limitations of seeing public engagement solely in terms of dissemination or PR, and highlighted the need to listen as well as speak when interacting with non-academic groups.

At the same time, there are growing demands for ‘public dialogue’ in other areas of policy making which affect people’s lives or which might be feared to meet significant public opposition. In planning decisions especially, there are now statutory requirements for public participation (or at least consultation) at local, national and European levels. These developments are seen as a response to an increasing need for legitimacy and public trust, in relation to both governments and corporations, especially in the context of increased accountability. In the social sciences, research is now widely seen as a necessary part of public participation and dialogue required, the greater the preparation and planning.

1.2.2 What do you want from engaging with publics?

It is clear that PE means different things to different people, and that there are many different agendas for PE. What you as researchers want from engaging with wider publics might include various combinations of the following:

- **Science communication**
  - To increase public understanding of what you are doing and why
  - To disseminate findings that might be of interest to specific groups

- **Inputs to research**
  - To get substantive inputs to your research from specific groups of publics (eg user studies, social research)
  - To collaboratively generate a research agenda

- **Science-public relations**
  - To improve the trust and reputation of researchers or academics (eg to inspire young people to pursue a career in science)
  - To understand publics’ concerns about a particular field and potentially meet these concerns

Democracy

- To consult publics on the development of relevant policies, to safeguard research (eg by involving publics in the social sciences)
- To give publics a say in the aims and direction of research funding

Some of these agendas are instrumental and some are normative. Thus, the desire to understand publics’ concerns about a particular area of research is generally motivated by a concern to avoid a major loss of public support for the field, while the desire to give publics a say over the aims and direction of research is generally rooted in a wider commitment to extend public participation in decision making. Not all researchers share all these aims, or believe that all of them are equally important or desirable. In any case, the very topic and nature of different fields tends to mean that the drivers for engaging wider publics also differ: for example, ethical issues are particularly concerning for many of the life sciences.

The key point here is that you need to be very clear about your aims and objectives for any PE effort—not only so you can design a PE process capable of meeting your aims and objectives, but also so you can be honest and open with the publics you seek to engage about the promises you make to them (§1.2.4).

1.2.3 Who are your publics and why should they engage with your work?

Posing these questions is a vital next step in designing any PE activity.

The reason for this is twofold. First is the recognition of the enormous diversity of those you may wish to engage. We urge you to think as many social scientists now do about wider publics in the plural and not to stubbornly avoid the temptation of constructing like the public think... in reality, there is no singular ‘public’... sharing common views. Rather the citizenry (of which we are all part) is diverse on numerous grounds. Quite apart from the obvious distinctions of gender, class, education, culture, ethnicity and age, people will have had very different and particular experiences in their lives—differences which profoundly shape both how they look at the world and their hopes and fears.

Because we all have multiple identities and needs—related to family, work, community and so on—and because the world is complex, our experiences and our views on all sorts of issues are also generally complex, often contradictory. For example, research on attitudes to science reveals that a general awe about the achievements of science (and technology) coexits alongside a general inclination to be sceptical about scientists in certain situations. In this as in other areas, people are influenced by the general climate of opinion and knowledge around them and in part by their own specific life experiences (or those of people close to them). Social scientists sometimes talk of different ‘standpoints’ to capture the complex breadth of people’s backgrounds, perspectives and feelings about a topic. They argue that, in order to understand different standpoints, one needs to see them in context, as situated in people’s life experiences.

The second reason for posing these two questions flows from this. If you are to succeed in engaging publics in any way you not only have to know specifically which groups it is you want to engage, you also have to think about what standpoints they may bring, where they will be coming from and why they might be motivated to engage with you. In short you need to cultivate the habit of thinking from the other(s) and ask ‘What’s in it for them?’. Self-evidently, if you do not do this, you are unlikely to succeed in recruiting those you want to engage or in keeping them engaged. Moreover, who your publics are may well have implications for how you engage them. For instance, will they be confident engage or will this be their first experience of talking with researchers? How will you manage dialogue involving people with deeply held opposing views?

1.2.4 Different levels of public participation and your ‘promise to the public’

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) proposes a useful spectrum indicating different levels of public participation and public impact. This is reproduced with some adaptation on the next page. Self-evidently, the level of participant influence over the outcome increases as one moves along the spectrum from simple input to consultation through involvement and collaboration to empowerment.

The two categories in brackets—‘research’ and ‘converse’—have been added to extend the relevance for PE in research.

It is vital to be clear about what level of influence you are offering to members of the public, and that you manage expectations accordingly. In particular, you must be crystal clear about the extent to which any decision making is to be shared with and shaped by participants. IAP2 insist that practitioners make a realistic ‘promise to the public’—and with good reason. Much public cynicism about those in authority (including academics and politicians) and about PE exercises is based on repeated experiences of broken promises, along the lines of ‘We were asked what we thought but they ignored what we said’.

At the outset, therefore, you must identify and convey clearly to your publics what it is that you stand to get out of engaging with you and what your promise is to them—in particular how you will take on board what they say and inform them of what has happened to their contributions. Only then can you expect people to be open and speak freely, to hear what you have to say and to take an interest in your work. And if you do not honour and deliver on your promise, you cannot expect people to come back and potentially undermine any future PE efforts by researchers.

Typically a PE exercise pitched at one level will also require activities at lower levels. For example, conversing and consulting generally require a considerable amount of informing as well. Different activities may involve numbers of people and different degrees of engagement. Some participants may be involved peripherally, either because they are not so interested or because they are too busy while others may commit a lot of time and energy to the activity.

There seems to be an inverse relationship between the depth of engagement which can be achieved and the number of people who can be included. Fewer people can dig deeper on an issue (as in Citizen’s Juries) and more people can bring wider perspectives (as in off-the-shelf packages like Future Search). Stakeholder dialogue can achieve reasonable depth by including one or more people from relevant stakeholder groups. This model is often effective in the resolution of environmental disputes, and is being used increasingly as a ‘governance’ tool in policy making.

Different levels of participation require different techniques, and whatever combination of techniques is chosen must be ‘fit for purpose’ (Session 3). Dialogue becomes more and more crucial to success as one moves along the spectrum, but in principle a dialogic approach can strengthen all of these levels. The greater the level of participation and dialogue required, the greater the preparation and planning required, as we will see in Session 4.
### Spectrum of Public Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public participation goal</th>
<th>Promise to the public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inform</strong></td>
<td>We will keep you informed. We will not withhold relevant information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>[Research]</strong></td>
<td>We will listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations. We will record and report these faithfully.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>[Converse]</strong></td>
<td>We will listen to and respect your feelings and views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consult</strong></td>
<td>We will keep you informed. We will listen to and acknowledge your concerns and aspirations. We will be open to your influence. We will provide feedback on how your input has influenced the outcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inolve</strong></td>
<td>We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. We will provide feedback on how your input has influenced the outcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborate</strong></td>
<td>We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions. We will incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empower</strong></td>
<td>We will implement what you decide.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from IAP2 sources

### 1.3.1 What is ‘dialogue’ and what can it achieve?

#### 1.3.1 What is ‘dialogue’?

A common sense understanding of dialogue implies two-way communication in which participants not only speak to one another but also listen to and hear one another: with the result that participants come away with a fuller understanding of the topic and each other, and that the conversation progresses in some way. Unknown to many a large body of practitioners and of literature, with attendant theory and practice, has built up around this broad set of principles. We might refer to this as dialogue with a capital D. Dialogue with a capital D is a communication methodology which prizes mutual listening, understanding and respect. Whilst different practitioners favour different approaches and uses of dialogue, the following themes are common to all.

A common sense understanding of dialogue highlights a second theme: namely the value of collaborative ‘group intelligence’ over individual thinking. (Note that dialogue here usually involves more than two participants.) Dialogue practitioners insist that everyone in the process has something to contribute. As the quote from Bohm implies, this process of hearing all the voices in a group can open up new spaces that no one individual could get to on their own. In a similar vein, social studies of science and technology point out that many different kinds of expertise are required in order to grapple with today’s complex and pressing challenges—not only different kinds of specialist knowledge but also various kinds of lay knowledge, including knowledge based on experience rather than formal training.

Dialogue with a capital D has its roots in conflict resolution, management, and public participation, all of which stress the collaboration of diverse stakeholder groups. Dialogue thus carries a strong democratic ethic of inclusiveness and equality; that people should have a say in decisions that affect them or interest them. (Note that this formulation makes all members of the public potential ‘stakeholders’.) In practical terms, this ethic carries the conviction that if everyone is given a voice and treated with respect, and if a trusting space is created to look for positive common ground, then the result will be a way forward that all participants can support. In short, if the process is good, the outcome will be good.

A third common theme thus concerns process. Unfortunately, inclusive and respectful dialogue does not happen automatically in most everyday interactions. Even when intentions are otherwise, it is all too easy to talk more than we listen, to assume we know what others mean or need, and to silence others. The powerful and vocal generally dominate to the exclusion of others. Dialogue therefore requires a conscious shift in group norms. In particular, it requires a shift away from the adversarial approaches so endemic in our culture (§ 1.3.3).

Central to the required shift in norms is the need to nurture a safe and trusting environment, in which all participants feel free to speak openly and in which everyone is valued and respected. This shift is usually made explicit through a set of ‘ground rules’ for the conversation (§ 1.3.5), and encouraged through the use of experienced facilitators (§ 2). The details vary but two requirements are shared by all: that participants should suspend judgement (good or bad) of other people and positions during the conversation; and that the facilitator’s role is to nurture an ethic of inclusiveness and mutual respect.
I.3.2 Outcomes, benefits and uses of dialogue

The key benefit attributed to dialogic conversations is that participants come away with new or enhanced understandings, precisely because they have had to really listen to other perspectives and be open to learning from and reflecting on these. This can be greater understanding about the complexity of a topic and/or about different people’s standpoints, their backgrounds, positions, perspectives, experiences, interests, needs, etc.

Less obviously but potentially of equal if not greater value over time, dialogue can have significant benefits in terms of relationship building:

- Dialogue can build relationships and trust amongst participants. This can be valuable not only in relation to the issue at hand, but the contacts and networks built can also be drawn on when needed in future.
- Dialogue can generate trust and ongoing engagement with the sponsor if people experience that their contribution to a dialogue has been heard and taken on board, and if they feel that their contribution has made a difference; they are more likely to trust the organisation that sponsored the dialogue and to participate in any future engagement activities.

I.3.3 Contrasts with adversarial approaches

An explicit critique of adversarial approaches is shared by all dialogue theorists and practitioners. Political debate, academic training, legal disputes and much decision making are all characterised by participants advocating and defending their own positions, whilst attacking others’ positions, with the expectation that only one side can win. In the adversarial approach, there is little or no room for contributions which are not fully worked out or argued logically, with evidence, and so forth. By contrast, dialogue seeks to move beyond and beyond entrenched positions. It does this by viewing all kinds of knowledge as valid inputs, and by encouraging participants to ‘tell their story’ and avoid sweeping generalisations. In addition, the requirement to suspend judgement and avoid silencing other voices encourages participants to work together rather than against one another. In such ways, dialogue tends to highlight the complexity of issues instead of polarising them.

The following table highlights some key contrasts drawn with more conventional approaches. As noted earlier, dialogue strictly defined does not lead to a decision (in so much as judgement is suspended). Nonetheless, where it is part of a deliberative decision-making process, dialogue has the potential to lead to a win-win outcome—win-win in the sense that the decision arrived at is one that all participants can live with.

Debate, dialogue and deliberation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Deliberation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeks to promote opinions and gain majority support</td>
<td>Seeks to build understanding and relationships</td>
<td>Seeks common ground in order to solve problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants argue, express, persuade and compete</td>
<td>Participants exchange, listen, reach across, reflect</td>
<td>Participants frame and weigh options and make choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: win-lose</td>
<td>Outcome: no decision</td>
<td>Outcome: win-win</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Bone et al, 2006

Similar contrasts are drawn between deliberative decision-making processes using dialogue and more conventional top-down and consultative approaches.

Contrasting approaches to decision making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-participatory decision making</th>
<th>Consultation*</th>
<th>Dialogic deliberation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on issues and outcomes.</td>
<td>Focuses on issues and outcomes.</td>
<td>Focuses on process as well – because process shapes outcome, and relationship building is important to both.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tends to privilege facts and specialist inputs.</td>
<td>Tends to privilege facts and specialist inputs.</td>
<td>Also takes account of other stakeholders’ expertise, feelings, experiences, values, views, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumes two or more set positions, and tends to highlight and polarise differences.</td>
<td>The remit is often ‘framed’ in narrow terms (eg around a set of firm proposals).</td>
<td>Tries to find common ground by addressing the interests, values and needs underlying people’s positions, so potentially revealing new opportunities or solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Win-lose outcome inevitable.</td>
<td>Win-lose outcome likely.</td>
<td>Searches actively for ‘win-win’ outcome, and ways to benefit all parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome is imposed, top-down.</td>
<td>Key decisions have often been taken before the consultation.</td>
<td>Ideally happens at an earlier stage in the process, so that participants can have real influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome is imposed, top-down.</td>
<td>Widespread cynicism that consultations are ‘window dressing’ only.</td>
<td>There is wider ‘buy-in’ and support for the decision(s) taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome often reflect pre-existing power and resource inequalities.</td>
<td>Outcome often reflect pre-existing power and resource inequalities.</td>
<td>Outcomes reflect the interests of a broader range of stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The points relating to consultation are drawn from Ackland et al, 1999.
1.3.4 Dialogue and discussion

We are often asked what distinguishes dialogue from a good discussion or conversation. A useful way of thinking about this is that conversations and discussions often take the form of an exchange of monologues, and rarely allow time for the kind of free-flowing non-judgmental sharing which builds on dialogue brings the potential for a win-win outcome. This is because the process of creating spaces for diverse voices and stories to be heard encourages participants to look beyond set positions, to identify the interests, needs, or values which underlie them but which are not generally visible or articulated. So doing, they are likely to find common ground or new understandings and possibilities from which more fruitful movement can take place. By strengthening relationships, dialogic processes also increase people’s desire to find agreement and to accept an outcome even if it doesn’t meet all their interests on the grounds that there is something in it for everyone.

1.3.5 Ground rules or guidelines for dialogue

Good practice in any inclusive and participatory effort involves a set of ‘ground rules’ or, for those uncomfortable with the language of ‘rules’, guidelines. Ground rules seek to set the tone in which dialogue can occur. Especially in the opening stages, they can ease people into working together and help them feel more comfortable about speaking—especially where participants disagree. Feel confused or intimidated, or where emotions run high. Ground rules are an invaluable aid for facilitators, giving them authority to challenge disruptive behaviour and nurture an ethic of inclusiveness and respect (§2).

The following points are fairly widely used in ground rules or guidelines for dialogue.

• We are here to work together; everyone has something to contribute.
• Give everyone space to speak; one voice at a time.
• Listen actively to what everyone has to say.
• Make your points clearly and don’t let yourself or others dominate the discussion.

• Respect different views; try to understand one another better, not to judge or impose your views.
• People have the right to be silent, but not to be silenced.
• You can tailor these guidelines to the activity you are planning and the groups involved, adding or amending items as needed. It is vital that you do not simply impose your guidelines, but rather give people the opportunity to say whether they feel comfortable with them, and to either add or delete specific points.

Some additional handy tools can also be established at the outset:

• Parking places. This is for matters which arise in a discussion but which take it off track. It means that the issue is not lost, and can be returned to at a later stage. The contribution of the person who raised it is acknowledged, but is not allowed to distract the group from its current task or topic. You must of course allow time later to address any topics which have been parked.

In most cases, the PE efforts of researchers are geared to enhancing understanding and relationship building rather than reaching resolution or agreement. Nonetheless, the merits of using dialogue as part of a decision making process are relevant to many kinds of PE—and to the development of strategy for PE—in that they signal the significant benefits to be gained potentially in terms of researchers’ relations with their publics.
1.4 How can dialogue be useful in public engagement?

1.4.1 Specific benefits of dialogue in public engagement

Increasingly, PE involves a two-way communication process; even in the case of dissemination or PR efforts. As researchers, you may have many reasons to want to engage with various stakeholders and wider publics:

- To gain other points of view as an input or inspiration to your research
- To build wider understanding of and support for your work
- To hear and potentially respond to any concerns in the hope of averting opposition
- To address or resolve social and ethical issues raised by your research.

In all of these scenarios, a dialogic approach will ‘add value’ to your PE efforts. It means you are more likely to really understand where people are coming from and so respond appropriately.

Dialogue aims for mutual benefit as well as understanding and mutual respect—hence the need to ask at the outset ‘what’s in it for them?’ (§ 1.2.3). This has real implications for how we do PE, for example:

- Inform and inspire: Dialogic approaches to dissemination and ‘science communication’ involve listening as well as speaking and so are more likely to identify what information interests your publics and what aspects of your field will inspire them.
- Research: Dialogic approaches to research see research subjects as participants with the potential to learn from and shape the research process (see below).
- Converse, consult and involve: Dialogic approaches in these types of PE seek to reduce or overcome lay-expert imbalances and empower non-specialists to participate as equals.

Note: By stressing the need to listen to your publics, we are not suggesting that informing people about your research ceases to be important in dialogue. Information is often a necessary prerequisite to reflecting or deliberating in depth on many issues. In addition, many participants demand information in order to gain the confidence to participate: they need knowledge so that they can understand the issues a bit more before they speak, and often so they don’t worry about appearing ‘stupid’. (See § 2.4.)

A recent project to engage publics around debates about stem cell research illustrates many of the points made here, and serves as a potentially interesting case for other controversial areas of research. Annex 2 provides an overview of how the project was conducted and draws some practical lessons.

1.4.2 Other benefits of dialogue in academic work

Dialogic approaches can also enhance other aspects of academics’ work. Social research methods—surveys, interviews, focus groups—tend to involve one-way communication. Those being researched do not learn much about the topic or about those doing or sponsoring the research; there is little or nothing in it for them. By contrast, dialogic research approaches aim for mutual understanding and mutual benefit, and see research subjects as participants with the potential to shape the research process.

Lectures and other forms of presentation are one-way in the other direction: the teacher learns little or nothing about the taught. Seminars and other small group forms of teaching have the potential to overcome this. There can be real advantages to consciously avoiding adversarial forms of discussion (see 1.3.3) in these settings; greater participation, greater learning from one another and increased scope for reflection.

Finally, any collaborative effort, be it in teaching, research or administration is enhanced when participants practice dialogue.

Note: Whatever the context or motivation, dialogue is not something which is achieved once and for all. In practice, genuine dialogue can be elusive—something that is achieved only in fleeting moments of enhanced understanding and trust, in specific encounters or exchanges, and then lost. (See § 1.3.4.)
2.1 Effective communication

Nurturing dialogue means learning how to facilitate effective communication. We can start by thinking about the challenges in practicing dialogue.

2.1.1 Obstacles to effective communication

Communication theory tells us that communication is never a simple process of transmitting messages: rather the sender encodes the message and the receiver decodes it through a complex array of social and cultural filters that shape what we see and hear. Thus, when we communicate with people with similar histories and worldviews, we appear very different; it helps build the mutual understanding needed to overcome cultural barriers. Encouraging people to ‘tell their story’ can help us to see the human in each other even when we appear very different; it helps build the mutual understanding needed to overcome cultural barriers.

In addition to these broad differences in background and perspectives, many individual differences can influence the effectiveness or otherwise of communication. These include not only personal circumstances or strongly held views, but also personality differences and communication skills. People with big egos or with little self-awareness can close down the possibility of meaningful dialogue before it even starts. A key challenge in practicing dialogue is to pay attention to the interpersonal dynamics in a group. Learn to sense how each member’s behaviour (yours included) is experienced by others.

The following table lists some obvious barriers to effective communication; you will probably have experienced these and others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal behaviour</th>
<th>Structural and cultural obstacles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Personal power</td>
<td>• Adversarial culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strong emotions</td>
<td>• Positional power or competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Different ways of thinking about an</td>
<td>• Cross-cultural differences and stereotyping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>issue (see Thinking Hats in Annex 4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Egos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Poor communication skills</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of relevant important information</th>
<th>Different standpoints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• can lead to speculation and suspicion</td>
<td>• Class, age, gender, ethnicity, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a downwards spiral of anxiety, fear,</td>
<td>• Backgrounds, needs, interests, hopes and fears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hostility and conflict</td>
<td>• Perspectives, views, values, etc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1.2 Active listening

For many academic researchers, the hardest part of practicing dialogue is listening more than speaking. The notion of focused or active listening is helpful in this context. This means giving someone your whole attention, to hear not only the words they are using but also (and more difficult) to hear and understand what lies behind the words—the feelings, meaning and significance of the message. Listening in this sense requires an attitude of empathy respect and acceptance towards the other person: the ability to convey to them that you want to hear what they have to say and will not judge them for it. This is why the suspension of judgement is so vital for dialogue: people need to feel safe and respected if they are to speak openly.

It is important to give people space to tell their story in their own words. Active listening does not mean you have to remain silent, but it does require you to demonstrate to the speaker that you are concentrating that you have understood what they have to say and that you value their contributions and (where relevant) accept their feelings at face value.

There are various non-verbal ways to signal this for example:

• Eye contact
• Nodding
• Leaning towards the speaker
• Undivided attention (not looking at your watch or being distracted)
• Recording what they say

Verbal signals that you are listening might include:

• Affirming sounds like ‘Ah-ha’
• Short phrases: ‘OK, I see.’ ‘Yes’
• Encouraging questions: ‘Can you tell us a bit more about that?’
• Clarifying questions: ‘Where does this happen?’, ‘Can you give an example?’
• Summarising or paraphrasing: ‘Are you saying…?’, ‘Can I check I’ve got this right?’

• Patronise people or de-value their feelings: ‘That doesn’t really matter’
• Affirming or validating: ‘That is helpful information,’ ‘Thank you for being so open.’

There are some obvious blocks to active listening which you need to look for in yourself and in other participants. Non-verbal blockers include:

• Fidgeting, yawning, flat facial expressions and other signs of boredom
• Distractedness such as looking at your watch or out the window
• Body posture very tense or over-relaxed

Verbal blockers include comments which do the following:

• Advise or order people on what they should do
• Judge people for their views
• Label people: ‘You’re being irrational, childish’, etc.

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2.1.3 The importance of questions and how you frame them

Judicious choice and framing of questions is a crucial skill for facilitating effective communication and dialogue. We have already noted above some ways of framing questions to demonstrate that you are listening actively and have understood people’s contributions, namely:

• Encouraging questions
• Clarifying questions
• Summarising or paraphrasing

It is useful to be aware of the distinction between open and closed questions.

• Closed questions invite a yes or no answer; they are generally only used for moving things on or to check people’s understanding: ‘Have we said enough about this?’, ‘Do you all agree?’
• Open questions often start with What, Where, Which, Why, When or ‘Who and invite fuller answers: they are open-ended and can help people to express their views or experiences more fully and to explore meanings.

It is also important to avoid phrasing questions in ways that imply judgement. For instance, ‘Why?’ questions, like ‘Why do you say that?,’ may engender a defensive reaction; instead try: ‘Could you tell us what has lead you to think that or ‘The group might be interested to hear what lead you to that view?’

This is an example of ‘re-framing’ a question in ways that open up rather than closing down dialogue. Below we demonstrate how you can re-frame negative contributions in a discussion into positive questions, that acknowledge the issue raised but open up a space to explore positive responses or solutions (§ 2.2.5).

The ‘Understanding and telling’ drawing exercise highlights how difficult it can be to communicate effectively even when the subject in question is straightforward and carries no emotional or other ‘baggage’!
2.2 Facilitating dialogue in group discussions

2.2.1 General guidance on facilitation

Your central role as facilitator is to help the group meet the aims of the discussion as fully as possible in the time available. In order to achieve this, you must also try to ensure that the fullest possible participation of the group, and you must maintain your impartiality on the topic under discussion. You may want to moderate the discussion in order to keep it on task and inclusive, but you are not there to contribute substantively.

Good facilitation requires good interpersonal skills, an awareness of ‘self in relation to others’. Cultivate active listening so you are able to grasp the points everyone is trying to make and develop an awareness of the dynamics, positive or negative, within the group, bearing in mind all the potential barriers to communication (above).

Remember: Facilitation is done WITH a group, not TO a group.

You and the participants are working together to achieve collective goals. A further key challenge in doing dialogue is therefore to gain participants’ trust and cooperation. Achieving real participation demands the practice of equality and mutual respect. It requires that people feel that:

• they are being listened to and valued;
• they are treated with honesty and respect;
• they can influence what happens.

When this happens, attitudes and behaviour change. People become more willing to hear and understand other perspectives and more information is shared. This in turn builds further trust and cooperation. When people do not feel they are being trusted in these positive ways, they will not share information; communicate openly or think creatively and positively. Dialogue is blocked.

Remember that dialogue is not something that is achieved once and for all. It can be elusive, achieved only in fleeting moments of enhanced understanding and trust. Do not lose heart if dialogue is blocked but practice ways of overcoming the obstacles. Try to build on the positive moments, to create a virtuous circle in which dialogue happens increasingly often.

2.2.2 Inclusiveness: How do you ensure that everyone’s voice is heard?

A typical pattern in unmoderated small group discussions (especially where the participants do not know each other) is that the more assertive participants speak first, then others gradually join in, but some participants—being at all time or more people dominate the discussion, or make dismissive or judgemental comments about other people’s positions. They will in effect have silenced or marginalised those participants to the detriment of all.

Your role as facilitator is to encourage a spirit of inclusiveness where everyone contributes as fully as they feel able or willing, and where no-one dominates the discussion and no-one feels marginalised or silenced. You have authority for this is backed up by the ground rules or guidelines for discussion, which participants agree to at the beginning of the event or activity. There are various ways to ensure that all voices are heard and respected:

• It can be useful to open with a straightforward and non-sensitive ‘warmer’ question, which you go around the group and ask for everyone to answer in turn. But beware that some people find this intimidating and thus tend to lead to a group norming dynamic, where people follow the lead of early respondents.

• Part of the task of a facilitated dialogue is to develop a shared understanding of reality so that the discussion is well informed from all standpoints. In this spirit, encourage everyone to say what they bring to the table, stressing that there may be many different perspectives and/or types of knowledge around the table.

• If someone is speaking for too long, you may ask them to make their point concisely so that others get a chance to speak.

• If the discussion becomes a melee or disruptive, dominating or distracting, you may ask them to make their point concisely so that others get a chance to speak.

• If you fear that several participants feel they have been silenced you might use an anonymous Sliding Scale (see techniques) of ‘I feel I am being heard’, in this way the whole group can gauge how inclusive it is and pass on any meditational action needed.

• If someone is being disrespectful or judgemental of other participants in the group rule ‘One voice at a time’.

• When handling behaviour which is disruptive, dominating or distracting, you can point out that your responsibility is to the whole group (by implication not to any one individual), and appeal to the group to move the discussion on or to respond constructively (by e.g. ‘reframing’ § 2.2.5).

• If someone has not been spoken you may ask if there is anything they would like to add or comment on in the discussion so far. But you should avoid putting people under too much pressure, do not force people to speak if they are obviously uncomfortable. People often choose to say nothing in order to listen closely.

2.2.3 How do you keep the discussion on track?

There are various ways to intervene in order to keep the discussion on track. For example:

• Ensure complete clarity and accountability as to what participants are being asked to do at any one point and why.

• Make judicious use of opening up and closing down techniques and question, as needed, at the beginning and end of the discussion.

• If people seem to be misunderstanding one another, or if one person is struggling to get a point across, ask them to clarify or give an example to illustrate what they mean. If this seems to be intimidating try reflecting what has been said (a key active listening technique) like me I see if understand your point. This can move the discussion beyond a jam, and is essential if the discussion is being recorded.

• If the discussion strays onto another topic, you may suggest that a note be taken of the topic and put in the ‘Parking Place’, so that it is not lost or ignored but can be returned to at a later stage.

• At the outset, enlist your participants in timekeeping and in keeping focused make sure they are clear about the aims of the discussion and know how long they have. A few minutes before the end it may be necessary to ask for any winding up thoughts. Where the intention is to feedback from small group discussions to a plenary session, get the group to draw threads or review what they feel are the most important points to have come out of the discussion. (There are various techniques for doing this. See § 3.1.)

• If the whole group falls silent, it is often helpful to ‘ride the silence’, at least for a while, to let people digest what has been said. But if the group appears to have dried up there are various neutral ways to prompt further discussion without ‘leading it’.

• Don’t mistake general silence for assent. Ask “Does everyone agree with this or are there different views?”

2.2.4 Impartiality: How do you avoid pre-empting or prejudicing the discussion?

In order to play the role of facilitator effectively you must maintain your neutrality on the subject under discussion and resist the temptation to contribute constructively to the discussion. This can be hard for academics who are used to taking, it can also be difficult where you have a keen interest or strong views on the subject, or are excited by what people are saying.

Maintaining impartiality does not mean you are passive. There are various ways to demonstrate your neutrality and engender the trust needed for everyone to feel safe to express their views and feelings.

• Do not comment on or judge people’s contributions. Even positive judgements about one contribution may block other participants from voicing differing views.

• Invite the ground rules if needed. Remind participants that everyone has a right to their views and that people can only participate where there is trust and maintain your impartiality as a model to others (see § 2.2.4 below).

• Throughout, try to maintain a positive atmosphere and tone. Seek to put people at ease and encourage goodwill, participation and trust—not least, by your body language and expressions.

It is especially important that you get into the habit of acknowledging everyone’s contributions, however modest. Your key role is to let people know their inputs are appreciated and understood, by acknowledging their contributions and inviting others. Remember that most people are shy of speaking in front of others they don’t know. The smallest ‘Thank you for that’ (preferably followed by their name) can make all the difference to whether they will feel like opening their mouth a second time. Merely stating in the ground rules that everyone’s contribution is valued is not enough; people have to feel valued.

• Do at any one point and why.

• Restate the question; ‘Let me just remind you of the question again…’. Take a moment to restate the question and see if it triggers something…

• Invite participants to look at the topic from a different angle this will usually involve an open question and clearly requires some knowledge of the topic.

• Invite others to add ideas or comments; ‘What else can we add to the list? Is anything missing? Does this trigger any other thoughts? Anything else anyone wants to add? Can we add some more detail to this? Has anyone got anything else they would like to add? Is there any aspect of this that we haven’t got yet?’

• If an individual has dried up, invite them to say more; ‘Can you tell us more about that?’ ‘Could you explain that in a bit more detail?’ ‘Can you expand on that a bit?’, ‘Can you give an example’.
2.2.5 Handling disruptive behaviour: Re-framing

As noted earlier, your role as facilitator is to encourage a spirit of mutual respect and inclusiveness where no-one dominates the discussion and no-one feels marginalised or silenced. In §2.2.2, we listed a number of ways you can respond to disruptive behaviour, often involving the ‘ground rules’ for discussion. Bear in mind that your responsibility is to the whole group, not to any one individual, and do not ‘reward bad behaviour’ by giving the disruptive person more airspace than anyone else.

In addition to these tips and pointers, we would encourage you to practice ‘re-framing’ a contentious or disruptive contribution. The point of re-framing is to regain a positive focus for the discussion. Done well, it can be a powerful technique for moving people from a negative stance to seeing a positive way forward. There are three basic steps:

- Acknowledge what has been said.
- Ask an open question that seeks to get at the heart of the problem.
- Involve other members of the group in solving the problem.

The following examples illustrate the kinds of shifts one can make in order to move from a negative statement to a positive question.

- “You are so negative about this proposal” –> “What could happen at a local level (here) to help improve things here?”
- “We should go to the press about this failure” –> “What would you like to have seen happen?”
- “The project officer has not been keeping us informed” –> “How might we improve communication?”
- “Last time I went to a workshop it was a complete waste of time” –> “What in particular made it a waste of time?”
- “You are so negative about this proposal” –> “What would you like to have seen happen?”

(Examples from Ackland, 1997.)

2.3 Recording people’s contributions

2.3.1 Recording discussions on flipchart paper

Records of a discussion may be made with an audio recorder or with someone typing a summary on a computer which is projected (so all can see what is being written). For the moment, however, the most widely used and simplest way to capture what people say in group discussions is to write on flipchart paper. Ideally, one person facilitates a discussion while a second person records, but sometimes the same person has to do both jobs.

As the recorder, your role is to listen carefully and then summarise each contribution. Here are a few guidelines:

- Use enough words that the point will be clear to someone not in the group, but not an essay—a short sentence or phrase is usually enough, but headings are generally not.
- Write as people speak and try to use their words without writing down every word.
- Ask for clarification if you are unsure of someone’s meaning.
- Maintain your impartiality by recording all contributions.

2.3.2 Recorded outputs

Very often the recorded outputs of a dialogic event will be analysed, either as an input to the next step in a multi-stage process or in order to feedback to participants and wider audiences what was said.

Always check with participants what they would like back in this regard. The written outputs can be made available to participants by taking high resolution photographs of them to be emailed, or (at greater cost) by producing verbatim records of these.

If a scientific paper is to be produced from the written records, it is good practice to get consent for the use of these—as you would get written consent for using taped records.

You can assure participants that none of the comments will be attributable, and that they are free to stipulate that any specific contribution not be recorded.

Whatever is being done with the records, it is essential that each sheet is clearly headed and numbered so that it will be obvious later which questions were being addressed and in what order the contributions were made.
2.4 Handling lay-expert encounters and diverse groups

By their very nature, dialogues involving researchers and wider publics are often lay-expert encounters. Equally, any dialogue involving diverse groups can be understood as an encounter between multiple realities.

2.4.1 Knowledge divides

This is a crucial issue for researchers doing PE. Knowledge is the most obvious ‘divide’ or imbalance when specialists meet non-specialists (an alternative way of thinking about experts and lay people). It is very hard for someone with three degrees and the habit of interacting with other specialists to imagine what it feels like to be a non-specialist or what is needed in order to convey specialist knowledge effectively to non-specialists.

The growth of ‘science communication’ efforts and expertise in the last few decades has no doubt improved researchers’ capability in this area to some degree. However, many lay people, even those who are specialists in other fields, remain extremely critical of scientists’ and other academics’ inability to talk in plain language and explain things clearly. Repeatedly, we hear people say they feel bamboozled by scientists. You must be sensitive to such feelings. Remember that your specialist knowledge is only one type of knowledge; other people may well bring important knowledge inputs and insights you hadn’t thought of or valued previously but which are highly salient to your work or the topic at hand.

2.4.2 Imbalances of confidence

The sense of being bamboozled highlights a second aspect of lay-expert divides, namely imbalances of confidence. Being dependent on particular expert knowledge (eg a doctor if you are seriously ill) can stir up deep feelings of vulnerability because we hand over control to that expert. We have to trust that they are competent and will act or speak in our best interest (and, potentially, of finding a solution that all can live with).

Imbalances of confidence are especially evident in PE encounters with individuals and groups who have had limited education or very negative educational experiences and who often report (in private) that clever people make them feel inadequate, stupid or patronised. This should be a major concern for any PE efforts that seek to be inclusive of wider publics, especially more disadvantaged groups. Subtle markers of class are often played out in such encounters, with all the attendant blindness as to how the ways in which different backgrounds and experiences shape people’s worldviews and emotional make-up.

2.4.3 Multiple realities

Different backgrounds and experiences often result in quite different standpoints on an issue (cf § 1.2.3 and 1.3.1). This constitutes a third kind of divide which can surface in lay-expert encounters. It is all too easy for people with strong, apparently anti-science views or deeply felt scepticism or suspicions, to be dismissed by researchers as ‘irrational’, ‘ignorant’ or ‘irrelevant’. When this happens, the person or people concerned may be momentarily silenced or marginalised, but their views are unlikely to be changed. The inevitable complexity to some degree—especially when given the chance to hear different views and reflect in more depth on an issue. In practice, the different perspectives brought by non-specialist groups can provide very valuable inputs to the task of enhancing everyone’s grasp of the complexity of an issue (and, potentially, of finding a solution that all can live with).

2.4.4 Power imbalances in lay-expert encounters

In sum, there are at least three divides or imbalances in lay-expert encounters:

i) knowledge imbalances
ii) educational and confidence imbalances
iii) differing experiences and perspectives

Power dynamics can play out through all of these imbalances to block genuine dialogue. Avoiding or working through such power dynamics is quite a challenge. It requires you to really imagine and empathise with how people experience you if they lack your specialist knowledge and your confidence or if they take vastly different or critical views to our own. You have to learn how to actively listen to, and actively demonstrate respect for those who differ from you. And you have to learn how to convey your own knowledge and views in ways that empower rather than dismiss or marginalise others. Remember that everyone is expert in something; if only their own experiences and everyone’s views are real for them. In dialogue, everyone’s views have legitimacy and deserve to be heard; all views are valid and relevant. You may disagree with them profoundly, but these are the publicly we want to engage with!
Choosing Specific Techniques: Which To Use For What Purposes

3.1 Overview of techniques

3.1.1 Different techniques for different objectives

The next table lists some techniques that can be used to nurture dialogue, indicating what they can be used for and signalling some practical considerations. Annex 4 of this Handbook includes details on how and when to use the specific techniques we have practiced in this course, and provides pointers to some other approaches.

Using these techniques does not automatically guarantee that dialogue will happen. How you adapt and facilitate them will determine whether they meet your dialogic aims. But all have the potential to achieve one or more of the following:

• to nurture respect for all voices, mutual listening and understanding
• to look for the positive rather than entrenching the negative
• to move beyond polarised positions
• to find common ground or new avenues where possible.

The crucial point to grasp here is that different techniques are appropriate for different types of tasks and objectives, from enhanced understanding through to shared decision making (cf the spectrum of participation in § 1.2.4). Moreover, different techniques are suited for using with particular social groups or mixes of groups. Where there may be reticence to speak, for example, early use of techniques which preserve anonymity can serve to ensure that all voices are heard.

3.1.2 Think before you choose a technique!

There is a fairly clear order of things one needs to consider and decide on before choosing a specific technique:

• Be clear about your objectives: the desired outcomes and outputs for this step in your event or activity.
• Be clear about who your participants will be and what is in it for them: Various factors – including how (re)included they are, how experienced in PE, and any pre-existing conflict or imbalances – will influence how easy or not it is to recruit particular groups, and how easy or not it is to achieve dialogue.
• Frame the question(s): Each step in a dialogic process will usually address a set question, which you have drawn up as part of a strategic succession of questions taking people from where they are to where you or they want to be (see § 4.2.1).
• Take account of all practicalities: The available time and resources, the venue, number of participants and facilitators, background and experience of both, all have a bearing on what is feasible.
• Select the most straightforward technique to get the job done: Don’t be a technique junkie and let the tail wag the dog by choosing a technique just because you think it’s cool or before you have established what you want to achieve and what the context is.

Section 4 takes you through this sequence in process planning. If your event involves several sessions, bear in mind that variety is important. Using a mixture of techniques helps keep the activity lively and avoids boredom setting in. It is also likely to work for a larger proportion of your participants since different people have different learning styles. Different people learn best from reading, from watching, from listening, from using their hands and bodies, from exploring their feelings, and from interacting with others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges/uses</th>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>Practical considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring all voices heard</td>
<td>Metaplan</td>
<td>Is reasonably anonymous and avoids ‘group norming’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauging feelings, views, level of knowledge</td>
<td>Sliding Scales</td>
<td>Can be done anonymously to avoid ‘group norming’. Can be used flexibly throughout an activity (eg I feel I am being heard).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building understanding</td>
<td>Carousel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Metaplan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Thinking Hats</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacing knowledge, perspectives and views</td>
<td>Nominal Group</td>
<td>The first two of these techniques are also useful for reporting back from small breakout groups to plenary—dependent on whether each group has addressed the same question or different questions.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mini-Metaplan</td>
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<td>Carousel</td>
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<td>Thinking Hats</td>
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<td>Listing</td>
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<td>Future visioning</td>
<td>Metaplan</td>
<td>This would use questions such as “It’s 2020 you’re looking … and you’re happy with what you see. What do you see?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding common ground</td>
<td>Appositive Inquiry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Thinking Hats</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generating creative ideas (eg of possible solutions)</td>
<td>Brainstorming</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Making choices/Consensus building</td>
<td>Short listing</td>
<td>There are various ways of getting a group to establish the levels of support for different proposals, so as to produce a short list for further discussion or identify the one with the most support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prioritising</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluating your efforts</td>
<td>Written evaluation forms</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Verbal feedback</td>
<td>It is vital to find out where people were coming from – in terms of why they chose to participate in the activity their prior knowledge and views, etc. – in order to understand the significance of what they got out of it, liked and disliked, etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sliding scales</td>
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3.2 Large and small group formats

A critical choice in choosing techniques is when to keep people all together in plenary and when to split them up into small groups (sometimes called breakout groups).

3.2.1 Large group formats

- To hear feedback when small groups return in plenary
- In general, large group formats are not good for achieving dialogue, because:
  - a small number of people tend to dominate and many voices are silenced
  - those who do speak may feel more constrained in what they say than in a small group

3.2.2 Small group formats

Small groups of 6-10 people work well:
- When the whole group is too large for everyone to have a say
- When in-depth discussion is needed
- To encourage less confident people to contribute
- To build trust and understanding; people are more willing to risk saying something sensitive in small groups than they are in large groups.
- When different tasks can usefully be done simultaneously

3.2.3 Methods for grouping people

- Group people randomly, by asking people to come from very different standpoints, etc.
- Grouping together people with similar standpoints tends to strengthen that group’s views. This can be helpful when:
  - In-depth technical discussion is needed by experts
  - When groups have not had an opportunity to discuss the particular issue, but are more likely to ‘think aloud’ in front of one another than in front of people coming from very different standpoints, etc.

3.3 Moving toward deliberation

A deliberative process seeks to arrive at a decision. Dialogue is essential if decision making is to be genuinely collaborative, so shared with relevant stakeholders. This process is likely to combine some or all of the following tasks (see table for methods):
- Future visioning
- Gathering and pooling relevant knowledge(s)
- Building understanding

3.3.1 Future visioning

Future visioning can be a very powerful early step in dialogic and deliberative processes.

The point of the exercise is to move people away from entrenched positions, or at least enable them to put these aside for a moment, in order to give voice to what they would like in an ideal future scenario. The surprising effect of doing this is that people often discover that they share similar dreams, or interests and needs, even with people whose views they oppose. As well as helping to build bridges, this unexpected common ground can sometimes suggest solutions or ways forward that no one had thought of before.

3.3.2 Hearing multiple realities

In dialogue about controversial or complex topics, it is important to create spaces for different styles of thinking and types of contributions: information, feelings, critical judgements, positive judgements, creative solutions, and contributions about process.

Especially where there is a mix of specialist and non-specialist groups, creative use of thinking hats can be particularly helpful (see Annex 4). This broad approach has several merits. First, it sets up a process in which feelings cannot be dismissed—something that can be particularly challenging for scientists and other academics. Second, it obliges everyone, even those with quite entrenched positions to voice, and thus potentially to consider other positions. Third, by introducing an element of theatre, it may help to level the playing field in terms of confidence and so facilitate inclusion.
4.1 Understanding the situation

This is a vital first step. A process designed without a full and clear understanding of the following risks failure:

What are your (or your sponsor’s) aims and objectives, in terms of outputs and outcomes? By what criteria will you/give the success of the activity?

- the desired outcomes.
- the needs of the participants.
- the available resources.

The task can be split into two stages:

i) understanding the situation

ii) designing and planning the process.

Note that a dialogic process may be a single event or activity, day-long or shorter, or it may be a series of events or activities, eg a series of workshops with information gathering and reflection taking place in between.

4.2 Designing and planning the process

Designing and planning a dialogic PE process is likely to involve repeated iterations between practical and substantive considerations.

4.2.1 Strategic considerations: framing the dialogue

Once you have a full understanding of the situation (above), the next substantive task will be to frame the process as a progression of questions, tasks or activities, which take your participants from where they are to where you and they hope to get to.

A crucial part of the planning stage will be to build on your efforts to understand the situation (above)—not least, to generate a sense of what is feasible by spotting the issue and the context to locate any information needed and to make contact with key stakeholders. Once all the strategic considerations have been established, the relevant practical constraints are known, you can draw up the outline of a timeline and move onto process design.

4.2.2 Designing and planning the overall process

Where there is to be a series of activities, process planning demands early attention to various practical matters, in addition to the strategic questions above. There may be a number of logistical constraints on timetabling: the existence of any deadline, plus the timing of school holidays or any other factors which might prevent specific groups from participating (eg harvest time for farmers). Before the timetable is set, you must ensure that a representative venue is available and booked for the days and times you want.

As a guideline, 6-8 weeks is the minimum amount of planning time required for a single event, and to ensure that participants can block out the date(s) in their diaries. A process involving a series of say 3 workshops, will require at least 9 months lead time.

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Who are the relevant stakeholder groups? Who else needs or would want to be involved?
4.2.3 Planning a single event or activity

The aim here is to plan an event or activity which will achieve your objectives. This may be a small meeting with a very focused and limited agenda, or a full day event with many people working through a series of questions. Whatever the scale and remit, try to avoid over-packing the event and ideally retain enough flexibility to be responsive to unexpected developments on the day.

Again timing is a critical consideration: how much time will participants be willing or able to devote to the event, and how much time will be needed to achieve your and their objectives? There is no perfect time for everyone: depending on their occupation and domestic circumstances, different people prefer weekdays in working hours, weekday evenings, or weekends. Start and end times must take account of people’s travel requirements, also setting up and clearing up time available (see § 3.1.2).

The aim here is to find the best technique(s) for your purpose. This involves deciding whether small groups, who will you put in the groups and how will you allocate them (§ 3.2.2)?

Once all of these fixed times have been agreed, you will then be left with slots for sessions in which dialogue is possible. In a day-long event, typically the introductory and other presentations will take you up to the morning tea and coffee break, leaving three substantive sessions one after tea and coffee in the morning, and two after lunch with tea and coffee in between.

Think clearly about what each session is for: what questions you want to pose and what outputs or outcomes you want from each (information gathering, learning and understanding different standpoints, problem solving, addressing different topics, finding agreement, evaluating). The importance and difficulty of the task should help you decide how long each session will require.

4.2.4 Planning individual tasks

The aim here is to find the best technique(s) to achieve what you want to achieve in the time available (see § 3.1.2).

A key consideration is whether small groups or a plenary will work best for your purposes. If small groups, who will you put in the groups and how will you allocate them (§ 3.2.2)? These choices have real consequences for the ensuing dialogue and how you facilitate this.

You must also decide whether you want all of the groups to work on the same question simultaneously, or work on different questions. This choice will have a bearing on what technique you use for reporting back to plenary if this is deemed necessary.

Once these are decided, you need to block out fixed times to meet people’s biological needs—lunch, tea and coffee breaks—as well as making allowance for concentration spans and avoiding fatigue. Remember that refreshment breaks are also valuable opportunities for informal interaction, so are part of the process. The longer the number of participants, the longer you have to allow for breaks, especially if toilet facilities are limited. Always call people back from a break 5 minutes before you want to start.

Allow enough time for registration, in which you might require participants to do things (e.g. a Sliding scale or Metaplan), and for any introductory comments and activities. This might include one or more presentations, e.g. to provide some sort of key information or feedback from a previous session or work. Similarly finishing off activities can take time.

4.2.5 Planning practicalities

At every stage, you must try to anticipate all the practicalities and ensure they are taken care of. Attention to such details can make the difference between success and failure. The following all require attention:

- Reviewing and refining the event plan
- Recruiting participants: Which methods? What messages? When?
- Equipment and materials
  - Is the venue wheelchair accessible and friendly?
  - Is it accessible and friendly?
  - What access to venue do you need for other presentations?
  - Is it accessible and friendly?
  - How will you lay out the room(s)?
  - What access to venue do you need for setting up and clearing up?
  - Is it wheelchair accessible and friendly?
  - What access to venue do you need for setting up and clearing up?
  - Is it wheelchair accessible and friendly?
  - What access to venue do you need for setting up and clearing up?
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### Questions Points to remember

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the context in terms of issues, conflicts, media visibility, etc?</td>
<td>Preparation is vital do your homework, finding key informants if necessary.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What is at stake for various groups?</td>
<td>What information do you need?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Why?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your (sponsor’s) aims and objectives</td>
<td>Your objectives are critical to the design of a process, just as with research design.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended/desired outputs and outcomes</td>
<td>The intended outcome may fall anywhere along the spectrum of participation.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Who?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Who do you want to engage and what’s in it for them?</td>
<td>1) ‘Thinking from the other’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Do you have to balance different stakeholder groups!</td>
<td>2) Are some stakeholders more important than others? What are the criteria?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Will any of your groups be hard to reach?</td>
<td>3) Think about your message and method for recruiting more socially excluded groups.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Any potential imbalances and inequalities?</td>
<td>4) Considerations for nurturing respect and understanding in a mixed group.</td>
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<tr>
<th>How?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) ‘Think from the other’ (your participants) in designing (a) recruitment messages and methods; and (b) your choice of techniques and your approach to nurturing dialogue.</td>
<td>For the purposes of this exercise you are asked to:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Identify the progression of strategic questions or tasks that will frame the engagement and get you to your desired endpoint.</td>
<td>1) Present verbally a summary analysis of the situation, including your participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Identify any information needs and think about how these will be met.</td>
<td>2.5) Produce a timeline to capture your overall plan (of an event or activities).</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Draw up your timeline for the event or activity see opposite</td>
<td>This should include: (i) fixed times blocked out, (ii) individual sessions, (iii) questions or tasks, (iv) information needs, (v) techniques to be used.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Decide on individual sessions: question(s), timing, groups and techniques</td>
<td>Use different coloured Post-its and pens to move specific items around until you feel the plan is fit for purpose.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB These tasks will need to be done iteratively.</td>
<td>In presenting the timeline, give your rationale for each of the choices made.</td>
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### 4.3 On the day

#### 4.3.1 Opening session

Welcome everyone and thank them for making the time to come along signal your aims and hopes for the session, and outline the programme. Specify your promise to your publics how you will demonstrate that you have taken what they say on board, and how you will inform them of what will happen to their contributions and any related outcomes. Introduce yourself and any staff involved. If numbers are not too big get the participants to introduce themselves possibly using a ‘warmer’ exercise to do so. Be aware that introductions can take ages if you do not explicitly limit them.

Explain your ground rules for discussions, saying why these are necessary in order to achieve (or approach) the dialogic aims of enhanced mutual listening and understanding. Remember to check that people are happy with these—so get their ‘buy in’—and ask if anyone wishes to propose any additional rules or any amendments to those you have proposed.

Attend to any housekeeping announcements—toilets, fire escapes and alarms, etc.

Move onto any presentations of information or background if needed, being sure to keep speakers to time.

#### 4.3.2 Substantive sessions

Make sure everyone—facilitators as well as participants—knows what they have to do in each session. Clarity is vital. It is easy for people to feel confused, so always ask for any questions before moving onto the next task. Keep people to time, but don’t be so rigidly inflexible that you can’t respond to unexpected developments or allow a bit more time if a particular discussion or activity is proving especially fruitful.

Allow time to get feedback from any small group sessions, and use any breaks to get informal feedback (from facilitators and participants) on how well things are working.

#### 4.3.3 Signposting the process

Participants can easily lose track of where they are in a process or how the current activity fits into the overall process. Whether you are running a single event or a series, make time at regular intervals (and as seems necessary) to recap where they have come from and what is coming up. A visual process map, located on a central wall space or flashed up as a slide, can be helpful.

At some junctures, if you have some leeway in the schedule, it can be a good idea to check that everyone is ready to move on or whether they need more time on what they’ve just been doing. If you are not sure whether the process is working for participants, take the time to check and rethink the remaining activities accordingly.

#### 4.3.4 Closing up

A key task before finishing will be to conduct an evaluation (see § 4.4). In addition, there may be several other wrapping up tasks—picking up any issues that have been collected in the parking place or agenda wall spaces, agreeing on what to do with any written outputs, agreeing any further steps in the process. Finally, don’t forget to thank all participants and staff, commending them on their achievements.
4.4 Evaluating your efforts

4.4.1 General guidance on evaluation

Evaluating your public engagement efforts should be much more than a box ticking exercise. The aim is to find out (i) to what extent the event or activity met your aims and those of your participants; and (ii) what learning you can take from it to improve your ability to engage wider publics in dialogue. Evaluating these questions requires thoughtful inputs from two sources:

a) Your participants. You want to know what brought them there and what they got out of it. This information is absolutely vital. Especially if you want to engage particular groups in an ongoing process of dialogue and deliberation, you need to understand the specifics: what motivates particular people to come and talk about your particular research, and what might motivate them to come back for more!

b) Those who sponsored, designed, delivered and facilitated the event or activity. They need to reflect on what aspects of the plan they felt had worked or not, based on their own experience and on the feedback provided by participants.

4.4.2 Getting feedback from participants

It is vital in any evaluation to find out from your participants why they came, what they hoped to get out of participating and where they are coming from. You can ask these questions (in various ways) when people register or at the beginning of the activity or on a written evaluation form at the end. The obvious advantage of getting a clear gauge of this from the outset is that you should be able to pitch your effort accordingly and be responsive to any particular concerns or issues.

The advantage of asking these questions on the evaluation form is that you then have relevant contextual information for analysing what each participant tells you they got out of the activity.

Feedback from participants can be obtained by various means or combinations:

- Techniques like Sliding Scales and Metaplan
- Written evaluation forms completed individually
- Verbal feedback session with the whole group
- Informal verbal feedback individually (eg with a flip camera)

Sliding scales (see Annex 4) can provide a nicely visual ‘before and after’ gauge—eg of people’s level of knowledge or concern about a topic—which can be incorporated into a written evaluation form or done on flipchart sheets, or both.

Written evaluation forms should be completed on the day if you want to maximise the response rate. Allow enough time (15 minutes) for people to respond fully. The forms should not be too long or people don’t bother; so select questions that really do the job. These might include:

- What was the most valuable thing (for you personally) that you took away from the activity?
- What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
- Did the activity change your views about anything?
- What sessions were particularly striking and/or useful for you?
- Did any sessions not work for you?
- Any other feedback or comments?

In certain circumstances, you might also want to use the evaluation form to ask:

- Would you like to participate in any further activities we might organise around this topic?
- Do you have any requests for agenda items or activities in any future events?
- What would you like done with the recorded views and information?
- Is there anything you would like further information on?

4.4.3 Getting feedback from facilitators

Getting feedback and reflections from those who have delivered and facilitated the event or activity may also be done in writing or face-to-face. The latter is probably most valuable. Two discussions can be helpful: one immediately after the activity, to pool people’s experiences and initial feelings about what worked and what did not and one after the participants’ feedback has been collated and circulated, to reflect on this feedback and suggest any decisions needed about how future activities might be done differently.

4.4.4 Then what?

If they have not been involved directly sponsors will need to see the final evaluation, incorporating all the feedback and reflections. This evaluation should be used as a basis to make decisions in light of any lessons learned and to consider future strategy for public engagement.
34

Annex 1

Summary Of Good Practice

What is dialogue and how to nurture it

1. Dialogue carries an ethic of inclusiveness and equality that everyone has something to contribute; that every voice be treated with respect and that participants work to understand where people are coming from even when they come from very different backgrounds or disagree strongly.

2. If the process is good the outcome will be good. Dialogue is distinguished from adversarial forms of debate and decision-making: it is nurtured through a commonly agreed set of ground rules and careful facilitation, which together encourage non-judgemental inclusiveness. If participants feel safe to speak openly and feel what they are heard, the benefits will be felt in new or greater understanding and new or stronger relationships.

3. Think about how dialogue can ‘add value’ to your PE efforts. Where dialogue happens, efforts to inform and inspire start from what interests people, efforts to engage research subjects see them as participants with the potential to learn from and shape the research; and efforts to converse with, consult or involve stakeholders or wider publics seek to reduce lay-expert imbalances and empower non-specialists to participate as equals.

4. Your central role as a facilitator is to help them for it, that you are concentrating, are using but also the feelings, meaning and significance the research; and efforts to converse with, consult or involve stakeholders or wider publics seek to reduce lay-expert imbalances and empower non-specialists to participate as equals.

5. The techniques you choose must be ‘fit for purpose’ and for the particular groups involved. As with the process, aspects such as trust, confidence and ownership must be fostered. The participants’ objectives are always changing and it is the facilitator’s role to help participants form goals for the activity. Dialogue requires un-pressurised time. It’s also a good idea to have room for flexibility to be able to respond to unexpected developments on the day.

6. How to design and plan a dialogic PE process

14. Be aware of potential barriers to effective communication. Differences in age, social class, education, gender and culture are all factors, but so too are differences in personal style and power. Encouraging people to ‘tell their story’ can help overcome such barriers and mutual understanding. Pay attention to group dynamics and cultivate an awareness of ‘self in relation to others’. Learn to sense how each member’s behaviour (yours included) is experienced by others.

15. Work to gain participants’ trust and cooperation. People need to feel that they are being listened to and valued treated with honesty and respect, and can influence what happens. When people do not feel they are being treated in these ways, they will not share information, communicate openly or think creatively and positively. Dialogue is blocked.

16. Involve the ground rules (as needed) to help participants understand the needs of the participants, and the available resources. Designing and planning the PE process demands repeated iterations between substantive and practical considerations.

17. Understanding the situation is a vital first step in planning any PE activity. What is the context? Key questions include: What are your aims and objectives? What do we need to learn about and the topic and context? Who should/ought participate and what’s in it for them? What information might they need in order to participate fully? Are there implications for how you should market and design the activity? What are the practical constraints on what is feasible?

18. How to design and plan a dialogic PE process

19. Choose carefully who should be included, on what needs for open dialogue and to try to understand where others are coming from. Even positive judgement can be too clever and don’t be afraid to adapt or simplify an existing technique. Using a mixture of techniques helps keep the activity lively and is likely to work for a larger number of people.

20. Whether the process is a series of activities or a single one, planning requires time and detailed attention to many practical and logistical considerations. Developing a timeline can be helpful: block out periods when participation is not feasible, and reserve much more time is required for the more important or difficult tasks or questions. Take account of the money and resources available, including staff and venues. Get interested parties to read the evolving plans for inputs as to how to make it as effective and workable as possible.

21. Don’t over-pack the programme. Everything generally requires more time than you might imagine, and of necessity, nurturing the trust needed for open dialogue and cooperation. It is nurtured through a commonly agreed set of ground rules and careful facilitation, which together encourage non-judgemental inclusiveness. If participants feel safe to speak openly and feel what they are heard, the benefits will be felt in new or greater understanding and new or stronger relationships.

22. People will only engage if they feel that they are being listened to and valued treated with honesty and respect, and can influence what happens. When people do not feel they are being treated in these ways, they will not share information, communicate openly or think creatively and positively. Dialogue is blocked.

23. How to design and plan a dialogic PE process

24. Involve the ground rules (as needed) to help participants understand the needs of the participants, and the available resources. Designing and planning the PE process demands repeated iterations between substantive and practical considerations.

25. Understanding the situation is a vital first step in planning any PE activity. What is the context? Key questions include: What are your aims and objectives? What do we need to learn about and the topic and context? Who should/ought participate and what’s in it for them? What information might they need in order to participate fully? Are there implications for how you should market and design the activity? What are the practical constraints on what is feasible?

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The context as we started this project was the parliamentary debate about the use of embryos to produce stem cells in the laboratory. We social scientists on the project were concerned that the debate had polarised around ‘pro-life’ or ‘pro-science’ positions, a framing which we saw as marginalising other voices (eg those who were donating embryos) and other potential issues of concern (eg the possible transgressing of animal-human boundaries, the possible use of stem cells for cosmetic applications). The stem cell scientists who collaborated with us over the proposal was concerned that at some point SCR might suffer from the kind of big public reaction that occurred around GM technology, and that this might threaten the further development of the field. He saw public engagement (PE) as a way of finding out about any possible issues of concern, in the hope that these concerns could be addressed and any future opposition averted.

Focus groups with a diverse range of participants were used to get first reactions on a range of possible issues the team had identified and to identify any other concerns. We then designed seven PE events on specific issues which had emerged from the earlier work. We offered them here in the hope that they might resonate or serve to pass on our shared learning:

• Overall some 300 people participated in the project, from diverse groups. Many were obvious stakeholders in the sense that they were directly involved in the field and/or stood to be affected by it in some way: stem cell scientists; bioethicists; pro-lifers; and other interested social and natural scientists and engineers; research nurses; consenting donors of eggs, embryos and foetal material; members of patient groups that might benefit from promised stem cell therapies. Many participants from these groups were enthusiastic ‘serial engagers’: they came to several of our events. They clearly benefited in terms of building new contacts and networks with other stakeholders (the social capital benefit), and many of those who were not scientists clearly also gained in confidence and ability to handle such interactions (the capacity building benefit).

• A smaller proportion of our participants were stakeholders in the broader sense that they were simply interested in the field other social and natural scientists and engineers; bioethicists; pro-lifers and other interested members of the public who happened to hear about the event(s). Recruiting wider groups proved difficult, especially the more disadvantaged or socially and economically excluded groups in society.

• Size has a big bearing on what you can do with a group and our events ranged in size: two were large (90 and 60 participants) and had been widely publicised. Two were closed events with a small group of selected invitees geared to addressing a specific issue. The other three were large enough (30+ participants) to hear about the event(s). Recruiting wider participants might be motivated to come along, and what they stood to get out of the event. We stressed that these events were not going to be creating policy (other than the indirect contributions in the three cases indicated earlier).

• The tangible outputs of these events were generally reports summarising the discussions posted on our website, plus publications on specific themes which drew on the transcripts and other records of the discussions.

• A large motivation for many participants was simply to find out more about what was going on and to understand better any related issues. In several of the events there was a demand for relevant information to be pre-circulated. This gave many people the confidence to speak in the discussion—not only because they were speaking form some knowledge but also so they didn’t appear ‘stupid’. Invariably participants reported that they had learnt a lot in particular, many indicated that they’d learnt how complex the issue was.

• The events on animal-human hybrids, trust and commercialisation were all themes with more general relevance to science and technology. In these events, we became aware of the underlying triggers and associations that tend to fuel public concern, and endeavoured to make space for these to be voiced. We found it useful to ground such discussions in something specific (eg the Hwang affair for trust and regulation, and specific companies for commercialisation).
Annex 3
Selected Bibliography


Useful websites
Involve: www.involve.org.uk
People and Participation: www.peopleandparticipation.net
Sciencewise: www.sciencewise.org.uk
Dialogue Designer: http://designerdialoguebydesign.net/
Dialogue by Design: www.dialoguebydesign.net
The Environment Council: www.the-environment-council.org.uk/resources
Annex 4
Useful Techniques And Approaches for Dialogue in Public Engagement

Note about materials: Many dialogue techniques involve gathering and sorting responses to sets of questions, and many of these techniques make use of a wall space or flipchart paper or ‘sticky walls’ plus Post-its or coloured paper in various sizes and suitable pens. Having the right materials for the job is a vital part of running an effective dialogue activity.

Appreciative Inquiry

The organizational development process seeks to build organisations around what works rather than trying to fix what doesn’t. The basic idea is that it’s better to put aside the negatives for the moment as so to explore the scope for building common ground around some positives. As such, Appreciative Inquiry could well be useful in PE, where the aim is to resolve a challenging issue with conflicting views, or to explore the scope for de-politicising a difficult issue or debate.

Brainstorming

To brainstorm something is to generate a free flow of creative thoughts. The idea is that by generically considering many options as possible people are more likely to find one that works. Not to be confused with Listing (below).

How it works:
- Keep the time short (5 – 10 minutes)
- Agree with everyone that there is to be no comment or discussion on any of the suggestions until time is up, they are free to make contributions without fear of being judged or censored.
- Ask everyone to shout out ideas and not hold back. Record these on a flipchart sheet as quickly and clearly as you can. (The task of recording may be delegated.)
- Keep the pace quick and energised, clap standing up, helps to keep the blood circulating!
- Shortly before time is up, ask if anyone who hasn’t said anything yet wants to.
- It is possible to kick-start a brainstorming exercise with a prompt list of good ideas that have been garnered from elsewhere: emphasise that this is not a list of proposals, if the brainstorming is part of an exercise in finding a solution, you may then want to cluster the ideas together (link with a symbol or number) and select the best for more discussion.

Buzz

The Buzz is a quick discussion in groups of 2 or 3, just ask participants to share first reactions or briefly exchange views or experiences on a particular question for a few minutes. It can be used after a presentation, to ‘wake people up’ without a repetitive ‘reporting back’. The exercise is a lively warmer up since the groups have to physically move around the room from question to question. It can also help to build understanding where participants bring differing perspectives or experiences to a complex or controversial topic.

How it works:
- 3-5 flipcharts are positioned at stations around the room each headed with one different but related question.
- Ideally there is same number of groups as questions (it is possible to have fewer groups than questions). The groups rotate around these stations until each one has been visited.
- Each group has a different colour marker pen for recording their answers to the questions, which is done by a facilitator stationed at each question. The facilitator may clarify the contributions of previous groups if needed.
- The idea is that each successive group reads and reflects on, elaborates and adds to the answers of the previous group so producing a fairly comprehensive view in a short period of time.
- Each ‘turn’ on the carousel is given a little more time than the previous one because they should have less work to do. Allow additional time for the moving around!
- The flipchart sheets with the responses to the set of questions represent a kind of cumulative wisdom. It can be useful to bring all the responses to the front of the room for a recapitulative review of the responses, or to allow time for participants to read and reflect on them informally over a break.

Carousel discussion

This is a very effective and time efficient tool for pooling knowledge and ideas, since each small group builds on the efforts of previous small groups in addressing a key set of questions rather than each group re-inventing the wheel independently of the other in this way. Feedback from group to group is built in to the exercise, which avoids time consuming and potentially repetitive ‘reporting back’. The exercise is a lively warmer up since the groups have to physically move around the room from question to question. It can also help to build understanding where participants bring differing perspectives or experiences to a complex or controversial topic.

How it works:
- Shortly before time is up, ask if anyone who hasn’t said anything yet wants to.
- Keep the pace quick and energised, clap standing up, helps to keep the blood circulating!
- Ideally, there is same number of groups as questions (it is possible to have fewer groups than questions). The groups rotate around these stations until each one has been visited.
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Crucial Conversations

The book of this title describes a crucial conversation as one which occurs when stakes are high, opinions vary and emotions run high. The authors, Kerry Pateman and colleagues, offer various techniques for conducting such conversations effectively, all of which involve mutual listening and understanding through direct face-to-face engagement, with an emphasis on making the encounters safe for people to speak openly. These techniques can be helpful in responding to all sorts of public and private conflict, including controversial areas of research.

Future Visioning

Future Visioning can be a useful approach early on in a PE activity. Its merit is that people move away from their immediate concerns and entrenched positions—or at least temporarily put them aside—in order to thinking more positively about where they would like things to go in the longer term. The result can be not only a very positive vision for the future but also the discovery that even people with opposing positions have some shared needs or wishes. This may well reveal surprising common ground no one had thought of before.

Various techniques may be used. With Metaplan, for example, the strategic question could be something like: ‘Is 2020, […] your vision of the future? […] What did you have in mind?’ This is a slightly softer question than ‘would you like to see discussed?’, ‘What 3 things do you want out of this process?’

For stage 1, ask participants to write down three responses to the question clearly and briefly exchange views or experiences on a particular topic (since it’s easier to start talking in smaller groups.

• Short cut or topic: 5 – 10 minutes
• Keep the pace quick and energised, clap standing up, helps to keep the blood circulating!
• Ideally, there is same number of groups as questions (it is possible to have fewer groups than questions). The groups rotate around these stations until each one has been visited.
• Each group has a different colour marker pen for recording their answers to the questions, which is done by a facilitator stationed at each question. The facilitator may clarify the contributions of previous groups if needed.
• The idea is that each successive group reads and reflects on, elaborates and adds to the answers of the previous group so producing a fairly comprehensive view in a short period of time.
• Each ‘turn’ on the carousel is given a little more time than the previous one because they should have less work to do. Allow additional time for the moving around!
• The flipchart sheets with the responses to the set of questions represent a kind of cumulative wisdom. It can be useful to bring all the responses to the front of the room for a recapitulative review of the responses, or to allow time for participants to read and reflect on them informally over a break.

Metaplan (or Card Storming)

Developed by E Schnelle as a creativity tool, the Metaplan technique is also used in organisational settings and in participation and deliberative exercises, e.g. for problem solving, agenda setting and future visioning.

Metaplan is a two-stage exercise. The first involves individual brainstorming without judgment or interaction, to come up with 3 (say) responses to a set question. The second stage is an interactive clustering exercise in which the whole group makes decisions about which individual contributions sit together and what categories are appropriate.

The Metaplan technique is more effective than conventional group discussion methods in several regards. Perhaps most crucially, the first stage ensures that everyone contributes, and that all inputs are heard and equally weighted. The fact that participants respond individually without any interaction avoids the tendency of ‘group norms’ behaviour. In so much as writing preserves anonymity, this stage is also likely to encourage participants to be open, possibly writing things they would not be willing to voice. The second stage tends to invoke participants’ more deeply in the group process. By considering everyone’s contributions and working towards a jointly supported outcome (the clusters), the process can reveal new insights or ideas not previously considered. It is also a faster way of changing group discussions and because it involves standing up, helps to keep the blood circulating.

How it works:
- Choose a strategic question you think will provide an effective peg for the purposes of the particular moment in your PE activity (see e.g Future Visioning or an agenda setting: ‘What 3 things would you like to see discussed?’). ‘What 3 things do you want out of this process?’
- For stage 1, ask participants to write down three responses to the question clearly and briefly exchange views or experiences on a particular topic. The task of recording may be delegated.
- The facilitator asks participants what similar points as to be moved and sorts similar Posts its or cards together accordingly. As the clusters begin to emerge, the facilitator then asks for suggestions on what headings are appropriate for each one – which they write up marking a cloud around the cluster.
- Facilitating this exercise requires care. Throughout stage 2, you should check that participants are happy with where individual responses are placed and what headings are chosen for each cluster. It is also important not to steer only to ask for suggestions, confirmation and clarification where needed. Do not ensnare in lead clusters too quickly.
- You should resist any tendency to limit the number of clusters. It produces a more nuanced picture if none of the clusters are too big, and you should be willing to create a cluster of a single response if there is no obvious fit elsewhere.
- Sometimes participants will clarify a post-it or card they wrote, but you should stress that participants do not have to ‘own’ any of the Post-its – so as to retain the option of anonymity.
- The outcome will be a visible image of the discussion for all to see. This might be a sufficient output in itself, or it might constitute an input to a subsequent stage in your process.
• In plenary, a spokesperson for each group
• Some (10) minutes before the end of the
How it works as a feedback technique:
where each group is discussing the same
method where separate small groups have been
and making their responses visible.

Mini-metaplan is also an efficient feedback
method where separate small groups have been
discussing a different question or subject
(contrast with Nominal Group feedback
where each group is discussing the same
question or subject).

How it works as a feedback technique:
• Some (10) minutes before the end of the
plenary, and where you want to collate a single
or subject in parallel before regrouping in
plenary and where you want to collate a single
list of key points. It avoids the tedious
duplication where each group reports the same
or similar points one after the other but ensures
that everyone is involved in choosing which key
points to report back.

How it works:
• Some (10) minutes before the end of the
plenary, to allow the groups to select one
point – until you have the requisite
number of points, all of which should be
starred by the facilitator. You may then get
the group to rank the points or circle the
Top (say) three.

If appropriate, reassure participants that
none of the points recorded in the small
group discussions will be lost, even if they
are not on the list of key points.

• Bring everyone back into plenary and ask
each group to sit together with their
flipchart sheets clearly visible (e.g. on the
floor in front of them).

• The lead facilitator then does a second
round robin, asking for one point from
each group in turn without them repeating
any previous ones. In 3-5 rounds all the
groups’ key points will usually have been
included.

• There are two ways of recording this
cumulative list. Either the lead facilitator
writes a new list, or the small groups could
be asked (before the plenary) to write
their 10 key points on Post-its or cards,
which can then be stuck on the plenary
wall space.

Role plays
A role play is a simulation exercise around a
specific situation or issue which contains two
or more different perspectives or interests.
Nominal Group technique
This time-saving ‘round robin’ method for
reporting back is useful where several small
groups have been discussing the same question
or subject in parallel before regrouping in
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Thinking Hats

Proposed by Edward de Bono in his book Six Thinking Hats, this technique is widely used in both public and private sector organisations as a thinking tool for group discussion (and for individual thinking) about difficult issues. The underlying principle is that there are six ways of thinking about something, to which he attaches different colours:

- **Information (white)**: considers solely what information and knowledge is available and/of needed; what are the facts?
- **Feeling and emotions (red)**: instinctive gut reactions or statements of emotional feelings; without involving any justification.
- **Critical judgment (black)**: logic applied to identifying flaws or barriers, seeking justification.
- **Positive judgment (yellow)**: logic applied to identifying benefits, seeking mismatch.
- **Creativity (green)**: statements of provocation and investigation geared towards coming up with new ideas, seeing where a thought goes.
- **Feeling and emotions (red)**: emotional feelings, without involving any justification.

**How it works**

- Depending on the topic and the group, a process will be designed that uses some or all of the ‘thinking hats’ in an appropriate order and with questions tailored to the issue at hand. The wiki on Thinking Hats and de Bono’s book give possible sequences for different purposes.
- The most simple use of this technique is to spend time on each of the chosen ‘thinking hats’ in turn — which can be signalled either by individuals wearing hats of the relevant colour or by sitting a hat (or proxy!) of the relevant colour in the middle of the group.
- The process is explained and/or agreed at the outset and the process is reviewed at the end with the blue hat (about the thinking process). The facilitator is in ‘blue hat’ mode throughout. Bad facilitating and failure to get ‘buy in’ to the process can result in people feeling railroaded.
- Often the process spends a reasonable length of time on the white hat — in order to establish a common understanding of what is known about the issue, and possibly what information is needed. If this is done well (i.e. all available info is there), less time may be needed on the other hats.
- The black hat (critical judgment) is generally followed by, or alternates with, the yellow hat (positive judgment) and/or the green hat (new ideas) — so as to move the process forward. The outcome of such shifts can be surprising.
- It is generally recommended that time spent on the ‘red hat’ (feelings) is shortest, simply to avoid judgment or rationalisation entering. But the ‘red hat’ can be used flexibly in and out of the other hats — e.g. as a check on whether people feel OK or not about where the discussion is going. Post-it can be used to ensure that everyone’s emotions are visible (like the first stage of Metaplan).

Some method of recording the responses to each ‘thinking hat’ is helpful, so that these are remembered to be drawn on at later stages of the process.