postnote

March 2001 Summary of POST Report Number 153

OPEN CHANNELS:
public dialogue in science and technology

There is growing interest in engaging the public more directly in policy and decision-making. POST has reviewed recent developments in public dialogue, focussing on science and technology and drawing on experience from elsewhere. This note summarises the key issues raised in the full report.

The Need for Public Dialogue

Recent years have seen increasing concerns about a widening 'democratic deficit' resulting in a decline in participation in political processes. This is characterised by declining trust in authority and expertise, particularly in the field of science and technology. Controversies over BSE, GM foods and medical scandals are recent examples of such trends.

Partly in response to this, bodies in both the public and private sectors increasingly seek views from outside people and organisations. Among the methods traditionally used are questionnaires, opinion polls, and invitations for written submissions. However, these have failed to stimulate enthusiasm and do not encourage deliberation between those taking part. Such methods may also under-represent social groups such as young people, old people, people with disabilities and those from ethnic and religious groups. There has thus been a move towards more innovative **public dialogue**, using consultation methods that attempt to broaden the basis on which policies and decisions are made (see Box opposite).

Innovative Consultation Methods

Two features characterise many of the more innovative forms of public consultation and dialogue:

- They are **deliberative** – participants interact, engage in considered debate and modify their views based on information, shared views and respect for different perspectives
- They are **inclusive** – i.e. they seek out the views of all that stand to be affected by a decision. In particular, opinions are canvassed from previously excluded, or hard to reach groups.

Among the growing number of methods available, the more common include:

- Deliberative opinion polls
- Citizens' juries and panels
- Standing consultative panels
- Consensus conferences
- Internet dialogues
- Focus groups

The full report provides more details of these and other methods of consultation and dialogue. See POST's web site www.parliament.uk/post/home.htm

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Such methods allow institutions to have greater interaction with citizens; engaging them in dialogue to increase the range of forums within which people can express their views, values and experience, and so participate in policy and decision-making.

There is increasing recognition that public dialogue can assist decision making when information (including scientific information) is incomplete. It can provide

valuable insights that may help to define questions, and to assess and evaluate solutions. The POST report reviews activities in the realms of science and technology (S&T), local government and health authorities. In the context of S&T, the House of Lords *Science and Society* inquiry concluded that open, transparent dialogue is necessary, and all institutions dealing with scientific and technological issues need to change their cultures to make dialogue the norm, rather than the exception.

What are the Reasons for Dialogue?
The POST report provides a 'snapshot' of recent public dialogue activities. It shows that institutions embark on dialogue for many different reasons, but all come within the scope of two overarching objectives: **supporting democracy,** and **making better decisions**. A more comprehensive list is given in the full report, but among the more commonly cited goals for dialogue are to:
- provide elected representatives with the considered views of informed lay people
- find areas of common ground and dissent
- increase trust in decision-makers
- increase support for decisions
- promote the personal development of participants.

Of the bodies looked at in the report, some are engaging in more public dialogue than others. For instance, local government and health authorities are well down the path while the Research Councils and academic institutions are only just starting to engage in such activities. Others are not engaging in public dialogue at all, either because they see no value in it, or they see it as someone else's responsibility.

Ensuring Dialogue is Effective
The report outlines three main elements that would determine if a dialogue process is effective:
- Objectives – setting out why dialogue is being sought
- Legitimacy – ensuring the process is acceptable
- Evaluation – identifying the quality of the process

Objectives for Dialogue
The report outlines that defining the objectives for dialogue is critical for ensuring effectiveness. Where objectives are clearly defined and agreed, the process will command more respect, and is more likely to have a constructive outcome. However, some institutions have been accused of engaging in dialogue purely because they felt that they ought to. Similarly, some are concerned that dialogue may have been used cynically to legitimise previously made decisions.

Acceptability and Authority
The 'legitimacy' of any process to engage the public depends on three key factors:
- **fairness** – Participants often express concern that their views might be ignored. Thus, formal and clear links between dialogue and decision-making are required
- **method and timing** – Dialogue ought to be fit for purpose. In addition, it should not necessarily force

consensus when unnecessary; and that it should take place when it can have the greatest effect
- **participation** – The 'appropriate' people should take part in the dialogue, depending on the objectives (e.g. lay citizens, difficult to reach groups, or statistically robust population samples).

Effectiveness
Criteria are being developed to evaluate the quality of a dialogue process and its outcome. The report points out that evaluation needs to be tailored to specific circumstances, according to the objectives sought and the methods used. However, there are some attempts to draw together more widely applicable sets of measures, but as yet no universal criteria have emerged. This raises concern among some that there is no firm basis for learning lessons to identify either good or bad practice. If this remains the case then bad practice will go unnoticed, good practice will not be disseminated, and dialogue will be justified on limited case by case anecdotal evidence (and some wishful thinking).

Further Development
The report identifies three items that might be required before dialogue can be developed further:
- **building the required skills.** There needs to be sufficient numbers of trained process designers and facilitators, and 'intelligent clients' who can recognise their own needs and work effectively with practitioners
- **providing sufficient resources.** There is a perception that dialogue is a lengthy and costly process, but the evidence does not support this claim. Indeed, many have pointed out that the full economic and political costs of not engaging in dialogue should be considered
- **providing a learning resource.** This would enable institutions learn from experience, including from those outside of their traditional fields of view.

Overview
The report shows that dialogue is widespread, the objectives and methods are varied, and that new processes are developing continually. It indicates that successful public dialogue requires:
- high level commitment
- an institutional culture valuing dialogue
- sufficient funds and skilled personnel
- a clear idea of why dialogue is being sought
- clear ways to show how dialogue has informed decision-making
- an agreed system for measuring impact and quality.

An underpinning question is how experience can be widely shared, good and bad practice identified and dialogue furthered on the basis of sound evidence.

www.parliament.uk/post/home.htm