

deliberative public  
engagement:  
nine principles

involve

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Deliberative public engagement is a distinctive approach to involving people in decision-making. It is different from other forms of engagement in that it is about giving participants time to consider and discuss an issue in depth before they come to a considered view. The aim of this document is to encourage and support deliberative public engagement in public policy.

Deliberation itself – where a range of people learn, discuss and work out solutions together – is not new. Forums, advisory groups, partnerships and some forms of consultation have done this for years and are becoming increasingly sophisticated. More recently, citizens’ juries and large-scale citizens’ summits have found favour with government and public service providers at both local and national levels.

Involve and the National Consumer Council (NCC) believe that deliberative public engagement can be valuable in helping to create better public services, promote social cohesion and foster a thriving democracy. There is already good practice throughout the UK, and the full potential contribution of deliberation to improving the quality of decisions and policy solutions, and to enhancing representative democracy is becoming clearer as experience grows.

The government and other public bodies are currently developing general guidelines on public and stakeholder engagement – making it timely for Involve and NCC to draw on the growing body of learning and evidence to contribute a set of specific principles on deliberative public engagement from outside government.

This is far from being the last word. Over the next year Involve and NCC will continue to monitor the field, listen to feedback on the value and relevance of these principles, and consider the potential need for more detailed guidance. In the mean time, we hope our work will contribute to the already-flourishing debate on the role of deliberative public engagement in Britain today.

# What is deliberative public engagement?

Deliberation is an approach to decision-making that allows participants to consider relevant information, discuss the issues and options and develop their thinking together before coming to a view<sup>1</sup>.

To be deliberative, a process must involve:

- ▶ **Discussion between participants** at interactive events (including through online technologies). These events are designed to give sufficient time and space to enable participants to gain new information and to discuss in depth the implications of their new knowledge in terms of their existing attitudes, values and experience. These discussions result in a considered view, which may (or may not) be different from participants' original view, and which has been arrived at through careful exploration of the issues at hand.
- ▶ **Working with a range of people and information sources** – including information, evidence and views from people with different perspectives, backgrounds and interests. This may include evidence requested or commissioned by participants themselves. Discussions are managed to ensure that a diversity of views from people with different perspectives are included, that minority or disadvantaged groups are not excluded, and that discussions are not dominated by any particular faction.

- ▶ **A clear task or purpose**, related to influencing a specific decision, policy, service, project or programme.

## What makes deliberative public engagement different

Where traditional tools, such as opinion polls, measure 'top of the head' public views, deliberative public engagement provides policy and decision-makers with much richer data on public attitudes and values, offers opportunities to more fully explore why people feel the way they do, and allows the time to develop ideas, options and priorities with the public. For the public participants, the experience provides opportunities to share and develop their views with each other and directly with experts and decision-makers. See Appendix 1 for more details on the value of deliberative public engagement

# Forms of deliberative public engagement

There are currently three main types of deliberative public engagement in the UK:

**Deliberative research**, which builds on market research techniques used by research agencies carrying out work for clients such as government departments. Examples include national citizens' summits and policy consultations<sup>2</sup>.

**Deliberative dialogue**, which builds on dialogue and consensus-building techniques, enabling participants to work together (often with expert input) to develop an agreed view or set of recommendations. Participants may then be involved in taking their recommendations forward to decision-makers, which can encourage shared responsibility for implementation. Examples include national dialogues on science and technology<sup>3</sup>.

**Deliberative decision-making**, which builds on partnership methodologies to enable participants and decision-makers to decide jointly on priorities and programmes. Examples include partnership bodies and participatory budgeting exercises where power is genuinely devolved to participants.

These three types overlap. Each type may be appropriate in different circumstances and a single

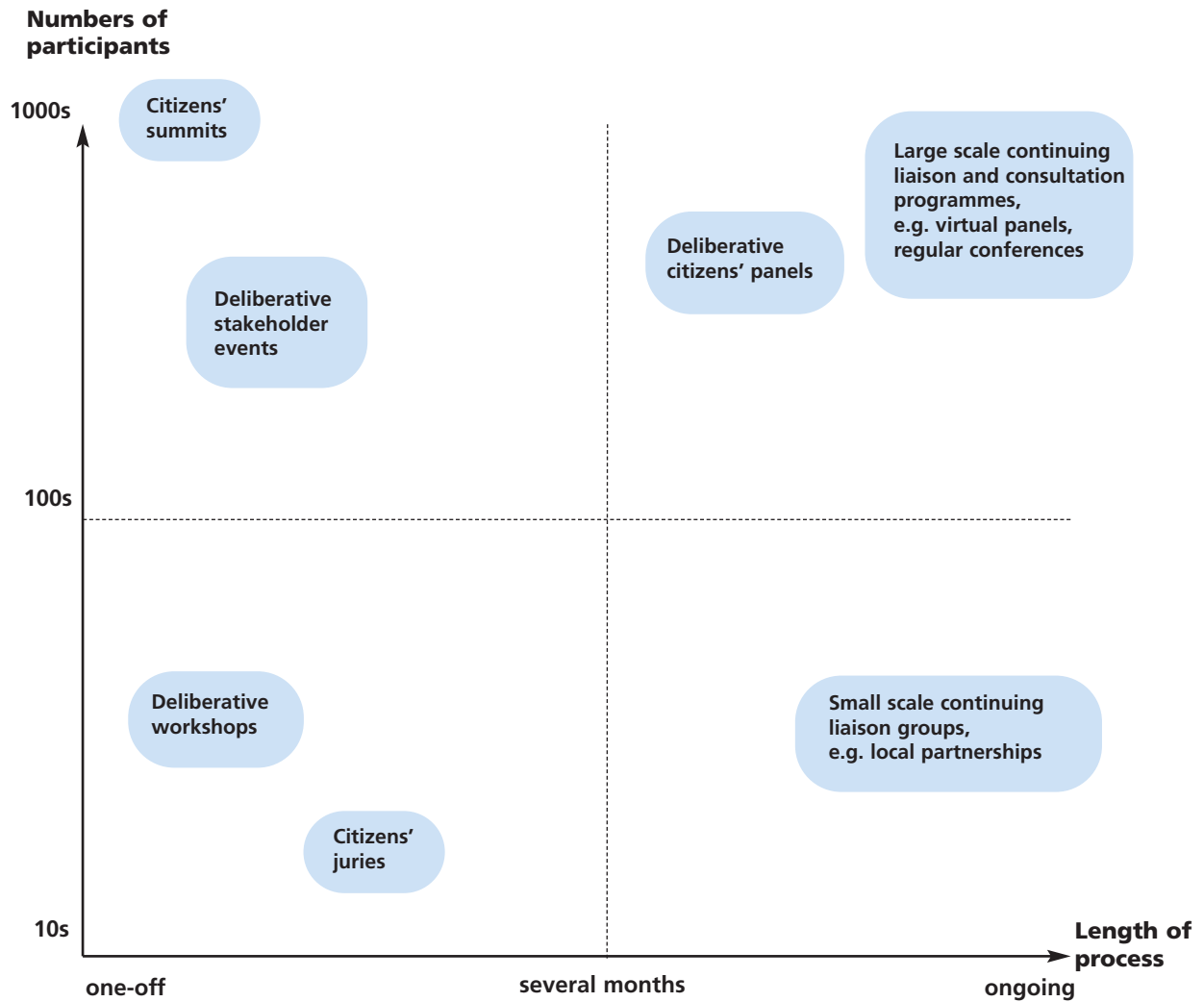
process may involve more than one type of deliberative activity.

The way a deliberative process is planned and designed, and the techniques used, depends on the circumstances, such as:

- ▶ the purpose of the process, and consequently the nature of the results required;
- ▶ the numbers of people to be involved;
- ▶ the timescale of the process;
- ▶ the geographical spread (local, national, international);
- ▶ the point in the policy process at which the engagement takes place;
- ▶ how complex, contentious or technical the topic is; and
- ▶ what the mix of specialists and public participants needs to be.

Deliberative public engagement processes can take place on any scale – from ten participants (for example, citizens' juries) to thousands of participants (such as citizens' summits). A process may be a one-off event, or part of a series of activities running over several years. Figure 1 illustrates how different approaches suit different numbers and timescales.

**Figure one**



# When to use deliberative public engagement

## Deliberation is suitable when:

- ▶ policy or decision-makers are keen to listen to and take account of public views, as a contribution to more robust decisions based on a deeper understanding of public values and attitudes on the issues;
- ▶ the decision, policy or service in question involves complex issues, uncertainty or conflicting beliefs, values, understanding, experience and behaviours; or where one viewpoint might otherwise dominate;
- ▶ the decision will require trade-offs between differing policy options, and participants working together can explore in detail the implications of alternatives to result in a better-informed decision; or
- ▶ the decision-maker cannot make and implement a decision alone; there needs to be buy-in from others.

## Deliberative public engagement can be used:

- ▶ across all levels of government, local, regional, national and international;
- ▶ across all types of services, delivered by public, private or voluntary sectors;

- ▶ across the spectrum of participation, to inform, consult, involve or empower people<sup>4</sup>;
- ▶ alongside other forms of participation such as, opinion polls, written consultations, community development, campaigning or lobbying;
- ▶ at any point in the policy cycle:
  - when an issue is initially identified as being of concern (policy determination or agenda-setting);
  - when the process for tackling the issue and potential outcomes are set (policy direction);
  - in planning the key elements of the desired outcomes and how to achieve them (policy design); or
  - during implementation, monitoring and review (policy delivery).

## Deliberative public engagement should not be used:

- ▶ when crucial decisions have already been taken; or
- ▶ if there is no realistic possibility that the engagement process will influence decisions.

# Effective deliberative public engagement: nine principles

## Effective deliberative public engagement: nine principles

- ▶ The process makes a difference
- ▶ The process is transparent
- ▶ The process has integrity
- ▶ The process is tailored to circumstances
- ▶ The process involves the right number and types of people
- ▶ The process treats participants with respect
- ▶ The process gives priority to participants' discussions
- ▶ The process is reviewed and evaluated to improve practice
- ▶ Participants are kept informed.

## The process makes a difference

A good deliberative public engagement process makes a difference – to participants, to decisions, to policy, and to projects and work programmes. Engagement can be seen to have made a difference when:

- ▶ policy-makers listen to and take account of participants' views;
- ▶ there is clear evidence of how decisions or policy developments have been influenced by it;
- ▶ participants learn about wider political and decision-making processes, as well as about the subject being discussed; and
- ▶ participants are engaged in a meaningful way, and are therefore more enthusiastic about getting involved in the future.

Engagement can only be effective if it takes place at the right point in the decision-making process (see page 5, *When to use deliberative public engagement*). This may mean that organisational processes need to change, to incorporate results from public deliberations into decision-making.



## **The process is transparent**

In an effective deliberative process the information provided to participants, the reporting of participants' views, and the channels by which their views feed into decision and policy-making, are transparent.

### **Transparent information:**

- ▶ comes from clearly identified organisations, publications or other sources;
- ▶ is carefully drafted for the purpose, with input from experts, stakeholders, or citizens (including possibly via advisory panels) as appropriate;
- ▶ reflects a range of different (and potentially opposing) perspectives; and
- ▶ is accessible to all participants (taking into account different literacy levels and languages, and disabilities such as restricted hearing or sight).

### **Transparent reporting of participants' views means:**

- ▶ participants are clearly informed about what is being recorded and reported in their name; and

- ▶ every participant can expect to receive a report summarising participants' views.

### **Transparent policy and decision-making processes means:**

- ▶ it is clear to everybody involved how the results from public engagement are intended to be used;
- ▶ it is clear to participants how policy and decision-makers will use their contributions, along with evidence from other sources, in making their decision; and
- ▶ it is made clear, after the engagement process, how the public input has had an impact.

Transparent processes also take account of the potential benefits and dangers of working with the media.

## **The process has integrity**

The integrity and openness of everybody involved – those running it and those taking part in it – are among the most important elements of successful deliberative public engagement.

A helpful formula for ensuring that a deliberative engagement exercise is tailored to the specific circumstances:



This means:

- ▶ The scope for making a difference to the policy or decision is explicitly declared at the start. In particular it is important to be clear about things that cannot be changed as a result of the process, in order to manage expectations.
- ▶ Decision-makers are sincere in their willingness to be open-minded. They listen and take account of the views expressed by participants, both on points of detail and more generally on how policy issues are framed and considered.
- ▶ The organisers clearly communicate the results of the process.

### **The process is tailored to the circumstances**

There is no single design for deliberative public engagement. Each process is designed to meet its specific aims and objectives, and to meet the needs of participants as well as those of the decision or policy-makers.

It is crucial that the following elements are clear from the outset:

- ▶ the purpose and objectives of the exercise (why and how);
- ▶ the intended outcomes (what will be achieved);
- ▶ the people who should be involved (specialists, decision-makers and public participants), and their potentially different needs and aspirations; and
- ▶ the context (social, political, historical, policy) into which the process will fit.

### **The process involves the right number and types of people**

The scale of a deliberative engagement process needs to be appropriate to the purpose, context and objectives<sup>5</sup>. Getting the right number and types of people across the right number and types of events means that:

- ▶ Efforts are made to involve people of different ages, genders, social class, ethnic groups, geographical location, as appropriate. Diversity may be as important as strict demographic representation.

- ▶ Efforts are made to include people from marginalised or seldom-heard groups. These can include people living in poverty or disadvantaged neighbourhoods, people with disabilities, older people, people in remote rural areas, commuters, and also those who lack the local or other affiliations that link others to their communities. It may be useful to make links through community and other activists who work with excluded groups. Separate initiatives can be useful (and may be necessary) for some groups, although it is important not to increase exclusion by separating these groups from the overall process.
- ▶ If appropriate, participants can be offered incentives or other support (for example, travel expenses, income remuneration, childcare), to ensure that they are not excluded from taking part on financial grounds.
- ▶ Efforts are made to include the right number of people. For example, if the event includes polling exercises, the number of people involved may need to be high enough to ensure a sufficiently diverse range of views. Similarly, large numbers of people can be valuable when it is important to demonstrate the importance of an issue or the high status of the engagement exercise.

### **The process treats participants with respect**

Participants are the most important resource in deliberative engagement processes, and their contribution and needs should be clearly valued and respected. In practice, this means that:

- ▶ Relevant policy and decision-makers may need to take part directly in the process.
- ▶ Organisers should fulfil their 'duty of care' to support participants so that they know what is happening and will not be harmed or distressed by the process.
- ▶ Organisers and decision-makers share a clearly stated commitment to taking the process seriously and respecting the contribution of the participants.
- ▶ Participants feel valued, comfortable and welcome. They can rely on:
  - a safe, non-confrontational atmosphere in which they can express their views freely;
  - a well-managed process which gives them confidence in the exercise; and
  - a friendly and informal environment where they feel they can speak openly.

### **The process gives priority to participants' discussions**

The main focus of deliberative engagement is always the discussions among participants. An effective deliberative process is one where:

- ▶ In every event held, the majority of time is allocated to discussion between participants. The views expressed in these discussions are carefully recorded.
- ▶ The exercise follows a logical path through learning and discussion, so that participants build on and use the information and knowledge they acquire as the process develops.
- ▶ Participants are given a variety of ways to express their views – both collectively, through the discussions, and individually through other methods, such as voting, post-it notes, postcards or flip charts.
- ▶ The process allows time for plenary feedback and summing up, so that participants can check and validate points that are being interpreted as the main results.
- ▶ Specialists, decision-makers and policy-makers are briefed so that they clearly understand that their role is to stimulate and support discussions among the participants, not to lead or direct them.

### **The process is reviewed and evaluated to improve practice**

There are two important reasons to build review and evaluation into deliberative public engagement: first, to assess what has been achieved; and second, to improve future practice.

Effective evaluation starts as early as possible in the process and continues until after the final policy decision has been taken. This helps to ensure that the process is guided by measurable objectives, which can then be used to test achievement, and that any impact can be assessed and shared with the participants<sup>6</sup>.

Review and evaluation can be done in-house or independently. In-house evaluation, such as self-assessment and peer review, can help promote internal learning, whereas external evaluation can ensure independent scrutiny, legitimacy and accountability.

## **Participants are kept informed**

People who are participating in a deliberative engagement process should be given clear information on the process before, during, between and after meetings, events or online initiatives. Organisers should circulate a summary of participants' views as they have been presented to policy and decision-makers; and they should provide clear information on the final decision, and how participants' input has made a difference.

Ideally, all reports and feedback to participants are published. Comments from individual participants should be kept anonymous; this enables everyone to contribute freely without fear of reprisals.

Effective deliberative processes can stimulate interest in the policy issue, or in civic participation generally, among participants. Organisers can support and harness this civic energy by:

- ▶ encouraging participants to stay in touch with each other after the event;
- ▶ giving participants information to help them stay involved in the issue or service through volunteering, campaigning or interest groups; and
- ▶ providing information about other public participation initiatives.

# Appendix 1: the value of deliberative public engagement

When done well, deliberative public engagement can be of real benefit for all parties.

For decision and policy-makers it creates:

- ▶ better policy and service delivery options, grounded in better knowledge of public values and priorities;
- ▶ greater transparency and accountability (and thus legitimacy) for decision-making, based on greater knowledge about the acceptability (or not) of specific policy options;
- ▶ opportunities to listen to public discussions about contentious issues, and therefore to gain detailed first-hand knowledge of public priorities;
- ▶ greater public understanding of issues considered and, potentially, shared responsibility for successful policy and service delivery outcomes;
- ▶ empowerment, education and motivation of the public and service users;
- ▶ better relationships between government and citizens with the potential for more effective longer-term partnerships;

- ▶ opportunities to build social cohesion by increasing understanding and mutual respect between people with diverse views, values and opinions from different sectors of society.

It gives participants:

- ▶ a chance to influence decisions on important issues that affect their lives;
- ▶ insight into the subject, decision and policy-making, and about participation itself;
- ▶ an enjoyable and worthwhile way of being an active citizen, and increased confidence and willingness to take part again;
- ▶ the opportunity to meet and share views with other participants, stakeholders, technical specialists, policy makers, service providers and decision makers; and
- ▶ a platform for increased understanding and mutual respect.

# Appendix 2: further reading

There are many sources of guidance on public and stakeholder engagement. The following list is a small sample of the material currently available.

- ▶ Aarhus Convention: *Convention on access to information, public participation in decision making and access to justice in environmental matters*, 1998
- ▶ AmericaSpeaks: *Engaging citizens in governance*, 2007 ([www.americaspeaks.org](http://www.americaspeaks.org))
- ▶ Cabinet Office: *Code of Practice on Consultation*, Better Regulation Executive, Cabinet Office, 2004
- ▶ Involve: *People and Participation*, 2005
- ▶ Office of Science and Innovation: *The government's approach to public dialogue on science and technology. Guiding principles for public dialogue*. Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2006
- ▶ Research Councils UK: *Dialogue with the Public. Practical guidelines*. Developed for Research Councils UK and the Office of Science and Technology by People Science and Policy Ltd and Taylor Nelson Sofres, 2002
- ▶ Sustainable Development Commission: *Public engagement and nuclear power*, 2007
- ▶ Sustainable Development Commission: *Engagement and sustainable development, and other guidance*, 2008 ([www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/engagement.html](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/engagement.html))
- ▶ Warburton, D; Rainbow, E; Wilson, R: *Making a difference: a guide to evaluating public participation in central government*, Involve and Department for Constitutional Affairs, 2007 ([www.involve.org.uk/evaluation](http://www.involve.org.uk/evaluation))

## Websites:

AmericaSpeaks: [www.americaspeaks.org](http://www.americaspeaks.org)

International Association of Public Participation: [www.iap2.org](http://www.iap2.org)

Involve: [www.involve.org.uk](http://www.involve.org.uk)

National Consumer Council: [www.ncc.org.uk](http://www.ncc.org.uk)

People and Participation: [www.peopleandparticipation.net](http://www.peopleandparticipation.net)

Sciencewise: [www.sciencewise.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise.org.uk)

Shared Practice: [www.sharedpractice.org.uk](http://www.sharedpractice.org.uk)

# Notes and references

1. Adapted from [www.deliberative-democracy.net/deliberation](http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/deliberation)
2. See for example the UK government's national deliberative processes on the health and social care white paper and the future of pensions:  
  
[www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_4138622](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4138622)  
  
[www.workandpensions.gov.uk/pensionsreform/debate](http://www.workandpensions.gov.uk/pensionsreform/debate)
3. See for example the UK government's Sciencewise programme: [www.sciencewise.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise.org.uk)
4. Taken from the International Association of Public Participation spectrum of participation: [www.iap2.org](http://www.iap2.org)
5. For further reading see Appendix 2 or the following:  
  
[www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/ProcessPlanner/Scope+Introduction](http://www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/ProcessPlanner/Scope+Introduction)  
  
[www.involve.org.uk/evaluation](http://www.involve.org.uk/evaluation)
6. Warburton, D. with Wilson, R. and Rainbow, E.: *Making a difference: a guide to evaluating public participation in central government*, Involve / DCA (now Ministry of Justice), 2007.



# How this document was produced

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