



Participation and engagement in ecosystem service delivery at the local level

A summary of a seminar held at Defra on 17th March 2011

Introduction

The Big Society and localism agendas provide impetus for developing new ways to help citizens and communities make choices that optimise the benefits they receive from the natural environment. With support from [Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre](#), the [Natural Capital Initiative](#) organised a seminar for environment policy leads, analysts and Defra delivery network representatives to:

- communicate learning on how to initiate and run public dialogue about land use and the natural environment, and,
- discuss needs for more effective public dialogue and roles for Whitehall.

The seminar 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 concerning the natural environment.

The meeting involved 20 participants from a range of public bodies including Defra, Natural England, Department for Transport, Environment Agency, Welsh Assembly Government and Countryside Council for Wales, together with a selection of researchers and consultants.

Presentations

- Dr. Rob Fish, University of Exeter - Introduction to national guide on participation and deliberative techniques.
- Dr. Bruce Howard, Natural Capital Initiative - Key messages/lessons emerging from the NCI 'Enabling Citizen Choices' open forum on 16th February.
- Steve Evison, Resources for Change - How do we decide if, and how, to plan for future ecosystem resilience? Discussion pilot from the Cambrian Mountains Initiative.
- Dr. Steve Smith, URS/Scott Wilson - Applying the ecosystem services approach to planning and decision making: the Lea Valley Regional Park Pilot.

Discussion

Following the presentations and plenary discussion, participants broke into small groups to discuss

- What are the things that communities want that need to be considered by Whitehall and the delivery agencies?

- What is the role of Whitehall in responding to those needs?

Some of the key issues raised were as follows:

1. **Supporting knowledge exchange.** Much of the discussion focused on identifying what is needed enable more effective public dialogue processes relating to the natural environment. Sharing of knowledge on effective participatory techniques was recognised as being of particular value. As part of this, real-life case studies can help illustrate approaches that work. Government can help by identifying what constitutes good practice in stakeholder dialogue about land use and the natural environment.
2. **Enhancing access to data.** Many participants felt that more could be done by government and the wider public sector to ensure that trustworthy scientific data are made available in accessible formats. Levels of trust in data varies according to the context, although there are many circumstances where public datasets are seen as the most reliable. It was generally felt that citizens are able to make use of apparently complex data if they are presented in the right format.
3. **Communicating the strategic dimension.** Dialogue processes need to be co-ordinated to ensure that strategic issues are addressed. Government has a role in communicating the strategic view. Improved access to environmental data in formats that can be interpreted by the public has the effect of allowing citizens to see the 'big picture' when considering local place-based issues.
4. **Ensuring the benefits of participation are clear to all involved.** Participants of the seminar identified the need for rapid demonstration of the benefits (for those involved) of participation in public processes about the natural environment. People need reassurance that their contributions are valued. Transparency throughout dialogue processes is key.