

Enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment



Summary of a seminar held at Victoria Quay, Edinburgh on 15th March 2011

Introduction

The involvement of people in decision making forms part of the principles for sustainable land use in the Land Use Strategy for Scotland. It is also an integral part of an ecosystem approach, which is being adopted researchers and public delivery.

The aim of this seminar was to provide an opportunity for Scottish Government, together with some of its key delivery agencies and research partners, to learn from recent projects exploring how to make citizens more central to decision making on land use and the natural environment. The meeting was arranged by the Natural Capital Initiative, with support from Sciencewise ERC. The seminar was hosted by Scottish Government. It followed an Open Forum on 16th February 2011 to consolidate learning from over 25 projects from across the UK that have been exploring ways of initiating and running public dialogue.

The meeting involved 20 participants from Scottish Government, delivery agencies and researchers.

Presentations

1. Bruce Howard provided an overview of discussions at the Natural Capital Initiative Open Forum 'Enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment', which took place in London on 16th February with support from the Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre.. This event brought together 35 people with experience of initiating, running and evaluating public dialogue on land use and the natural environment. Key challenges and opportunities were identified, along with key considerations for government in creating the conditions for more extensive and more effective public dialogue about the natural environment.
2. Elli Carlisle, Scottish Natural Heritage, summarised community meetings to assess the effects of climate change on landscape and quality of life at a local level. These took place in 2010 in The Machars and Nairnshire, with support from the Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre. The meetings involved a mixture of residents, representatives of local estates and local authority officers. Among the learning points presented was that groups want to see the impact of their engagement, with discussions and recommendations feeding into ongoing dialogue. It was suggested that a 'toolkit' for discussions would be helpful in encouraging use of the approach in other locations, as would an online record of experiences and learning.
3. Mark Reed, University of Aberdeen, started his presentation by summarising evidence in the published literature concerning the benefits of stakeholder participation in dialogue

concerning land use and the natural environment, and how this dialogue is best initiated and run. He provided a case study of lessons learned from the Sustainable Uplands Project. A key learning point was that the outcome of a participatory process is more sensitive to the way in which it is undertaken than the tools that are used. The importance of starting dialogue early and carefully considering stakeholder expectations and desires was emphasised, along with the need to put local and scientific knowledge on an equal footing.

Discussion

Participants discussed the 'citizen choices' topic in the light of the presentations. Some of the key issues discussed were:

1. **Developing a rationale for public deliberation of knowledge gained by environmental scientists.** Knowledge associated with personal experience is valuable and relevant. It is important not to underestimate the level of knowledge of non-technical participants. A spectrum of dialogue styles/approaches should cover this.
2. **Encouraging policy-makers to make use of the opportunities that public dialogue provides for policy and governance.** A particular challenge is in ensuring that participation is achieved in national strategies. There is a need to promote good practice with regard to enabling effective public dialogue, rather than purely consultation activities.
3. **Achieving appropriate levels of participation public dialogue processes.** Motivating people to participate is a challenge: some social or demographic groups may be considered 'hard-to-reach'. This can be addressed by appropriate allocation of resources, as well as allowing time for dialogue to become representative. Follow-up to let people know about outcomes and impact is an important aspect of building participation.
4. **Use of existing social groupings and meeting places is important, especially in ensuring that dialogue is sustained.** The Managing Borderlands Project is one example of a project that has made good use of well-established social capital to sustain dialogue over an extended period. Follow-up and feedback is easier when this takes place through existing social networks. For involving citizens in environmental science issues, science centres have a valuable role. Also *Café Scientifique*-style events can be a good way to bring out and discuss contested views and ideas.
5. **Demonstrating outcomes from public dialogue processes.** The absence of tangible outcomes can serve as a disincentive for further involvement. Even before dialogue has started a community needs to have a sense of what the possible outcome of their input could be. National Park Planning Processes in Scotland have recognised this. Several participants in the discussion expressed the view that people can be realistic and pragmatic about their expected outcomes from dialogue.
6. **Recognise the dynamic nature of communities and the natural environment.** Those participating in dialogue processes need to understand that dialogue will need to change according to the issues being addressed and the people involved. People's interests change

through their lives. Techniques are available to map communities to assess how groups will interact with each other.

7. **The need for effective facilitation.** Facilitators are very helpful in situations where conflict can occur. Important criteria when selecting facilitators are (1) a basic familiarity with environment-related issues and local terminology and (2) independence. Training for facilitation skills is necessary for people who help to co-ordinate public dialogue. A small amount of training can deliver a significant result. One participant mentioned that in the Highlands there is a free network of trained facilitators.

Web resources for projects and initiatives mentioned during the seminar:

- [Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre](#), including [public dialogue on landscapes and ecosystem futures](#).
- [Natural Capital Initiative Open Forum 'Enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment'](#)
- Forestry commission [toolkit](#) for the forest sector on engagement.
- [Environmental Consequences of Participatory Governance Project](#)
- [Sustainable Uplands Project](#)
- [Managing Borderlands Project](#)