

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT SOCIAL RESEARCH GROUP

SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODS SERIES

Guide 1: Deliberative Methods

What are deliberative methods?

Deliberative methods are commonly described as a hybrid between consultation and research. They aim to involve the public in decision-making in a meaningful way. While in some ways similar to qualitative research methods (e.g. focus groups), they provide an opportunity for participants to find out more about a topic, consider relevant evidence and discuss this evidence with other participants before presenting their view. This can happen over a number of weeks or months.

The use of deliberative methods has increased over the last three decades; much early experimentation with deliberative methods has taken place within the NHS. Some argue this is in response to public discontent with previous public participation experiences and a decrease in trust of government and public officials. Involvement in deliberative methods has been seen as potentially more satisfying and beneficial for participants than taking part in other modes of participation. In Scotland, since devolution, there has been an increasing emphasis on openness, accountability and a focus on the citizen – this has provided some impetus for the development of participatory mechanisms, including deliberative methods.

The range of deliberative methods

There are a range of approaches that come under the ‘deliberative’ banner - and they differ in a number of ways including; duration, the number of participants, how participants are selected, whether incentives are provided, the amount of time spent, and how information is presented to them. These are some of the most common methods:

Method	Description
Citizens’ Juries	A one-off event that enables 12-16 members of the public to make informed decisions on complex issues e.g. public budgets, taxes, voting methods. Jurors hear from a variety of experts, cross-examine them, deliberate about the topic and present their findings as a report and/or oral presentation at the end of the event.
Consensus Conferences	Consensus Conferences also facilitate discussion between the public and experts. During a consensus conference, contentious and complex issues (usually concerning topical scientific or technological subjects) tend to be explored. Conferences usually last 3-4 days and involve around 10-20 participants. The media play a key role and are invited to attend parts of the event.
Deliberative workshop	Deliberative workshops are similar to focus groups although there tends to be more focus on deliberation. They can take anything from a few hours to several days to conduct and involve around 8 – 16 participants.
Deliberative polling	This quantitative approach measures people’s opinions <i>before</i> the process of deliberation. Participants are then provided with in-depth information on the subject matter, participate in discussions and have the opportunity to ask questions. <i>After deliberation</i> , participants’ opinions are measured once again and any differences between the two measurements are highlighted. The number of participants in a Deliberative Polling process range from around 200 to 600 and should constitute a representative sample of society.
Deliberative mapping	Deliberative mapping combines quantitative and qualitative methods to assess how participants rate different policy options against a set of defined criteria. The emphasis of the process is not on integrating expert and public voices, but understanding the different perspectives each offer to a policy process.

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What are the advantages and disadvantages of deliberative methods?

The **advantages**:

- Provide opportunity for the public to consider different options and make more informed decisions than is possible from traditional consultation methods;
- Help the public engage with the more complex issues;
- Attempt to recruit representative groups of the public. They have the potential to gain insight from a more considered group of citizens than traditional consultation methods – which tend to attract the already politically engaged;
- Provide more detailed understanding than conventional surveys;
- Can create dialogue/engagement with citizens over a long period of time;
- Can provide policy makers with an understanding about how the public might change their opinion and/or behaviours if provided with relevant information;
- Provide a platform for specialists and lay people to discuss and debate issues together.

The **disadvantages**:

- Planning and design is time consuming and resource intensive and, as deliberative events often need to be run by independent organisers, they tend to be expensive;
- Can lack robust sampling strategies and if small numbers are involved the views expressed can't be said to represent the views of the public at large; also recruiting those in 'hard to reach' populations can be challenging.
- Sometimes perceived as 'show-trials' used by those in power to attract publicity rather than meaningful engagement;
- The effectiveness of deliberative methods are partly dependent upon the information from policy-makers being communicated clearly and in a manner that will not bias the outcome;
- Careful thought need to be given to what will be done with the findings so that the research meets its original commitments (e.g. to really influence policy);
- Given the high-profile nature of some deliberative methods it may be difficult for policy colleagues/ Ministers to decide how to proceed if they disagree with the public's recommendations.
- Representative and participatory democracy should reinforce each other rather than conflict –but this can be difficult in practice.

Examples of the use of deliberative methods in the UK and internationally

Deliberative workshops: People's Inquiry on Nanotechnology and the Environment, UK (2006)

Policy context: The People's Inquiry was part of Nanodialogues, a series of four practical experiments to explore whether the public can meaningfully inform decision-making processes related to emerging technologies in four different institutional contexts.

Technique: The Inquiry consisted of three deliberative workshops with a group of 13 east London residents, which focused on the use of nanoparticles to clean up chemically contaminated land. The workshops involved input from scientists, Environment Agency staff, government policy-makers, and other stakeholders, and ended with public participants drawing up a set of recommendations.

Result: After the process ended, a group of participants presented their recommendations to Defra. The final Nanodialogues report was launched in June 2007 to an audience of policy makers, research council staff, scientists and social scientists.

<http://publications.environment-agency.gov.uk/pdf/SCHO0607BMUJ-e-e.pdf>

Consensus Conferences: Denmark, 1989 to date

Policy context and technique: A consensus conference is a forum at which a citizens' panel, selected from members of the public, questions 'experts' on a particular topic. The panel then assesses the responses, discusses the issues raised, and reports its conclusions at a press conference. A distinctive feature of this approach is that the citizens' panel is the main actor throughout: it decides the debate, questions, witnesses, and conclusions. Ultimately, the panel produces a report outlining its conclusions for government.

Conferences have been held in Denmark on Human Genome Mapping (1989) and on the Future of Private Transport (1993) in the UK (1994) and many other countries.

The Danish Ministry of Research has funded several consensus conferences since the late 1980s, which have been run by the Danish Board Of Technology (DBT). The DBT has a relationship with the Danish Parliament through its nine-member Research Committee and it tries to maximise the impact of its consensus conferences by holding them in the parliament building and scheduling them at times when particular topics are already the subject of public debate.

The lay panel's findings are frequently mentioned in the Danish media and the Danish Board of Technology publishes the experts' papers, the lay panel's report, and a description of the conference. The Danish parliament has debated issues raised by the consensus conferences on several occasions. The lay panel's recommendations have no statutory authority but have had direct impact on the legislative process in the Danish Parliament.

Result: Consensus conferences in Denmark attract impressive media coverage - the first and last days of the conferences are usually covered on television and radio, and newspapers not only report on the conferences, but run background and feature articles on the topic under discussion. The conferences act as a stimulant to public debate and keep important issues on the political agenda. Dutch and UK examples highlight the importance of media coverage and the difficulties of ensuring that the media show an interest in the proceedings. (Without media coverage, the extent of public involvement is quite limited) and difficulties of integrating the process with parliamentary business.

<http://www.tekno.dk/subpage.php3?article=468&toppic=kategori12&language=uk>

Examples of the use of deliberative methods in the Scottish Government

There has been limited use of deliberative methods by the Scottish Government as policy teams tend to prefer the use of traditional consultation methods.¹ That said, there are a few examples and these are detailed here.

Citizens' Jury on Government Communications (2006)

Policy context: The Scottish Executive commissioned a Citizen's Jury in response to the findings of the Phillis Review Group report, *An Independent Review of Government Communications*, which explored different ways of structuring and managing government communications. The aim of the exercise was to explore a number of key evidence gaps from a Scottish perspective relating to public understanding and perceptions of the Scottish Executive and the effectiveness of its current communications.

Technique: The Citizens' Jury was made up of 24 participants who were randomly selected and demographically representative members of the public. Jurors heard from a variety of experts during the three days, deliberated about government communications and presented their findings at the end of the event.

Result: The report of the Citizens' Jury, including a chapter of recommendations, was published in August 2007.

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/08/28143010/0>

¹ <http://openscotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/09/16120105/01060>

Reconvened Focus Groups for Scrutiny Review (2007)

Policy context: The Crerar Review (Independent Review of Regulation, Audit, Inspection and Complaints Handling of Public Services in Scotland) was commissioned by Scottish Ministers in 2006. Part of its remit was to make recommendations on the purpose, principles and role of effective external scrutiny, including clarifying who the customers and beneficiaries are. The Review sought to increase its understanding of public perspectives of the external scrutiny regime through commissioned research that aimed to explore awareness and understanding, expectations, views on public involvement and views on how the current arrangements might be improved. A deliberative research method (reconvened focus groups) was chosen, reflecting the fact that scrutiny of public services is a comparatively dry and complex topic and many of its concepts and functions were likely to be unfamiliar to most members of the public. As such participants were likely to require a lot of information and some time to think and reflect before they could engage with the issues to be explored

Technique: Seven groups of service users plus 1 'citizens' group were recruited to participate in the study. The groups met for 2 x 2 hour sessions with a four week gap in between. At the first meeting they discussed their current awareness and experience (traditional focus group) and were introduced to scrutiny concepts and bodies and provided with information regarding preparation for the next session. At the second session they were reminded about concepts and terms and subsequently discussed the research questions, their reactions to proposals put forward by the Review and asked to come up with their own recommendations. The intervening period was used for reflection and investigation by participants, and preparation by the research team based on what was emerging from the first sessions and the Review itself.

Result: The research report "Scrutiny and the Public" fed into the recommendations of the Review, was published, and was subsequently used as part of the evidence base for the 'user focus' short life action group, one of five set up to implement the recommendations of the Review.

<http://openscotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/10/11105618/0>

Evaluation of Deliberative methods

There are a number of examples of evaluations of these methods in achieving their aims of public participation in decision making. These tend to be multi-method evaluations using 'before and after' designs and commonly some element of observation. However, comparisons between different methods are tricky because of the very different contexts these methods are used in - and the difficulties in attribution of public participation from other effects. Evaluations often focus on the *process* of participation and early or intermediate outcomes, though clearly the longer-term *outcomes* of these methods are important.

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Key references/links

More information on the range of methods available, pros and cons of these methods and examples of their use can be found on Involve's people and participation website:

<http://www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/Involve/Home>

GSR featured deliberative methods as part of their "Methods Spotlight" series:

http://www.gsr.gov.uk/downloads/professional_guidance/methods_deliberative.pdf

A literature review on civic participation in public policy making commissioned by the Scottish Executive in 2005 includes a chapter on deliberative methods:

<http://openscotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/09/16120247/02496>

Involve have produced a guide for evaluation of engagement activities:

<http://www.involve.org.uk/evaluation>