

Public dialogue Factsheet

Public Dialogue

A public dialogue is a qualitative research process during which public audiences interact with a variety of experts to deliberate on issues relevant to future strategy or policy decisions. A public dialogue provides an opportunity for organisations to gather public views to inform their activities so that they are aligned with society, particularly relevant for publicly funded research organisations. They should provide a balanced view of the topic, include factual information, and space to discuss opinions and societal/ethical considerations. Dialogues give everyone the chance to speak, to question and be questioned, to develop their own views and opinions, allowing in-depth discussions and offer insight into the reasoning behind people's decisions.

Public dialogue as a tool for promoting Open Science

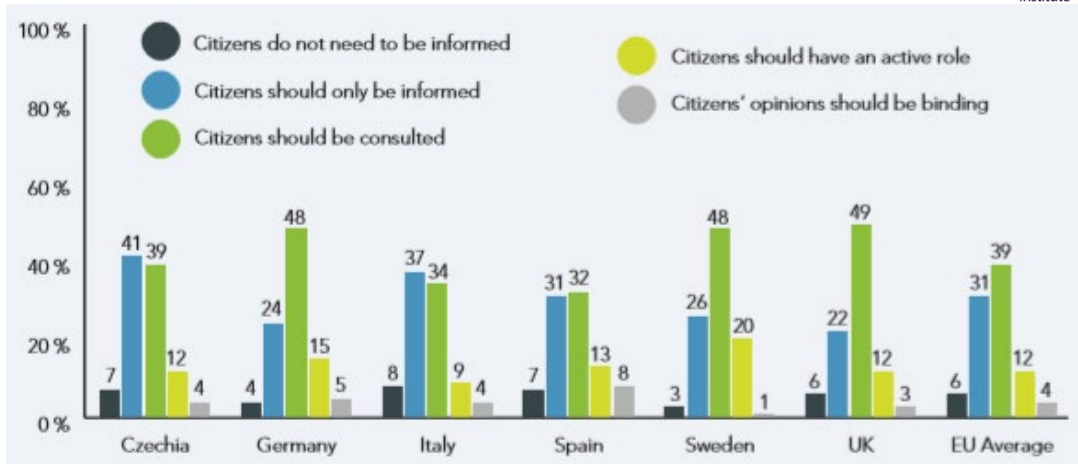
A public dialogue as a way to support society to be involved with and evolve alongside scientific developments:

According to the Special Eurobarometer 341 on biotechnology (2010)¹ when asked about genetic technologies, on average 53 percent of the European citizens believed that scientific developments in the field would have a positive effect on the way of life for the following 20 years. However, a public attitudes [survey](#) performed in 2018 by the ORION consortia showed an average 55 percent awareness on genome editing among citizens in the UK, Germany, Sweden, Czech Republic, Spain, and Italy. If research and innovation are to realise the perceived positive effects of genetic technologies, further efforts need to be made to allow society to keep up with the speed of developments. Showcasing the suitability of a public dialogue in addressing this need, most of the participants to ORION public dialogue on genome editing (over 80 percent) reported that they felt the dialogue enabled them to judge better what the benefits and risks of genome editing might be.

Indeed, in the 2013 Special Eurobarometer 401² on Responsible Research and Innovation, over half of the European citizens (55%) thought that public dialogue is needed when it comes to decisions about science and technology. Four out of ten (39%) thought that citizens should be consulted and that their opinion should be considered regarding decisions about science and technology. Over ten percent (12%) believed that citizens should have an active role in decision-making on science and technology and four percent even thought that the citizens' opinion should be binding.

¹ [Special Eurobarometer 341](#): Biotechnology, European Commission (2010) – accessed 9th September 2020.

² [Special Eurobarometer 401](#): Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), Science and Technology, European Commission (2013) - accessed on 4th September 2020



Eurobarometer results – from countries where ORION public dialogue on genome editing took place - on question about public dialogue.

A public dialogue as a way to open up scientific research and incorporate fairness and ethical principles:

Following on from these findings, in 2018 ORION surveyed citizens in countries where the ORION dialogue work was conducted about their views on opening up scientific research. Participants were asked to consider which phases of science should be open to whom and why: research priorities, results and outcomes were found to be top priority for participants, in particular for scientists in the same field and especially concerned citizens, mostly for the democratic reasons of fairness and ethics, closely followed by research quality purposes.

Based on these findings, we conclude that public dialogues are an acknowledged way to support society to be involved with, and evolve alongside, scientific developments. This is further strengthened by the appetite of ORION surveyed citizens in opening up scientific research for interest groups for reasons of fairness and ethics, which is in agreement with RRI principles.

A public dialogue as a public engagement tool:

Over 85 percent of respondents attending the ORION public dialogue felt more confident in participating in dialogic scientific activities, after attending this. Over 50 percent self-reported to be more likely to participate in a similar activity after having attended ORION public dialogue, provided a clear path outlining opportunities for involvement is available.

Importantly, after participating in ORION public dialogue, majority of participants (over 90 percent) held positive views about increasing the public money destined to organizing similar scientific activities that incorporate citizens.

From the point of view of public dialogue participants in the scientific community, the dialogue's experts, they viewed the ORION dialogue as evidence of how granular and polarized public opinion can be in relation to emergent and controversial science and technology and the sensitivities requiring careful mediation in the undertaking of public engagement. Scientists involved in ORION dialogue self-reported lasting impact, both regarding their own attitudes towards the public as scientifically engaged and interested, and as a professionally enriching and reflective exercise providing insights for

adapting research portfolio and longer term ambitions. Finally, scientists also articulated how the dialogues were professionally empowering in confirming to them the value of their research, specifically fundamental research.

Finally, the ultimate impact of a public dialogue would be to provide feedback to the research lifecycle: A mechanism to gather evidence on public perceptions on the research performed at our organisations. This evidence can be used by organisations at several stages of the research lifecycle, from idea creation, research project design, to grant writing and dissemination.

Practical elements

Project design and preparation

1. Determine key aim(s): Why do you want to organise a public dialogue?
2. Determine main objectives: What steps do you need to take to achieve the aim(s)?
3. Determine expected benefits: What do you want to achieve with the dialogue?
4. Establish partnerships: Who do you need in the team to successfully conduct the public dialogue?
5. Define key evaluation indicators: How will you measure impact?
6. Design project timeline*, work packages and budget allocation

Project Governance

A. Multidisciplinary Advisory Board:

- Provides oversight and guidance to the overall project.
- Members' expertise should cover research, ethical and sociological aspects of the topic.
- Prepare recruiting document: What is it expected from these professionals? What is the expected time commitment? What is the timeline of their involvement? How will communications occur (face to face meetings, emails, telephone or video conferences, etc.)?

B. Review Group:

- Helps steer Advisory Board proposals to adapt them to the specific aim and context of the dialogue.
- Includes a variety of professionals and acts as a link with the stakeholder groups who are the target of the dialogue's outputs.
- Involve the group in the design of the materials to use with the public to ensure that a range of perspectives are taken into account.

Expert facilitator and method development³

- Conducting a public dialogue requires high quality facilitation to provide participants confidence and equal opportunity for all to express their views and opinions. An organisation experienced in participative processes is best suited to develop the method behind the dialogue and to facilitate it.

³Profession/Organisation commissioned to conduct the dialogue.

- If the project is operating in the public sector, check whether goods, works and services require Public Procurement. If so you will need to prepare an Invitation to Tender for services. Allow sufficient time for this process.
- If a public dialogue has a particular characteristic that only few organisations can supply, it might be exempt of public procurement.
- The expert facilitator/organisation should liaise directly with governance group(s) to ensure correct project development.
- The expert facilitator/organisation can provide advise on best choice of (dialogue) method to meet your needs.
- The expert facilitator/organisation will develop the stimulus materials to be used during the events with the public with the help of project stakeholders and based on the project design.

Public participants' recruitment

- Usually performed by the Service Provider to meet certain recruitment criteria and demographic quotas.
- Incentives are offered to compensate for participants' time and effort, to retain participation when there are time gaps between convening of groups, and to ensure representation of more disinterested voices (in 2019/2020, this incentives are circa 80 Eur per day, split 40/60 over two days in this type of dialogue process).

Community building

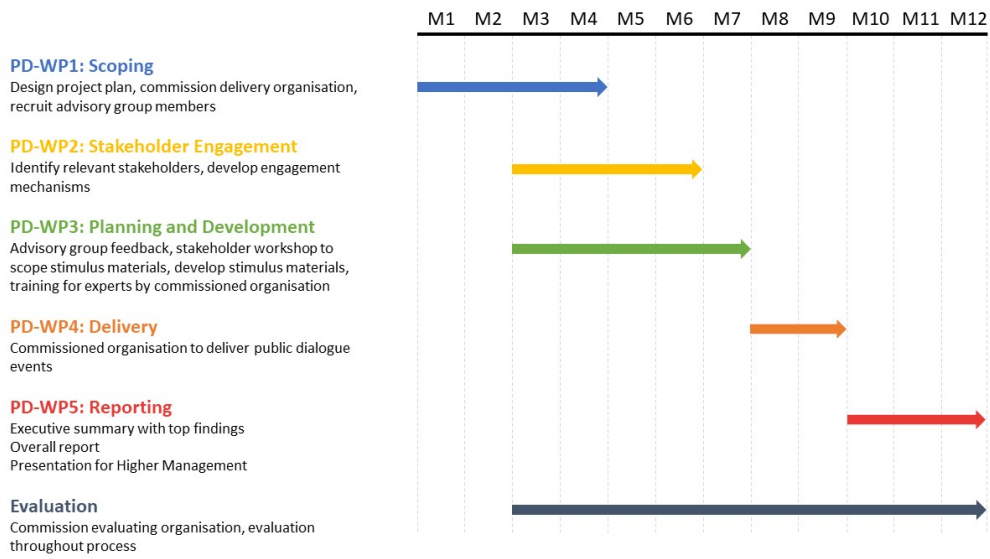
- A dialogue provides an opportunity for people to discuss, create and participate in research and innovation. Seize this opportunity to build a long-lasting community of science-savvy citizens.
- Think about General Data Protection Regulations and what you will need to keep in contact longer term. Include those terms in the recruitment criteria.

Public dialogue events

- Consider stakeholders availability when planning for dialogue date and time.
- Invite a number of experts on the topic to inform the conversation without steering it (circa 6 experts per 30 public participants). These are stakeholders engaged during the project design and preparation phase.
- In advance to the events, prepare checklist of event planning and conducting: Venue (accessibility, events' calendar, AV arrangements), catering/refreshments, sponsors (where needed), audio visual support, transport, etc.
- Discussion guide prepared by Service Provider/Organisers contains information about event timings and professional roles and responsibilities.

Reporting and dissemination

- Service Provider/Organisers can gather public dialogue findings in report. Allocate sufficient time for reviewing report and internal sign off.
- Different dialogue findings might appeal to different stakeholders depending on their motivation in participating/supporting the dialogue; consider writing audience-specific briefings outlining main findings.
- Prepare a dissemination and communications plan well ahead of the publication of the report: How, to whom and when will you share the findings of the dialogue?



* Example of a public dialogue timeline (M1-12: Months).

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